

“Jason did it. Jason killed Nicole.” Donovan Cobb was in a state hospital for the criminally insane.

“Jason? Jason Vorhees? The psychotic killer from Crystal Lake? The one with the machete and hockey mask?” John Leonard was visiting his long time friend at Patton in San Bernardino, California.

“No. Jason Simpson killed Nicole Brown Simpson. I know this for a fact.” Donovan sensed uneasiness from John. He changed subjects. “I think they’re putting extra medication in my food. Slipping it in there, you know.” There were orderlies walking around in the distance.

“You’re in here because you had direct knowledge of what really happened on nine eleven. You wouldn’t relent. Most Contrarians are on the run now.” John relaxed. “Sakata is up at Atascadero. She was the same once you went in.” His voice became a whisper. “I can’t help you if you continue to fight these people. The Illuminati have their Agenda and they won’t stop until all of us are erased.”

Donovan Cobb was seated across from John Leonard and got up, walked around the wooden table, and sat next to John so he could whisper back. “Everybody in my wing knows something. JFK. Nine eleven. OJ. The list goes on.” He watched the orderlies in the distance. He felt safe. “On the day Nicole was murdered, Jason Simpson got stood up by her. He was a chef at a Beverly Hills restaurant. His girlfriend gave him a set of knives as a gift. He was off balance and enraged. He hacked off his girlfriend’s long hair one time in a fit of anger. He killed Nicole. He was Charlie.”

“Charlie? What are you talking about?” John Leonard took notice of a doctor staring at them through a window.

“OJ wrote a book called *If I Did It*. Charlie is this supposed person who actually committed the murder. It was his son, though. I have good information on this.” Donovan got up from his chair next to John and walked back to the seat across from him. “I know other stuff. It can wait.”

“I believe you, Donovan. We have to keep a lot of this silent and secret.” He waited for about ten seconds and watched the doctor. He wanted to know if he would come in the room to end their visit. The doctor moved along. “Our enemies are after us. It’s a risk every time I come to see you.”

“I understand, believe it or not. I knew this was coming. I did

nothing they accused me of. They decided I was too much of a pain in their side. I've always known how they operated." Donovan looked around at the others in the room. There were three who had visitors. "It's a living hell. I don't know if my life will ever be normal again."

A couple of weeks later, John Leonard was in the San Geronio mountains two hours drive east of Los Angeles. He traveled to Big Bear to meet with four middle school teachers who taught down the hill in Highland, California. They met at a place called the *Lodge of the Elders* down the street from Snow Summit. It was spring break on Tuesday, March 18 of 2003. "I presume you have all watched the Matrix? You're familiar with the blue pill/ red pill idea?" John sipped from a mug of hot cocoa.

Vance Boyle was a chemistry teacher. "We've been talking." He was nerdy. His black plastic-rim glasses reflected the typical stereotype. "I get online and I discuss significant events with strangers from around the world." His mouth became dry. He continued nervously and apologetically. "America Online is such an amazing thing! Who would have thought these conversations would be possible ten years ago?"

Heather Mathis was an English teacher. "I didn't believe him at first." Heather was probably the most attractive teacher at Emory Middle School. Her breasts were ample and she wore a silk maroon button up collared shirt. "He would talk about this crazy stuff he would find on the internet. Funny stuff at first. The chupacabra, for example. Alien autopsies. That sort of thing." Just like Vance before her, she became nervous and her voice cracked. "Before too long, he stumbled on sensitive information. *Illuminati stuff*. Top secret government projects and we couldn't speak about it in the teachers' lounge. We had to take it to a pizza parlor down the street."

Dorian Sampson was a biology teacher. He was unapologetic and unfazed. "I knew a lot of what Vance stumbled on years ago. My college roommate was a conspiracy theorist. I'm well aware of replacement theory as it pertains to ecosystems. The Darwin woollybutt, for example, is native to Australia but has become dominant in the inland valley where we teach. You know this species by its common name, the eucalyptus tree. Quite aggressive." Unlike Vance and Heather, Dorian remained calm and confident. "*Species do not evolve to perfection, but quite the contrary. The weak, in fact, always prevail over the strong, not only because they are in the majority, but also because they are more crafty.*"

John Leonard was impressed. “Friedrich Nietzsche! Wow! You don’t hear him quoted every day!” He sipped some more cocoa then wiped off whipped cream from his lip. “I have one for you!” He tried to remember it verbatim. “*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into the Abyss, the Abyss will gaze back at you.*” They had all been served chili beans and corn bread. John broke his bread and ate.

Corey Smith was a history teacher. “I have one for you. Mark Twain.” He was the slimeball smart alec of the group, prone to being skeptical and impatient. “*All you need in life is ignorance and confidence. Success is sure to follow.*” He was smug and his grin was never ending. After a few tense moments, he said, “You’re going to have to do a lot, pal, to convince me this Illuminati thing is real.” He studied John Leonard’s face. He began to feel sorry for his tone and eased up. “Of all of us called here, I know the theory better than anyone. Do I believe it? No.”

John Leonard was not offended. “This life is not for everyone. This is why I brought up the Matrix and the idea of blue pill/ red pill. We take chances in life. We explore. We do this physically and we do it mentally. Right now, you are experiencing cognitive dissonance. There has been an uncomfortable idea presented to your mind. You want to reject it. You don’t want to hear the truth.” There was a manila folder on a coffee table behind John. He reached for it then handed it across to Corey. “Do you know what cacophony is?”

Heather, the English teacher, answered. “I do. It’s the bullshit sound I hear every time I pass the band room.” Her vocabulary was as good as it got. “Brett Everson teaches band. Trumpets, tubas and bugles all blaring at the same time.” Once again, she felt apologetic as if speaking out of turn. “They get better as they go on but I don’t know how he tolerates the early months of the school year.”

“Yes.” John Leonard was genuinely thankful. He was a forty-five year old man and had been part of a secret society known as the *Heuristic Order of Lachrymose Contrarians*. He refocused on Corey. “In music, we have beauty. It’s quite mathematical, actually. Tuning forks resonate with one another if they are the same size. It goes beyond this. If a tuning fork is precisely double or half the size of another, it will also resonate. These are called octaves.” He thought he might be disclosing too much for a simple illustration but continued, “If you have a four-inch tuning fork and an eight-inch one, they will be

in the same key. Are you familiar with this?"

"No sir." Corey Smith was humbled. He used to teach government as well as history at the local high school but became accustomed to younger students. He reflected on what a colleague once told him, *You should just go and teach at a place for retards. It's the only place you'll ever feel comfortable and secure.* He felt queasy. *It's happening again.*

"Let's suppose you take the midpoint between these two tuning forks. *Six inches.* This is called the fifth. I'll spare you the details why." John Leonard wanted his point across.

When Corey felt his ignorance exposed, he became defensive. Somehow, he learned to deal with it. The person who suggested he work at a school for the mentally challenged also suggested he listen to a lot of Bob Dylan. It was good advice. "Positively Fourth Street" played inside of Corey's head. *You've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend. When I was down you just stood their grinning.* Corey became aware of his grin and wiped it off. He was somber and attentive. *You got a lot of nerve to say you have a helping hand to lend. You just want to be on the side that's winning.* The song continued. *You say I let you down. You know it's not like that. If you're so hurt, why then don't you show it?* It had a purpose and Corey skipped to the relevant part. *Do you take me for such a fool to think I'd make contact with the one who tries to hide what he don't know to begin with?* Corey Smith was well aware of his ineptitude outside of his specialized bubble. He worked on it. "Sir. I came a long way to see for myself. I am deeply regretful of my bitter pessimism." He watched John Leonard contemplate his offering.

Undaunted, John explained, "Do you know how many colors there are in a rainbow? Literally, an infinite amount. Twenty years ago, I owned a Commodore 64 computer. It had sixteen colors which I believed were wonderful. In 1987, Commodore launched the Amiga 500 which then lauded four thousand and ninety-six colors. How fantastic! Right? What do you need them for? We have black and white then there are three primary colors. Red, blue and yellow. If a painter mixes red with blue, you get purple. Blue and yellow make green. Yellow and red make orange. Crayola makes a killing off selling different hues and shades of these basic colors. The different greens include forest, shamrock, jungle, pine, asparagus, fern and some others. Red has Venetian, Indian, brick, maroon, scarlet and some others. Would you know the difference between any of these if your

life depended on it? Blue has teal, aquamarine, cerulean, navy, midnight, denim, Pacific, turquoise, sky and more. You get the point. Our eyes are trained on a few basics. Only a specialist would know the difference between one and the other. If you've heard of Phyllis Horner the fashion designer, I am personal friends with her. She would know the difference between these subtle hues and shades." John Leonard got up from his seat and poured himself more hot cocoa. The Sun had set a half hour earlier and there was a chill in the air. "Music is not a lot different than the visual world. They operate with wavelengths. If you've talked to your school's trigonometry teacher, he could tell you about sines and cosines." He sat down. "The four-inch tuning fork has precisely twice as many peaks and troughs as the eight-inch one. Just like there are an infinite amount of colors in a rainbow, there are an infinite amount of notes between octaves. The untrained ear only hears a few, though. Cacophony. The beginning guitar player doesn't know when his instrument is out of tune. It hurts the ears. To the professional, it's hard to stand. At some point in music history, they decided to separate octaves by twelve steps." He did not sing. Rather, he recited "Do-Re-Mi" from *The Sound of Music*.

Do, a deer, a female deer

Re, a drop of golden Sun

Mi, a name I call myself

Fa, a long long way to run

So, a needle pulling thread

La, a note that follows so

Ti, a drink with jam and bread

That will bring us back to do

John Leonard noticed that Heather Mathis gleamed at the allusion to her very favorite musical. He didn't stop to ask about her feelings. Instead, he went on, "Do re mi fa so la ti. These are the seven recurring notes on the piano. They correspond to C, D, E, F, G, A and B."

"Seven notes?" Corey Smith was baffled. "You said there were twelve."

"There are five black keys. They are called sharps if coming from the left and flats if coming from the right. If you double the seven notes you get fourteen. Try to think about the keyboard layout in your mind. There are places here and there between white keys where there are no black keys. Between B and C and between E and F. Twelve. You get twelve notes between octaves. When you look at a piano

again, you'll see the pattern of two black keys together, then three, then two, then three all the way down. These are the same notes at different octaves. So you get your four-inch tuning fork and your eight-inch one. In between these octaves you insert a perfect middle, the six-inch one. I told you it's the fifth. If we are in the key of C, the fifth note is G. D is the second, E is the third, F is the fourth. Follow me?" John believed the four middle school teachers understood the logic but sensed they were concerned about the reason for detail. *They want to know what I'm getting at*, he thought. "The pattern of a major scale is whole, whole, half. Then whole, whole, whole, half. You skip the black keys twice, in other words before you reach E and you only need a half step to reach F. Then you skip three more black keys before reaching B. A half step then gets you to the octave at C."

Dorian Sampson became fidgety but did not speak. *Why am I here?* he wondered. *Was this a mistake? I'm starting to question my decision to come to this place.*

John sensed his anxiety but plodded. "Since the beginning of rock music, bands have made lucrative careers from the first and fifth notes in different keys. On your electric guitar, it's called the power chord. Just two notes. The first and fifth."

Though uneasy, Dorian joked, "Chicks love it! Am I right?"

Heather poked Dorian in his side. "Don't say that!"

John Leonard laughed. "Yes! Chicks have been know to love rock 'n' roll music but it's more complicated. In between the first note in the major scale and the fifth, we have another perfect insertion. The *third* note. Punk rock bands might live exclusively off the first and fifth notes but the better rock songs are more elaborate. In between the four-inch and six-inch forks, you have one that is five inches. In the key of C, this would be E. It's now a triad. A neat-sounding collection of notes. C, E and G. You can strum these together or you can pick them apart. *Arpeggio*. That's what it's called when you single them out in a repeated pattern."

Corey Smith became frustrated. "With all due respect, what does this have to do with why we're here? We traveled a long, windy road to get here." Corey was proud of his statement because of its double meaning. He couldn't resist spelling it out, "Literally and figuratively."

John dismissed his comment. "The major chord is happy and festive. Happy birthday to you! We like to hear that song. We love to sing it. We cheer." His point was getting closer. "Guess what happens

when we take the middle note within a triad and knock it down a half step?"

Corey's ignorance of music was challenged again and his stomach sunk.

"We feel melancholy. We don't need to understand the mathematics of music. We know something's off. This is called a minor chord, by the way. Musicians deliberately screw with mathematical lines. They do it to screw with your emotions. They do it to elicit responses." John was hoping there would be resolve on the faces looking at him. "What Child Is This? You know the song."

Heather Mathis sang. "*What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?*" Her voice was soft and in tune.

"Minor key," John said. "The triad of A major is A, C sharp, E. You knock C sharp down a half step, you're at C. If C is your root note on a piano, all white keys resonate with it. *It sounds good, especially the third and fifth notes.* You get a little bit of dissonance on the second, sixth and seventh notes, but not a whole lot."

"*Dissonance*," Corey Smith repeated. "I know exactly where you're going with this."

"With the exact same set of white keys, you can emphasize A as your root note. At that point, you're on the minor scale. Relative to its position, the keys are no longer lined up whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half between octaves."

Heather could no longer control herself and busted out in delirious laughter. "I'm sorry," she said then laughed some more. "It seems like a joke, but I understand."

"You better. Because there are a lot of things out there that will blow your mind!" John Leonard said. "*Cognitive dissonance.*" Knowing Heather taught English, he tested her vocabulary. "Could you tell me and the others what cognitive dissonance is? It's literal meaning without attached connotation?"

She was flustered and took a couple of seconds to answer. "Cognitive. Adjective. Concerned with the process of knowing or perceiving." She paused. "Dissonance. Noun. Inharmonious. Discordant. Incongruity." She became mildly angry. "Are you happy?"

John disregarded her angst. "We are all going through this. We all have uncomfortable ideas and it's our natural reaction to push them out. This is not the way problems are solved, though. We

identify our problems, we seek methods to take care of them, then we execute plans of attack. That is why you are all here. You were searching for answers in AOL chat rooms. You found me. I represent tycoons. There is a hidden war going on. The media will never talk about it. There are good people disappearing. Personal friends. They are whisked away to remote locations around the world. *The Illuminati*. This is who runs things. My group was the Contrarians but we've been disbanded. For decades, we were rivals. After they knocked down the Twin Towers, they set a plan in motion."

"*What?*" Dorian Sampson was startled. "Bin Laden didn't do it?"

"It's in the manila folder. Much of what we're going to cover is in there." He reached for it. He thumbed through a few pages and found one with nine eleven factoids. "You'll be up to full speed in no time." He passed around the paper. "Nine eleven *is* an inside job."

"*What?*" Dorian demanded. He was handed the factoid paper from Heather and started scanning through it. There was a timeline and other miscellaneous information.

"Jesus is risen. Have you ever heard that saying? Why would a person say it that way? Jesus *has* risen. You would think that would be the proper verbiage." John turned to Heather. "Am I right?"

"Jesus is risen?" She thought about it. "It's a theological issue. Jesus never died."

"Well? Nine eleven never ended. We are experiencing it today in the form of the Patriot Act and NSA surveillance. A personal friend of mine worked for decades in the Central Intelligence Agency. Kind guy by the name of Horace. He provided me with all the information I'll ever need to know." John Leonard thought he might get choked up at some point and was surprised he handled the issue with grace and tranquility. "We were thrown to the wind. There are secret prisons all over the world. Last year, Horace was relieved of his CIA duties. Last month, I lost contact with him. Another friend of mine—a *computer programmer by the name of Donovan*—was committed to a detention center for the criminally insane. They framed him. They sabotaged his vehicle, and when cops were able to isolate him, they accused him of many, many things he didn't do."

"And that's where I come in?" Dorian Sampson asked. "My cousin works at Patton Hospital. You think I can get him out?" It was gloomy to discuss.

"We'll work on the details later," John explained. "It's not

simple. They're killing him in there." He thumbed through more pages. "This is Rachel Corrie."

"Holy shit!" Corey yelled. "What happen to her?"

"Yesterday was St Patrick's day. I understand you four celebrated together at Killarney's before heading up? Anyhow, the day before St Patrick's, that girl you see mangled up in that photo was protesting for a pro-Palestinian group called the International Solidarity Movement. These guys were associated with some Contrarian buddies of mine. She was protesting in front of a bulldozer as a human shield. The Israelis have been building settlement homes further and futher into the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. She had a bullhorn and was shouting at them to back off but they didn't."

Tears ran down Dorian's cheeks. He studied the photo of her. "They did this to her?" He shook his head disbelief. "How inhumane!"

"The Illuminati is a hidden cabal of powerful moguls. They control banking around the world, and the media. They own steel mills and they're involved in every industry you can think of. No one in the public is going to find out about Rachel Corrie. No one is going to tell Barbara Walters about Donovan Cobb. No one's going to challenge the wicked people who have hijacked our government and our world." John Leonard searched for another document and pulled it out. "This is Greater Israel."

Corey Smith took it and studied it. "What?" He was mesmerized. "It extends into Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria." He traced his finger around a red line. "What exactly is this?"

"It's their plan," John said. "They won't stop until Isreal is larger than Texas. They cite Biblical history dating back to Genesis. The war in Iraq that's starting in a couple of days? You think that's about weapons of mass destruction? You think bin Laden conspired with Hussein to terrorize America? Osama bin Laden was a CIA operative once known as Tim Osman! That's in the folder there. Donald Rumsfeld was a White House liason to Saddam Hussein and Tariq Aziz. The US government gave the Iraqis biological weapons like anthrax and bubonic plague! William Casey used a Chilean company as a front to give them cluster bombs. They provided the materials for sarin and other chemical weapons!"

Corey asked, "So this is red pill territory? We can drive down that hill to our homes in Highland and pretend this never happened?"

Heather added, "Or we can say it happened but pretend we

rendezvoused with a total kook. *A nutjob.*” The emotions swirled in her tummy. “I’ll be honest to say that it’s tempting.”

Dorian chimed, “I’m a biology teacher. I’m disgusted by this. *The anthrax.* The biological warfare. I’m in! With or without anyone else, I’m in!”

Vance had been quiet but added his own two cents. “I’m a chemistry teacher. *Sarin?* I’m put off by that. I might be a coward in many ways—I’ve never been one to seek confrontation—but this one stirs me.”

“Good,” John said. “I think I have a good group here. I have a million dollars for you at the end of it like we discussed online. You split it however you want. I need you to go back to work after spring break is over. We don’t need to raise any suspicions. You go about life as normal until the summer. At that point, I get you together with a film crew. I am personal friends with Preston Bancroft. Have you ever heard of him? Hollywood producer? You’ll be working on a show called *Riddle Rattlers* as consultants. We have chemistry, biology, history and English teachers here.”

“Why not hire professionals?” Corey asked. “University professors?”

“I was told the show would be called *Fringe Investigators*,” Heather commented. “What gives?”

“Last minute change, Heather,” John said. “*Riddle Rattlers* has a ring. And Corey? We need loyalty. It’s not a one hundred percent TV show. It’s a front. You’ll be chasing leads about Bigfoot. You’ll go around the country. *Ghosts. Bermuda Triangle. UFOs.* Of course, we already know the answers to a lot of these things but we’ll throw the public a bone. We know where a few Sasquatches live but we leave them alone. We know where the Yeti are. We tell the public what they need to hear. In the mean time, you help me find my friends. They’ve been scattered to the wind, like I said. The production is largely a front for a much bigger picture.”

“I’m in.” Vance joined Dorian in acceptance.

“I’m in, too.” Corey Smith was reluctant. “What if we want out?”

“I’m in with no reservations.” Heather was happy.

“If you want out?” John asked. “You can’t un-know certain things. You can go home. That’s your prerogative. But you’ll never forget Rachel Corrie from this point on. Her crushed body will echo inside your skull. You won’t forget.”

"I get it," Corey said. "I have a couple of months to prepare for this. It'll be hard. How should I handle my students?"

"Tell them the fanciful things. You'll be looking for unicorns. That sort of thing. You don't have to tell them the darker stuff. Keep that to yourself." John Leonard felt satisfied with the meeting. "Does anyone here snow ski? They have night skiing up the road."

Dorian Sampson and Vance Boyle took off skiing while while Heather Mathis and Corey Smith stayed back at the lodge with John Leonard. They watched *Bram Stoker's Dracula* together. They spent the night, then the four middle school teachers took off the next morning in Heather's silver Honda Accord. The manila folder was just starters. It was meant to spark their evening discussion. Each person was given a fat D-ring binder. They discussed their time together as they winded down Highway Eighteen. It was late afternoon and Heather was having trouble keeping the Sun out of her eyes when steering around certain curves. She said, "Cuckold. That's their weapon of choice. Did you get that? The Illuminati fragmented at the turn of the millennium. John's Contrarian group affectionately called their rivals the Scoundrels until nine eleven. Before being broken up, the Contrarians would meet annually at different places around the world. Every fifth year, they were in Australia."

"Donovan Cobb had a wife named Thelma Rhett and he had a side lover. Japanese gal." Dorian Sampson was seated behind Heather. "Sakata Tara."

"Bram Stoker's Dracula. That's what they did to him." Corey Smith was seated in the back with Dorian. "Dracula was a real person. *Vlad the Impaler*. He was part of the Order of the Dragon which is a real enough organization. Has Illuminati connections somehow."

Vance was in the passenger's seat and was getting car sick from the turns and the altitude. "I've watched that movie many times. Vlad was out fighting the Turks and kicking ass on the battlefield. Some of the Turks played a horrible trick on his lover, Elisabeta. They shot an arrow through a slit in her castle with a note attached saying Vlad died." There was silence. "She jumped to her death into a river below."

"Dracula found her dead when he returned and read her suicide note. Van Helsing had brought her inside and mentioned her soul was damned for killing herself. Dracula became enraged, renounced Christ, then plunged a sword into a stone cross. Drank the blood which poured out and became immortal." Dorian's mind drifted. "What was that

about cuckold? Heather?”

“Yes.” She spoke to him through her rearview mirror while checking the road’s twists on occasion. “They jacked John Leonard’s friend really bad in the head. He had a wife and mistress. They would shoot him anonymous text messages and emails that they were cheating on him, especially the Japanese gal, Sakata Tara. Lies for the most part. But they would send suave men to talk to her in restaurants and there’d be someone tucked away taking pictures. *It looked like she was cheating on him.* They said they had sex tapes of her. It broke his psyche. He would storm out in the middle of the night looking for her.”

Corey was conflicted about Donovan. “These guys are tycoons. They’re rich. We’re supposed to accept their relationships aren’t monogamous. He had a wife for political reasons or companionship. I’m not really sure why that would be. And he has a soul mate, apparently. The Asian. And she’s supposed to remain faithful to him even though he spends half of his time in his marriage.” He rubbed his chin. “I don’t know about these people.”

Vance gave his opinion, “A million dollars is a million dollars. We spring Donovan from his hospital, we find some of their other friends, and we’re sitting pretty.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.” Heather was once again distracted by the Sun in her face and realized she drove a couple of feet into the oncoming lane. *Fuck. We could die up here,* she thought. *Lucky there wasn’t a car headed our way.* “I grew up watching the soap opera, All My Children. These twists and turns in relationships of wealthy people never bothered me. Palmer Courtlandt and Adam Chandler can do whatever the fuck they want. Then there were the night soaps, Dallas and Dynasty. Never got too much into them.”

“They were doing the same thing to Sakata, though. Sending her messages that Donovan was involved in gay porn. Anything that would press her buttons. She was in Bakersfield when she snapped.” Corey tried to remember what he was told while Dorian and Vance were away skiing. “How was Miracle Mile, by the way? I heard it’s a tough slope.”

“I’ve seen worse. The Wall is a double diamond. When it gets icy, I definitely wouldn’t recommend it for beginners.” Dorian returned to the subject. “They paid literal clowns to follow Sakata around. They would show up at different places around the city. They drove her insane.”

"How is it that cops were in on this?" Heather asked. "He specifically told us that bad cops have been on the Illuminati payroll. They meet in lodges like the one we're coming from."

"After listening to the Mark Fuhrman testimony in the OJ trial a few years ago, I don't put anything past them." Vance was exhausted and couldn't wait to get into bed.

"It feels dreamlike. This whole experience." Dorian was wearing down as well. "Do you think this project is a sure thing? Do you think it might fall through?" The following day, the war in Iraq began. The four teachers got together at his home, watched a lot of CNN, and discussed the "shock and awe" campaign. They discussed life's events, barbecued, and swam in Dorian's pool.

All of them were single. Heather was divorced and lost custody of her three-year-old son. At dawn, they got into the jacuzzi. Heather was high on life. She never had this much adventure in such a short period. "I lost custody of Wade right before the school year started. That was a low point for me." The four of them abstained from alcohol all day and now began to drink Budweiser cans. "Cade married less than two months after we split up so the judge figured it'd be the more family-friendly home. I could've been a slut, though, and slept with any cowboy from a local bar. Guys are dying for free sex."

Corey Smith had been married and divorced twice. No children. He told Dorian and Vance, "Don't ever get married, guys! It's a headache."

Vance responded, "I'm looking for the perfect girl, believe it or not. I date a few times a year and I wait for that spark. If it happens, so be it. I'm not chasing it, though."

Dorian commented, "It's all overrated. *Relationships*. Penguins mate for life. They're an exception. I double majored in biology and anthropology. Chimps? Cheetas? Dogs? No one but us and the penguins." He popped open his first can of beer.

Heather felt warm inside. "I'm glad we can be civil. I'm voluptuous and attract attention even when I don't want it. You guys are good to me." She held up her can of beer into the middle of the spa and the three guys toasted her. "I'll change my name back to Rawlins soon enough. It's not fair, you know? Why do women have to go through this?"

Corey asked, "So he up and moved to Chicago? That's gotta hurt really bad!"

"That's why I need this money. I need my son back. It's not

right for a mother to be separated from her child.” She knew she would cut herself off at two beers. Any more and wicked emotions would come streaming out. She held herself in check. “I’ll make it up to him.”

“It’s a dog eat dog world,” Dorian said.

“So rough, so tough out here, baby.” Corey laughed. They shared a good evening together and stayed tight for the next few weeks. On the first of May, they were back at Dorian’s. President George W Bush had landed on the aircraft carrier, USS Abraham Lincoln. There was a large banner hung behind him reading “Mission Accomplished” and he was speaking on CNN signaling the end of major fighting in Iraq. Corey was taken back. “This is just the beginning, isn’t it? This is what we were told up in Big Bear. It’s all a lie. The media is feeding horse shit to the public.”

“Operation Iraqi Liberation? Acronym for OIL?” Dorian was sarcastic. “Maybe it’s over.” He caught a mean glance from Heather. “No, this is the beginning. Red pill. I keep thinking about it. Now and then, I go into strong denial. Most the time, though, I’m preparing for this summer.”

“Shit’s gonna get real,” Vance said. “I hope we can handle it.”

The Emory Middle School year ended at the end of May. On June 2, 2003, the four were hiking around Turtle Canyon near St George, Utah. John Leonard provided them with a guide, a beautiful brunette with frizzy hair. She was to get them up to speed about their first assignment. Her name was Cora Salazar and she spoke three languages fluently. “Most of the film crew has already moved along to New Mexico. We’ll catch up with them in a couple of days.”

For most of his adult life, Dorian Sampson was a pessimist toward romance. He knew the statistics for marriage success. They were less than fifty percent. All fools falls in love, they each believe their relationships are special and strong, then things fall apart. Fifteen years after his time with Heather, Corey and Vance in the summer of 2003, he would join a movement called MGTOW, an acronym for Men Going Their Own Way. Pretty much a commitment to abstain from serious relationships. No need to worry about heartbreak, child support, alimony and all the side garbage intensive relationships bring. As he hiked along the running waters which separated Turtle Canyon from Desolation Canyon, he was smitten. Cora was a breath of fresh air. “Can you tell us what our assignment is again? Please?” he begged her. He was winded. “And can you tell us why we are

retracing the footsteps of the departed film crew? Why not just meet them in New Mexico?"

Cora Salazar was twenty-six years old and healthy. No deepness of breath. "We will eventually be in Mexico at the Mapimí Biosphere Reserve. It's called the Zone of Silence. The film crew was up here a couple of weeks ago setting up shots. One of them stayed behind and will be meeting us later at Green River. We will meet the three stars of *Riddle Rattlers*: Doug Lucas, Michelle Morris and Flynn Neighbors. They are Berkeley dropouts who developed a zest for understanding unusual things." Heather Mathis was the youngest of the Emory Middle School teachers at twenty-nine and Corey Smith was the oldest at thirty-three. The three Berkeley students were all twenty-one and all born days apart from one another in April of 1982. "These guys are full of energy so I hope you can keep up with them." She watched Dorian heave.

I felt so good skiing in Big Bear. Why is this happening to me? Dorian watched Cora and the others walk along in front of him. When he felt strong enough, he caught up to them. "What are we filming out here?"

"Four Corners Monument, for starters. The place where Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado come together. Special place. Not only for Americans but also for Navajo and Ute tribes. It's their boundary as well and makes for perfect photo ops during the production of our show." There was a sizable flat boulder and it seemed to be a perfect place to sit. "We can rest if you'd like. Eat some trail mix? Have some water?"

Dorian Sampson felt she was directing the suggestion at him. His indignation was hard to hide. "I'd appreciate that." His beige safari shirt was lined with sweat. "Four Corners? I want more. I'll eat the trail mix and you try to explain what's going on. *Please.*"

Heather, Dorian, Vance and Corey listened. The Zone of Silence was a special place. Radio signals did not work there. A cousin of hers, Julio Prieto, was a tour guide in the area for the thirty miles it spanned across. The cactus, medicinal guamis, buttercup flowers, and mesquite trees grew particularly large in the area. Two meteorites crashed around the Zone in 1938 and 1954. Another came down west in the Allende Valley in 1969. "My great uncle was on horseback when that one hit. He saw it for himself. Three years earlier, he was working for Mexico's national oil company called Pemex. They could never get good radio signals. Besides the junk that

came down from meteorites, there were huge deposits of magnetite under the ground. Scientists figured this is the reason why. The place used to be under the ocean a long time ago. The Sea of Thetys. There are fossils of sea shells and a lot of salt deposits. They mine the salt out there.”

“Why the Four Corners, though? Why this?” Dorian was unraveling a strawberry Fruit Roll-Up. Cora Salazar’s voice was throaty. Dorian was falling in love. She walked somewhat pigeon-toed. He knew the signs. A washing feeling went through his body. “Green River? New Mexico?”

The Zone of Silence was located where three Mexican states came together: Chihuahua, Coahla and Durango. The year after the third meteorite crashed, a five-story Athena rocket was launched from Green River. It was supposed to return to New Mexico around White Sands. Instead, it went bizarrely off course. “The Athena rocket slammed down into the Zone of Silence. No one knows what happened. They started calling it the Mexican Bermuda Triangle. A month later, Wernher Von Braun came down and worked with my great uncle, Juan. They worked out of his home in Escalón. Set up shop. They built a special ten-mile rail to the center of the huge crater. Tents, labs, kitchens. They made their own little town.” Cora Salazar opened a canteen, swished warm water around her mouth, then spit it out.

“I’m starting to get it.” Dorian shielded the Sun from behind Cora. “We’re out here for photo ops. Some editor is going to take snippets of film here and there. We’re lucky if five seconds of this Utah trip will make it to TV. Fast cutaways played over a narrator’s voice.”

“You nailed it!” Cora laughed. “When we take off to New Mexico, we won’t just be visiting White Sands where the rocket was supposed to come back. We’re going to Dulce. Do you know what’s special about that place?”

“Can’t say I do.” It was Corey Smith. “Should we?”

“Dulce is a three-hour drive east of Four Corners Monument in Apache territory. In 1979, there was an underground government base. Went as far as seven stories below the surface. Aliens were kept there. Tall ones. *Greys*. Their stench reeked pretty bad from what I understand. They got fed up from being held captive so they went for it. They got a hold of weapons. *Lasers*. There was a shootout with Green Berets and sixty people were killed.” Cora had a box of raisins

in her backpack on pulled them out. “White Sands is at the southern tip of New Mexico.”

“Wow!” Dorian Sampson was stunned. “This story has layers!” He was excited. “I like it!”

Heather was embarrassed. “You don’t believe this! Do you? Dorian? Do you?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Dorian was disturbed. “It’s the *story*! You teach literature! You should know this! It’s a great story!”

“So why the aliens, right?” Cora Salazar popped a few raisins in her mouth. “What does this have to do with the Zone of Silence?” She chewed then popped in some more. No answer. “Aliens live there. They are called Nordics. Sounds like a joke but they are tall and blond. Benevolent. Magical. Telepathic.” She noticed Heather Mathis becoming nervous. “You don’t have to believe this, like I said. You are here as consultants. You will be on TV. Vance is our chemist, Dorian our biologist. Flynn, Doug and Michelle are the stars. They go recklessly into the world uncovering mysteries. You lend them credibility. It’s the bare minimum we need to have for legal purposes before we have to insert footnotes at the bottom of the screen saying that everything is merely for entertainment purposes. ‘Vance Boyle, chemist’ displayed under your face as you speak about magnetite and salt deposits. ‘Dorian Sampson, biologist’ displayed as you talk about the Zone’s gopherus tortoise, the biggest land reptile in North America.”

“And what am I?” Heather Mathis asked. She was having doubts about the project. *I knew we’d be consultants but no one said a damn thing about being on television.*

“You are good-looking people.” Cora coaxed them. “Nothing sinister, here. You are our folklore expert, Heather. You have leeway with your insights when interviewed. If you freeze, we feed you lines of what we believe the public needs to hear.”

“Sounds like crap!” Corey exclaimed. “But it’s a business! I know that much! It’s a business.”

“I have to let you know something. I really believe the Nordics are there. I have doubts about the *Greys* in Dulce, but I believe the Nordics. Many people have become lost in the Zone. My cousin, Julio Prieto, was one of them. They saved him. They saved others. Kind creatures.” *If they don’t believe, oh well, then they don’t believe,* she sighed. *They’ll have to go see for themselves.* “One last thing. The meteorite deposits are all gone. The structures they built when they

excavated are gone. It's a skeleton of what it used to be. We'll be using a lot of graphic inserts, artistic renditions, and dramatic recreations. You're fine with these things?"

Vance Boyle was tired. His body and his mind had enough. "I'm ready. It's a draining experience just to get this far, but I'm ready."

There were complications. Feuding drug cartels were becoming more active in the area. Violence became rampant. With each assignment for each episode, there would be a side, secretive venture. "John Leonard has a friend who disappeared a few months ago. Connor Milton. Used to have a zoo for exotic animals near Acapulco. He also had a place by the Zone in Cabellos." Cora Salazar thought of something funny. "He was fond of hiking around *Tetas de Juana*."

"Why are you laughing?" Dorian asked her.

"Tits of Joan! That's the translation." She gave the group time to get their giggles out. "There are mine shafts everywhere so it's not the safest drive. John Leonard believes he might have been kidnapped but our guys think something less suspicious happened. Maybe he had an accident."

The group got up together and prepared for an evening meeting with the three stars of Riddle Rattlers. They got acquainted then headed to the Four Corners Monument. They hit it off well. They went to Dulce, New Mexico and the filming became fluid. It was like they were old pros. As they drove away from Dulce in a customized brown Ford Econoline van, John Leonard visited Donovan Cobb at Patton Hospital in San Bernardino, California. This time, they were allowed outside. "I'm going to spring you out of here, Donovan."

"Yes? How are you going to do that?" Donovan was never a smoker but pulled out a Marlboro Red. "I picked up a new habit." He lit his cigarette and dragged from it. "Politics." He blew out. "You get along with certain people if you have cigarettes. It's like currency in this place." He took another drag. "You can't just carry them around. You have to smoke 'em."

"Verisimilitude. I like it." John looked around the grounds. The people walking around seemed tranquil and sedated. "You have to look the part." He patted Donovan on the thigh. "The cop that arrested you. Accused you of all those horrible things. He got busted in an impound yard scandal. He was running a ring with a friend of his. Stealing cars, basically. Migrant workers from Ventura strawberry

fields were his main target but the higher ups—*Roy Thurman and his Illuminati pals*—paid the guy off. That's how you were busted."

"How's Sakata? Tell me she's okay." Donovan thought of the word "verisimilitude" and was surprised John remembered. Preston Bancroft was getting better and better at making his movies look lifelike. Like his father, Hale, he started off producing slapstick comedies. There was hardly any attention to detail much like zany Saturday Night Live sketches. But verisimilitude became more and more important. He wanted to be convincing.

"We have lawyers and advocacy groups working on this night and day. It's a nightmare, Donovan. The Scoundrels are coming after her. Do you know who Rikishi is in wrestling? Do you know what his signature move is?" John was concerned.

"No. Can't say it rings a bell." Donovan wanted to know about Sakata.

"Kayfabe. Right? You have to know kayfabe from all the years you've been around Preston. Kayfabe, Donovan. Kayfabe."

"Kayfabe? Of course I know kayfabe. Jesse Ventura won the governor's race in Minnesota a few years ago. He was a Navy seal and a professional wrestler. He said all of Washington, DC was kayfabe. It's the fake personalities. It's the scripts they go with. I know kayfabe." He was half finished with his cigarette. He feared he would be addicted when he was outside again.

"Rikishi is this fat ass Samoan. His move is called the Stinkface. Basically, he knocks you unconscious then sets you on the mat in the corner. He takes his humongous butt and rubs his asshole all over your nose and the rest of your face." John Leonard watched Donovan Cobb smoke. John hadn't smoked since his mid-twenties and was tempted to ask him for a cig.

"Your point? This better be good. I don't like these images in my head." Donovan tossed his cigarette onto the ground and stompt it out.

"They're trying to get Sakata. The Scoundrels are. Roy Thurman is behind it. He has connections at Atascadero. There's this hideous fat piece of shit in the porn world, Ellis Johnson. He does side jobs. It's not just stuff behind the camera. They catch people in vulnerable positions. People strapped for cash. People in desperation. People who need favors. He has a tag team partner, Bruce Dickey. He's a creole midget with an eight-inch cock. Their only goal is to induce agony." John couldn't resist. "Let me have one of those."

Donovan handed over a cigarette then lit another for himself. "So they're going to bang my lover? A fat ass and a midget? Then I slip into real insanity." Donovan's gaze was distant toward the clouds. "Johnson? Dickey? I presume those are stage names. They'd have to be." He felt sorry for himself for a few moments then it broke. "I get the part about Rikishi. I'm not always quick about connecting the dots, but I think I am this time. There's an actual asshole that is rubbing itself on your forehead. No kayfabe. You can't pay me to be in that position. And the porn actresses. I watched *Boogie Nights*. The guy's wife was being fucked by some stranger on the driveway during a party. I never understood how they did it. How could you be married to a porn star? How could you say it's just acting?" Donovan turned to John. "I'll fight this but I don't see what good it does. We're outmanned and out-spent. How can we win this?"

"We can't, Donovan. This is why they left Preston alone. He knew. He stayed away from them. He pretended they didn't exist and went along with the official nine eleven story whenever pressed on it. He gave them vanilla. He could have cooked up something really good, but he gave them something soft. He gave them things they could sink their teeth into." John Leonard thought about a couple of movies. "Remember Jennifer Tilly in the Getaway a few years ago? She's kidnapped with her husband then one of the bad guys starts to bang her while her husband is strapped on a chair groaning. She even starts to like it! She tells her husband to shut up."

"Agony, brother. I know what they're trying to do." Donovan gazed into the distance more than thought about Preston. "I don't blame him. Preston? We had one final good moment at his Hollywood home before the shit really hit the fan. He told me then. Live to fight another day. I didn't have it in me. I couldn't do it." Donovan Cobb had started an independent comic book company, Enigma. "I had fifty pages of drawings swiped from me since the last time you were here. Jesus Christ lives in another dimension called the Nether Region. He's a superhero. He rides around on a dinosaur."

"Why, Donovan? Why?" John Leonard could sense it. One of the orderlies roaming around would overhear their conversation. They would deem John to be insane as well as the friend he was visiting. "Why?"

"To know I'm free. Even in this place. We have a few nut jobs in here. Each guy believes he is not crazy. Everyone else is. I'm in that boat, I suppose, but I had my reasons. We had this Biblical

literalist going around saying the world is only six thousand years old. There were dinosaurs on Noah's Ark. Jesus rode a dinosaur into Jerusalem, not a donkey, on Palm Sunday." Donovan smoked his cigarette and all of it made sense to him. "How could I not do this?"

"Okay. I get it." John Leonard accepted his explanation. "Charlie Manson. You know his deal, right? He took over the home of Dennis Wilson from the Beach Boys in Topanga Canyon. Manson wrote a song, *Cease to Exist*, and the Beach Boys turned it into *Never Learn Not to Love*. After the Sharon Tate murders at Roman Polanski's home, Manson was sent to prison. He kept recording music. Guns N' Roses re-recorded one of those songs, *Look at Your Game, Girl*."

Donovan was perturbed. "I'm no killer, though. I did not plot anything horrific. I was just going about my life when they cracked down on me." He was upset at himself for letting emotions get the best of him. "They changed my medication to Seroquel. They forcibly inject me with propofol if they believe I'm unruly. That shit fucks up your liver and it kills you! I need to get out of here!"

"I'm working on it." John Leonard hugged Donovan Cobb. "I've got to go."

Seventeen hundred miles to the east of Patton Hospital, Roy Thurman contemplated life from the one hundred and sixth floor of the Sears Tower in Chicago. He was alone in his modest suite overlooking Grant Park and Lake Michigan. He reflected on Halloween of 2001. It was a month and a half after the Twin Towers collapsed in New York City. He thought about the building he currently walked around in. *It could happen here*. He paced with anxiety. On Halloween of 2001, he had the walls of his office painted purple. He dressed as the Joker with his hair dyed green, his face caked white, and wearing a purple suit with an orange button up underneath. He applied his own makeup and it was sloppy. Instead of resembling Cesar Romero's sardonic grin, Roy's red lipstick was drooping down and frowning. When he reached an oval Victorian-style mirror with brass decorated trim, he stopped and asked his reflection, "Magic mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" He tried to be cheerful but it appeared his painted-on smile was dripping off his face. He anticipated the night time gathering with office workers. Years later, he would watch *The Dark Knight* and believe Christopher Nolan got his idea for Heath Ledger's look by getting a hold of one of his office party's group photos. Roy Thurman was working as an insurance executive for Willis Group Holdings. *Our*

guys brought down the Twin Towers, he mused to himself. And now we're poised to control Planet Earth. He kept pacing. You would think I'd feel better than I do.

Roy Thurman stopped in his tracks.

"Beelzebub?" A dark feeling washed through his body. "I did as you said!" Roy was a thirty-third degree Freemason. Albert Pike had been the leader of the Masons in 1871 when he published *Morals and Dogma*. Roy read it extensively and became quite familiar with the Scottish Rite and many of Pike's teachings and philosophies. For ninety percent of Roy's life, he felt like an ordinary person relative to what corporate executives go through. Ten percent of the time, he found himself engaged in a world of spirits. He could sense them strongly, especially when he was alone. He felt darkness and let it pass. He quoted Albert Pike, "The apocalypse is, to those who receive the nineteenth Degree, the Apotheosis of that Sublime Faith which aspires to God alone!" He waltzed around the office. "And despises all the pomps and works of Lucifer. Lucifer, the Light-bearer!" He tempted his demons to haunt him. "Strange and mysterious name to give to the Spirit of Darkness! Lucifer, the Son of the Morning! Is it he who bears the light?" When Roy returned to the Victorian mirror, he continued his recital by staring into his own eyes. "And with its splendors intolerable blinds feeble, sensual, or selfish Souls? Doubt it not! For traditions are full of Devine Revelations and Inspirations. And Inspiration is not of one Age nor of one Creed."

A phantom spirit knocked down papers from Roy's desk.

"Yes! It is you, indeed, Beelzebub!" There were air conditioning and heating vents overhead but they weren't blowing. Roy looked upward. There was nothing there. He picked up the papers. He thought about his ex-lover, Maureen Li. She was crushed to death in the North Tower on September 11, 2001. "It had to be this way, my Maureen." Maureen was Asian and was his first romance after his wife's death on TWA Flight 800 on July 17, 1996. "Norah? You shouldn't have slept around on me!" It was initially thought in the public that terrorists fired missiles from pleasure boats near Long Island at the jumbo jet. The reality was that Roy Thurman had connections with the Deep State of America. They did crazy things many, many times. Flight TWA was taken down by a Navy missile. Eye witnesses reported seeing two orange fireballs zooming upward before the explosion at fourteen thousand feet. That was a diversion. A small naval plane fired the lethal shot. The National Transportation

Safety Board said it was a errant fuel tank spark which caused the plane to blow. It wasn't terrorists and it wasn't the Navy. Roy knew different, though. "Tragic. Simply tragic," Roy said to himself on Halloween of 2001. He poured himself a half glass of Absolut vodka and slammed it. Retired pilot, Bill Donaldson, knew the truth as well and tried to bring it to light. Mysteriously, he died at the age of fifty-six of a brain tumor less than a month before the nine eleven batshit.

In the summer of 2003, Roy Thurman reflected on that period of his life. He was still in the same Sears Tower suite. He still liked to dress up in makeup and disguises during private times. He would spend Fridays walking around in darkness and talking to the spirits around him, especially Beelzabub. Papers would fly off his desk like they did on that memorable Halloween. He would lay them out there. He was assured of pure contact with supernatural forces when these things happened. It was on a Friday evening, June 6, 2003 when the papers flew off his desk again. Roy Thurman already had a few stiff drinks in his belly. "Beelzabub! You are a weird one!" He shook his finger at an invisible force. He picked up the papers. "Donovan Cobb!" He shook his fists into the air. He wasn't dressed as the Joker this time around. He was dressed as Jason Voorhees with a traditional white hockey mask. Roy was large. He believed he fit the part well. "You know what I'm doing, Donovan! Don't you!" Roy had connections at SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. He was able to acquire the Patton comics Donovan was working on. Roy saw his sketches of the Joker, Jesus riding a dinosaur, and Jason Voorhees dancing in a forest. "You can see me, Donovan! And I know this!"

Weeks went by. It was the Fourth of July. The crew of Riddle Rattlers flew commercial on an Air St Thomas flight to Bermuda. Vance Boyle was seated next to Dorian Sampson. Vance had the window at the left wing. He looked across the clear blue sky. The clouds underneath looked like large cotton balls. He commented, "I half expect to see a gremlin out there." He turned to Dorian.

Dorian had been chewing on complimentary peanuts. "That was one of my favorite Twilight Zones." He looked across the aisle. Michelle Morris was snoring. "This project has turned out to be good. I really liked the *Zone of Silence*. I really did. I thought we would meet up with aliens." He pushed the idea out of his mind. "I fell in love with Cora, you know?"

"What?" Vance was surprised by the candor. "Explain! I

don't get it." He flagged down a stewardess. "Seltzer water? Please?"

"She was flirting with me in Utah." He looked back across the aisle. He wanted to make sure Michelle was really sleeping. He was ashamed for what he was about to say. "Her pussy. She kept pointing it at me." Dorian sweated and his mouth became dry. "Propensity. You're a scientist and so am I. You know about standard deviation." Heather Mathis was seated a few rows behind them. She taught English at Emory Middle School and Dorian was sure she would know the right words to describe what he was trying to get across. "She was wearing jeans, of course. Her stance was always open when she faced me. She'd be talking to Flynn or Doug and I knew somehow she was thinking of me. She pointed her hips in my direction nearly at all times. She wanted me to think of her." Dorian felt drips fall from his armpits. *"She wanted to echo in my head."*

"Why, Dorian? Why?" Vance shook off the question. He recalled a circumstance he was in. "Do you remember Miss Kipton?" All of a sudden, Vance felt flush. "Emily Kipton? The new sociology teacher?" Vance believed Dorian wanted to back out of the conversation. "She was flirting with me *heavily* this past February."

"February?" Dorian pondered the month. "February?" Dorian asked again. "What gives? I missed it. You haven't mentioned it." He finished his peanuts.

"You remember the teachers' lounge? How it was decorated? Cupid shooting arrows? Hearts? 'Be my Valentine' hung over the doorway?" Vance took off his eye glasses and considered how he would explain. "You guys weren't there. It was only me and her. Fourteenth of February. She was wearing an Emory Middle School sweatshirt. You know the one."

"I have one. We all have one. I know it. Get on." Dorian thought about his own story. He had the urge to butt in so he wouldn't lose his own focus. He sat still.

"She faced me." Vance became mildly aroused as he reflected. "She took it off." He could see her clearly in his mind. Beautiful lady. Probably the youngest teacher at the school. Still trying to find her way. Still trying to fit in. Still trying to make friends. "She lifted her sweatshirt up above her head. It froze. Her midriff was exposed. Her belly." Vance suppressed his feelings. "Probably three seconds. She twisted to the side so I could see the outline of her breasts. *Pokies*. No bra. Just a plain t-shirt under."

"So?" Dorian asked. Each guy had a story to tell. Each was

full of his own worth. *I'm special. Not you.* "What's the big deal? Did she come over and stroke you?"

"You don't get it." Vance thought about the school's PE teacher. "Tom Oakford. You know him?" He waited for a response. "He tells his football players to get in the heads of the other team. *Talk shit.* Make sure the opposing quarterback has nightmares of our linebackers. Stay in their heads because half of winning is psychological." Vance saw a blank expression. "She was wearing a special shirt underneath." He waited. "You matter. That's what was written on it."

"So?" Dorian said again.

"You matter. I'm a chemistry teacher. Under the caption, there's this atom. Get it? A chemistry joke. And it's Valentine's. A message." Vance thought about his mental reaction that day. *She doesn't understand valence shells. That Bohr diagram is a hideous misnomer. Electrons don't spin around the nucleus in that manner.* "She walked up to me. Told a joke."

By now, Dorian was curious. "What's the joke?"

"I'd tell you a chemistry joke but all the good ones are Argon." Vance laughed to himself.

Dorian chuckled. "I admit, that's good." He wanted to tell his own story about Cora but ceded. Dorian felt confirmed. He wasn't alone.

"If I could freeze a moment in time, that would be it. If I could live *Groundhog Day*, that would be it. If I could wake up to one day over and over, that would be the day. If I could explore my options time and time again, I would go to that moment." Vance thought of the Twilight Zone again. "The man goes insane. The one sitting at the window." Vance looked outside. "In the Twilight Zone movie, there's a little girl seated behind him. *You used to be a normal person!* I think of that over and over." Vance visualized the gremlin at the wing. After the stewardess handed him seltzer water, he said, "If I focus only on that moment, you'd think I'm crazy." He popped open his bottle and drank. The carbonation went down smooth. "She wore other shirts, you know? Did you miss them? Leading up to Valentine's she had a shirt which read: We are the chemists who say Ni. Understand? Ni? As in nickel, the twenty-eighth element of the periodic table? Monty Python reference. She knows I like Python." Vance exhaled a deep sigh. "You think that's all? *Think like a proton and be positive.* That's what she says to me! A sociology teacher with these great

interests in chemistry.”

“How’d it turn out? I gotta admit I missed it. I was in that same lounge as you.” Dorian looked across the aisle. Michelle Morris looked like she was struggling as she slept. *Probably a nightmare*, he thought.

“Fucked up,” Vance responded. “Fucked up really bad!” He collected his thoughts. “Right before we take off from work on Valentine’s—*it was a Friday, keep in mind*—she approached me in the parking lot. ‘I have another joke for you,’ she said to me. ‘What?’ I asked. ‘A neutron walked into a bar and asked how much for a gin and tonic. The bartender replied: *For you no charge.*’”

“I don’t get it,” Dorian said. He thought for a couple of seconds. “Oh! I get it!”

“Yeah. Neutrons have no charge! Only something I’d get!” Vance never told the story of Emily flirting with him because he didn’t think anyone would believe him. He saw himself as a nerd. *A geek*. “What would she see in me? I’m with you, Dorian. But you obviously think Cora had the same feelings toward you.”

“Why didn’t you ask her out?” Dorian wondered. “Why?” He remembered their conversation in the jacuzzi weeks ago. “Are you that stand-offish toward women? Do you not believe any of them can be great? An exception to the rule?”

Vance was proud. “It strokes my ego. You know it does. All the flirting. If I was a Nobel Prize winner, I would have asked her out. I’m a work in progress. At some point, she would have dumped me. I’m sure of it. She’s so pretty.” There was another story to tell. It was related and it had to do with the days after Valentine’s. “You know who has his shit together?”

“Keanu Reeves?” Dorian mused. “Enlighten me.”

“Desmond Severns,” Vance answered. “Taller. Probably smarter. Teaches physics.”

“Oh!” Dorian was losing interest. He wasn’t sure he’d tell his own story. “Bigger cock. Better FICO score. Bigger truck.”

“Do you know he studied at Cornell? I studied at a state school!” Vance was frustrated. “The Monday after Valentine’s, Emily is cold toward me. I was supposed to ask her out. That’s what I realize. She’s wearing this t-shirt, but it’s not chemistry-oriented. A stick-figure ball on a plateau sloping down to a lower plateau. *I have potential*, it says.”

“So? I teach biology. What are you saying?” Dorian thought

of Cora Salazar. He was in love.

“So? Energy is neither created nor destroyed! It changes form! Chaos theory! It changes from potential energy to kinetic energy! She’s breaking up with me!” Vance felt his heart race.

“Breaking up with you?” Dorian felt bad. *I have an imaginary relationship, too. I shouldn’t talk.*

“In her mind, we were an item. I know it in my bones. It was supposed to be consummated in the physical sense. And when I failed to ask her out on Valentine’s, she moved on. Desmond was her guy. She told me another joke on that Monday. ‘*What did the nuclear physicist have for lunch?*’ I shrugged. ‘*Fission chips!*’ I laughed, actually, but I realized she’s moving away from me. Then she wore a new shirt on Tuesday. There’s a stick figure person snoozing in a bed. ‘*Newton’s first law. A body at rest wants to stay at rest. Now go away.*’” Vance remembered how defeated he felt.

It hit Dorian. “I believe you, my friend. I believe you went through something like me.” He thought it was his turn to tell his own tale. “Cora? She pointed her box at me. Consistently. Sometimes, it was lifting her leg and setting a foot on a rock while as she scribbled notes. Consistently. Utah. White Sands. Chihuahua.” Dorian lusted for her by the time the *Zone of Silence* piece wrapped. “Nancy O’ Dell. She used to stand like that. And Hilary Duff. I remember those two. Open stance. Like Brian Downing from the California Angels. *Rattle in your head.* Like linebackers are supposed to do to quarterbacks.” A few years later, Dorian Sampson would watch a monologue from comedian Dane Cook on Saturday Night Live. *I saw a young boy eating an ice cream cone. I smashed it in his face. You know that kid is going to remember me when he’s fifty.* “Her eyes, brother. Her eyes.” Dorian slipped into a trance. “Unnatural feel. I could tell she was around even when I focused on something else. She had a presence.”

“What do we do?” Vance asked. “I love women. I know you don’t believe it, but I do. I want everything to be right. I don’t want to be part of a broken relationship.”

You have to take chances, Dorian thought. *You’re too brittle.* He guarded his opinion. “We’re all part of this drama, Vance. Love is blind. It strikes when you least expect.” The group touched down in Bermuda. The other two points of the Triangle were in Miami and Puerto Rico. A whole lot of shit gone wrong. Boats. Planes. The whole thing. They were led to the southern shore. “What the fuck?”

Dorian asked. He was staring at a blue and yellow circus tent pitched fifty yards from breaking ocean waves.

John Leonard was there to greet them. He was kind. "We have a place for you." Dorian Sampson, Corey Smith, Vance Boyle and Heather Mathis walked behind him. A butler-looking guy with an eye spectacle pulled open the tent for them. There were a couple of elephants inside. There was a monkey roaming around dressed up for beach boardwalk work. He carried a tin cup. "You will sit in those chairs." There were four dark Mahogany wooden chairs sitting side-by-side. Behind them, there were twenty white plastic chairs. Nothing fancy. John Leonard clapped. From the back end of the tent, many scantily clad women walked through. They were all beautiful and wore skimpy, revealing togas.

"What is this?" Corey Smith asked. He felt aroused. The women sat behind the four chairs. "What the hell?"

The four middle school teachers sat. "Did I do something wrong? It feels..." Heather Mathis was rarely at a loss for words. "Wrong. It feels wrong."

John Leonard reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver whistle. He blew it.

A midget entered the room. It was Spencer Lafayette. He was dressed as a miniature baseball umpire. He carried brown ropes with him. He tied the teachers to their chairs. "You're going to like this!" he told them. He got next to Heather's ear and breathed inside of it. "I think you're pretty," he whispered. She was creeped out but Spencer didn't care. "It's my job," he told her. He licked her left cheek. He watched a tear roll down. Spencer stormed off.

As the midget left the tent, Preston Bancroft walked in slowly. There were three girls with him. They walked side-by-side. Preston spoke to the four in the chairs. "You think you did something wrong?" He strutted around them. "You've done nothing wrong. You passed any expectations we ever had for you."

Corey was trembling. "My rope is a bit tight. It's cutting off circulation."

"Shut up," Preston told him. He walked around. Sometimes, staring high into the tent's vertical beams and sometimes watching the elephants being led around by trainers. "Do you know who Donovan Cobb is? You should know by now. There is a war going on."

"Donovan was committed to a mental institution. Mister Leonard told us. He was accused of stripping down naked and going

for officers' guns. He shouted something about the power of Apollo. He was going to destroy our world before they took him down." Heather Mathis felt ashamed. "So the story goes."

"Donovan is my best friend. Yes." Preston licked his lips. "He's held up in an institution. Yes." He felt queasy. "Something has come up that I did not expect."

"What is it, sir?" Vance Boyle was the only teacher not in fear. *There's rhyme and reason for this.* "What are you going through?"

"The Bermuda Triangle swallowed one of our guys. It was a couple of days ago. I wasn't too close to him but I was tight with his father." Preston pinched the top of his nose then rubbed his eyes. "Out there somewhere. Like it knew you were coming." He thought about his daughters who walked in with him and stood in silence. He felt like a lunatic but everyone knew it was true. "Horace Streets. CIA. That's how I know him. But it wasn't Horace that got swallowed." Preston turned away from the group. "James, his son. He was on a fishing boat. Storm came. Out of nowhere." Preston cried. The group couldn't see his tears. He wiped with his sleeve then turned around. "This is way too real for me."

Dorian Sampson calmed down. "I heard about your group. You're one of the last Contrarians. I get it." He thought about the rope burn around his wrists. "We know you're crazy. But you have every right to be."

Preston collected his thoughts. "This is your initiation. *It's your hazing.* Light. Very light. I've seen worse and we played softball with you at the *Zone of Silence*. You must be heuristic, though. You must walk in our shoes. You have to see through the same filters." His wife, Tabitha, was nowhere around. His three daughters provided support. Myrna was the oldest at eighteen, Michelle was the middle at sixteen, and Jodie was the youngest at thirteen. "Let's go," he told them. He grabbed Myrna's hand and they walked out together in a chain.

The night of their hazing, Donovan Cobb was wide awake on his bed. His bunkie was a guy named Arthur Ennis. They hadn't talked much and Arthur was only around for a couple of weeks. "You want to know what I'm in for?" Arthur felt the softness of his pillow. He was sure it was stuffed with feathers. "I'm so glad they didn't send me to state prison. They do that to a lot of people."

"You? I have you pegged as meymhem, somehow. You got mad. You got enraged. You pierced your bare hands into somebody's

belly and pulled out their guts in front of them. You pulled them out while they were still alive so they could see what ripped-out intestines looked like.” Donovan’s mind was sedated with pills. He wanted sleep. Physically, it’s what his body called for. Something was stronger at work. No way to sleep.

“Creative,” Arthur responded. Both men were on their backs. The door was ajar and hallway lights provided a little bit of illumination. “Not me, though.”

“The guy before you?” Donovan turned to his side. “That was his story. Pulled out someone’s guts.” All of a sudden, Donovan was sure he would conk out.

“My story?” Arthur licked his lips. “It was a video game.” He was proud of the path which brought him into a mental hospital intended for the criminally deranged. “Polybius.” He stared at the ceiling. “You ever hear of it?”

“Hear of it?!” Donovan was intrigued. “I’m a video game designer, my friend! *Pool of Radiance!* I worked on that, son of a bitch! You don’t talk to me about video games thinking I know nothing.” He was now frustrated. *It’s all talk inside this joint*, Donovan thought. *So many tall tales and no way to prove anything you say.* “Polybius? I’ve heard of it.” *It’s the video game that drives you crazy*, Donovan thought. “I’m just not sure it’s real.”

Arthur Ennis finally turned to his side in order to face Donovan. “It’s real, alright. You give me fifteen minutes of your time and I can prove it.”

“Prove it?” Donovan laughed. “I’ll give you my lunch tomorrow if you do!”

“You’re on!” Arthur was happy. “Here’s the caveat. I won’t be around to accept your payment! I do this for pride!” He realized his voice was loud and he quieted down. “They gave us meds a half hour ago. My proof is this. After ten minutes, they’ll get antsy. They’re reading my mind as we speak. They’re playing it off, though. They don’t want me talking about Polybius. *They’re wired.* Telepathic. They want to stop me!” His voice was getting loud again.

“Acute paranoia? Is that part of your diagnosis? I’m getting good at this, by the way.” Donovan opted for laying on his back again. “Go ahead, sir!”

A million things whipped through Arthur’s head. “Yes. Paranoia. Other things, but I’ll prove it! In fifteen minutes, they’ll come in and say they gave me the wrong medication. That’s why they

took me away from my last bunkie. They'll grab me, sedate me in front of you, then escort me out. You'll never see me again."

"And if we stop talking?" Donovan came across his share of strange characters over the past few months.

"Doesn't matter, Donovan." It was time for weirdness. "I know you're girlfriend's name." Arthur watched Donovan's face and saw he was nervous. "Sakata. Sakata Toro."

"Fuck." Donovan capitulated. "Fuck." *Sakata Tara. Close. So fuckin' close.* "You have ten minutes to explain."

"First of all, I can be a mole. Right? It's a natural reaction. You think I'm a mole. Now you're the one that's paranoid. But I know something about you. You've seen it. You've experienced it. You know it's possible. Not only is it possible, it happens on a regular basis. Supernatural stuff."

"You're wasting time. They'll be here to grab you any moment. Polybius, my friend. If it matters, tell me about Polybius. I know some things about it, but it's rumor." Donovan was good about not swallowing sedatives over the weeks. He stuffed a few under his mattress. He thought he might need them very soon.

"Atari was the best video game manufacturer of all time," Arthur explained. "Everyone knows this. I was born in 1982 when the twenty-six hundred reached it's peak. The following year was known for the collapse of the video game industry. No one knew there could be a recovery." Even though there was ten minutes to tell his tale, Arthur felt calm. He slowed down instead of speeding up. "Atari decided to go into phone modems like Commodore. These phone modems let video game players compete against each other. Problem? They were run by DARPA. *That's the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency!* It's a government agency and to ninety-nine percent of all people, it didn't matter. They sifted, though. They scanned people. And they worked closely with CERN."

"CERN?" *Why the fuck am I in this joint?* Donovan wondered. *Preston is out there. Freedom. He has freedom. I chose to "fight the fight" and I'm locked up with this total loser.* "CERN?" Donovan asked again. "You get my snack all week if they don't nab you in ten minutes."

"Fuck off." Arthur considered telling Donovan he was bullshitting. He was just trying to sound interesting. A fire was in Arthur's belly. "*Organisation européenne pour la recherche nucléaire.*" Arthur Ennis wasn't French but he was sure he nailed the

accent. "It's foreign, okay?"

"I'm getting some shut eye, guy. Tired. We'll continue this tomorrow." Donovan rolled on his side away from Arthur.

"Thelma. *Thelma Rudolph*. You married her." Arthur watched Donovan whip around to face him. "I have telepathy, Donovan."

Thelma Rhett, asshole. Say her real name, he thought. "You have five more minutes before they take you away."

"You keep guarding your thoughts. I can always hear the first name. The last name, not so much." Arthur didn't care. "CERN. They built an atom smasher. *The Proton-Antiproton Collider*. It opened a dimension door. Demons. Angels. They walk with us. Moreso than it's been in a long, long time. And they're building something bigger. *The Large Hadron Collider*. They're in the middle of construction as we speak." Arthur was resigned. If they took him away, he said enough. He was at peace.

No one came.

"Get on with Polybius, asshole." Donovan believed the guy was not deluded nor paranoid. "Get on with it!"

"Polybius? You ever play Junior Pac-Man?" Arthur was at ease.

"Fuck you, asshole!" Donovan sensed an up tempo pace of orderlies walking by.

"Everyone knows about the ninth key in Pac-Man." It was the most popular game in the early eighties. "Unless you were stationed in Siberia."

"Polybius! Get on with it!" Donovan did not like his surroundings. He wanted more control.

"Miss Pac-Man has it's own idiosyncrasies. It's own patterns. You know? How far can you get in Junior Pac-Man? Walk into an arcade. Put yourself in a time machine, and go to 1983. No one's playing Junior Pac-Man. It looks like Midway got full of itself and tried to tap a resource above and beyond what it was supposed to. *Blood from a stone*. Greed. Human greed. That's what all the critics said." Arthur Ennis believed in gut checks. He was having one. "The eighth screen of Junior Pac-Man delivers a secret message. You have to know the right pattern and you have to know where to look." Arthur no longer believed Donovan was worth talking to. "It's his initials. In the lower right of the screen as Junior Pac-Man is dying. You know the right pattern to run, you die at a certain place, the video game

designer's initials flash for a few seconds." Arthur pondered the motivation. "Good move to get you laid, I guess."

Donovan laughed. "Yes. I suppose."

"Polybius was way beyond this, Donovan." For the first time in the conversation, Arthur felt fear. "It connected to the CERN particle accelerator. *It knew dimension doors*. It was connected to the Darpanet, as it was called back in the day. It had motion sensors and infrared mechanisms. *Cameras*. Polybius would play as a regular video game as long as people were around. *Robotron 2084*. You ever check it? It was much like that. And Berzerk." Arthur thought he might be losing Donovan so he got back on point. "It knew things, obviously. It knew there was a hidden wallet in the alley behind the arcade stuffed with cash. It knew how to get you into your favorite concert. And just like a classic seductress, it kept you coming back for more."

"What did you do?" Donovan demanded. "It's all innocent until now."

"I stabbed people for Polybius, Donovan. There's this mafia lord in the game who you wind up indebted to. *Roy Thurman*. Looks like a cross between Max Headroom and Lex Luthor." Arthur's face was flush. "They got my parents' credit card numbers. I was allowed into bath houses. I got weed." He knew it was a matter of seconds. "San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. Donovan? There are many dupe Polybius machines. There are only a few connected to the special modems."

It was clockwork. The orderlies came in. There were two ladies. One looked like Kim Fields from *the Facts of Life* and the other resembled Diane Ladd from *Alice*. "Kiss my grits," Donovan said.

The black orderly took Arthur by the forearm. "Sir? It seems we may have given you the wrong medication earlier." She tugged him. "We must take you for blood tests."

Arthur stood with the lady. He felt defeated. He told Donovan, "I am King Arthur. In a prior life, that's who I was!"

The redhead explained, "This is standard operating procedure, Mister Cobb. It will only take a few seconds." She put her palm on Arthur's shoulder and escorted him out.

The next morning after breakfast, Donovan Cobb was caught in a mad fury. He started a new set of comics. Iconic abstraction muddled with symbolic expression. Aspect-to-aspect transitions in the spirit of Osamu Tezuka. Caricaturization, parody, and dim humor.

Emphasis on shading and darkness. He didn't realize it, but he achieved a hundred percent astral projection. He was watching the four teachers from Emory Middle School as they boarded the sea vessel, *the Lucky Dragon Nine*. He sketched Heather Mathis with a large head and little body. "Bobblehead look never hurt anyone," Donovan whispered to an empty room. The orderlies hadn't brought Arthur Ennis back and they hadn't brought in a replacement. He drew an exaggerated bosom on her. She smirked at Vance Boyle. *Hey there, hot stuff*, was written in her thought bubble.

Thousands of miles to the east, the crew of the *Riddle Rattlers* actually boarded a ship. Vance told Heather, "The lightning." He pointed across the sky. "It's horizontal. You ever see that?"

Rain was light at the beginning and became heavier and heavier. "I don't like this weather," Heather told Vance.

The large ship wobbled and the deck became drenched. "It's a good paycheck we have coming!" Corey Smith carried his luggage and continued on past Heather and Vance. He followed a guide downstairs into sleeping quarters.

The clouds were dark and the thunder was monstrous. "If we die, it's tonight." Dorian Sampson smiled. He tried to joke. "If we make it past this, we'll have tales to tell for a long, long time." He walked in the direction of Corey Smith.

"We should join them!" Vance yelled to Heather.

"I'm not leaving until we see Moby Dick!" Heather Mathis was giddy.

Thousands of miles to the west, Donovan Cobb drew a large whale behind the Lucky Dragon Nine.

The Contrarians were a disbanded group of people but a few of them managed to stay together. Horace Streets came out of hiding. He walked with John Leonard. "My son was swallowed by the *Devil's Triangle!*" He looked at Heather and Vance. He never met the teachers before. "My name is Horace!"

"Pleased to meet you!" Heather extended her hand to shake. "We are all rocked to our foundations!" The gusts of wind reached forty-five miles per hour and rain pelted her face. "I'm just a middle school teacher, Horace! I am not used to this!"

Vance took Horace's hand after Heather. "Pleased to meet you, sir!"

"My daughter is here! I don't like to put her in hazardous situations!" Horace yelled to compete with the wind's howl. "Her

brother is gone!” He shielded his eyes. “James got swallowed but his son is here! *Thaddeus!* Eleven-year-old wiz kid!” He knew he couldn’t handle the outdoors much longer. Another horizontal bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. “Let’s continue this downstairs, can we?” Twenty minutes later, they met up. The hunt for exotic animals owner, Connor Milton, was not successful during the trip to Mexico. Other former Contrarians were contacted and brought in. “I was on the run,” Horace told the middle school teachers. They sat around an oval dining table sharing a bottle of red wine. “*The Abyss.*” He could tell they weren’t sure what he was getting across. “When the rich and powerful go into hiding, they call it the Abyss. Sometimes, one of us gets abducted. It’s the same. *The Abyss.*”

“I don’t want to be a downer,” Corey Smith said. “You guys? You rich folks? You can’t take care of yourselves too well.” He raised his wine glass then drank. “Just an observation.”

“No worries,” Horace said. He wasn’t offended. *Imbecile*, he thought to himself of Corey. *You have no idea what we go through on a day-to-day basis.* “There are underwater pyramids off the coast of Cuba. Two thousand feet below the surface. This is part of your assignment. Preston Bancroft will sit with us and explain more. Not sure what he’s doing at the moment.” Horace poured himself more wine. “The Bermuda Triangle is amazing but there are stories to be told the public has never heard. Yes, we will be looking for my son, James. Preston let me know that part of your job is to take care of side tasks. You don’t need to worry about me, though.” He focused on Corey. “There are hidden Mayan ruins under thick rainforest canopies in Guatemala. We will get to this. Sixty thousand structures the public knows nothing about.”

“Sir?” Corey Smith felt insulted. “I know you guys are special.” He now felt embarrassed. “I get full of myself. I apologize.”

“Forget about it.” For Horace, it was like talking to a young child. Patience was required. “Not far from Sarajevo, the world’s largest step pyramids are hidden away. Only my secret group of Contrarians knows about this!” Now, it was Horace who felt insulted. “*The Pyramid of the Moon, the Pyramid of the Sun and some other one.* Not sure it has a name just yet. They are older than the Pyramids of Giza and they are larger!”

“With all due respect,” Heather said. “How have they remained hidden?”

“They look like mountains. They are covered with lush trees.

Green fauna. And all you have to do is show up with the *Riddle Rattlers* and you all look like geniuses. All the while, other people made the discoveries.” Horace thought about his daughter, Vivian. She was away at her room with her nephew, Thaddeus. Horace liked Vance, Dorian, and Heather. It was Corey. *Haughty*. Came across as haughty.

The boat shook and wobbled. Vance Boyle offered a bit of trivia. “Decades ago, they discovered sixteen pyramids in Xian, China. I know this because of an article I read on carbon dating. Maybe we can go there? It’s a personal fascination of mine.”

“Where’s the freaking midget?” Horace called to the sky. He was on his fourth glass of wine and longed for the company of Spencer Lafayette.

From the far end of the dining room, Preston Bancroft entered alone and walked briskly. He joined Horace Streets, John Leonard, and the teachers. “I am a traveler of both time and space,” he said.

Only Horace knew what he was talking about. “It’s happening.” All muscles in his face went totally numb.

“The compasses are swirling. We know the signs.” The sea vessel rocked and Preston thought of the *Poseidon Adventure*. “Any moment now, we’re going through the portal.”

Dorian Sampson was at a loss for words. Preston Bancroft was the producer of *Riddle Rattlers*. He was involved in cinema. It felt like a practical joke. “Hey, guys. I went along with your shit in New Mexico. I agreed to be filmed and I attested to the credibility of alien life forms, specifically *Greys*. I signed waivers allowing you to broadcast my face to billions of people around the world.” Dorian was a tiny bit miffed. “Can you cut out the bullshit? When the cameras aren’t rolling? I understand you are prompting us to get into character. *Whatever*. We take on our alter egos. But can you cut out the bullshit?”

Miles away to the west, Donovan drew them talking.

Preston humored Dorian. “Did you watch the Twilight Zone when the young girl is yelling and no one can find her? She’s inside a dimension door.” He reconsidered. “Forget that. *Think of the United States military*. In 1943 as World War II is going on, they took a shot at time travel. *The Philadelphia Experiment*. They made an entire destroyer disappear! Guys got caught with their torsos snatched in different realms. The USS Eldridge. Our planet is filled with vortices. Do you know what these are? Imagine the world is a soccer ball but

instead of pentagons and hexagons, it's all motherfucking triangles. There are ten points bouncing between the *Tropic of Capricorn* and the *Tropic of Cancer*. The places where they meet don't obey regular physics! We're in one of those places now!"

Dorian realized it wasn't a prank. "Tell me more. We're in the Bermuda Triangle. What else is there?"

"There's a spot east of Rio de Janeiro." Preston grabbed the half-full wine bottle and chugged. "The Pyramids of Giza. The sea between Madagascar and mainland Africa. Indus River near Karachi in Pakistan. Wharton Basin west of Australia. The Dragon's Triangle southeast of Japan. Loyalty Islands north of New Zealand. Hamakulia. Volcanoes in Hawaii."

John Leonard added, "There are twelve vortices if you count the North and South Poles."

Urgency was strong. Preston rambled. "Vinny Testeverde was color blind. *Color blind!* Does this mean purple doesn't exist? No! *Drop Dead Fred* was such a wonderful movie! Produced by Paul Webster, a buddy of mine! *Elizabeth Cronin could see Fred but no one else could.* Except for other kids with imaginary friends! Don't you see? And I had such a big crush on Phoebe Cates. I got her to drive limo when my pal, Donovan Cobb, was initiated into the Contrarian Council of Nine in 1983. Some musicians have perfect pitch but others don't. Get it? Quantum physics explains so very much. Marshall McLuhan knew this would happen, people! Technology has become an extension of our nervous systems! *We are wired today more intensely than we ever have been!*"

"I still don't get it." Dorian tried hard to comprehend. "These are wives' tales and you're making it out to be much, much, much more."

Donovan penciled the Lucky Dragon Nine vanishing into thin air. The Bermuda Triangle swallowed it.

Lights flickered on and off. John Leonard said, "I felt it."

Preston confirmed the belief. "Walk outside. Even in this storm, you will notice the difference."

"*Screw you!*" Dorian Sampson knew the storm was getting stronger. "I'm heading to bed." He took off and the rest stayed and chatted with nervous quips and phrases. When Dorian woke up early the next morning, he headed up to the deck alone. The sky was violet and the sea was calm. Nine pterodactyls flew in a V-shaped formation over his head.

The first reaction of Roy Thurman was to phone Donald Trump. The *Lucky Dragon Nine* had only vanished for six minutes before Roy knew about it. Roy reached Donald's messaging service. "I have a business proposal for you, sir, worth billions of dollars. You call me. *Soon.*" There were first-round college football stars who reached the professional level with incredible hype. Ryan Leaf was one of them. Every now and then, there were busts. On the flip end, teams accepted undrafted free agents into their camps. Drew Pearson, for example. A wide-receiver-converted-from-quarterback taken by the Dallas Cowboys in the seventies. Three Super Bowls. "Desmond Severns? I might need your service," Roy Thurman spoke into an answering machine. "Physics. *I like your physics.* I have an interest in your service and I have a fat wallet with the good attitudes." Roy wanted a partnership. Trump was akin to a first overall pick in the NFL draft. Severns would be like an undrafted walk on.

The Bermuda Triangle ranged from Miami to Puerto Rico to Bermuda. The Dragon's Triangle expanded from Guam to the northern Philippines to Yamatai Island east of southern Japan. From 1952 to 1954, Japan lost five military ships in the area. Since then, hundreds of fishing boats went missing. The legend of strange occurrences dated back since ancient times. Desmond Severns met up with Roy Thurman at Yamatai-koku, also known as Yamaichi-koku, a couple of days after he was contacted. "I suppose you read my thesis papers on various dimension doorways." Desmond was greeted with a handshake upon meeting with Roy outside a modest coastal cantina hut.

"Yes I did!" Roy thought about some of the declarations. "*Portal to Hell* was about Bermuda and *Dragons From Nowhere* was about this place. Yamatai, the lost kingdom of Japan, has been ruled by a female deity known as the Sun Queen. She commanded a squadron of samurais and she could control the weather. During World War II, the Japanese believed they could tap into her powers and that's when they lost their vessels."

"Yes, I wrote about that." A young lady brought Desmond a hot cup of coffee. They were seated outside on tiki furniture. Bamboo stalks sprouted from a nearby marsh. Desmond was sure they extracted their own natural sugar from the surrounding cane. "My research isn't so centered around myth and folklore, though. I studied Carl Sagan. They say time is the fourth dimension but, in the world of actual physics, I know of no less than eleven dimensions. *Real ones.*"

"Explain." Roy reached for edamame beans.

"Imagine we live in a two dimensional world. A place as flat as paper." Desmond lifted up a napkin and stretched it out in a horizontal plane. "Imagine a round ball moving through this plane from top to bottom. If we live in this two dimensional world, we would not see the ball for what it is. We would witness a small point entering our world. That point would turn into a line as the ball traveled downward. It would get wider and wider until the ball was intersected at it's midpoint—at *its equator*. Then? The line would get smaller and smaller until it became a single point."

"Then it would disappear." Roy was amused.

"That's why we have crop circles, sir!" Desmond was serious. "They are 3D representations on a 2D plane. Aliens send us signals. This is one of their methods." He didn't want to discuss aliens, just yet. "I explained how a 3D object looks traveling into a 2D universe. Now, I'll explain how a 4D object appears in our 3D world."

"I know the name of this." Roy tried to think. "*Cataract*." It was on the tip of his tongue.

"Close enough," Desmond offered. "*Tesseract*. It looks like a cube inside a cube. But we need time to understand its qualities and if we saw it in animation, it would appear as an illusion of a cube undoing itself."

"I guess you had to be there!" Roy laughed at his own joke. When he was done, he asked, "You studied at Cornell and you could be teaching at a better school in a better city. Why middle school in one of America's random suburbs?"

Desmond was caught off guard by the question. "Why did Mother Teresa feed the poor in Calcutta? It's a good question. Best I can say is it's a calling. *I'm supposed to be there*. There's a nice little bar down the street from where I live. *The Wooden Nickel*. Live music. A whole lot of classic rock 'n' roll. These guys could've made it big as recording artists but it wasn't in their veins. They were happy to stay with the locals."

"You took a gal named Emily Kipton there this past St Patrick's Day. Sweet little thing." Roy watched Desmond's face turn red as a tomato. "Banged her afterward."

"It was good sex," Desmond admitted. *What is going on here?* he wondered. "You did your research on my collegiate work. I know that. You've also done some combing through of my personal life." He wasn't sure what he was in the middle of.

"What can you tell me about Corey Smith? He taught history

with you at Emory.” Roy poked the tips of his fingers together.

“He’s the first one I know of that stumbled across the Illuminati. AOL chat rooms. It was innocent at first. Then he started going to Starbucks with a few other teachers. Dorian Sampson, Vance Boyle, Heather Mathis, Tom Oakford and Brett Everson. *Creepy conversations*. Occult themes and tin foil hat material. *Nine eleven was an inside job*. That kind of talk. I went to a couple of these gatherings and Dorian, the biology teacher, tasked me with proving the Twin Towers went down with explosives in a sophisticated controlled demolition. *We’ve got to tell the world what we know!* That tone. I’m like, *I want to keep my job and the last thing I want is to look like a nut case!*” Desmond shook his head in disbelief. “I wasn’t the only one who got cold feet and backed out of their meetings. Oakford and Everson did, too!”

Roy Thurman unbuttoned his shirt and exposed his left nipple. “See this?” There was a dime-sized triangle tattooed on his upper-left chest. “Illuminati.” A couple of dry laughs. He pulled out a brown leather wallet. “Do you know who Salmon Chase is?” He opened his wallet and pulled out bills. There were twenty of them. He handed them to Desmond.

“Holy fucking crap!” He held them and spread them on the table. “Is this?”

“Salmon Chase is on the ten thousand dollar bill. That is the money I promised you.” Roy watched Desmond study the two hundred thousand dollars. “Salmon Chase ran for president in 1860. Lost against Abraham Lincoln but became his treasury secretary and popularized American greenback money. He’s a cousin of mine. Our families have an intimate history together.”

Desmond Severns rolled up the money and put it in his front pocket. “I’m not so high on pride. I think you know that. I tested as a sociopath. I have a certain amoral quality which people like you admire. I’m a hired gun. A yes man. Fuckers that hate me call me a brown noser. I think you know the truth, though.” The view across the sea was serene and the Sun began to reflect upon the waters like a drug store post card.

“I love villains, Desmond. I have my whole life. I emulate them.” Roy Thurman considered an anecdote. “Superman is one of the biggest pussies ever imagined.”

“What?” Desmond was surprised. He tried to think of something relatable but was unable to.

“He’s this amazing piece of shit. I’ve thought this since I was young. He has these outrageous superpowers but he is crippled by stupid psychology. *He cares what people think*. He should be banging Lois Lane. You know that! But his overlords gave him a choice! Live as a normal guy with the girl you love or fight villains to maintain the admiration of the feeble masses.”

“It’s kind of noble, isn’t it?” Desmond didn’t want to lose Roy. “I teach my classes more than just physics, by the way. Actually, I segue physics to everyday life situations. For example, Newton’s third law is that every action has an opposite and equal reaction. *That’s karma*. That’s what I tell them. Even though it’s true in the discipline of physics, it goes for social interactions, too.”

Roy moved on. “Do you know who Magneto is? X-Men?”

“Yes sir! Special prison. They couldn’t keep him contained. They had to build a world exclusively of glass and plastics.” *I’m not talking to a regular person*, Desmond concluded.

“In the world I exist in, that’s the only way it happens. White collar crimes happen as much as blue collar crimes but we never, ever get prosecuted. Actually, we do but it’s only when one big shot betrays another. We built this specialized prison for my nemesis, Donovan Cobb.” Roy Thurman considered the comics he seized. “He has special attributes that I’ve never, ever seen in anyone else. A thorn in my side.”

“I’ve heard of Donovan. I’m pretty sure everyone has. He’s an underground hero. His comics are widely distributed online. Usually, the websites hosting his images are shut down in days. I think that makes him more popular.” Desmond’s mind turned back to Emily Kipton. “How did you know I had sex with the sociology teacher?”

“I know a lot of things.” Roy thought about banking. “Salmon Chase? The guy on the ten thousand dollar bills I handed to you? He’s the bedrock of Chase Manhattan. We are devouring idiots left and right. It’s not just puny nobodies. We are devouring banks. *Small banks*. It’s a consolidation of sorts. Only the strongest survive. We review your records. Your spending habits. We know you were in a *Motel 6* near Cal State San Bernardino on the night of March seventeenth this year. So was Emily. She used her debit card at Jack in the Box across the street ten minutes before you checked in. We could have arrested you, you know?”

Desmond was offended. “*Arrested me?* For sleeping with an attractive lady I work with?”

“For drinking and driving. You had five green beers before you left the Wooden Nickel. You drove three miles and that’s more than enough to nab you. I own the cops in most cities. I have FBI connections. You got by because of my grace. And my vengeance.” Roy Thurman expanded, “As you were getting it on with that teacher, those other four teachers remained tight and traveled up to Big Bear to meet with a rival group of mine. It’s a disbanded secret society known as the *Contrarians*.”

Desmond felt relieved. “So I got laid because you’re trying to get revenge of one of them! I get it! It makes sense, now!” He remembered Emily in bed. Beautiful, mid-twenties, almost desperate. “She talked a lot of the chemistry teacher, Mister Boyle. Said they had something going on but he broke it off. Turned out to be a lie. After sleeping with her, I asked Vance if something was going on. *Nothing*. I might be shady but I’m not a total loser.”

“You gave her pleasure.” Roy reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “*Cubans*. We will smoke these.” He handed one over. He spit on his fingers then rubbed saliva on the shaft. “Wet yours. Have you ever smoked one?”

“No sir! Can’t say I have!” Desmond was happy. “You have to understand the dichotomy of the humanity we live in. We’re civilized, yet we’re wild animals. Dorian Sampson, the biologist, has a way of framing things in such a primal manner. They talk the talk but they never act on it. We are meant to connect.” He took a flick lighter from Roy. He lit his Cuban and puffed. “I need pussy, mister. I’m not ever going to sit around like a dweeb!”

“Emily Kipton was a nice girl. Do you know we have more records than Chase Manhattan provides? You fuckers go to computer dating services and think we don’t understand your entire personal profiles.” Roy Thurman was ecstatic with his stogie. He inhaled. “Emily wanted a nice man. *Cock size doesn’t matter*. That’s what she wrote on one of her candid profiles. *I want a man who loves me. I want him to be silly*. And she thought that guy was Vance Boyle and she gave him every chance to make a move. After Valentine’s Day, she had a change of heart.”

“The physics shirts. I noticed a difference.” A light bulb went off in Desmond’s mind. “Saki? Tell me they have something alcoholic.”

Roy Thurman clapped to their waitress. “We’ll take your best saki. Maybe a couple of bottles of Sapporo while you’re at it!”

"I know what women want," Desmond confided. "*Nine inches*. I am endowed. I never wanted it to be a weapon. I mean against other dudes. I studied physics. I wanted women to like me for my mind. I am brilliant in mathematics. I know how far our universe goes. If I settle with a woman, it's because she understands my brain. I know how to please a woman. I learned on accident during college. I didn't mean to, but I learned."

"Confidence!" The waitress was quick to return with a couple of bottles of Sapporo. "More than your endowment and your brain, women want confidence. I have a deep pocket, for example. I know I can buy people off. *Confidence*. They love it."

"Yes. I lost my pride. During my sophomore year of college, a morsel of integrity left my body. Landing strips, wild jungles, shaved coin slots, trimmed triangles." Desmond poured his bottled beer into a chilled mug.

"Pussies. You are drawn to pussies." It was rare that Roy felt embarrassed but he knew Desmond hardly cared who he hurt. "You banged Emily Kipton so the mystery would be over. You wanted to know if her nipples were tiny or silver dollars. You wanted to know which direction they pointed. You wanted to know if her clitoris was wrecked or kept pristine like a tight virgin rose." Roy knew he had the right guy. "I have adversaries."

"This is a dream job," Desmond confessed. "Ron Jeremy was out there fucking all kinds of women during the seventies. Today? He's peddling *Phallosan* on UHF channels late at night! Even with nine inches under my belt, I'll admit I've been tempted to try it. Penis enlargement. But I don't need to." Saki was set in front of him. *Does she understand English?* Desmond wondered about his Japanese server. "I have enough of a package."

Roy poured hot saki into his cup then poured some for Desmond. "You are prime to work for me because of your parameters." He toasted him then continued, "You speak with high intelligence in your college papers but you speak like a foul-mouth piece-of-shit child in front of me."

Is that so wrong? Desmond wondered.

Roy Thurman opened his wallet again, but this time he pulled out the picture of a splendid-looking lady. "I am in the business of wrecking minds. Vance Boyle had a hard crush on Emily Kipton. He wasn't where he wanted to be when she flirted with him around Valentine's. He's a smart man, though. He had plans. We intercept

his AOL messages and he figured he could save enough money to offer her a condo by the end of the school year. *How romantic, right?* He wants all the planets to align. He wants there to be a zero chance of failure. But you came along and offered her the large cock. *The status of the private college you graduated from.* She wilted like a flower. And it throttled Vance's mind." Roy watched Desmond study the picture he was handed. "That's Cora Salazar. Beautiful, isn't she?" Roy could tell Desmond became aroused. "I want you to fuck her. I want this knowledge passed on to Dorian Sampson."

"I will do it," Desmond Severns agreed. "I will fuck any beautiful woman willing to sleep with me."

"Their agony will be great," Roy Thurman was satisfied. "There will be no opposition when we're done. There will be rumors spread across the corners of the globe." Roy puffed his Cuban. "*Don't fuck with Roy Thurman.*" Rarely, he spoke of himself in third person. "*You will suffer!*"

Desmond Severns was a hired hand. He wasn't altogether proud with where he stood. He believed life was about compromises. He was making one now.

"Final note." Roy Thurman never felt better.

"What is it?" Desmond asked.

"They're in another dimension." Roy Thurman thought about life's different traps. Used car sales. Condominium timeshares. The list went on. "They were traveling west of Bermuda when I first contacted you."

"Why are we in the Pacific?" Desmond asked.

"They disappeared for six minutes and a mysterious ship was sighted by the American Navy here in the Dragon's Triangle. Then it disappeared again."

"We're going into this portal to find shit heads you're trying to get revenge on? It's a death trap!" Desmond thought about the two hundred thousand he'd been handed. "I'm all in!" The two men set sail westward on a masthead-rigged sloop to Kogashima at the southern tip of Japan on Kyushu Island. It was a beautiful place for tourism. The Sakurajima volcano provided a wonderful view in the distance. They would go there to meet up with other participants for their adventure.

Before reaching land, Roy Thurman told Desmond Severns, "I invoked Beelzabub. One of my adversaries is a man named Horace Streets. His son was fishing near Bermuda. I knew I had him."

“Many people don’t call it the Bermuda Triangle.” Desmond was in love with the sailboat they were on. He wanted one of his own. “They call it the Devil’s Triangle, just like this place. Locals in the west Pacific interchange Dragon’s Triangle with Devil’s Triangle.”

Somewhere in another realm, John Leonard and Preston Bancroft were speaking inside the captain’s quarters of the *Lucky Dragon Nine*. It was a small cruise liner about two football field lengths and had two hundred and fifty sleeping accommodations. “There are maps in here which are very important.” John opened a few drawers and pulled out a few cylinders. “Let’s get these to the others.”

The crew of the *Riddle Rattlers* waited inside a conference room. “Do you remember when we came back from Big Bear after spring break that Desmond Severns was talking about the Bermuda Triangle?” Dorian Sampson wanted affirmation. “He actually believed the myths were real?”

Heather Mathis thudded her fingers on the table nervously. “Yes. I overheard him talking to Miss Kipton about it.” She noticed Vance Boyle become anxious. *Everyone’s wound up. I have no clue what’s going on.* “I think they started dating.”

“I liked her, Heather.” Vance looked over to Dorian. “Me and Dorian were talking about her on the flight.”

John and Preston walked into the room. “We have maps and we can show you what’s going on.” John put a few cylinders on the table and pulled out a few scrolls. “In this tube, we have the legendary island of Hy’ Brasil.” John unrolled five different maps. “In 1325, it is placed two hundred miles west of Ireland by Angelino Dulcert.” He pointed down to a sepia splotch which denoted it as Bracile. “In 1375, it shows up on the Catalan atlas as Illa de Brasil. There’s a river running down the center of it, see?” John traced his finger. “It shows as two adjacent islands here.” He went to a third map. “This one is from 1436 and is Venetian. *Sola de Brasil*. Andrea Bianco, the cartographer.” The fourth map was from 1595. “This is a Mercator map. Do you know anything about Mercator? Simply called *Brasil*.”

“Mercator?” It was Corey Smith. “I know Mercator quite well. I’ve had discussions in class about this. It is psychotically distorted. Greenland is bigger than Africa. The Northern Hemisphere is elongated and is stretched twice as long as the south. This makes Europe nearly the size of South America. It creates cultural bias. That’s the reason for the class discussions. In our formative years, we don’t know that fourteen Greenlands can fit inside of Africa. South

America is actually twice as big as Europe. The Peters map was presented in the early nineteen seventies as an alternative to Mercator. It was like the metric system, though, and never caught on. It wasn't perfect but it depicted land masses true in proportion to what they really are. I prefer the Winkel map, personally. It's roundish. I like it that way."

"Yes!" Preston turned to the fifth map. "Gerardus Mercator was one of the most significant geographers we have ever had. This last one, though, is from John Nisbet in 1674. He named the place *Hy' Brasil*, a minor corruption of the other names floating around. By this time, John Jay had gone out looking for the island from 1480 until 1481. The island was gone!"

"What are you saying?" Dorian asked. "It disappeared?" *Maybe these guys sucked at navigating*, he thought.

"I produce movies, Dorian. I was never interested in the actuality of a story. Does it matter that Honahlee is out there with some magical dragon living on it? No! Every now and then you come across these supposed true stories. *Stuff that writes itself*. To borrow the old adage, truth is stranger than fiction." Preston thought about Donovan. "My friend had a Japanese lover. A few months ago, she swore demons were having sex with her when she went to bed at night. *Forcing themselves on her*. My dad knew Sidney Furie who directed a horror movie in the early eighties called *The Entity*. It was based off the real life of Doris Bither who claimed three phantom spirits raped her regularly. She hired paranormal investigators. These guys claim they were able to capture orbs in photos. They somehow confirmed her account of what was going on."

Dorian was scared and frustrated. "You have a special life. Up until this summer, I have never traveled more than five hundred miles away from my home town. I don't have the privileges you have had. I am trying to wrap my head around this." He felt the urge to grab the maps and rip them apart but refrained. "*I can't do it!* I have a mental block! Or maybe my trust is shot!"

"Calm down." Preston soothed Dorian and the others. "Becoming emotionally unbalanced will only make things worse." He tapped his finger on the fifth map. "We can have the time of our life if we play this right. *The glass is half full*. There is magic around us."

John Leonard said, "Nisbet made it to Hy' Brasil in 1674. The island had been appearing then disappearing off and on for centuries. Some people claim it was shrouded in a special fog and could only be

seen clearly for a few days every year. Seventeen years after John Jay reported it missing, John Cabot said it was back. Then it was gone. Then it was back. By the time Nisbet got there, it was a land like no other. Gigantic black rabbits. A magician like Merlin. He gave away silver and gold. The citizens were able to move shit around with sounds. Do you know what acoustic levitation is?"

"Yes," Heather answered. "It's also called acoustophoresis. I have prepped my share of spelling bee winners." She felt some shame. "I can't say I've ever used the word in a sentence."

"Yes!" John Leonard was excited. "*Acoustophoresis!* It's not even the substance of fantasy! Scientists are able to replicate this on a tiny level! They have suspended water droplets in mid-air. They have done this with spiders and they're sprawling around all crazy with their legs. It's freaky to see." He got back on point. "The walls of Jericho were knocked down by trumpets. Does anyone know the story of Exodus from the Bible?"

"My father worked on a silly film in Mexico around Yucatán." Preston shrugged. "I met my soul mate there. *Tabitha*. She starred in a movie about aliens building the Mayan pyramids. *Acoustic levitation, just like John said.*" He looked at the four teachers and could tell they wanted a break from the nutty talk. "There's no other way to explain the ruins of Pumapunko."

"Fast forward to twenty-three years ago." John Leonard pointed to numbers at the bottom of the last map. "Sergeant Jim Penniston from the US Air Force was stationed at Woodbridge in the United Kingdom. Rendlesham Forest at Suffolk is a few miles away. There had been UFO sightings. Jim came across an alien craft. It telepathically gave him sixteen pages of binary code." *52.0942532 N 13.131269 W.*

Corey Smith stated the obvious. "Those are map coordinates! Latitude and longitude."

"They are the precise location of where Mercator said Hy' Brasil should be!" John Leonard added, "The other binary code was mysterious. *Eyes of your eyes.* That was the translation."

"We are in the Bermuda Triangle," Heather said. "Why this talk?"

"We are not in the Bermuda Triangle," Preston said. "The modern GPS system we use today became fully operational by the military in April of 1995. That's what we use on this ship. *We are right now off the coast of Hy' Brasil.*"

“Wow!” Corey Smith wanted to believe what he was hearing. One of two things was happening. Either the group truly slipped through a dimension door in the Bermuda Triangle or they were in the middle of an elaborate and incredible prank. Either way, he loved it.

Roy Thurman was heading into the Dragon’s Triangle southeast of Japan on a forty-passenger family catamaran fishing ship dubbed the Maroon Typhoon. His father, Edgar Thurman, was haggard and coughing hoarsely. He wore a brown beanie matching his brown rain coat. “I’ve got a little secret for you, sonny,” he told Roy at the bow of the ship. Dark gray clouds swirled in front of them. A waterspout sprung up high and then a bolt of lightning struck it. “Your mother disappeared when you were an infant. You were born on July 6, 1945. You’re one year older to the day of George W Bush. By mid-September of 1945, World War II was over. We went to Perth, Australia to celebrate. *The Thurmans have had bad luck over there and that’s why we keep to New Zealand.* Anywho, it was a rare time of peace between us and the Contrarians. After Truman, Churchill and Stalin got together on good terms in Yalta, it looked like it was time to let bygones be bygones. We went out sailing on one of their sea vessels and your mother was on a boat in front of us.” Edgar looked up into the dark sky. Rain came down quickly. “It was weather just like this. Storm out of nowhere.” A blue whale surfaced a hundred yards in front of them. Edgar continued as if it was a regular sight. “She was about that far from us.” He pointed to the whale. “Lighting struck. And then she was gone. *The whole boat was gone.*”

“You were in the Wharton Basin?” Roy marveled at the giant sea beast then watched it plunge out of sight.

“You bet your ass we were in the Wharton Basin!” Edgar felt invigorated and yelled out to the turbulent ocean. “Come back here, Moby!” He turned his attention back to his son. “I told you she had a fishing accident and disappeared at sea.” He looked into Roy’s eyes to see if he was prepared. “I didn’t tell you she was taken in by the portal.” He waited to see if Roy would plummet into disbelief. “This place is not normal!” Edgar pointed out to sea and dished out more family secrets and trivial bits of information. Mabel Thurman went missing in September of 1945. She had started to practice witch craft during the past few years. She had a traditional cauldron in the backyard of their Toledo home. She believed beer and wine were considered to be potions when they were first created and discovered. She talked to Edgar through mirrors since she vanished. Rooms had to

be dark and candles had to be lit. She would move the flames. "It was like Alice in Wonderland, my son," he told Roy. "There's another world on the other side."

"I've had my experiences with mirrors, pop." Roy reflected on his time up top the Sears Tower and consulting Beelzabub. He thought about Snow White and the evil queen's magic mirror on the wall. "Hey! Somebody told me the other day that the saying is, '*Mirror, mirror on the wall...*' Do you know anything about this?"

"Yes! And no!" He had more to say about Mabel. "Your mother had gray hair by the time she was thirty. She aged different than everyone. She was seven years older than me but I never cared about age. *I loved her.*" He got back to Roy's question. "*Magic mirror on the wall.* That's the way I remember it. This place! *The Dragon's Triangle.* It's a portal, but portals don't stay in place and there's never any knowing when it'll be open. Our whole world has magic, but it's concentrated in places like this. *Mirror mirror on the wall?* Our world is fusing with a parallel Earth! That's what I've heard and that's why I told you to bring a physicist! They understand time travel!" Edgar's knees were killing him. The pain was especially intense when it was cold. "Do you know the other day somebody told me Nelson Mandela was alive?"

"What?" Roy Thurman scanned his memory. "He died in prison! We talked about this! Late eighties? Early nineties? Can't remember the date, but he died!" Roy switched subjects to politics. "You mentioned W! He was a dweeb at Yale but I liked him! Yeah, I'm one year older than him but I'm a year and half younger than John Kerry." Roy reflected on his private times with George and John in the *Skull and Bones*. There was naked wrestling, and also contemplating the meaning of possessing the skulls of Geronimo, Pancho Villa and Martin Van Buren. Roy would hold one up and pretend to be Hamlet. *Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio! A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy!* They also had the skeletons of strange creatures. Orcs, goblins and centaurs. "We're going to fix the election in 2004. The media is all in. John Kerry will be the nominee for the Democrats and George W Bush will campaign to the public telling them not to change horses in midstream. We're borrowing from Lincoln. Kerry's going to play soft ball and that's why we're funneling him money. We were pals at Yale, us three. Great times! And just in case it doesn't go as scripted, we have *Diebold* electronic voting machines in Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida. *They're easily rigged and there's no paper*

trail.” Roy was proud.

Edgar Thurman’s mind shifted. “Your mother disappeared in 1945 in the Wharton Basin.” In a matter of fifteen seconds, the gray clouds disappeared and the rain stopped. “We just went through it!”

“Through it?” The sky became violet and they were situated a half mile from the *Lucky Dragon Nine*. Further along, they stared at the island of Hy’ Brasil. Roy wondered about Desmond Severns down in the sleeping quarters. *He’s missing out on a sight*, Roy thought.

Edgar continued, “Your mother’s best friend in college was a lady named Beatrice Bouvet. I loved her with a mad passion after your mother was gone.” He looked up into the sky. Three pterodactyls chased each other from Hy’ Brasil. “She had my baby in 1949. Little Aubrey Bouvet. We never married so she kept her mom’s name. Then they disappeared in the *Dragon’s Triangle* in 1952.” Edgar looked into the distance. Near the shore of Hy’ Brasil, a Plesiosaurus surfaced and snapped at hovering gulls.

“So I have a sister?” Roy was drawn to the unusual creatures around and wondered if they should take precautions to protect themselves from attack.

“Half sister, yes.” Edgar was tranquil. “It was 1952 when Beatrice and Aubrey left.” His mind wandered to the Bible. “Did you know Enoch never died? Genesis five, twenty-four. *And Enoch walked with God. And he was not for God took him.* Elijah, also. Second Kings, chapter two, verse eleven. *And it came to pass as they still went on and talked that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into Heaven.*”

“Catholics don’t believe Mary died. They believe in the Assumption. She just started floating into the air and was taken into Heaven.” Roy Thurman’s heart had become sordid and dark. He thought about his incantations and invocations to dismal supernatural forces.

“You don’t have to be a Christian to believe God exists. The Devil knows God is out there. The Devil does not abide by God’s wishes.” Every now and then, Edgar imparted wisdom onto his son. “One of the Devil’s greatest feats was to convince the world he does not exist.”

Profound. Fucking profound. “So why are we here? Are we here to rattle the Contrarians some more? Are we here to find my long-lost half sister, Aubrey? Are you here to find Beatrice? Or my mother?

Why are we here?"

"Search your heart, son!" Their fishing boat was getting closer to the *Lucky Dragon Nine*. "You are here for revenge, from what I understand. You are here to squash your enemies." A sea serpent resembling Nessie poked its head above water a stone throw's away. "Our family has used these doorways for centuries. This is your first time with me. You're a middle-aged man right now but I was only twenty when I had my first experience." Edgar petted the head of the serpent when it was close enough. The serpent ducked under the boat. "In all honesty, I thought they might've all closed up."

Roy Thurman was angry. He held it in. "You thought I'd call you crazy if you told me about my half sister." He watched the three pterodactyls race back to Hy' Brasil. "And this place!" Roy let his anger go. He understood. *I wouldn't tell Byron or Annie about it either unless I could prove it. Or unless they thought I was joking.*

"It is what you make out of it. Time is different here. There are gulls over there." Edgar pointed. "And pterodactyls over there. You never know how long it will last. And when we return to the Earth we're used to, we don't know which one of the vortices it'll kick us back to. Sometimes, we wind up on the other side of the globe."

As the Thurman fishing boat went through a portal in the *Dragon's Triangle*, Donovan was mad at work sketching new comics. He sang Pink Floyd softly, *"I got elastic bands keeping my shoes on. Got those swollen hand blues."* He glanced across the room. His new bunkie was just waking up. *"I got thirteen channels of shit on the TV to chose from. I've got electric light."* His singing became louder. He drew Roy Thurman's fishing boat disappearing into a giant portal. *"And I've got second sight! I got amazing powers of observation."*

Rory Donohue yawned then walked over. "What are you working on?"

Donovan didn't answer. His pencil finished details of lightning and storm clouds. *"And that is how I know when I try to get through on the telephone to you there'll be nobody home."* Donovan erased a few erroneous lines and when he was comfortable with the page, he answered Rory. "Comics. It's a hobby." Rory seemed distant and zonked out. "What's your name? I'm Donovan. What are you in for?"

"Rory Donohue." He didn't extend his hand for a shake. "Serial killer. Devil was talking to me. I used to be a botanist. Took too many shrooms. Black widows. Dart frogs. Taipan snakes. Brazilian spiders. Scorpions. Five killings with five different animals.

And I would've done more!"

"What stopped you?" Donovan Cobb was sick of meeting nut jobs. He had to humor Rory, though. It made the time pass quicker. He thought about George Orwell. *During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.* He thought about himself and his comic panels. He believed he was conveying great truths through a non-respected medium. He believed the world was full of too much horse shit. Here he was believing he was sane in a crazy world. "Can I ask you something?"

"What stopped me?" Rory Donohue became antsy. He shifted side-to-side. "I got bit! By a rattler! That's what happened! Called for help!" He shifted more and more. "Can't trust nine one one! They ratted me out when they got to my house! '*What's all these deadly animals doing in your house?*' they say! '*This is America! I got freedom! You ain't no one to tell me what I can keep in my house!*' I tell them. '*And give me a lawyer if you's gonna arrest me!*' Right? All these liberal commie punks taking over our law enforcement agencies. Taking our guns." Rory stopped shifting and bent over toward Donovan. "So I use their logic against them, right? Did you know what Martin Luther King wrote from his jail in Birmingham? '*One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws!*' That really stuck it to them! But they said they had to pull me in and it don't matter. I'll have my day in court."

Donovan focused. "I was going to ask if you believe you are sane in an insane country. How about it?" Donovan went back to his comics and started a new page. He drew pterodactyls flying away from Hy' Brasil and he drew a fishing boat approaching the *Lucky Dragon Nine*.

"When I meet my maker?" Rory shifted side-to-side again. "When I meet my maker?" He thought about his life and resurrection into another world. "When I meet my maker, he will know I killed the right people."

Donovan sketched Nessie approaching the fishing boat. "I ain't no one to judge," Donovan told Rory. "That should always be a last resort. *Killing people.*"

"What?" Rory got defensive and thought maybe he should attack Donovan. "You ain't killed no one? Most of us in here are for killing! What you done?"

Donovan stopped sketching and held up his pencil to Rory. "The pen is mightier than the sword." It was spontaneous and he

wasn't sure how to follow it up. "In today's world, the tools have changed. Maybe we should change the saying. *The internet is mightier than the nuclear bomb.*"

Rory felt stupid. He stood in front of Donovan shaking his head. "That ain't no pen, you moron!" He swirled his finger around his ear. "That's a pencil! Looks like one of us forgot to take his meds!" Rory started to prance around and mock Donovan in a silly voice, "*Ooooh! Look at me! I'm from Crazy Town and I'm speeeeeecial!*"

Donovan was frozen. Just then, his savior came through the door. It was the black lady who reminded him of Kim Fields. She spoke, "I have news for you, Mister Cobb."

"Yes, madam! What do you have?" He started to gather his comic drawings.

"You have a visitor. It's your father, Delbert. But that's not all. The judge has dismissed the charges against you. You will be released today."

Rory Donohue stood in shock. "You can't release him! He's crazy as a loon! Keep him in here."

Donovan wasted no time. "I was going to keep them in Hy' Brasil for fifteen years. They were going to cross paths with dinosaurs, Medusa, and unicorns." He thought about his cigarettes and decided to leave them. *No hesitation. Get out of here. Leave it all behind but the comics. Take no chances.* He scribbled something on the bottom of his very last panel. *And they returned to their world safely.*

Vance Boyle, Dorian Sampson, Heather Mathis, Corey Smith and the rest on the *Lucky Dragon Nine* were shot back to the shore of Bermuda. In the captain's quarters, Larry Warrick told Horace Streets, "We time traveled, sir." He studied computer print-outs. "This is a log of our location with its corresponding time." He pointed to a series of logs which had nothing. "We're linked to GPS." He pointed out the blank spots where coordinates should be analyzed. "GPS wasn't available until a few years ago so look!" He pointed out the dates next to it. "They flow backward instead of forward."

"I'm no navigation expert!" Horace was flustered. "My daughter slept through this whole thing! I went in her room to warn her! She was sleeping! So was Tad, my grandson!" Horace was ashamed he lost his cool. "What do I tell my people?"

"It gets better! *Way better!*" Larry Warrick was proud. He would reflect on this moment until his hour of death as an old man. He

moved his pointer finger along to a certain part of the page. “Do you know what NBS is? The National Bureau of Standards? Do you know what the Atomic Clock is?”

“No.” Horace shook his head. “I’ve heard of it, yes, but I don’t know details.”

“NBS-6 got online through Darpa in 1975!” He showed the list of locations coupled with times. “In 1993, NBS-7 comes in!” He moved his finger. “We lost our coordinates because GPS is not here yet! But we’re able to draw from the Atomic Clock!” He moved his finger. “At some point, you can see the decimals decrease.” He moved his finger more. “Pretty soon, we’re not in micro-seconds!”

Horace realized the conclusion. “We’re moving through time and our ship’s computers are unable to track the precise time and location because the satellites aren’t out there. The Atomic Clock is not developed enough.” Horace Streets had a habit of lying to his daughter. He was in the CIA and was instructed to give his tightest colleagues “need to know” information. His daughter? She would not know what happened. “Keep this under a tight lid.”

“Yes sir!” Larry Warrick pointed out one last section to Horace. “This, sir? It’s not because the computer stopped trying to indicate information. We went past the sundial! We went past celestial navigation!” The Contrarians were an amazing group of people but Larry Warrick never believed he made any significant contribution. He always got them from point A to point B but he was never smart enough to impress anyone. At the moment he talked to Horace as they reconnected with their regular place and time in the Caribbean, he thought he moved the ball along the floor. He helped roll the snowball. “I’m not asking for any praise, sir,” he told Horace. “But we traveled through time and I can prove it to anyone you need me to.”

Delbert Cobb took his son, Donovan, down the street from Patton Hospital to an Italian restaurant called *Two Guys*. “Bet you’re starving for a real meal!”

Donovan Cobb inhaled and enjoyed the aroma of pasta and spices. “The food in there wasn’t that bad, believe it or not.” A waitress set bowls of minestrone down. “This looks good!”

Before doing anything else, Delbert did something peculiar. He moved the salt and pepper shakers. He moved the sugar packet holder. He moved the Parmesan and red pepper shakers. They formed an invisible barrier between himself and his son. “I have something to tell you, Don. There are strings attached with your release.”

Donovan was enjoying his soup. "What? What are you talking about? John Leonard said the cop got busted in some shady business having to do with a tow company." He was hungry and kept with his food. The waitress set down rolls and he took one.

"Yes. But it's not that simple. Roy Thurman pulled strings." Delbert watched his son freeze. "He wants to play with you like a cat toying with a beat up mouse."

What the fuck? Donovan thought. *How could this be?* Yet, nothing surprised him. "What about Sakata? What's going on with her?"

"Roy worked with Cornelius through a newly-created CIA program called Operation Subtle Chameleon. Basically, they know they were too heavy handed on everyone after nine eleven. They're loosening the noose. But they're still insanely jealous of us! We live better lives when they're not in our hair. And it's the golden age of perversion. They're letting their buddies go crazy with it. Jerry Sandusky works at Penn State as an assistant football coach. A friend of mine in the Bureau said he's molesting boys on a regular basis but they're told to stand down. Don't get involved. And there's a bus driver in Cleveland who kidnapped a few women. Same thing. Don't get involved. It's a buddy system. *They're cave men looking out for each other.*" Delbert shook some pepper into his soup. He drank ice water. "A few days after nine eleven, there was a massive porn movie shot inside the LA Memorial Coliseum called *Gangbang Girl Number Thirty-two*. That's when I first noticed it. Then I heard rumors of fondlings from prominent politicians."

"I don't get why I'm out. If he hates me so bad, he should have left me in there." Donovan drank straight from his soup bowl. "Do you remember we used to play *Jarts* when I was a kid? We got lucky and no one got their eyes poked out but it was the perfect example of a disaster waiting to happen. This is the same!"

"Sakata is out. Same program. You'll be staying in an apartment close to where we're at. She'll stay at an apartment down the street. Operation Subtle Chameleon is like a witness protection program except that you're not informants. You have to keep a low profile for a while. You have to work regular jobs for a few months. I bought a Suzuki Samurai for you. Sakata will drive a Chevy Chevette. Bad paint jobs. Lots of problems with oil leaks and screeching sounds from the engines. They don't want you to see each other after ten at night." Delbert expected protest but didn't get any. "They're jealous

and they're insane. It's like the Eagles' song Desperado." His face became stern and he recited, *"Don't your feet get cold in the winter time? The sky won't snow and the Sun won't shine. It's hard to tell the night time from the day. You're losing your highs and lows. Ain't it funny how the feeling goes away?"*

The waitress brought lasagna. *Yuuuummmm*. Donovan said, "So they don't want to hurt us bad enough to kill us? It would weigh heavy on their evil conscious minds if I wasted away in a mental institution? On the flip end, they couldn't handle it if I went back to the good life!" He cut into his pasta and took a bite. The sauce was scalding but Donovan didn't care. It was the best food he had in a long time.

Delbert was served tortellini. "I have your tens of millions of dollars in a conservatorship. It'll be released back to you when it's over. *They don't want you battling them anymore.*" He nipped at his food. "Word is out next year's presidential election is fixed! You can't be running to the media or broadcasting this through your comic panels!"

Donovan was infuriated. "Freedom is all I have!" He let his emotions settle. "Do you remember the Seinfeld episode when Jerry is playing that European guy at tennis?"

"*Milos?*" Delbert chuckled. "One of my favorite ones!"

"Jerry was way better and somehow he embarrassed Milos in front of his wife. For some reason or another, Jerry agreed to let Milos beat him so Milos could save face. But Milos kept taunting and mocking Jerry. Jerry couldn't handle it and started to dominate the tennis match in front of Milos' wife." Donovan was positive his anecdote didn't connect. "Or what about SpongeBob when he pretends to be dumb in front of Patrick's long-lost parents?"

Delbert wiped his mouth of Alfredo sauce. "Can't say I watched that one."

"Same thing. SpongeBob is doing his friend a favor by pretending to be dumb so Patrick could look smart by comparison. Then? Patrick starts to make fun of SpongeBob as if he was really stupid and then his parents start heckling him too! See? It gets a little too real so SpongeBob has to take Patrick aside to tell him to lay off." Donovan hit the nail over the head. "I'm not good at playing possum. Okay?"

"You don't have much of a choice. His guys have law enforcement wrapped up all over the place. They'll throw you back

in.” Delbert asked the waitress for a box. “I’ll eat the rest of this later.”

Donovan kept with the anecdotes even though he knew his point by now got across. “What about when they’re sword fighting left-handed in the *Princess Bride*? Inigo Montoya was losing but says, ‘I know something you don’t know. I am not left-handed!’” He smirked.

Delbert said, “Yeah! Then Wesley is driven back and says the same thing! ‘I am not left-handed either!’” He kept spooning tortellini in his mouth. By the time the waitress came back with a box, he was finished with his food. “My favorite lowball scene in a movie was from *Color of Money*. Remember when Tom Cruise purposely missed the last shot against Paul Newman? Playing in a nine-ball championship game, his bank shot grazed the side pocket but it didn’t sink! *Great drama!*”

“Turned out good old Vincent Lauria out hustled Eddie Felson! Bet against himself and made a complete fortune!” Donovan ate the last of his pasta. “I’ll play their game. I’ll pretend to be feeble. I know it’s not the best time to make our move. Horace said 2012. That’s when we should reconsider our business. I’ll pretend I suck. It’ll hurt my pride, but I can do it.”

There were two black helicopters in the sky flying over Delbert’s dark gray Honda CR-V as he pulled out of the parking lot of Two Guys with Donovan. The copters were eyes for Roy Thurman as he sat in a meeting with constituents high atop the US Bank Tower in Los Angeles. He was gathered with Logan DuPont, Mindy Collins, Ralph Van Duyn, Sebastian Reynolds, and Zooey Morgan. Logan asked, “Do you think it’s going to work?” There was a bowl of jelly beans in the center of their boardroom table. Logan popped a few in his mouth. “I think they’re fighting a good fight.”

“Work?” Roy Thurman stood up and tried to hide his frustration. He walked around in a nice three-piece suit. The night before, he went to bed dressed in *Riddler* pajamas inside the Roosevelt Hotel. “It has to work! We have the money! We have the men on the streets!” In the upper corner of the room, there was a mounted monitor. It showed live feedback of Delbert’s car driving onto a freeway onramp. “Operation Thunder Clamp. You guys worked out the details, I gave the approval, and everything’s in motion.” Roy thought about legislation in Congress. If a gun control bill was passed, you could bet it was introduced by a Democrat. If a budget austerity bill was passed,

you could bet it was drawn up by a Republican. The CIA had a similar situation. Roy's group was prone to designing projects and operations which emphasized hounding and physical force. The disbanded Contrarians, though, worked with sublime influence. Operation Thunder Clamp was meant so that the political right-wingers in Washington had little resistance. They had their Agenda which had to be implemented. "I've been thinking about that meeting we had in the first week of January of 2000. I haven't been back home to New Zealand since then. The Contrarians were there and I thought we could get along. I really did."

Mindy Collins spoke. "I got in an argument with mister Donovan Cobb that day. About JFK. We were splitting hairs about who killed him." She thought about her cousin, Michael Collins. "I had a whole speech I was going to give about Mike going into space." She watched Roy study her. "I've been so proud to have an astronaut as a family member. And he saw a UFO with Buzz during their Apollo 11 mission." She lowered her head in shame. "I froze that day. We were there to discuss the UFOs we saw on New Year's Eve. I froze."

"You're okay, Mindy." Roy sat. "You corrected Donovan that it was Roscoe White shooting from the storm drain and not Johnny Roselli. I'm proud of you! You have spunk! I wanted to chime in. *Give my two cents*. Was it Joseph Milteer who killed Kennedy? Neither or you mentioned him. James Files? You skipped him, too. Michel Victor Mertz? He was there." Roy thought about football. His gaze turned to the men in the room. "It was Monday Night Football sometime about fifteen years ago. I grew up in Ohio so I rooted for the Bengals and Browns but Chicago is my adopted home town. I love the Bears. I was watching the Eagles play the Giants, though. Randall Cunningham always amazed me. The way he scrambled. The way he improvised. He could turn nothing into something in a heartbeat. I wish he could have played for us in the Windy City. I digress. On this particular Monday night, he did something that blew my mind. He scrambled away from Carl Banks, almost went down, and as soon as he stood, he fired a touchdown pass to Jimmie Giles."

Ralph Van Duyn said, "I remember that well! Great play! What's the illustration for?"

Roy explained, "My father, Edgar Thurman, worked for the Department of Justice in 1963. He was tight with FBI honchos including J Edgar Hoover. He helped shape the DEA in its early form back in 1973 and even had influence on how Immigration and Customs

Enforcement would run earlier this year even though he's long been retired." Roy looked at Mindy. "I don't know how much you understand about football but Randall Cunningham was the master of the busted play. There is a certain way things are drawn up in playbooks and on the chalkboard. They hardly ever run that way. The best players are known for instincts."

"You're saying?" Mindy had the feeling of being in a high school class room. It felt like a lecture.

"My father, Edgar, was in charge of redacting JFK documents. My family knows how it was drawn up. We know which snipers were positioned in this or that building. On this or that lawn. We know who was *supposed* to be in the drain." *But it was a busted play*, Roy thought. *Not enough cameras to prove anything*. "At parties, they would talk about Edgar this and Edgar that. Hoover had the spotlight. Everyone assumed they were talking about him but my father had pull. He knew things. He *wanted* to stay in the shadows."

"You're an honorable man," Mindy said. She was curious. "After that meeting, you said something about the Black Dog Man. What was that?"

"Louie Watt was the Umbrella Man, honey." Roy Thurman knew details. "Did you know that?" He thought of an anecdote. "My father and me? He's given me a lot of wisdom." He marveled at her curious expression. "Curiosity killed the cat. We know this."

"Yes sir," Mindy responded. *Is this a veiled threat? Nah.*

"I was in a deep talk with my father. I was eleven. Rock 'n' roll was getting bigger and bigger. I wanted to go to a live Bill Haley show but dad said I was too young. I was okay. I was obedient. I consoled him with that particular saying." Roy felt warm inside. "Curiosity killed the cat," he said again. Roy stood. It was his style in meetings. He was restless. Up, down, up, down, up, down. "My dad said, 'Curiosity killed the cat so now he only has eight lives left.'"

Sebastian Reynolds had been disinterested in the dialogue but this got him. He busted up into hard laughter. "*Fuck, that is good!*" He swiveled his chair to the side as his body convulsed in violent fits. "I'll use that!" He settled down and returned forward. "With your permission, sir!" He chuckled a little more then added, "If I can tie this in with Schrödinger's cat, I'll be the life of parties for months to come!" He gave Roy a thumb's up and smiled at Mindy. "JFK was killed by the Secret Service," he said. "Not one hundred percent sure, but I know those guys are human. They did it."

Roy clapped his hands. "Before we go too far off the rails, here, I need to express the essence of Operation Thunder Clamp." He circled the group slowly three times before speaking again. "You guys drew it up but you have to believe in it! You must have conviction!" He thought again of the Philadelphia Eagles with Randall Cunningham. "We cannot improvise. Randall Cunningham was great! He knew how to do it! He was special." When Roy returned to his chair, he stood in front of it. His face was stern. "We are not that guy! We don't know the moves and we don't have the instincts! Michael Jordan can windmill dunk! Can you? In the figurative sense? He can launch from the free throw line and slam it in! Special person with special talent." Roy felt uneasiness from his cohorts. "We are special, but not that special! We are at the top of our game! But our adversary is extremely special! He is Sammy Baugh! He is Johnny Unitas! He is Bill Russell! He is Mickey Mantle!" Roy Thurman became angry and his pock-marked face became pinkish. He wasn't angry with his group. He was so close to being the number one thing in the world. Roy was a definite legend in his own mind. Donovan Cobb was the only person on Earth who could hold a candle to him. Roy recalled college teachings from a Yale psychology class. *My father knew Alfred Adler. I know what the inferiority complex is. I'm supposed to step around it.* "Donovan Cobb is special, okay guys?" *Now I'm rationalizing. Freud would be ashamed of me.* "He is a messiah. Let's not sugarcoat this. The Hindus believed there were various incarnations of Vishnu. One of them was Buddha and one was Jesus Christ. Donovan has this very quality." Roy contemplated the comics he seized. "He has a delusion which says he is the world's savior! I have spoken to psychiatrists who dealt with him. I have studied his work!" Roy thought about bacteria in petri dishes. "He is contagious like a virus. He is fighting for the common person." Roy felt flush and shame. *Is that so wrong?* he wondered in a moment of self-doubt. "If we don't stop him, the Agenda will be gone!"

"What is our takeaway, sir? What are we supposed to leave this meeting with?" Zooey Morgan was concerned. She liked Roy Thurman's logic. She knew there was something beyond rational thinking. Roy was telling the group to stick with the plan known as Operation Thunder Clamp yet his emotions were out of control. "You're telling us to stick with the script even if it doesn't feel right. Am I correct?"

"Yes ma'am!" Roy's head was jumbled. "Yes!" For the first

time in years, Roy believed he could lose the grip on goals within his larger personal picture. "I brought up that meeting in New Zealand for a reason. In my impromptu speech, I talked about Cretins. It was their word, originally. Horace Streets! That psycho who some imbecile allowed into the CIA! Him! *Don't do the Twin Towers thing!* He's a pussy! *Don't go into Afghanistan and steal their heroin and oil!* Freakin' idiot! *Tell the public what the real reasons for the war are!* Loser! And he hands over all his information to Donovan! Fucking classified information! Donovan draws comics and there's penises coming out of my head! You don't think I can recognize my own face? He's not even discreet! I look like a male version of Medusa but instead of snakes, there are cocks coming out of my head!" Roy looked at the monitor in the corner of the room. Donovan was heading westbound on the Ten Freeway an hour west of Los Angeles. Roy was placid all of a sudden. "In the Contrarian world, there was their group; us, the Scoundrels; and the Normies, who Horace called Cretins when he was angry." Roy Thurman felt victorious. "We don't let them dictate the terms!" He felt empowered. "I analyzed the text of Operation Thunder Clamp and there's something in between the lines which you never spelled out." He looked around to see if anyone would address the issue. "Donovan Cobb is not a messiah!"

Mindy Collins reacted, "But you said he is!"

"Yes!" Roy Thurman felt off his rocker, but it was a good emotion. "I believe he is a messiah, personally. As a group? We don't have to believe this! There is a new footnote to Operation Thunder Clamp! The Contrarians work in threes. *Wynken, Blynken, Nod. Tic, Tac, Toe. Wine, Women, Song. Beginning, Middle, End. Lock, Stock, Barrel. Life, Liberty, Pursuit of Happiness. Stop, drop, roll!*" Roy usually brought a drink with him but did not on this day. His mouth was dry and he wished for water. "The Contrarians no longer define how we view the world! We do! Scoundrels, Contrarians and Normies? No! Puppeteers, Beacons and Cretins! That is the new three! You are in one of these categories on our planet! Puppeteers? That is us! In this room! It is our loved-ones and colleagues! Beacons? That is Donovan Cobb! It is everyone who believes they can beat us or change us! Why this term? They are Beacons because they will draw our FBI agents! They will be tracked worse than Operation Swarming Gawk was ever intended! And who is left? The Cretins! Fuckers on the sidelines! Screwing each other without any pride! Following our official script! Standing in line! Eating Spam and ten

flavors of Top Ramen! Being the team player! The predictable yes man! We will give them low interest rates on their homes and cars! They will be ours! They will fight the Beacons! They will be rewarded with flimsy track homes and they will love us for it!”

It was early August of 2003 and Donovan Cobb was sitting on a black metal bench next to his lover, Sakata Tara. He had been settled into his apartment at Blossom Grove for a couple of weeks. The courtyard featured a brown lawn, a swing set and slide inside a sandbox, and a filled-in swimming pool. “I read a lot of Edward Abbey when I was in the madhouse.” It was midday and the Sun was hot. He looked at the empty swings and visualized children on them. “My place has roaches. That’s not the worst part. It has spirits. It’s haunted.” He peered over at the swimming pool which had been filled to the brim with sand. He saw children splashing around and playing Marco Polo. “And this place?” Donovan turned around and scanned over the dead grass. “Blossom Grove?” *Wow! They always name these places after things they have nothing to do with.* “Let’s just say it could be worse. I’m trying to stay upbeat.”

“I missed you a lot.” Sakata Tara had been taken to Atascadero in San Luis Obispo County. “Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2* stayed at Pescadero State Hospital. Supposedly, that place was modeled after the hospital I was in.” She was released on the same day as Donovan and was now staying walking distance down the street at Bamboo Gardens in Highland, California. “Same observation as you.” Donovan squeezed her thigh. “You don’t have blossoms here and I don’t have bamboo.” She forced a half smile.” She thought about demons. “I’m haunted too, Donovan.”

“They hide in the corner.” Donovan felt crazy. “They camp there. They’re trying to induce obsessive compulsive disorder. It’s hard to function.”

“They’re getting to a lot of people. Robin Williams. Jim Carrey. Others.” She felt embarrassed. “I wrote to you in a letter that they try to have sex with me.”

“I think they’re coming from the Catholic Church. I don’t know why. I thought of all the Renaissance things we could be doing but it’s all blah out there. No one is trying. The human spirit is dead.” Donovan watched invisible children chasing each other around and playing tag. He thought about *Field of Dreams* when Ray Kinsella flattened his cornfield to replace it with a baseball diamond. “Do you think WP Kinsella saw the ghost of Shoeless Joe Jackson? In real life?

I think it's funny that he gave the lead character his own last name in the book."

"I liked that movie." Sakata looked across at the sandbox. She could see children building sand castles. "Field of Dreams will always be one of my favorite."

"*A patriot must always be ready to defend his country against his government.*" Donovan quoted Edward Abbey and thought it was funny. "I read *Jonathan Troy*, *Black Sun*, and *Slickrock* when I was locked up." He quoted him more, "*Power is always dangerous. Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best.*"

"I like that." Sakata's gaze turned to Donovan. "They won't let you have internet for a couple of months. *They're afraid you're going to wreck someone with you angst.* You can come to my place. You can use it there."

"You have an outside barbecue pit. I like that." Donovan kept quoting Abbey, "*Anarchism is founded on the observation that since few men are wise enough to rule themselves, even fewer are wise enough to rule others.*" He pulled Sakata close to him. Their foreheads touched and Donovan rested.

"I have OCD at the computer keyboard. The demons come out of nowhere." She pulled away. "They don't like what I'm writing. *I'm trying to save us and get our lives back on track.* I have to backspace many, many times on the same word because they pop out from nowhere. They get in the typing keys and they try to sexually violate me. If I don't do as they want, they make life difficult." Sakata considered herself to be a strong person. "John Leonard visited me a couple of times. Robin Williams has this condition. *Lilliputian visions.* That's what he said they are. *Charles Bonnet syndrome.* That's another term for it. *Lewy body dementia.*" She thought about Donovan's comment about the Catholic Church. "A lady told me the pope is thinking about quitting. *Too much evil in the world.*" Sakata was raised with Shinto family and never bothered to research Christianity. "A pope can't quit, can he?"

"Hasn't happened in my lifetime." Donovan thought about his walks around the neighborhood. There was a large river wash a half mile south. "I like going down to that creek when you're away." Sakata worked at McDonald's and Donovan worked at AM/PM. "My demonic tormentors tell me I'm supposed to be homeless. There's a lot of hobos down at the wash. We don't talk but I think about it. If the shit hits the fan, it's a fresh water source." Donovan thought of a few

more Edward Abbey quotes. First, he said, "*Love implies anger. The man who is angered by nothing cares about nothing.*" Then, "*The missionaries go forth to Christianize the savages as if the savages weren't dangerous enough already.*" Finally, "*Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit.*"

"There's a few haunted places I want to visit." Sakata was not prone to fear but something was off. She couldn't pin it down. "Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Kentucky. I want to meet people like us. Edinburgh Castle in Scotland. There are people who have gone through what we go through. Povenglia Island, Italy. Castle of Good Hope, South Africa. Island of Dolls, Mexico. When all this crap blows over and this unofficial house arrest ends, I want to travel with you again. I want to go there."

"Preston was friends with Mark Victor who wrote *Poltergeist*. You're talking about haunted places. Do you know *people* are haunted? That's the difference. Poltergeists are lost souls. They are troubled. Instead of remaining locked to a certain location, they travel along with their victims like a very dark cloud. That's what you're experiencing in bed and at the keyboard." He thought about a rebooted television show from the eighties. "Preston's dad knew a guy named Peter Medak who directed an episode of the *Twilight Zone* fifteen or twenty years ago. *Personal Demons*. It was about a guy with writer's block. Hooded demons haunted him and followed him everywhere. It bugged him. The guy was trying to write a kick ass screenplay but couldn't think of anything."

"Can I guess?" She was in a better mood. "He finally blows up at the demons and asks what the heck they want. '*Write about us,*' they say. The guy does and it's one of the best pieces of work he's ever done." She grinned. "I might've watched that one."

"I do my comics and I'll write about some of my demons. When I was in the loony bin, I drew Roy Thurman as Medusa. There were cocks coming out of his head instead of snakes!" Donovan laughed. It was dry laughter. "Someone swiped my comics when I was asleep. *They're not supposed to do that!* I don't dignify my demons unless I can make fun of them. It keeps me strong. I wait until they're weak and then I attack." Donovan Cobb thought about Arthur Ennis. "I met a guy who said Polybius drove him crazy."

"What's that? Donovan?" Sakata wondered about his life. They were separated for a few months and there was bound to be many stories he would bring up. She hoped there was no trauma. The two of

them had vicious enemies. She hoped no one got to him to the point he wouldn't be the same as when she first met him.

"Polybius was created by the United States government. I've talked to you about MK-Ultra and the Manchurian Candidate. It was their attempt at mind control through a video game. It was an experiment which lasted years and took many forms. Operation Mockingbird was a program run by the CIA starting in the fifties. Agents infiltrated *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *CBS*, *The New York Times*, and other media outlets. They wanted to control what people thought. Pong was the first coin-operated arcade game and it was released in 1972. Space Invaders came out in the summer of 1978. Popular. Taito's best ever. Galaxian and Asteroids came out in 1979. Arcades were the rage. Just like Mockingbird, it was too much of a temptation to stay away from. If the government can control your mind, they will. As a matter of fact, a guy in the funny farm told me the etymology of the word."

"Etymology?" Sakata was curious.

"Yes! In linguistics, it matters how a word comes about! *Government*. It comes from *gubernare* which is a Latin verb meaning 'to control' and *mentis* which is Latin for 'mind' so that says it all! Polybius was put in a Portland arcade in 1981. It was an eight-bit design and didn't stick out more than any other games around. It was addictive, yes. Government agents tailed the most ardent players. They studied them. What they found was the game caused hallucinations, insomnia and nightmares." Donovan thought about Pac-Man. "Games were becoming colorful and lifelike. *Pole Position* was an awesome car racing game in 1982. Polybius had to keep up with graphics. It was like Frank Zappa in music, though. Never hit the mainstream. The game had a Zork-like quality to it. There would be text moments. And it was interlaced with 8-bit mazes and crude pictorial graphics at the completion of each level. You would realize mazes were depictions of real places, though. It might be a street you lived on. It might be a neighbor's house. And the prizes were places where safes, purses and actual hidden chests were kept."

"Do you think that's why we're haunted by demons, Donovan?" She really wanted to know. "Someone's out there playing video games with our lives?"

"That's a great question and I'm not sure." He considered it. "Demons have been around a long time. They use different methods. I'm positive about that much."

“When I was locked up in the nuthouse, I met a lady.” Sakata felt powerless. “She was involved with an Oxford guy named Nick Bostrom. *Simulation hypothesis*. That’s what the guy was all about. We’re living in a highly sophisticated simulation! Some intelligent set of alien beings created a program and we’re their guinea pigs. Nothing is real! Everything is a lie!”

“I feel you, darling.” Donovan leaned over and kissed his soul mate. “This is so absurd!” He looked around the grounds of Blossom Grove. “This is not supposed to be our lives!”

“What are we going to do about it?” She wondered about her job at McDonald’s. She had to work the night shift and still had laundry to do.

“I want to spend time at your apartment. I can still program video games! I can do my comics and I can create a game catered to our circumstance. Now that the internet is here, we can connect with others who have the same struggles, same ideas, and same goals.” Donovan also had to work later. He knew it was time to wrap up.

“Polybius? Donovan? Are you going to create a massively multiplayer online role-playing game?” Sakata smiled. “I know you were working on some *Dungeons & Dragons* project when you got thrown in. Maybe Polybius? Something underground? Something with psychological mazes? Something any bum off the street couldn’t just stumble on?” She thought it was ingenious. “I would start to play video games if you did that.” *We can have sex tonight when we both get off work*, she thought. There was supposed to be a curfew imposed by Operation Subtle Chameleon. She was willing to take chances.

“Polybius?” He felt good. “Yes! I can do that!”

Later that evening about a mile away, Desmond Severns met with Dorian Sampson at a Starbucks. They ordered coffee, bought some pastries and set up a chess board outside. Desmond was white and moved his king’s pawn ahead a couple of spaces. “Are you going back to Emory this year?” He watched Dorian move his king’s pawn up a space. “I have important things I need to talk to you about.”

“We had a major freak out a few weeks ago. I think you know that.” Dorian thought about Emily. He wanted to ask Desmond about her but kept it quiet.

“I was given two hundred thousand dollars. Roy Thurman.” Desmond moved his king’s bishop’s pawn up two spaces. He was setting up for the king’s gambit. “He was hiring me to destroy you. Cora Salazar. He knew you had the hots for her.” He watched Dorian

take the pawn which he had just advanced. Desmond responded immediately by putting his king's knight in front the black pawn. "He wanted me to have sex with her and film it. Send you the tape afterward."

Dorian became angry and suppressed it. His face was red. "Why would you tell me this?" He advanced his king's knight's pawn to defend his other pawn. "Why did you have me leave the others out? We had such a great time in Bermuda. The *Riddle Rattlers* as show is on hiatus. I doubt any of us go back to teaching." Dorian thought about going through the dimension door. "We had unexpected events. The producers and stars are regrouping. They're giving us time off."

The chess game went on as they spoke. "I was in the Dragon's Triangle near Japan. Roy flew me out there. I don't know what to make out of anything. His group of billionaire friends are feuding with the group that hired you to do that *Riddle Rattlers* show. Capulets and Montagues. Percys and Nevilles. Puntis and Hakkas. Hatfields and McCoys. Barbers and Mizells." Desmond looked down at the chess pieces. "This is all we are to them. Pawns to be moved around."

"I don't understand why you're telling me this." Dorian moved a knight forward and was preparing to castle on his queen's side. "You were paid well to ruin my life. Why tell me? Why return to Emory?"

"He had a change of heart. We were out at sea on their fishing boat. We went through a portal, so they say. I was sleeping." Desmond reflected. "I told him about our meetings here. Talking about nine eleven and the Twin Towers. I played it off. Like I didn't know it was a controlled demolition. I'm a physics teacher. I know all about melting points. I know about steel's proportional limit, elastic limit, yield point and rupture strength." He contemplated his next chess move. "I've heard the stories of thermite and mini-nukes. I've discussed these issues with a fellow physicist from BYU, Steven Jones. It's an uphill battle. It's a thankless job. It's all about controlled opposition. It's a no-win situation." Desmond moved a piece. "Do you know what a DEW is? Direct energy weapon?"

"I was in the same camp as you. I was invited to Big Bear during spring break. I froze. I didn't tell John Leonard we had discussed nine eleven. I didn't trust the guy enough at the time. I was like, 'What? Bin Laden wasn't responsible for the attacks?' Something like that." Dorian felt the futility. "These tycoons do whatever they want. I agree. We're like chess pieces to them."

"The United States government is working on bigger, better,

faster weapons. They're willing to use them against the populous. Someone has gone crazy. The DEW I was talking about? It can vaporize objects in an instant. It has a strange effect on automobiles. It leaves their skeletons pretty much in tact but obliterates the tires and everything else on the inside. Quite unnatural. I saw photos of burnt cars around the World Trade Center after all the shit went down. I'm convinced it was a direct energy weapon." Desmond looked at the board. "The best chess players are able to read the pieces like constellations."

"I thought we were going to take on the world, Desmond. I thought Tom Oakford and Brett Everson would stay on board. We had a good group." Dorian looked at the pieces and considered what Desmond said. "*Zugzwang*."

"*Zugzwang*? What?" Desmond was unfamiliar with the term.

"We haven't got there yet in this game, but that's what these elite groups have us caught in. *Zugzwang*," Dorian repeated. "It's the point in the game where every move you make puts you at a further disadvantage."

"It's the slippery slope. I get it." Desmond considered Emory Middle School's social dynamics. "I don't know why you guys go charging at the beast. The dragon is out there sleeping peacefully in his lair. Why are you hunting him down? I moved to San Bernardino to avoid the ruckus of the big cities. San Francisco. Los Angeles. New York." Desmond thought about a cartoon he liked as a child. He spoke like Elmer Fudd. "*I might be a scwewy wabbit, but I'm not going to Awcatwaz!*" He laughed. It was a role reversal episode where Bugs Bunny became the hunter and Elmer Fudd dressed as a rabbit.

"I liked that one," Dorian said. He thought about his generation and how they were brought up on cartoons, even as adults. *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *King of the Hill* were solid shows on Fox. The Cartoon Network showed classics all day. "I like the one where Bugs Bunny is a beautician and he's fixing up that giant, furry, red monster." Dorian never liked Desmond a whole lot, especially after he heard about him hooking up with Emily. He was starting to see a human side of him. *I don't know that I like this*, he thought. *I don't trust this guy. I don't want to like him. I feel danger.*

"The truth? This is all it's about." The chess game was continuing along and Desmond was gaining the upper hand. "This is competition. This is civility. We don't go out there and beat each other up with clubs." Desmond Severns thought about Emily Kipton.

"I knew Vance liked her. I knew she liked him back. You can't expect someone to hang on that long, though. You can't expect them to go home lonely every night. There was nothing sinister about what happened with me and Emily. It wasn't personal." He now thought about Cora Salazar. "With that said, evil exists in the world. Some form of it truly exists. We become jealous. We become enraged. The thing that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ability of foresight. We know a mini-mall is being built here or there because a sign out front tells us so. There's no surprise when construction crews show up. You're a biology teacher and you know it well." Desmond watched Dorian study the chess board. It was almost as if he was being tuned out. "I had the foresight to believe it would cause you mental harm if I made it with that pretty girl who showed you around Utah, New Mexico, and the Zone of Silence." He watched Dorian move. A defense was being set up on his queen's side corner. "Two hundred thousand dollars is two hundred thousand dollars. Roy Thurman has black sites set up all around the world. Diego Garcia is one of the best. A modest military island a couple thousand miles south of India."

"It's bigger than us. I understand completely." Dorian Sampson was frustrated with life. "When I was up at Big Bear, I started telling John Leonard about replacement theory. I talked about the Australian eucalyptus tree taking over Southern California." He recalled lyrics from the Whispers and spoke them, "*Do you ever wonder? That to win somebody's got to lose? I might as well get over the blues! Just like fishing in the ocean, there'll always be someone new!*" He felt good. "They speak in lyrics a lot. The Contrarian guys. Seemed to happen at least once a day when I was out there with them. And replacement theory? It goes beyond trees. It's in our humanity." Led Zeppelin was popular on the boats around Bermuda. "*All I see turns to brown. As the Sun burns the ground. And my eyes fill with sand. As I scan this wasted land. Try to find, try to find the way I feel.*"

"Wonderful! Kashmir!" Desmond took another one of Dorian's pieces. "I love it!"

"Look around, Desmond!" The weather was good and young people walked in and out of Starbucks. "I'm a biologist so I'm sensitive to this more than most. Migration patterns. Emily and Vance hit it off because she knows replacement theory as a sociologist. It's called *white flight*. There are fewer and fewer of us. In a few short years, everything has turned to brown. When I was up at Big Bear, I

quoted Nietzsche. Turns out John Leonard, our host, was a fan. *Species do not evolve to perfection, but quite the contrary. The weak, in fact, always prevail over the strong.*"

Desmond Severns had an insight. *So Vance wasn't just trying to get into Emily's pants. They had a thing going. Something intellectual.* "Look, man. I know what you're talking about. All of us put our money into college. We start families later. We don't plan to have as many children because the cost of it is tremendous. Is it part of a master plan? I'm not so sure."

"The Contrarians believe it is. In Europe, they call this phenomenon *Eurabia*. John Leonard believes Roy Thurman's group is causing these changes." Dorian watched Desmond take his queen. "Brace yourself. Do you know who the first slave owner in America was?"

"Thomas Jefferson?" It was a guess. Desmond believed he was three or four moves away from checkmating Dorian. "Can't say that's my area of expertise."

"Jefferson?" Dorian chuckled. "That was a century later. In 1654, it was Anthony Johnson. He owned two hundred and fifty acres of land in Virginia. Got in a spat with a guy named Robert Parker. Took it to court. They were fighting over the ownership of an indentured servant, John Casor. Up until then, true slavery didn't exist in the New World. You did your time and then you gained your freedom. The ruling in this case changed a lot of things. Anthony Johnson won ownership of John Casor as a slave, not an indentured servant."

"I think we all know in round about ways that customs of slavery evolved." Desmond took another one of Dorian's bishops. His king was exposed. "*Check!*"

"Anthony Johnson had been an indentured servant. He was a black man who gained his freedom after years of hard work." Dorian put his king on its side to concede the game.

"Aw! Come on! Let me chase you!" Desmond wasn't upset. "You're saying the first slave owner in America was a black man! Wow! I had no idea! I bet your buddy, Corey Smith, told you this! He's approached me about weird stuff! Said Marco Polo came to America! So did some Chinese guy named Zheng He! *Waaaaaaaay* before Columbus! I tune the guy out." He gathered the chess pieces and put them in a felt bag. "He's not playing with a full deck, if you know what I mean."

“Corey? He’s a guy who grows on you. *Slimy*. I’ll admit, the first few times I talked to him, I thought he was slimy.” Dorian had mocha left and finished it.

“If I can be candid, I’ll admit he’s the only one in your group who scares me.” Desmond folded the game board and put it in a backpack. “He told me a former vice president shot president Alexander Hamilton. I have to ask you something. Wasn’t Alexander Hamilton a president? In my memory, that’s the way it was. Corey burst my bubble and said he wasn’t. I remember a high school teacher telling me all men on our currency were presidents except for Ben Franklin.” Desmond considered the money he was given by Roy Thurman. “This was obviously wrong. Roy paid me in cash. Salmon Chase is on the face of the ten thousand dollar bill.”

“In Contrarian circles, they call this the Mandela Effect. Some people believe Nelson Mandela died in prison long ago. *They have memories of him and watching the news cover his funeral*. We all know he was elected as president of South Africa from 1994 until 1999. Right now, he’s living a quiet life in Johannesburg.” Even though he lost, Dorian was tempted to ask Desmond for another chess game. He let it go.

“Do we?” Desmond Severns was livid. *They keep fucking with me!* “I was on that stinkin’ boat and they said I slept while we all went through a dimension door. Pterodactyls flew in the air! Supposedly!” Desmond stood up and faced Dorian nose-to-nose. “Are you part of a hoax? Is this an internet version of Punk’d? What the fuck are you doing to me?”

Dorian got up and backed off. “Calm down!” He put his hands up. He considered what he would do if attacked. “What’s your issue?”

“I watched Nelson Mandela’s funeral on TV!” Desmond considered the possibilities. “Is Roy paying you? Are you gaslighting me?”

“*Quicksand!*” Dorian operated on instincts.

“What?” Desmond was caught off guard. “What?” he asked again. He realized he was out of order. He sat. “Quicksand. Explain.”

“One of the greatest Contrarians ever to exist is a producer named Preston Bancroft. His method blurs the lines and actors who wind up in his films start believing *this* is the act! Living ordinary life is the ultimate act!” Dorian refocused. “How many times have you seen quicksand in movies? *Princess Bride*. *The Neverending Story*. *Clash of the Titans*. *Beastmaster*. *Blazing Saddles*. *Valley of Mystery*.

Jumanji.” Dorian considered other tropes. “Car falls off cliff and explodes. *That doesn’t happen in real life ninety-nine percent of the time!* Man gets shot but there’s no blood on the shirt! *Get Smart!* Right?”

“Roy Thurman is a follower of Albert Pike. Led the Freemasons back in the nineteenth century. That much, I know. Roy was fond of citing stuff Pike said or wrote. According to legend, Pike predicted World War I, World War II, and World War III. It was in a letter to some tripper named Mazzini. Outlined the whole thing. The first war was set for the Illuminati to overthrow the czar of Russia. The second one was meant to pit fascists against Zionists. The third one? Just started in Iraq a few months ago. Zionists versus Islamic jihadists!” Desmond was confused and unsure what to believe. “Nukes are expected this time around.”

“I will quote Albert Einstein.” Dorian continued, “*I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought with, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.*” He was ready for another mocha. “Go ahead and sleep with Cora! Two hundred thousand dollars? Make your sex tape! Send it to me! I am not concerned about sexual exploits. We are on the cusp of nuclear proliferation!”

“Okay!” Desmond tried to be casual. “So I’m the dick in this whole process? I’m just a guy trying to get laid! What’s wrong with that? Are you a tinkerbelle? Do you not have hormones?” He realized Dorian was offended. “I’ll play you at chess again if you want. But first, tell me about slavery. And replacement theory. I cut you off. I want to know. Go ahead.” Desmond was truly humbled. “You’re ahead of the curve. You know what’s going on.”

Dorian watched Desmond pull the chess board back from his backpack. “I’m getting a mocha and I’ll be right back.” Desmond set up the pieces for another game. Dorian returned with two mochas. “I got one for you.” He looked down. He was to play white this time around. “NBA teams win two thirds of the time at home. In Major League Baseball, home team wins fifty-one percent of the time. Why do you think this is the case? The disparity? In basketball, is it the emotion? Are refs biased? Are they corrupt? The playing field physically is level but we find the home team winning much more in one sport more than the other.”

“You are space case!” Desmond accepted his mocha. “I will bone Cora because you want me to! You don’t want her to be lonely. I was paid two hundred thousand dollars to do the job. Just pretend

you're hurt then Roy Thurman will pay me even more to sleep with another girl you're later interested in. It's like those insurance fraud schemes. We can be on the down low and stick it to those stupid billionaires! What do you say? You don't have the cajones to ask her out anyway, right?"

"Slavery?" Dorian asked. "Do you know what America's first foreign war was? *The Barbary Wars under Thomas Jefferson!* Black men owned white Europeans in north Africa! At the shores of Tripoli! You need to understand true history!" Dorian was glad to play another chess game. He wanted revenge. "All we were doing was freeing the captives!" An hour later, they were in Dorian Sampson's backyard soaking in the jacuzzi. "Do you know why these demographic changes are taking place? The Elite like to enslave non-whites, specifically brown and black people. Have you heard George Carlin's comedy about this?" The beer of choice for the evening was bottled Michelob. Dorian twisted one open and handed it to Desmond. He reached for another into an ice bucket for himself. "*We can bomb the shit out of your country alright! Especially if your country is full of brown people! Oh, we like that! Don't we? That's our hobby!*" Dorian had the skit committed to memory. "*That's our new job in the world, bombing brown people! Iraq, Panama, Grenada, Lybia! You got some brown people in your country, tell them to watch the fuck out or we'll goddamn bomb them!*"

Desmond laughed a little. He didn't like Dorian at school. He thought he was a weakling. He now saw a side to him he could enjoy. "I like the one where's he's talking about parking on a driveway and driving on a parkway. And about the near miss." He drank then spit out some beer as he remembered it. "*It's not a near miss! It's a near hit!*" Michelob came out of his nose.

"Yeah?" Dorian finished the skit. "*Well, when's the last white people you can remember that we bombed? Can you remember the last white people we bombed? The Germans! Those are the only ones and that's only because they were trying to cut in on our action! They wanted to dominate the world! Bullshit! That's our fucking job!*"

Desmond wiped tears from his face without shame. "And he's talking about baseball versus football! Extra innings versus sudden death!" He felt warm in the spa and wanted to swim. "Funny shit!"

"We're in the middle of slavery, Desmond." Dorian was serious. "Debt slavery. Roy Thurman is friends with Rothschild bankers. They deliberately planned our struggle. They sold us down

the river. It's morbid to think about. I'm a biology teacher. I'm in tune with things other people aren't. Most traditional teachers in my field say we're in the Holocene epoch. We're not. This is the Anthropocene epoch. Humans have more impact on our Earth than anything else."

"This is taboo territory." Desmond sneered. "This is why I stopped coming to your Starbucks meetings a few months ago." He had more than half a bottle of beer and he downed it. "Cat's out of the bag, though. We've met our makers. You met John Leonard and I met Roy Thurman." Desmond contemplated the gravity of their circumstance. "True masters of their domains."

"Masters of their domains?" Dorian was frustrated. "*Time don't heal a broken gun!*"

What? Desmond wondered. *Did he just cite LA Guns in a response?*

Dorian explained, "Roy Thurman is a legend in his own mind! He thinks he projects this false superiority to everyone! He does! But to his own people! Like any comic villain projects fascination to his crony followers! But to us?" He shook his head. "There's a gross disparity between what Roy thinks of himself and what people in my group think of him. Derelicts! We think of you and anyone else who does his dirty work as imbecile derelicts! *Everybody has a price!* That's his attitude and you enable his behavior!"

"You didn't take money from John Leonard?" Once in a while, Desmond had a move he used on ladies. Currently, he used it on Dorian.

"Wow!" Dorian said sarcastically. "You can lift one eyebrow higher than the other! Neat!" He clapped for a few seconds. Then, "Yeah! We took money! Was it to bone your mom or your sister? No!"

"I understand your accusation!" Desmond was offended. "You think slavery is here again. It never ended. We're debt slaves. Roy has paid congressmen passed NAFTA to undermine unions. They hated Teamsters for being fat, lazy and overpaid. They brought in Mexicans to compete. They allowed the borders to be overrun. If you weren't in Roy's tight circle, you were marginalized. Pushed to the edge! Pushed over the edge in many cases!"

"Let's not forget the Arabs flooding into Europe and Australia!" Dorian tilted his beer bottle in Desmond's direction. "Did you watch *White Man's Burden*? Travolta is one of my favorite, I must

admit! That was less than ten years ago and it seemed like such a joke it could ever happen!” Dorian Sampson remembered discussing the film with Horace Streets in Bermuda weeks ago.

“Belafonte was good! Always liked him!” Desmond considered, “It was a reaction to Rodney King and OJ Simpson.”

“It was satire. There was a hypothetical world where black people ran everything and whites were the struggling minorities. Less than ten years after the film was released, we’re looking at it.” Dorian thought of OJ Simpson. “John Leonard has a friend who was institutionalized. While holed up with a bunch of crazies, he stumbled on a guy who knew details about the OJ case which were never discussed in public. His son? Jason? That was his cap which wound up in the courtroom as evidence. There are family photos of him wearing it. Once OJ was charged with murder and the cap was taken into custody, Jason started wearing the same kind of cap, but a different color.”

“I could care less about that case.” Desmond was at ease. The spa put him at pure rest. “Roy Thurman talked to me about the Machine. Did he get it from Pink Floyd? Can’t remember. Did Pink Floyd get it from his group, the Illuminati? Not sure. It’s a euphemism for our society.” His head had been resting backwards but now he straightened it and looked at Dorian. “We can’t stop this thing. I see what you’re talking about. We’re all in a free roam type of slavery.”

“You don’t understand the intricacies.” Dorian wondered where the conversation would head if they were to get toasted. He told himself that he’d cut himself off after three beers. “Roy’s friends, the Rothschilds, run the entire planet! They’re a subset of the Illuminati called the *Triumvirate*. They own all the money! Did you know Muammar Qaddafi is actually a good guy?” *Awwwwwwkkkkward!!!* Dorian thought Desmond might pack up and leave. He thought about the red pill/ blue pill idea. *I hope he goes red pill because this could lead to something.*

Fruitcakes! Desmond was mad. *This is the only thing they do! They think of shit ordinary people can’t handle! And when that’s not enough, they even think of things fuckers like me can’t handle!*

Dorian’s move was to hand Desmond another beer. “I got caviar in the fridge when we’re done.”

Caviar? I can go for some caviar. Desmond settled down. He accepted the beer.

“Mao Tse Tung published his *Little Red Book* in the sixties. It

was a Bible for sprouting Communists in China and Communists around the globe. Full of advice, sayings, teachings, and the whole thing.”

“*Take a page from the Red Book and keep them in your sights. Red alert. Red alert.*” Desmond was tired and tilted his head back again.

“What?” Dorian asked. “Rush? I never made the connection.” He got back to Qaddafi. “About ten years after Mao’s *Red Book* was published, Muammar published his *Green Book*. He was raised as a goat herder way out there in the boondocks. He had a natural disdain for authority. He swore on his inside that if he ever came to power, he would represent the common people. Sure enough, he hit it big. Lybia had oil. He was raised in Western schools. He tried to fit in. *He tried bad*. He wanted to create an Arab superstate with the nations around him. He was scoffed at by leaders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Their royals had been implanted for many generations. They wanted nothing at all to do with him, a former goat herder. Sure, Maummar wanted to disband Israel, a United States ally! That was very unpopular on a global stage. He meant well, though. He gave his citizens free homes and free cars. He built the largest fresh water aqueduct the world has ever seen. Loaves of bread cost a quarter.”

“Everything television has ever said is that he’s a madman!” *This guy’s a total loser*, Desmond thought. “Why do you fuckers stick up for guys like this?”

“Well, it wasn’t perfect.” Dorian felt silly. “I mean, they gave away free cars! And free apartment buildings! It was like that class in high school which had no seating chart! If you left your home for a couple of weeks, you might find someone else living there when you came back! And your car? You might drive it to the market then someone else might drive it home! No one owned shit! It could become frustrating! The path to Hell is paved with good intentions! He financed freedom fighters around the world! He circumvented the Rothschild banking system.”

“This is where Roy Thurman comes in?” Desmond Severns was ahead of the curve in physics. His own colleagues were impressed by his theories of subatomic particle properties. He had no clue about macroeconomics, though. He didn’t know how money got from one place to another.

“Richard Nixon took the United States of America off the gold standard in 1971. It was meant to be a temporary thing. Muammar

Qaddafi minted a currency backed by gold.” Dorian Sampson reflected on the “Line of Death” speech but said nothing.

Desmond connected the dots. “So Reagan bombed him and the pretenses were different when filtered through the media.”

Dorian refused to answer. It was too obvious. It was like explaining the punch line to a simple joke. “One man with courage makes a majority.” He quoted one of his favorite people.

“I don’t know a whole lot about alternate history, ethnographies, or world economics. My specialty is physics.” Desmond polished his beer and was positive it would be his last. “I know that one, though.”

Really? Dorian wondered. *You’re a total dimwit in everything except your concentrated field.*

“Andrew Jackson.” Desmond Severns thought about Roy Thurman. “Roy hates every Democrat who ever lived. He makes a point of studying his enemies, though. He won’t be caught off guard this way.” He was ready for caviar. “He told me this one. He said he uses it against you Contrarians.” Desmond got out of the spa. “I’m ready for the caviar. I hope you have crackers.” The two guys snacked, got dressed then gambled at San Manuel Indian Bingo for a couple of hours. Their next stop was the Mt View Cemetery on Highland Avenue. It was dark. They had to jump the wall to get in. They brought a twelve pack of beer. “Why are we here again?”

“I come here when I need to think.” They walked along. “Right up ahead.” Dorian pointed. “Ozzy Osborne’s guitar player, Randy Rhoads. Plane crash, I think. Died in 1982.” They walked without talking for a half minute. When they got to Randy’s above-ground tomb, they settled onto the lawn. They cracked their beers open. “Do you know who Van Halen’s third lead singer was?”

“Gary Cherone. Easy Answer. And there was a rumor that it might be a chick. Patty Smyth. Scandal lead singer. Never panned out.” The beer they drank was Rolling Rock. “This is dog shit!” Desmond was tempted to spit out his beer but his buzz wasn’t strong enough. He stomached the fucked up beer.

“You’re wrong, sir.” Dorian was ashamed. “John Leonard runs in oddball circles. He’s an actor. He was at some college in Seattle for some reason or another. *Cornish College of the Arts*. Met a guy named Mitch Malloy who went on to become a decent country singer. Nashville. That scene. Somehow or another, Sammy Hagar has a falling out with Van Halen and they boot him out. I think his

lady was having a baby when Eddie wants him to record something for a soundtrack. *This or that movie*. The fellas call Mitch! They audition him!"

"Ninety percent of what you talk about sounds like bullshit." Desmond swigged and wanted a full buzz. "But you've been right a couple of times." He stared at Dorian. There wasn't a whole lot of light in the night sky but there was enough. Desmond detected a gleam in Dorian's eyes.

"You're the physicist, Desmond." Dorian toasted him. "You know all the theories. The dimension doors. Quantum mechanics. But you're in denial. I went through a portal in the Bermuda Triangle. You went through a similar one near Japan. But you were sleeping. And you're in denial that it happened." He refocused. "The Contrarians have a member."

"Aren't those guys disbanded?" Desmond hated life. He missed out on the dimension travel or else he was having the wool pulled over his eyes. "What's the function of your group?"

"He's the most interesting Contrarian who ever lived. Roy's father knows him. He comes and goes." Dorian sweated. "James Richards. He's mastered dimension travel. It's not just in Bermuda. It's not just in the Dragon's Triangle. Those are the largest doorways. There are many, many small ones many, many, many places. James found one here in California. *Livermore, California*. A rabbit hole. Jonas, a magician from Hy' Brasil, brought him in." Dorian drank putrid Rolling Rock and felt crazier than he ever felt. "The Beatles did not break up in 1969."

"They broke up in 1970. Yes, we know this." Desmond watched a documentary on the Fab Four.

"Dickweed! They supposedly broke up in September of 1969 but it wasn't announced until April of 1970! You're missing the point, through." There was a locked iron gate preventing fans from walking into the tomb of Randy Rhoads. Dorian wanted to go in. There was a tradition to throw guitar picks through the gate as a tribute. Dorian wished he had at least one to toss in. "The Beatles never broke up! Not in 1969! Not in 1970! Not since then!"

Desmond Severns finally had more than he could handle. "You guys are great bullshitters. What is this really about?"

"I'm not a bullshitter!" Dorian was mad, but he realized Desmond had every reason to doubt. "The Beatles recorded a thirteenth album. *Everyday Chemistry*. James Richards came back

with this cassette when he returned from the rabbit hole in Livermore.” He pulled a tape out of his pocket. “This is not the master.”

Desmond took the cassette. At first, he was grateful. Next, he was defensive. In anger he yelled, “If you’re putting me on, I will string you up!”

“Listen, Desmond. There’s more.” Dorian wanted to get to his point for a long, long time. He believed it would be harder. It came easy. “There’s a universe out there where Lee Harvey Oswald shot John Fitzgerald Kennedy. You know the theories of the multiverse better than writers of DC Comics. There’s a universe out there where the Earth is a cube and Bizarro is the greatest hero to ever live. There is a universe out there where the Earth is actually six thousand years old. A firmament of ocean is supernaturally suspended high in the sky and it rained down to destroyed humanity. Only Noah and his family survive. That particular universe is real somewhere in the great beyond. Here? You’re a physicist. We know it’s different. I’m a biologist. I know evolution happens. It’s not like the textbooks, but it’s there. *The Aquatic Ape Theory is the realist explanation anywhere around!* And? Somewhere, there is a universe where Osama bin Laden masterminded nine eleven. He trained fuckers on monkey bars and armed them with boxcutter knives. He beat the United States of America’s multi-billion-dollar defense system. And even though he’s a giant Arab on dialysis, he’s evading the best of our intelligence agencies! He’s on his cell phone with Saddam Hussein plotting the next major terrorist act.”

Desmond stood up and turned his back on Dorian. He was at a loss for words. His nerve was touched. He was triggered. He finally turned around slowly. “So you’re with them? The terrorists? You are a perpetrator of treason? All terrorists want the seventy-two virgins! That’s why they did it!”

“Desmond?” Dorian now had the tone of a normal guy talking to a sad retard stricken with Down’s Syndrome. “The only reason I bring any of this up is because you acknowledged earlier the Twin Towers could not have been brought down with airplanes alone, let alone the third building, WTC7.” Dorian was flustered. “The third building wasn’t even hit by a plane and collapsed into it’s own footprint demolition style! Do you know how hard this is to do even if you’re trying? Demolitions go wrong! They go sideways once in a while.”

“If this is your way of calling me a pussy for believing the

official story, go ahead and do it! I already told you what I'm about." Desmond pounded the rest of his Rolling Rock, even though it tasted like the center of a skunk's asshole. He pounded another. "I don't need to lose my job at Emory Middle School for you or anyone else!" They were almost out of beers so he slowed down. He took a piss near a grave not far from where the chit-chat was going on. "I might be a pussy for going along with the official nine eleven story, but I got into Emily Kipton's pants!" He zipped his fly. "I got a killer deal on my SUV! Great fuckin' interest rate!" He ruffled Dorian's hair. "I'll bone Cora next! Motherfucker!"

Dorian stood up. His shit was distraught. "I brought you here for a reason!" He motioned to the tomb of Randy Rhoads but he wavered a bit. He didn't want to come across as overbearing.

Pussy material, Desmond thought. *I should crack your shit in the jaw. Right now.*

"Ozzy had a lyric, Desmond. A few years after Randy Rhoads was mauled to crap in that airplane disaster!" Dorian tried to remember. He spoke, "*Taught by the powers that preach over me. I can hear their empty reasons. I wouldn't listen. I learned how to fight. I opened up my mind to treason.*" He thought he did well. "Are you trying to please Roy? Or maybe Ozzy?"

At last, a light bulb lit inside of Desmond Severn's mind. "Ozzy!" He backed away. "George Washington was accused of treason by the British! Anyone is! When you fight your enemy, they will pretend you're still supposed to be sucking their cocks! Treason! They accuse you of treason for sticking up for your rights!" The night Desmond banged the shit out of Emily, he had her right nipple in his mouth for thirty seconds or so. Solid tit. Proud of himself. *It's just skin*, he could remember thinking. And his next line of logic was to go down on her. *Rancid. Like a spoiled tuna fish sandwich.* But he kept licking. "There's a certain magic in the world, Dorian. I ate the shit out of Emily, Vance's sociology friend. Her pussy wasn't sweet. It was bad. But I stayed there for five minutes figuring that's what she wanted. I spoooned on her tummy, which I regret. I wanted to be able to ask her what our child would be named in the coming weeks. But I spoooned on her tummy. The would-be joke was over at that moment."

Dorian was infuriated and tried to hide it. "You're quite the genius!" It was sarcasm and he hoped Desmond did not pick it up. "If you wake up with Vasoline around your asshole in the morning, would tell anyone?"

“*What?*” Desmond didn’t expect Dorian’s reaction. “*What?*” he asked again.

As Desmond and Dorian jumped the cemetery wall to make their ways home a couple of hours past midnight, Donovan and Sakata were meeting each other a few miles away on Bondi Road just north of the Santa Ana River Trail. Their apartments were a quarter mile apart from each other and they met in the middle under an amber streetlight. Fifty feet away, there was a trail blocked by an oblong locked triangular swinging gate. It wasn’t hard to step around it, but it kept cars from going further. The wash was a mystery to Donovan. It was wide and the concrete walls on either side were quite tall. Yet, there was hardly any water flowing through it. It was lush with trees. There were tents pitched inside housing the homeless. In Donovan’s mind, it could have been built much smaller to do the same job. He wondered if there was a time when the entire thing flowed with water. He brushed the thought away. He pecked Sakata. “How was your day at work?” He Eskimo kissed her.

“Me? I burnt a couple of burgers and dropped some fries. Other than that, okay.” She held Donovan’s hands.

Donovan pulled her close and started slow dancing and singing, “*You’re just too good to be true. Can’t take my eyes off of you. You’d be like Heaven to touch. I want to hold you so much. At long last love has arrived. And I thank God I’m alive. You’re just too good to be true. Can’t take my eyes off of you.*”

They held each other and slowly circled. Donovan sang and Sakata was happy. She was scared, too. It could end. They could be pulled apart again. Even if things were going as normal, Donovan liked to take off for months at a time to be his own person. Sakata cherished the moment. When Frankie Valli’s song reached it’s chorus, Sakata joined the singing, “*I love you baby, and if it’s quite alright I need you baby, to warm the lonely nights, I love you baby, trust in me when I say...*” When they were done, Sakata stepped back and said, “I’m afraid. Donovan, I’m afraid that I’ll like this. I’ll fall in love with this lifestyle. I’m starting to like my customers.” She was still wearing her work uniform.

“I have mixed feelings about it. There’s a Hispanic gal—*quite pretty lady*—who trained me on registers and hotdogs. She hits on me. I like it. Flattering. Doesn’t stop.” Donovan sat down on the pavement. Sakata joined him. Bondi Road was not a through street so there was hardly any traffic. “And every thug that comes in? I feel

bad. I think any guy is a potential robber.”

Sakata shook it off. “I have a cousin who’s coming in tomorrow. Talked to him on the phone during my break today. Do you remember Satoshi?”

“Satoshi Nakamoto? The incredible math wiz?” Donovan had known Sakata for twelve years. Over time, he got to meet many of her friends and relatives. A lot of the names didn’t stick. There were too many of them and they were Japanese. Satoshi’s stuck. He was good at math and he programmed computers. “He was dating Yoshiya a while back. How did that turn out?”

“Off and on. They separate once in a while, but nothing bitter.” There were moths fluttering around the amber light above. Sakata watched them then said, “I thought he could help you with Polybius. He’s very, very good at programming and has kept up to date with all the new languages. You’re still using JavaScript and Rebol? Satoshi is working with Falcon and Gosu. He can help you.” They talked about their days at work for a few minutes then headed separate ways. The next day, they met at Sakata’s apartment with Satoshi. They began the design and program of a new version of Polybius. Sakata prepared egg rolls. “I’ll leave you men alone if you need me to. I can buy snacks at the store.”

“That would be nice, honey.” There were a lot of technical things to get done. Donovan prepared a few mind maps and flow charts before hitting the sack the night before. He wanted to discuss some of the basics with Satoshi. “All I need is a half hour to nail this down.” Sakata walked out the door. When she was gone, Donovan explained, “I’m thinking of *War of the Worlds*. Before television, people got their entertainment through radio. In 1938, there was a broadcast of an alien invasion. Orson Welles caused mass hysteria. A million people were in the streets thinking they were under martian attack.”

Satoshi asked, “And you want to duplicate the same hysteria of New York City here and now?” He considered his role. “I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

Donovan put one of his flow charts on the table. “It’s not that simple. We need a recruitment process. We need a way to know who we can trust. The mass hysteria isn’t automatic. It’s a tool if we’re attacked.” He pulled out a notebook. “This is a storyboard of how it might happen. We create a game called *City Dweller* for a mass audience. Put it out there for free. Hardly any sense to it. Just fun.”

The first page showed an overhead shot of a town similar to Sim City. He flipped the page. "This is the storefront of a psychic's place. *Madam Cassandra*. She will ask a few questions. Do you have any skull and bones for me? That kind of thing."

"This is a filter process, I'm presuming. *Three hundred and twenty-two*. That should be the answer. It filters the thick from the thin." Satoshi Nakamoto hadn't been in the United States for a couple of years but he talked on occasion to Sakata Tara over the telephone. "I've heard much about your secret societies and conspiracy groups."

"On September 11, 2001, we barely made it out of the North Tower alive. One of my good friends, Julian Garrett, was able to obtain a mess load of secret patents that day. We're talking about quantum computing, perpetual motion, and reverse engineering. My Contrarian group was put way ahead of the curve because of this. Our adversaries attacked us, though. They spread us to the wind. It's been pointless to fight back. Before we scattered, Julian passed a lot on to me." Donovan pulled out a thumb drive. "This has layouts of streets and homes. I know we can use this. Straight from the government in most cases."

"So it's an onion? Polybius is a cyber onion? A mental maze." Satoshi was intrigued but something lurked. "I can get in trouble for this. I can have lame brain government agents come after me like they did you and Sakata."

"That's where the Deep Web comes into play. That's where Polybius is really housed. Do you know why Napster failed? We have to think about these reasons." Donovan programmed best when filled with cheap sugars. He went to Sakata's fridge and came back with a couple of sodas.

"Metallica?" It was a joke. Satoshi saw the disappointment in Donovan's face. Satoshi became serious. "It was out in the open. It was an easy target to hit. Lawyers ran everything. Life was no longer closer to the heart." He accepted a soda from Donovan. Satoshi said, "Kazaa made it because it was peer-to-peer. No centralized system."

Donovan was glad that he didn't have to explain the basics. "And that's what Polybius has got to be. It has to live in the Deep Web."

"Dark Web," Satoshi commented. "In my circles, we say Dark Web."

"The semantics don't matter." Donovan thought of an analogy. "Have you ever heard of the Deep State?"

“If I have to guess, it’s the hardliners in Russia. It’s the guys who didn’t want the Soviet Union to dissolve. It’s the guys who kidnapped Gorbachev.” Satoshi was sure he nailed it.

“Yes. So far as I know, this happened in Turkey as well. The prime minister was Süleyman Demirel in 1991 right after the Gorbechev incident. Military leaders formed a state within a state. They circumvented democracy and held on to values of the old Ottoman Empire. It began in 1960 with a general by the name of Cemal Güsel then was attempted again in 1971 by some other guys. The Deep State in Turkey still exists today.” Donovan sat and jotted notes. “We are like rats to them. The Deep Web. The Establishment hates us and they’d like to get rid of us forever. They can’t, though.”

“We have to give our people hope. We have to give them a peer-to-peer game that is fun. It keeps people posted. It rounds up an army of regular people who can act in unison. If they do another nine eleven, we can strike back. We know where they live. We get in their houses. We convert their sons and daughters to our side. We show the public the errors in their ways.” Satoshi started typing code. “I think it should be like a second-person novel. I think they should have all these choices, but we should lead stupid wankers on wild goose chases. There are people that will never be fully one hundred percent onboard.”

“Quite intuitive.” Donovan was pleased. “Madam Cassandra gives you a map. It leads to the island of Polybius. It leads you to the real game in the Dark Web.” The mental cranks started spinning in Donovan’s mind. “There are vast amounts of empty spaces in our world.” Donovan thought about the wash near his apartment. “Sakata has an idea to put Pokémon characters in these places. You can play Polybius at home and it might send you on a real-life task. There might be another Polybius player who has a special password. You meet in the wash and exchange information.”

“Cyber currency?” Satoshi felt inspired. “We can give away points.”

“Like Blue Chip Stamps!” Donovan thought of his mother. “There used to be a time when you could earn Camel Cash. You know the cigarettes? You could buy a pool table if you had enough.”

“Incentive! One hundred percent incentive.” Satoshi was inspired and typed faster and faster. “We can give coin bits here and coin bits there.”

“One hundred percent incentive? We have to make sure it’s fun. It has to be mindless. We have to allow people to chose their

destinies. Are you a watcher? Are you a participant? There will be people who just like to sit back on their couches. We have to let them. Others? They need meaning in life. They need to believe they're contributing to the common good. They haven't paid their dues. *Guilt complex*. They need to be out there fighting the same beast that pushes us all down."

"I think we need an early sacrifice in the game. You log on to *City Dwellers* and create an account. You magically come across a fortune through a made up lottery or inheritance. You can go about life and be frugal. You can play it safe. But I'm thinking about *Jack and the Beanstalk*. We need risk takers. And we need to make sure they're taking risks on our behalf." Satoshi's mind was rolling as he typed. "I can create non-player characters. They can seem as real as humans, but it won't last too long."

"Put Jesus in there." Donovan thought about his time in the mental institution. "Jesus rides a dinosaur. He flies jets. He's everything we would expect in MacGyver. If players shy away from this version of him, we don't need them around. We need to shake people out like dumping beach sand through a seive. If they only accept the traditional version of Jesus, they are way too trained by our society. They can't help us win."

"What about Buddha? Maybe he can run a donut store?" Satoshi wanted to laugh but held it in. His fingers typed faster and faster. "I'll code something about tendencies because no one's certain to meet our absolute goals." A couple of minutes passed. "I'm putting in a user-friendly mod option."

"What?" Donovan asked. He was truly impressed with Satoshi's typing skills. Fast and accurate.

"All these empty places. Like the creek." He typed. "We have to let users make their own worlds with their own rules. They have to dictate rules. Does gravity exist? Do guns exist? What year is it?"

"Time warps!" Donovan was truly happy. "Tron," he said. "Make a Tron world down the street. And? A Max Headroom one."

"I want you to know that if I'm good at this, our game will shape reality." Satoshi Nakamoto typed and typed. His cousin, Sakata Tara, returned with a box of various chips and different flavors of Kool-Aid. "When this thing is done, you won't be able to tell reality from everything else," he told his cousin. Satoshi programmed with amazing zeal. "I have this idea for a creepy character."

"Yes?" Sakata asked. She listened from the kitchen and

prepared strawberry Kool-Aid.

“He’s a supernatural businessman. Faceless. Extra tall. Tentacles coming out of his back.” Satoshi’s fingers danced quickly on the keyboard. “Slender Man. That’s what I call him.” He had been clocked at more than a hundred and twenty words per minute. He wished he was even faster. “We have to counter-balance your cutesy Pokémon guys, dear cousin.”

“I have some serious, serious additions I want to make, too.” Donovan flipped through his notebook. “Do you know what DUMBs are?”

“I presume the opposite of Smarts?” Satoshi joked. He typed and considered it. “Zombies?”

“No. Zombies are way below dumb. It’d be a great idea to put them in, though.” Donovan’s mind raced. “DUMBs are Deep Underground Military Bases. A pal of mine visited me when I was away at that putrid asylum. John Leonard. He found four local middle school teachers and hooked them up with my best friend, Preston Bancroft, who produced a show which sent them on freaky trips. One of them was to Dulce, New Mexico where Grey aliens tried to escape from an underground military lair. There was a shootout and a bunch of people died.”

“Dulce?” Satoshi figured they could have a rudimentary version of Polybius by the end of the night. “I know that place. It’s connected to army bases around the country through elaborate tunnels.” It was a no-brainer. “I’ll put them in. And the aliens.”

“Polybius has to feel real around the cities. People don’t want this fringe crap where they feel most comfortable. It’s the ghost towns and the deserts. They need meaning.” Donovan thought of the Doors. “This is why Jim Morrison went out there.” He contemplated more. “There are exceptions. I want there to be time warps. I want the Pentagon to exist as it did on the day of September 11, 2001. I want the hole to be in the wall. There was no airplane wreckage. My friend, Preston, was a fan of Alfred Hitchcock. In the old days, you didn’t need the absolute gore of real life. You just needed the suggestion of it. In *Psycho*, Janet Leigh takes a shower. No provocative nudity. Filmed from upper-chest. A dark figure came in. Downward stabbing motions. It’s the silhouette of a killer. No blatant incisions. At the end of the scene, there is blood dripping into the drain.” *Wonderful art*, Donovan thought. “We watched *Get Smart* together. People were shot and killed in every episode but there was never any blood.”

“Do you want me to put Maxwell Smart in Polybius as a non-player character?” Satoshi asked. “We can put CONTROL and KAOS in there. Ninety-nine, the Chief, Mr Big and everyone else.”

“I’m concerned about our society’s mentality. We grew up watching Bugs Bunny. If TNT blows up in your face, you still live. Your face might be charred, but you still live. In *Get Smart* episodes, a person who gets shot doesn’t bleed. We accept it because it’s a spy comedy. But in real life, there was no plane wreckage on nine eleven at Shanksville, Pennsylvania or in Washington, DC.” Donovan didn’t want Polybius to be preachy but he wanted moments of satire. “I’m not crying over spilled milk but we can fix things.”

“I understand your nemesis, Roy Thurman, was a mob boss in an earlier version of Polybius.” Satoshi was nearing a crossroad in programming. There were templates he could use from online sources to speed up the process. He logged onto the internet and searched. “Do you want me to put him in?”

“Yes.” Donovan had a drawing of him. “I see him as a male Medusa with penises coming out of his scalp.” He thought he might get the jitters during the process. He was serene, though. “I have this funny idea that Washington has unholy alliances. I want those relationships exposed.”

“Like what?” Satoshi cut and pasted a huge chunk of gaming material from his favorite site for programmers. He planned to modify and mold it to his liking. “I don’t like their PC atmosphere. *Biosolids*? Just say shit or dookie! Right? *Enhanced interrogation*? Just tell people you’re torturing fuckers and don’t care about international laws! *Forced disappearance*? You kidnapped someone, okay? *Budget reinforcement*? Taxes, man! Say they’re taxes! *Negative employment retention*? Someone got fired! *End-of-life decision making*? Someone got fed up with living and killed himself! *Kinetic military action*? You’ve started an illegal war!”

Sakata brought a tray of Oreos with cheese and crackers. “Hope I’m not disturbing you.” She set it down then went back to the kitchen. “I want to add my own two cents. There should be houseflies. You must shoot them with shotguns. I think it’s a great metaphor for Roy Thurman’s gang.”

“You got it, sugar plum!” Donovan blew her a kiss. “One hundred percent chance it will be in Polybius!” He took a couple of Oreos. He wished for milk instead of Kool-Aid but didn’t say anything. He nearly lost focus but got back on track. “Unholy

alliances exist in our world. Long ago, the Catholic Church and the Freemasons butted heads. The Dark Ages went on for centuries. Knowledge was suppressed. It wasn't until 1992 that Galileo's excommunication was lifted. In 1993, they apologized for their role in the African slave trade. Don't you think the pope knows nine eleven was an inside job? Five hundred years from now, we might get another apology."

"I understand this." Satoshi ignored the snacks and kept plodding along. "Catholics and Freemasons have different philosophies. They have something important in common, though. Like you said, it's an unholy alliance."

"What do they have in common, cousin?" Sakata was in the kitchen making Jello shooters.

"Power," Satoshi answered. "The only way they'd lose is if they're at each other's throats while masses rose against them."

A week later, Donovan Cobb was at Blossom Grove planting flowers on the brown lawn across from the filled-in swimming pool. Sakata approached him, "What are you doing?"

"*Screaming daisies.*" He referred to a Bush song. *I'm not sure she knows Greedy Fly*, he thought. *From fourteen miles away.*" He watched her frown and was sure she didn't know the song. "I got permission from the manager to plant these. I can't stand how drab it is around here."

"Satoshi is doing great. He has a network of fifty other programmers. Polybius is almost done in its alpha phase." Sakata had the day off work. "Maybe we can take a drive later? It'd like to get away."

"Sounds good!" Donovan got up and brushed dirt from his overalls. "I'm working on my comics still," he said. "My OCD has been acting up pretty bad. I have Lilliputian visions of a girl I cared deeply about as a senior at Hollywood High School, Debra Laird. They're dream mining me. I wake up and they're there. They won't let me remember my dreams."

"They? Who else besides Debra?" Life was stupid. Sakata wished for the simple times.

"Mariano Tenney. Bully." Debra was an attractive girl. Donovan was attracted to her but never let the relationship progress past friendship. He didn't want to ruin a good thing. The mascot of their school was a sheik and was modeled after a character played by Rudolph Valentino back in 1921. Debra regularly wore a black

Hollywood High Sheiks baseball cap with Sun neck shade flaps in the back. “Mariano was the first staunch Zionist I ever met. A year after we graduated, I’d hang out with Debra at a malt shop. Mariano was the manager. The Gas Crisis was going on. Long lines to get to a station and they rationed people by odd and even license plates. Mariano hated Arabs. He had run for school president promising to change our mascot. Debra ran against him. Neither won, but Mariano resented us. He blamed us for not winning. He thought he was to bask in glory. When we’d go to the malt shop, we’d get poor service. I’d ask for no pickles on my burger and they’d deliberately get it wrong. Debra hated onions. She’d get onions.”

“This makes no sense. Why would Debra visit you with someone she hated?” Sakata thought about her personal demons. They weren’t as persistent lately and she could now sleep better.

“That’s the magic of it. *Pain*. Roy Thurman is behind it. He has paid her off. He has scared her. I don’t know. Maybe she’s not in on it, but I’ll tell you how it operates.” Donovan looked at the brown lawn around him. He could see daisies sprouting. “When I drive? Hey, I love my Suzuki Samurai! Doesn’t have a lot of power, but it’s fun. It’s topless. I put a radio station on. *I can see bands playing*. Lilliputian stuff. There’s a miniature band at the dials. Usually, they mock me. They have sold out. In this post-nine-eleven world, they are required to mock me. So I change the channel over and over. I get lucky once in a while from a band who didn’t lay down and go along with the Illuminati plan of world domination. But it’s pitty at that point. They’re getting slaughtered. If I keep the radio station on their song, I can see them pleading for me to change it. My mind is tapped into a spiritual dimension. So this Mariano guy? He started showing up a few days ago. I can’t look in the mirror anymore. People think Lilliputian visions are just of miniature pixies but they’re not. He’s a creeper. In an instant, he’s large. Standing behind me. Trying to mimic my moves. And if I don’t do as he says, he goes to Debra. Slaps her in the face.”

“I’ve had this for a few months, Donovan,” Sakata said. “The comics you left with Satoshi? I’ve analyzed them.” *Are we both crazy?* Sakata wondered. “Donna Leon? Is that Debra Laird? She wears an oversized cowboy hat. Is that Debra?”

“Of course it is!” Donovan paced. Finally, he said, “Let’s walk to the wash.” They left together and Donovan talked. “It’s Polybius, Sakata. Roy Thurman knows I’m trying to take him down.

This is just one of his bullshit moves. Remember when I was at Shokan before the Towers went down? My recliner was in the kitchen? I said it was because the Element needed it that way but it was the demons. One would always race to sit down before I got there pretending I was trying to sit on his lap. They wouldn't do it if I put it in the kitchen. They wanted me to look crazy. I walk around with black Sharpie markers and scribble notes on my hand. They're dream mining. They steal my dreams in the morning. They take the best of my thoughts. They don't let me return to my notes. I'm lucky if I can get to ten percent of them. There are Post-its all around my apartment." When they were outside the gated community, Donovan looked into the wash's basin. There were lush trees. "They'll sway toward us. If it wasn't for the telekinesis, I might get help. I can't block these images out of my head."

"My cousin told me the Universe is a hologram. The stuff he's programming will manifest itself." Sakata crossed the street with Donovan and looked along the windy dirt trail in front of them. She could see Chazirard, Jigglypuff, Gyarados, Pikachu and Mewtwo running along with them. "Can you see them?"

"Yes." Donovan didn't know their names but said, "Pokémon characters." Twenty minutes later when they were walking along the water, Donovan brought up portals. "Video games are fun to design. You can create worlds which cater to your own rules. When David Crane designed *Pitfall* back in 1982, it had a surface level and an underground level. You could climb down a ladder and run to the next screen and then it would shoot you out much, much, much further. *Cyber wormholes*. Super Mario Brothers had the same thing going. The concept isn't new, though. In fiction, the *Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland* had characters who traveled from simple homes to intriguing distant lands. The *Land of the Lost*, too." There was a scraggly man washing himself in the river ahead. Donovan kept to himself until they walked past him. "Stephen King wrote a great short story, *Mrs Todd's Shortcut*. It was about a lady who took side roads on her way home. Trails here and there. She always checked the odometer at the end and wanted to find the best route. The closest distance between two points is a straight line. Before she knew it, she was doing the impossible. She was coming home traveling way less than what the map said she was able to. Obviously, she went through a portal. There were strange animals around whenever she did this."

"I liked *Being John Malkovich*. They went into that weird

building with the tiny, little floor.” Sakata giggled. “They had to stoop down really low and when you got to a certain spot in the office, you got to be the actor, John Malkovich. You got to see through his eyes.” Sakata rubbed Donovan’s tummy as they walked. “Then it spit you out on the side of a New Jersey highway.”

“You know what one of my favorite was?” Donovan was happy. He looked in the sky and saw three UFOs buzzing around. The Sun was setting and the sky was orange. To the right of the Sun, he saw the planet Nibiru. “There was a music video by the band, Krokus. It starts off with a medieval motif. Everyone’s dressed in hoods and rags and dancing around. They’re pulling a large fifties or sixties pink Cadillac or something. A few are carrying a coffin. The singer is chained up and starts to sing.” He tried to remember details. “His lover is killed in front of him in a dungeon. He swears revenge.” Donovan laughed. “Something supernatural freed him. It gave him modern clothing from within a coffin. There was a hatch and he went down it.”

“Sounds abstract. Maybe we can find it on the internet when we get back?” Sakata wanted to sit. She looked around for a good place. She found a large boulder and pulled Donovan along.

“Here’s the funny part. The hatch takes him to a diner. The brute who killed his lover in the dungeon is now the cook. There’s a television mounted in the corner and he’s watching himself sing but it turns out to be music news like MTV or something. The anchor lady is his lover. The singer steps up onto the counter and starts walking on everyone’s food. He makes his way to the TV. The guys sitting at the counter are his band mates. They’re like, what the fuck?” Donovan knew they should head back. He didn’t want to be in the wash much past dark. *One of these times, I won’t care. I’ll walk all the way to Los Angeles with her.* Donovan thought about dimension doorways. Two weeks later, he was visited by John Leonard at his apartment. “I have some stories to tell you!” Donovan greeted John and brought him in.

“I have some stories of my own,” John said. “You first, though.”

“Last weekend, me and Sakata borrowed a couple of dirt bikes from a neighbor. We rode the wash all the way to Norco.”

“Norco?” John asked. “Where’s that?”

“About thirty miles toward LA. It was a blast!” Donovan thought about Pokémon characters. “We saw Charmeleon drinking from the river side. I figured it was because we asked Satoshi to

program him into Polybius. There was a homeless man cleaning up, though. Funniest thing ever! When Charmeleon got close to him, the vagrant man moved! He turned around and looked at him. He sized him up.”

“Do you know the story of Fátima? Town in Portugal? Named after one of the daughters of Mohammed?” John walked around the apartment. “I’m getting you out of here, by the way. That’s what the news is about.”

“Fátima? Three shepherd kids saw the Virgin Mary there. That’s about all I know. People flock there in the tens of thousands hoping to witness a miracle.” Donovan got up and went to his kitchen. “I have some great iced coffee in here.” He poured a couple of mugs and put cinnamon sticks in.

“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the Devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” John Leonard quoted Ephesians, chapter six, verses eleven and twelve. He sipped his coffee and chewed on a cinnamon stick. “This is not bad at all!” He refocused. “For every collective vision of benevolent spirits like the one at Fátima of 1917, there are many treacherous ones. St Teresa watched demons from Hell hack away at a corpse during a funeral, for example. She saw demons her whole life. In the nineteenth century, St Gemma was tormented in her convent by the Devil. He would laugh at her from the shadows at night. As time went on, she could see into the spirit world more and more clearly. One of the Devil’s dogs liked to hop on her bed and tear at her. She swore she was dragged around by her hair. They meant to pull her into Hell itself. She died at the age of twenty-five. In the nineteen sixties, four girls in Spain saw the judgment of mankind with rivers flowing with fire and blood. All of these are collective visions and not individual illusions.”

“Eerie, John. Really eerie.” Donovan asked, “So what’s the good news? What brings you to Highland, California?”

“Roy Thurman is breaking down. I can’t say I’m sad. He meant to destroy us all.” John Leonard reflected on the meeting they had at the beginning of 2000 after many of the Elite witnessed alien crafts in different parts of the world. “Roy was rattled after he went through a dimension door in the Dragon’s Triangle. He saw Hy’ Brasil and creatures which were supposedly extinct. He eased up on you and

Sakata. I don't know if you realize this, but Roy owns this apartment building and Sakata's. You were supposed to be his guinea pigs in life. He was planning to toy with you until death."

"He had a change of heart?" Donovan asked. "Truthfully, I thought he'd destroy me in the asylum."

"He had elaborate plans on how he was going to torment you. Your apartment manager? Alysson? Very pretty, right? Wears skimpy clothes and flirts? That's to break you and Sakata up. Then the rug is pulled from under your feet. She starts to date whoever it is you hate the most in the building. Eighty percent of the people here are like movie extras. They're using Hale Bancroft's scheme from long, long ago. And your tires will wind up slashed. Your Suzuki keyed. Operation Thunder Clamp. They figure out what you want and it becomes a carrot on a stick. They figure out what you fear. They hit you with it."

"So what's going on with Roy?" None of the information surprised Donovan. He went through similar persecution in the summer of 2001. Roy's people did a good job. They induced learned helplessness. Donovan thought about starving African children from television. They liked to show bare-boned kids with flies landing on their faces. The kids were too tired to shoo them away. "Do you understand what battered wife syndrome is? Women stay in horrible relationships. They don't know how to get out. Often, they don't even know how to describe what's going on because it's subtle and cumulative. A lot of these women grew up with abusive dads. Like a fish doesn't know he's wet, too many ladies don't even know what courtesy and kindness are." He thought about Sakata. "I don't understand men who abuse women. I couldn't do it."

"You think Roy's group gets off on hurting people?" John laughed. "It's *Sympathy for the Devil*, Donovan." He laughed more. "Roy has been shipped off to a rehab facility in Malibu!"

Donovan busted up into hysterics. When he composed himself, he commented, "You're right, John! I'm sad! Part of me is sad and I have sympathy! But why? How'd it happen?"

"Last July, Roy Thurman invited Cornelius Stuart to the *Cremation of Care* in Monte Rio. You know the one, right? Nearly every president has been invited to this ceremony. Senators, Scoundrels, and once in a while, Contrarians. Why Cornelius? Of all the people in our group, he's the most adamant about reconciliation. He believes the *Great Rift* was just nonsense meant to tuck us away

into our comfort zones. He believes we're all Illuminati and fighting for the same team. Roy, on the other hand, is like the Joker from the old Batman television series. He's going to tie Batman up in a lumber mill on a log and send him to his bloody death toward a spinning blade. He's not even going to stick around to make sure that Batman dies. Of course, Batman's going to find a way to undo his ropes!" There was a limousine waiting outside which John hadn't told Donovan about. John didn't want the driver to wait too long but he also knew he had to mentally prepare Donovan for what was next. "*The Cremation of Care* is meant to kill your weakness of caring too much. People with thin skin don't make good corporate executives. They don't make good political leaders. *They care too much.* Roy Thurman started caring about you. He had a 'coming to Christ' moment, or so I'd speculate. After he saw Hy' Brasil, his world was turned upside down. He had a different vantage point, and it no longer involved hunting you down and inducing severe trauma. He planned to move Bruce Dickey and Ellis Johnson into Bamboo Gardens. You have no clue how elaborate Operation Thunder Clamp was drawn up! They were going to stalk you and Sakata and then pretend it was all coincidence."

"Cold feet?" Donovan asked. "Roy Thurman must have got cold feet for the first time in his adult life! We took a lot of side roads because things got clogged up. We were in a vulnerable position last weekend! We were riding dirt bikes inside the Santa Ana wash! He pulled off, right?" Donovan thought about dinners with his dad over the past few weeks. "I think Roy got to my pops. We go to dinner and something is always off. When I was released from Patton, we had dinner at an Italian joint. My dad started building a semi-invisible barrier using salt shakers and other table props. Drinking glasses, Parmesan cheese shakers and stuff. A few days later, we were at a Mexican place. Same weirdness but different action. He would anticipate when I was going to drink my beverage and intentionally drink at the same time as me. Then he would nod to our server as if he was scoring points every time he freaking did it. When our food came, he would time when I would shovel beans into my mouth and then eat at the exact same time. It felt slimy so I would alter my plans midstream. I would move my drinking glass, for example. But he was obligated to grab his. It would be way too obvious if he mimicked me at every turn. Mockery? I can't tell you the exact motivation. Then he brings up *American Me*, the movie about Chicano gangs in prison. It felt like he was hinting something or trying to convey an innuendo."

“You know the Agenda, Donovan! You can’t waver! You can’t appear weak! There is no hesitation.” John Leonard intended to take Donovan Cobb away on a flight to New York. “Sebastian Reynolds and Logan DuPont are now running the Illuminati. They ousted Roy in a soft coup. They could have killed him. They’ve done worse for lesser reasons. Roy lost his killer instinct and they didn’t like it. They’re pretending he developed a drinking problem. He’s going to be tucked away for at least sixty days. When he comes out, he’ll be a fraction of what he used to be. He’ll have ceremonial duties but I doubt he ever gains the power he had before. In the meantime, I’m pulling you out of this place. I have a performance tomorrow in Battery Park. *Hamlet!* How long has it been since you’ve truly been away from the doldrums? We have a stopover in Denver. I need to show you some things there. Illuminati stuff. Roy’s guys stopped being careful! They’re laying it out for the world to see! Freemason symbols! Murals with aliens and killer gas. Martial law allusions!”

“I have a garden of daisies outside I’ve been working on. Keeps my mind off this. I get it. It’s time to face our hard reality. Operation Thunder Clamp is ending. But that doesn’t guarantee anything.” Sakata was away at work. Donovan already knew the answer before asking, “We don’t have time to say goodbye, do we?”

“The chauffeur is waiting,” John said. “We have to go. You’ll see her soon enough.” They took off. John Leonard performed in a live play in New York. A few days later, they flew Sakata Tara to join them.

Time went on. The four Emory Middle School teachers decided to return to work. An hour and a half drive west, it was September 11, 2003. As a youngster, Roy Thurman’s family would leave the cold elements of the Midwest and they would rent beach houses in California during the summers. Roy liked the trails of Tuna Canyon Park. He reflected on his life. Currently, he was a couple of miles down the road at the Red Rock Recovery Center. The view of the ocean was immaculate. There were sea lions and flocking gulls just outside the gate. He could see them through the facility’s wall-sized windows. He was sitting in a therapy circle with nine other patients and two councilors. Two of the patients were A list celebrities. It was his turn to speak. “I lost my edge. Simple as that. And I was having hallucinations. I know what caused them, though, and it wasn’t the alcohol.”

“We all have a tendency to slip into denial,” one of the

councilors said. “Our friends can tell when we’re in deep trouble and we’re blind to our circumstance.” She was a pretty lady named Jayla Balsam and she wore a dark blue knit Red Rock Recovery shirt.

“I grew up in Toledo. I was a Cleveland Browns fan, can you believe it? Tim Couch will save us from years of disgrace! Mark my words!” Roy Thurman thought about a Hail Mary pass against the Jacksonville Jaguars. “I miss Bernie Kosar!”

Jayla tried to peel the onion. “You grew up in Toledo. What do you remember about your childhood?”

“My dad inherited a shipping business from his father. But it goes way back to my great-great-grandfather, Jubal Thurman. Born in 1839 in Vermont. He was the understudy of one of America’s great industrialists, Collis Huntington. He ran the *Chesapeake and Ohio Railway*. He was one of the Big Four. True pioneers of the West. Built the Transcontinental Railroad with Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford, and Charles Crocker. My great-great-grandfather was an ambitious man. He didn’t stick to just locomotives. He was pals with George Lauder who had great connections to Carnegie Steel. Jubal Thurman’s son, my great-grandfather, Grady, was raised around the Great Lakes and built Thurman Cargo and Freight into one of the most solid companies around. Great-grandpa Grady passed the company along to grandpa Toby who gave it to my dad, Edgar.” Roy looked around the circle. He had their attention. “My father, Edgar, was named after the poet, by the way. I love *The Raven*!”

“Is this the root of your problems?” Jayla asked. “Is this a family issue?”

“My father, Edgar Thurman, ran Thurman Cargo and Freight until I was fifteen then sold it off. He was invited to join the Department of Justice. Our family packed up and moved to Washington. Corrupt city, I must say. Way, way, way back, Collis Huntington wasn’t just an industrialist. He was a lobbyist. One of the most hated people anywhere. We all stayed tight as families. Elbert Gary, JP Morgan, Charles Schwab. Grandpa Toby graduated in the same Yale class as Prescott Bush, the president’s grandfather. If you want to know who stole Geronimo’s skull, it was him. Prescott Bush did it.” It felt surreal to Roy. He was used to spilling his guts in a corporate board room, not in some rehab facility. “I went to Yale with John Kerry and president Bush. We had good times together. We were drinking outside of the Tomb a couple of weeks before finals. There were eight or so of us. I said, ‘Hey! Let’s skip studying and head out

to the farm!’ We always joked about cow tipping. Never did it together, but we talked. I was serious and I thought we’d go.”

“Cow tipping?” Jayla asked.

“Cows sleep on their feet! Ya’ catch them doing it and you sneak up on them! You can push them over and it’s the funniest thing you ever seen.”

A few people sitting around couldn’t contain their laughter.

“I did it in high school and I wanted to do it again.” Roy moved on, “So I belong to a special group of people. Lot of money. They figured we’d rig the next presidential election! They have that much pull, especially in Ohio! I got cold feet. I won’t go into detail as to why, but it was an epiphany I had while sailing near Japan a couple of months ago. I caved in. I figured everything doesn’t have to be so fixed and I suggested John Kerry have a legit chance next November. There’s a young, charismatic black state senator in Illinois. His mother was involved in the Ford Foundation. I suggested we follow up on our doctrine of inclusion. Throw them a bone. We can still have political success if we zig and zag a little.” There was silence for a while. Roy concluded, “It was like *Jerry Maguire* when he decided to pass out a mission statement meant to fix the screwy things in his company. They had enough of me. I don’t drink any more now than I did ten or twenty years ago. I lost favor. One of my colleagues over the years is a guy named Sebastian Reynolds. His family runs this place.”

“Wow!” a guy next to Roy said. “Is it my turn now?” He saw Roy was done. “My trip here happened because of a celebration on Fourth of July at Point Mugu. It was the shirt I was wearing. *Afghanistan: Where Nations Come to Die*. I am an anti-war activist. Has anyone heard of the Reichstag Fire? The Nazis burned their own parliamentary building in 1933 and they blamed it on the Communists. This led to a totalitarian state. Do you know Operation Northwoods? In 1962, the Department of Defense proposed to JFK that the US military blow up a commercial jet near Miami and blame it on Fidel Castro.”

Jayla asked, “How does this relate to a drinking problem?”

“On the Fourth of July, my shirt triggered an Iraq veteran. He got up in my grill. I’m like, ‘*Don’t come at me, bro!*’ But he wouldn’t let up. He’s barking about the families of victims of nine eleven. I should have respect for them, he says. I ask the guy about the Reichstag Fire and Operation Northwoods. ‘*Do you even know what these things are?*’ And he knows nothing. There are children around,

waves are breaking, everything looks good at the shore, alcohol is involved, so it's more heated than it otherwise would be. *'Nine eleven was a false flag attack, dummy!'* At this point, the guy knocks my beer out of my hands. He storms off. No punches were thrown but my friends thought I went to far." He scratched his chin. He was an A list actor. "It's not the first time I've been here."

A couple of the lady patients had crushes on the guy. They were giddy and they clapped.

Weeks went by. As the group made more collective progress, they went outdoors more and more. They started with strolls along the beach. Eventually, they would take long walks along the trails of Charmlee Wilderness Park. Roy Thurman became good friends with the star. As the years would go on, he would be asked by friends and family members for the actor's identity. Roy hardly told. It was a good therapeutic period for him. He liked to spill his guts. He felt nasty about the stories he had to tell but he had to get things off his chest. "I graduated Yale in 1967." The view from Charmlee was good. Across Pacific Coast Highway, the ocean was sensational. "I was in love with a girl who lived next to my frat house."

Gary Manheim was the A list actor and was the youngest of three sons. All of them started acting as children and were featured as extras in *Hook*, a Steven Spielberg adaptation of the Peter Pan story. His oldest brother, Channing, was the most successful as an adult. He starred in *The Daring Racers*, a movie about coked up Indy car drivers; and *Lunatic Starship*, a comedic sci-fi flick about a star fleet driven to insanity by an aggressive fungus mold. The middle brother, Kenneth, didn't take show biz too seriously. He wound in teen comedies about drunk guys having fun during spring break. The Manheims weren't the Baldwins by any stretch of the imagination, but they held their own. Gary watched a roadrunner jet past them. He said, "*Beep, beep!*" He thought of the cartoons. Wile E Coyote always got worked over but he always came back for more. *Persistent motherfucker*, he thought.

Roy and Gary had a habit of letting the rest of the group get ahead of them. It helped them talk more candidly. "Ashley Bamin. She was the daughter of the chancellor of the Board of Trustees. Only child. She would come out to water her lawn in tiny shorts and a t-shirt which always got wet." Roy Thurman thought of her. He wound up marrying Norah Lumley. Yale's first coed class was in 1969. Norah was a freshman that year. "Ashley had something special. A bounce in her step." He thought of her crimson hair and her powder blue eyes.

“Hot.”

“I wish we could go into time machines.” Gary felt like going for a swim. “Maybe if we get back early enough, we can get some surf in. One of the councilors said he had a board.”

“Ashley was a beauty.” He ignored Gary’s surfing idea. “I can see her in my head like it was yesterday. It was the late sixties and women stopped wearing bras. *They felt empowered*. And I felt tempted.” They walked along. “There’s an allure to those kinds of people.” The four humors were blood, melancholy, phlegm and bile. Roy remembered his college days. “There’s these fluids inside of us. *The four humors*. If they are in balance, they say we have a good sense of humor.”

“I know this,” Gary said. He thought of his brother Kenneth’s piss-poor teen comedies.

“I felt wonderful when I was around Ashley and, one night at a party, she came over.” Roy Thurman had been granted twenty million dollars in a family trust fund the year before. He suspected Ashley was after his money. “She made out with me. I was drinking Jack Daniels.”

“When I get out of this place, I’m gonna have a shot of Jack!” Gary laughed.

“It’s funny about emotions. I felt great with Ashley. The biggest donor to our theatre department was Hale Bancroft, some Hollywood super producer. Why he gave us money? I don’t know. I learned a word from him. *Apophenia*. We have a tendency to attach serious meaning to random events. I made out with Ashley on the front porch of our frat house. *Bus Stop* by the Hollies was on the radio.” There were gulls overhead. Roy thought of the pterodactyls he saw at Hy’ Brasil. “I never felt better with a woman.”

“What happened?” Gary asked. *I hope those birds don’t shit on us.*

“Her boobs sagged a bit. But that wasn’t a problem! I swear it wasn’t.” *I’m saying my quiet thoughts loud*, Roy thought. “It’s just that I was twenty-two and she was eighteen. Most freshmen girls had the perky thing going, but she didn’t.” *Best tits I’ve ever seen*. This time, he kept his quiet thought to himself. “Her dad? He wasn’t just a chancellor. He bred horses. They were studded by Omaha, War Admiral and Count Fleet. This is no fucking joke! Generations of winners. So she had all these...” Roy walked. He was not a politically correct person, yet he held his tongue. Finally, he said, “*Midgets*. She

had midgets around her house night and day.”

“Jockeys? Are you talking about jockeys?” One of Gary’s favorite places was Santa Anita. He thought, *I’m going to have a shot of Jack, then I’m heading to the race track. First fucking thing when I’m out of here.*

“It was like a circus going over to her house!” Roy was frustrated. “I think that’s why she came to the parties. *To escape.* I fell in love with her. I had pull at Yale. I graduated in sixty-seven. Two years later, women were allowed to take classes on campus! You think it’s a coincidence? I loved Ashley and I lobbied. Why can’t the chancellor’s daughter take classes?” Some people were prone to turning red when embarrassed or angry. Roy was one of the people who would have random blotches show up on his face and chest. He was wondering how he looked to Gary. He tried to calm down.

“Roy?” Gary was concerned. “This story doesn’t have a good ending, does it?” Sure enough, Gary noticed a few patches on Roy’s neck.

“She wound up boning a fucking midget! Damn it!” Roy was enraged and spittle dribbled down his chin. “She was gorgeous at five-three and she pleased a four-foot-seven motherfucker!”

“Bro!” Gary grabbed Roy’s shoulder. He stopped him. “I’m going to guess something. This Mighty Mouse guy? He was rich, right? He was one of the winners? Kentucky Derby? Preakness? Belmont Stakes? This bitch? I’ve seen them in Hollywood! Daughters and sons of rich actors! Sometimes? Their parents don’t have a ‘share the wealth’ attitude! They throw the kids to the wolves. It’s a hard life out there! They wind up in prostitution! Dealing drugs! Shady shit! Killing people! *That’s right!* They find solace in the mafia.”

Roy brushed him off. He kept along the path. “She was after my pocketbook? And when I didn’t dish out cash, she found some rich horse jockey?” He felt like crying. *I’m a sinister motherfucker*, he thought. *It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there.* Roy Thurman stood at six-three and the young, slender version of himself at Yale was two hundred and fifteen pounds. The mid-aged version added much more weight. “Did you read *Of Mice and Men*? Curley beating up Lennie? The TV show, Taxi? Louie De Palma as an angry runt boss? What about *The Princess Bride*? Vizzini?”

“He was such a meanie!” Gary laughed. For the first time in his most recent rehab experience, he didn’t dread being there.

“Robots? Computers? They’re making people like me obsolete! There used to be a time when the public needed men with brute strength! And they let us get away with a lot! Cat calls at construction sites! Grabbing ass on the lawn at rock ‘n’ roll concert pavilions! Picking fights with midgets at biker bars!”

“You know what my dad used to say?” Gary put his arm around Roy and they walked along. *“There’s always free cheese in the mouse trap.”*

“You think I’m being baited? Ashley was baiting me in the sixties and I never learned my lesson?” Roy shook it off. The idea lingered. “You’re right!” He had a moment of unease. Gary’s arm was around him and he felt vulnerable.

“There’s more to this. As an actor, I’m forced to wear many hats. I look through glasses with many colors and shades. I walk in many shoes.” Gary thought about politics but it was a testy subject. “I have found truths out for myself.” He had a gut check and a quick examination of conscious. “You’re going to find the answers you need! You need to answer your own questions, though. I can help you get there.”

Roy was angry. He wasn’t angry at Gary. It was all the bullshit that came back in his life. “A midget! Right? I thought of them as jockeys until I knew Ashley betrayed me! Then I noticed the pattern. It’s like they wear you down. It tore into my psyche.” In Roy’s mind, he flipped between a half-full and half-empty glass. “People are freaks. They have fetishes! Some grandma is boning her dog in her backyard at this moment! Some other guy just watched American Pie and decided to stick his cock in a hot, apple pastry! At this moment! Some other fucker has tied a rope around his neck and started jacking off inside a closet! I heard it’s a thing!”

“So she’s into midgets?” Gary asked.

“Why would she be?” Roy was beyond angry. He was demonstratively infuriated. There was a gopher who poked his head up a few feet away. Roy chased it and tried to stomp it. “I’m a big guy! That’s what chicks like!” *Fuck this shit*, he thought to himself. *This is so common sense I don’t know why we’re having this talk!* “There are a few things chicks like across the board! A large cock! Put nine inches out there and they’ll jump on it! A fat pocket book! I got one! Family name or prestige! A woman will forego huge cock if she thinks she can be a queen! Intellect! One percent of the freaks out there want a man who can dazzle the mind and they don’t care about anything

else! Artists? Yes. Minority of the freaks, still. A guy who can walk into a bar and kick anyone's ass! That's still a turn on!"

"You're most of these things," Gary observed. "But, all these years later, you lost to a midget." He watched Roy flinch. "The crux of your anger at this moment is that there's no guarantee."

It felt like a machete slammed through Roy's brain and he was reminded of Donovan. "Yes." He was pissed. "You want to know the truth?" Roy thought about all the observations he made over the years. It wasn't just the horse jockey who shared a bed with his love interest, Ashley. He saw this over and over. The princess kisses the toad and he becomes a prince. Beauty and the beast. Hot chick, stupid guy. "I will kill them all." Roy sneered. "FEMA camps. I have plans, I have connections in Congress, and it makes zero sense at all." He patted Gary on the ass. All of a sudden, he wanted to catch the group in front of them. "Why should we lose to these fucking Cretins?"

"*Cretins?*" Gary Manheim asked. "Lord have mercy!"

A few moments passed. "Do you believe in God?" Roy Thurman contemplated his circumstance. Red Rock Recovery was not a jail. He didn't have to return to the facility. He was supposed to be there six months but he was getting antsy.

"God?" Gary took a few moments to think. "At parties, I run from guys like you. I don't like to think about it." He looked into the sky. "Something's out there."

"In my group, we know God exists." Roy wanted to be free. He wanted to be on a yacht in the ocean again. "We don't obey. We think of God as an entity who cares too much about stupid shit. Some vegetarian isn't eating beef because he cares about cows. Some vegan isn't drinking milk because he's concerned how much milk is pulled from cows by those stinking machines. *They think it's inhumane*. And they won't eat fish and they don't eat eggs." Roy's mouth was dry. "Everyone has one in the family. *A do-gooder*. And they don't drink Coors beer because the Mexicans hated the company during the seventies." Roy's gut was full of bile and he thought about the four humors. "We worship Moloch." He was proud and he could feel his fluids coming into balance. "And Beelzebub. *He's a favorite of mine*. And Mephistopheles and Baphomet and Lucifer. My Illuminati group does this." Roy tried to spit but it was dry and stuck to his mouth. "'Marduk, Rimmon and Balaam." He thought about his relationship with Beelzebub in particular. "We know God is out there." There were tall strands of deer grass as they walked along. They swayed toward

Roy. There was no breeze. *Beelzebub is doing it again.* “Ashley was a fluffer.”

“What?” Gary asked. “She jacked off horses?”

“Yeah. I learned this after we made out.” Roy thought about his favorite seventies movie. “Do you remember when Annette approaches Tony with the condoms?”

“Saturday Night Fever?” Gary recited John Travolta’s line. “*Are you a nice girl or a cunt?*” He was ashamed, not because he remembered, but because of the taboo c-word. “I’ve had women like that in my life.”

“So you know what I’m talking about!” Roy knew he was driving it home. “There are good girls gone bad. Ashley was a horse fluffer and that led to her kinkiness. Before long, she’s boning midgets! You know what I’m talking about! Right? And what father would make his daughter fluff horses? So I’m thinking, maybe she’s white trash! Back then, we didn’t call ‘em white trash but you get the gist. Ashley, though, had this parameter. She had the ability to make me feel like I’m the center of the world, but she’s doing it for some short shit horse jockey as well!”

“I remember Danny Manero tried to talk to his dance partner. He didn’t want her to become a slut.” Gary shrugged. “We all go through this.”

“Welcome to your life,” Roy said.

“I know,” Gary responded. “There’s no turning back.”

A few hours later, Roy was feeling much better. For the first time since he was in rehab, the councilors let everyone out after dusk. Gary and Roy walked along the Malibu shore. Moonlight reflected on the Pacific Ocean. Waves crashed. Roy loved the smell of seaweed. He carried some along with him. His spirit was much higher. “You want to hear a funny story?”

“What’s that?” Gary Manheim was a fan of *Point Break*. He thought about the beach scene when Johnny Utah played football with Bodhi. He thought about some of the philosophy of the movie. Bodhi, a surfing bank robber, befriended Johnny Utah, an undercover FBI agent. He talked to him about coexisting on different planes. He talked about the death of the human spirit. He talked about their success having to do with the lack of hesitation. In the end, Bodhi’s group of masked bank robbers was thwarted when he changed plans midstream and demanded money from a locked vault. One of his inner circle cohorts was shot and died.

“One of Ashley’s favorite midget jockey friends was a butch chick, probably four-nine. Never raced in an actual derby. She was around mainly to prep and train the horses. Michelle Smallwood. Had Mötley Crüe’s *Theatre of Pain* album cover tattooed on her back. This was before tramp stamps were popular. Wore nothing but sports bras when she rode. Big hooked nose. Cauliflower ears. The left half of her jaw had no teeth because a horse kicked them out. She reeked. Really bad. Came to frat parties with Ashley after I found out about the fluffing. It was comedy!” Roy laughed. “I studied psychology a lot. *Compensation*. I realize how people offset their shortcomings. Horse jockeys? They feel bigger on the horse! *They’re not bigger, but they feel bigger*. Dudes with small peckers? It’s the same thing! They go out and buy a large four by four. I knew a jockey who had a ripped aquamarine Dodge Ram! He needed a roll out ladder to get in it! This was just a few months ago! Funniest shit you can imagine!”

“Small, my table,” Gary Manheim said. “It seats just two.”

“What?” Roy asked.

“I’m a fan of Pearl Jam. They knew what it was like. You get all these people up in your grill. I grew up in the spotlight and I don’t know what normal people go through. I was a child actor. And we’re human. We need space. I go to an airport and I have to take a transfer from one flight to another. Fuckers are out there trying to get your autograph. *Fine*. I get it. I’m an actor. It’s going to make their world.” Gary shook his head. “But it’s never enough. There’s a crowd of twenty maniacs and you sign three autographs. You try to catch your connecting flight. Then you hear some dick yell at you what an arrogant loser you are because you take off. You skip him. He feels slighted.” Gary thought about *Point Break* again. “I loved when Bodhi rode the fifty-foot wave.” He looked into the ocean. “That’s how I want to go out.”

“Bodhi?” Roy asked. “What?”

“Bodhi? From *Point Break* in Australia. The killer storm.” Gary shifted. “We have much more in common than you’ll ever know. I’m a Hollywood liberal and you’re some banker conservative. We’re just opposite sides of the same brain. *We have the spotlight, though*. We have fuckers in our grill every day. With you, they want money. With me? Mojo. Hollywood actors have mojo. They want a piece of us.”

Roy Thurman thought about his plans to send ordinary American citizens into FEMA camps. They would be systematically

killed. He was frustrated by the demands of the public. He didn't like the tactics of those who were cut out of the pie. Donovan Cobb was the worst of them. His family was blocked from having any influence over how the Federal Reserve was run. As a result, Donovan and his best friend, Preston, became pests. They wouldn't go away. Roy didn't want to talk about banking. "That midget friend of Ashley's? *Funny!* She was at a party. Apparently, she knew MMA. In karate, fighters have a routine called *kata*. It's like ballerinas moving about in a choreographed dance. Except they're pretending to kick and punch invisible people. Michelle Smallwood had this thing going on." Roy chuckled. "Everyone was drunk and she was in the middle of our living room. She goes into routine where she's beating people up like she was Bruce Lee." He thought of a Bruce Lee quote. *Empty your mind. Be formless. Shapeless. Like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle.* "Her end move was an elbow to her foe's face." Roy pictured her. "Those were good times."

"You think Ashley was her secret lesbian lover?" Gary reached down and grabbed beach mud. *I love the way this feels.* "I mean, she was fluffing horses and all."

Gary and Roy became friends and they were released from rehab in January of 2004. On February first, they were in Houston inside one of Roy's friend's luxury boxes watching the Panthers play the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVIII. The halftime show was one for the ages. A former 'N Sync member tore down the blouse of Janet Jackson, exposing one of her boobies. Gary and Roy traveled the country for a few weeks. In March, they were at the Mustang Ranch near Reno, Nevada. They were looking for Roy Thurman's lost love, Ashley Bamin, who was rumored to be working there as a prostitute. The brothel had been shut down since 1999 but Roy thought he could find leads. Sure enough, he did. He was dropping hundred dollar bills around town asking questions. He found out she was working as a blackjack dealer in Elko, Nevada now as Ashley Marglini at the Paul Bunyan Hotel. On the weekends, she worked as a prostitute at Mona's Ranch. Roy found her and paid for time. He held her in a bed. "How did this become your life?"

Ashely wept. "You didn't want to see it." At fifty-five, she was still attractive. "I had to get out. My father was overbearing. I had no privileges of being a rich kid. We had money. But I was so deprived!" Ashley thought about the horses at home. Roy had been

fighting with his wife, Norah, in 1977 when Yale had its ten-year class reunion. Roy invited Ashley to go with him. They slow danced to Michael Martin Murphy's *Wildfire*. It was a song about the ghost of a lady who died while searching for her pony during a terrible storm. Ashley sat up from the bed. The brothel was not well kept and their sheet wasn't clean. She was ashamed. She pulled down her blouse. "This is Wildfire." There was a tattoo of a horse near her left clavicle.

Roy Thurman pulled down his shirt. He had an Illuminati triangle near his left nipple. "I could have saved you from this."

"I didn't want saving, Roy. I wanted a chance to be a real wife. But you were with so many women during college that I gave up." She thought about the horse jockey she slept with. "I tried to use sex as a weapon." She shook her head and turned away. "I regret it."

Roy laughed at the irony of having money. There was so much freedom. Billy Joel had a lyric, *You can't dress trashy 'til you spend a lot of money*. He thought about psychology and how people internalize their lives. Tarzan was raised by apes and could never live as a regular person in an urban setting. "I had the best moments of my life with you years before I became jaded. This world teaches you to fight or else you go under. At Yale, I still had my innocence. So did you. By the time I got together with Norah, it felt forced and arranged. Our families clicked but it was never the chemistry I hoped for."

The last time Ashley saw Roy was at the 1977 reunion. She ran away from home. She joined a brothel. "You left me out too long." She thought about *Dances With Wolves*. Lieutenant John Dunbar was sent deep into the frontier to man a post. He was all alone and befriended a wolf. No one from the Army was sent to spend time with him. He spent months waiting. He also befriended an Indian tribe. Changed the way he looked, acted and thought. Eventually, the Cavalry came but he was already transformed so they considered him to be a traitor.

"I know what it's like." Roy Thurman thought about Donovan Cobb. "I'm usually on the other end of it. I banish people. I don't forgive. I protect what we have."

"Why are you here? Roy? Why?" Ashley wanted to be saved. She knew Roy had the money to lift her out of the physical doldrums but she wanted to be saved on the inside.

"*Live for yourself*," he said. "*There's no one else more worth living for*." It was the lyrics from Anthem by Rush. "*Begging hands and bleeding hearts will only cry out for more*." He spent a few

moments in quiet reflection. "That was my attitude for years. But I've seen the light. It's lonely at the top. The Carnegies and Fords have gone through this and they set up philanthropic organizations to give aid to good causes. I thought that was weak. For a long time, I did. But I'm King Midas. Nothing around me is alive. I came here with a good friend, Gary Manheim. He helped me see the light. I was already on the right path, but he helped me see a bigger picture."

"I never thought you were evil, Roy. No matter what others have said." She thought about kissing him during the sixties. "We're all born into this situation. *The Machine*. The Machine runs everything and we have to know which cog we are."

"You're the last chance I have in life. My enchantment is gone. I don't believe in anything. A few months ago, I traveled through a dimension door near Japan. *Inside a fishing boat!* I want to take you with me! I know we can leave this place! I've hired a lot of people. *Experts!* They know how to get places. Hy' Brasil! We can go there!" Roy leaned over and kissed her. There was a time warp in his mind. Same kiss as when he was on the fraternity porch. *Bus stop, wet day, she's there, I say, please share my umbrella*. He could hear the Hollies sing. *Bus stop, bus goes, she stays, love grows, under my umbrella*.

"I will leave. But this is not a cesspool. You talked so long about these people like they were pariahs." She held his hand. "Your heart has softened. I will go with you." A half our later, they were in Ashley's Winnebago in the backyard of her friend's house. Ashley was packing clothes into a suitcase. "This was only supposed to be a temporary thing. I have a home in Reno." She went through a closet. "Daisy should go with us."

"Daisy?" Roy asked.

"She's the girlfriend of the owner of Mona's." Ashley scurried to the kitchen. She started a pot of coffee. "I became Ashley Marglini in 1996. Married the owner of the Paul Bunyan. Lasted three years. *Horrible three years*. We divorced. No kids. He hit me a lot. *Devin*. Devin Marglini is one of the honchos of this town. I kept his name because it has power. They respect you more in the brothel. That's how much pull he has. Daisy? That's Daisy Rosenfeld."

"They are pariahs. You brought the word up earlier. Casino owners? Brothel owners? They prey on weakness. My family transported steel through the Great Lakes. We need steel. It's civil. But these guys prey on the weakness of the human spirit." Roy watched Ashley move about. She had a bounce. She always did.

“People think I’m a filthy piece of shit because I’m not a Communist. My family believed in making a profit. But we provided a service. We got steel from one place to another. What are these guys doing?” After the 1977 Yale reunion, Roy took Ashley to a Hilton hotel room. They had sex. When copulation was over, Roy put his nose into Ashley’s asshole. He licked. He stayed there. *What are you doing?* she asked. Roy came up and asked her face-to-face, *Do you know why women have two holes?* She laughed. She didn’t know why. Roy told her, *So men could carry you like six packs.* Roy was in love. He lifted her and carried her to the balcony. They stared across the city into the night sky. Ashley was never offended. Currently, Roy thought of that time. “You don’t think I know who Devin Marglini is?” Roy stood and turned his back to Ashley. He huffed and puffed for a few seconds then faced her. “They are slime! I have a group of pompous billionaire rivals called the Contrarians. They think their shit doesn’t stink! They are into organic farming, government socialism, and so-called clean energy! They treat us like we’re the scum of the Earth! But if they could only see the layer beyond us! The casino owners! The brothel owners! It’s a slippery slope from there! We’re talking about human trafficking! I run black sites around the world! I know what I’m talking about! Sex slaves! Forced labor!”

Ashley zipped up her suitcase. She headed to Roy. “We can’t stop this and we shouldn’t.” She went to the fridge and brought out a cheesecake. “It’s always been this way.”

“Fucking whores!” Roy yelled. “Fucking whores! Fucking whores! Fucking whores!” He vented. “After our night at the reunion, I played a couple of songs over and over again. *Cecilia* by Simon and Garfunkle and *Hey, Hey What Can I Do* by Led Zeppelin. They’re songs about whores. I have friends in the CIA and FBI. Do you not know I knew you ran away to Nevada? Do you not know I knew you joined a brothel? It weighed heavy on my mind.” Roy returned to Norah after the reunion. Presently, Roy grabbed Ashley close by the arms. It hurt her a bit but it didn’t scare her. Roy looked at the black pupils inside of her blue eyes. They grew, then shrank, then grew, then shrank. “I fucked up, Ashley! I went back to Norah when I should have stayed with you! And now? I have a fucking ulcer! My stomach grinds me! I was such a coward! I ran with the Joneses! I tried to stay with the in crowd! I loved you the whole time!”

“I will bring Daisy, or else I don’t leave!” Ashley’s emotions got the better of her too much in life. If she was able to settle, she

could see the bigger picture. Roy was offering an escape.

“Daisy is going to want to bring her lover! Some retarded loser!” Roy looked into Ashley’s eyes but held her at a distance with his arms stretched outward. “I can tell you a story. Did you know the Los Angeles Night Stalker had council? The fucker killed many women in cold blood! He didn’t deny the murders and he showed up to court with an inscribed pentagram on his palm! In the LA area, where the serial murders took place, they couldn’t get a local public defender to represent him! They had to bring in a guy from Texas! But that’s our system! As a matter of principal, you get representation! Understand? The guy from Texas? In the eyes of the Los Angeles public, they thought he was defending the Night Stalker, also known as Richard Ramirez! Me? I think the guy was defending the system itself! We have to make sure the system remains!” Roy pulled down Ashley’s blouse and admired her horse tattoo near her left clavicle. He was hypnotized. He pulled down her blouse further. He lifted her bra and suckled on her boobie. He was reminded of breast feeding from his mother. He put her bra and blouse back into place. “Richard Ramirez was a bad guy. But, besides the murders, he kept his shit to himself!”

“I don’t understand,” Ashley said.

“Daisy’s guy, whoever it is. If you arrive at a point in life and you own a casino or a brothel, you’re a sociopath! You are preying on human weaknesses!” Roy was a villain in life and he knew it. He believed there were different shades of being a villain. “Do you know what a pariah is? You’re the one who brought up the word! Richard Ramirez was a serial killer, but he wasn’t telling everyone they should be a serial killer, too! He wasn’t teaching seminars! He wasn’t doing infomercials.” Roy looked into Ashley’s eyes and he knew he had her. “A pariah? He turns good people into bad people! He spreads his mental disease! He talks shit when no one’s looking and he pretends to be friendly when the cameras are rolling! He can’t be stopped and he’s a total virus!”

Ashley was at a crossroads. She loved her friend, Daisy. She wanted to make a case for her.

Her hormones raged and she felt like she was seventeen.

“Fuck me, Roy!” She walked to him and leaned against his chest.

Roy took off his shirt.

“Not here!” She pulled him through the Winnebago door.

“Right here on the lawn!” The grass was brown and pebbles were everywhere. “I want to wake up with grass blade cuts all over my back!”

They boned. It took Roy five minutes to unload his jizz inside of her.

Three days later, they were at a Beverly Hills party together. Roy bought Ashley a nine-hundred-dollar cute outfit from Burberry’s on Rodeo. She felt transformed. It was a fuchsia gown trimmed five inches above her knees decorated with abstract butterscotch daffodils. “I feel like Pretty Woman,” Ashley said. “You know the movie?” They walked uphill along a curved driveway. There was music blaring from the mansion in front of them. It was New Order’s *Round and Round*. Ashley liked the song and sang. “*The picture you see is no portrait of me. It’s too real to be shown to someone I don’t know. And it’s driving me wild. It makes me act like a child.*”

“Gary Manheim is supposed to be an hour late. He’s stuck in traffic on the four-oh-five.” Roy held Ashley’s hand and squeezed. “This is Kenneth’s house, his brother’s.”

“Kenneth Manheim?” Ashley asked. She was happy and didn’t have anything to drink yet. She heard wild teenage laughter ahead. She knew they were drunk. She wanted to get to the bar. She thought about liquor. Wine. White wine. That’s what she craved. “I loved Kenneth in *Bratwurst Summer*! Remember when the kid gets mad in the hospital waiting room? He spits on the doctor’s kneecap? Fuck, that was *soooooo* funny!”

“Then his dog pisses on the doctor’s BMW tire?” At the time, Roy didn’t like the movie. As he heard Ashley reflect on it, he suddenly believed it was in the exact same class as *Casa Blanca*. Roy blocked it out. “Hale Bancroft is going to be here. He produced *Bratwurst Summer*. He’s a rival of mine. If I squeeze your hand extra tight, I need to leave. Five minutes. We don’t have to be so obvious. We can mingle.”

“I heard on the news that Hale is trying to start a new roller derby team. *The Zulus*. They’ll play at the Home Depot Center in Carson. He was talking and it made sense to me. Notre Dame has the Fighting Irish. San Diego State has the Aztecs. Cleveland has the Indians. Why are there no teams with black mascots? Do they not have anything to be proud of?”

“Hale Bancroft isn’t even black!” Roy was disgusted. “They are opportunists and they are feeding off the sympathies of today’s

politically correct society.” Roy thought about Preston, Hale’s son. “I worked with those fuckers. That’s why I’m so uncomfortable coming here.” The entrance to Kenneth Manheim’s door was thirty yards away. Roy stopped. He admired the cars around him. Bentley, Rolls-Royce, Maserati, Lamborghini, and Jaguar. “They love to do the photo op. It’s a ploy.”

“His partner, Morris Taft, is part of the ownership group. *He’s black*. How could that be racist?” Ashley was horny. She had been pent up in Elko, Nevada for so long that she lost hope her life would ever be decent again. When Roy showed up unexpectedly, she saw light at the end of the tunnel. She stood on the property of a raging party in Beverly Hills. It was no longer “light at the end of the tunnel” but rather, she was standing in the actual light. *Literally*. There was a strobe light that started spinning above the front door. She pulled Roy. “Let’s get inside this place.”

Roy walked with Ashley. “I’ve dealt with these liberal Contrarians over the years.” Roy’s emotions were now muddled. He became friends with Gary Manheim, an open liberal. “Hale’s son? Preston? He’s that kid at the Thanksgiving table. He wants to sit with the grown adults.” Roy wanted to show up with a positive attitude and it wasn’t working. “You know that one? He thinks he’s too mature for his kiddy cousins and the rest of the family. So he pouts and throws a tantrum!” A drunk teenage gal came storming out of the front door. She was holding her mouth, got to nearby bushes, then puked out a huge load. “When Preston was thirteen, he literally approached me. Wanted money. Some script he was working on. *Sci-fi*. His dad set him up with a trust fund but it wasn’t going to kick in until he was out of high school! He figures he’s going to schmooz me! But his script is some liberal bullcrap! Why am I going to finance that stupid shit?”

Ashley pulled Roy along. She looked up at him then kissed his sagging third chin. “Let’s go in!” She giggled. “I have a good feeling about this.” They walked through Kenneth’s door. “*Holy shit!*” She was starstruck. Jack Wyatt, Jack Dawson, Louis Balks. She had fantasies about these people. Frank Elgin, Todd Anderson, and Matt Hagen passing around a marijuana joint in the far corner. *I love this house*, she thought. She inhaled the aroma of the weed. John Caliban was carrying Rene Fane over his shoulder. He took her through the kitchen sliding glass door then slammed her into the backyard pool. Ashley laughed and continued along with Roy. There were people playing poker in the dining room. Richard Mace was dealing to Bruce

Baxter, Joey Ferrini, and Alan Swann. The smell of cigar smoke was strong. Ashley was reminded of velvet paintings of Elvis. The picture she saw in her mind was good. She thought it should be replicated at swap meets around the country. She thought about a painting she saw of Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Elvis Presley smoothly kicking it inside a diner. *This is good*, she thought. Right before Ashley and Roy made their ways into the backyard, Ashley bumped into Blair Brenen on accident. *I am in Heaven*, she thought. The swimming pool was large and nearly rectangular. People splashed away. There was a bar to the left and an attractive female bartender serving drinks to swimmers. Roy and Ashley walked over and ordered mudslides. The path continued along and sloped downhill past the pool. The view of the valley was good. The Sun had already set but the aesthetics of the lights below were pleasing. "I have guilt," Ashley said.

"Is it the jockey thing again? We have a couple of hours to talk about it." Below them, there was a tennis court and a large gazebo. "That really killed the lovey dovey of our relationship. For a while, I thought I had a good love triangle between you and Norah. I dated other girls, but you two were my only steady women."

"I never forgave myself. It was an emotional thing. If I could have handled it, I would have." There was a couple leaving the gazebo as Ashley and Roy got there. "We have the place to ourselves." They entered and sat. There was a keg of beer with plastic cups. "Do you want one?" Ashley reached for a cup and poured. "I sure do!"

Roy drank the rest of his mudslide. "I'll take one." Roy reflected on the sixties. "You have a real magic. I could always feel you from across the room. *Across the lawn*. Your magic put me on top of the world when things were going well but it devastated me when you were angry. Hell hath no fury like a woman's scorn. You were the strongest."

"Did you kill my jockey buddy?" Ashley liked her beer. She guessed it was Bud Light. "He was found dead in my backyard with blunt head trauma. The doctors said he was kicked in the temple by a horse. The horses were all locked in their stables. I wondered about this. I didn't bring it up at the reunion because it was such a great night. But did you?"

"I don't need to, Ashley. I'm a kingpin. I run a lot of shit. When you fuck with me, thousands of people are instantly affected. Someone's going make their way over. *Put concrete shoes on someone*

else and send 'em swimming with the fishes. My wife, Norah, cheated on me about ten years ago. I had dinner with a Navy admiral at Marcel's in Washington, DC. I told him about it. A couple of weeks later, Norah was on TWA Flight 800. The Navy shot her down."

"Fucking shit!" Ashley laughed.

"I thought about killing you," Roy said. "I thought long and hard about killing you. You fucked with my head that much. I wouldn't do it myself, of course. That's not how billionaires operate. You would go hiking and have an accident. That sort of thing."

"Well, I guess, thanks?" She giggled. "I wound up as a prostitute in a brothel. I'm not so sure you wouldn't have been doing me a favor. I got used to it. The humiliation."

"I became a stronger person for what you did. I wouldn't say I became a *better* person, but I was stronger. I learned a move that obliterates my enemies. *Cuckold*. A man thinks he's going to have a good time as a porn actor doing side jobs. He signs all the release papers. Then we trap him. Dungeons. He thinks he's going to be the dominatrix of some sadomasochistic roleplay but we tie him to a chair. We have experts. We find out who he loves or used to love. A wife? A sister? A mom?" Roy laughed. "We even did a grandma one time." Roy rubbed Ashley's leg. "We bring her in and throw down the mat. There was a midget in the porn world named Bruce Dickey. Originally, he was from the South American rainforest and he was there at Yale giving speeches about clearcutting. But he was a pervert and tried to sleep with the young freshmen girls. We could have banished him but we saw a use. He had no moral compass. On the outside, he seemed to. On the inside? He only wanted to get laid. Didn't matter who."

"You turned him into a porn stud?" Ashley was intrigued by the story.

"I made him into a tool. I made him into a crony. People fucked with me. They wound up in dungeons. This midget would screw the shit out of somebody's loved one right in front of them." Roy's mouth was completely dry even with the beer. It was always like that when he was flustered. "I got the idea from you, though. You hurt me bad." Roy expanded, "It started off with just pure cuckold. Then? My rage grew. I wanted a solid reputation for being mean! Why? So no one would fuck with me down the road! But they kept coming at me. I had to raise the stakes. This midget would fuck your wife in front of you, then you would wind up locked in a pillory."

“*Pillory?*” Ashley asked. Her smile was beautiful. The gazebo was strung with Christmas lights and it was way past holiday season.

“It’s one of those wooden clamp devices they used in New England during the Salem witch trials. You know the ones where your head and hands are bound?” Roy leaned over and smooched Ashley. “Bruce Dickey would walk behind the man, pull down his pants, then butt fuck him. We’d film it and laugh. We’d send VHS tapes to his friends and family.”

“You said he was porn star, right? *Was*. He’s not at this anymore?” Ashley started to feel hunger. There were hors d’oeuvres in the living room. She saw pate and baguette crostini when first passing through the living room. In a few minutes, she was sure they’d head back up.

“He’s swimming with the fishes, Ashley.” Roy laughed then inhaled deeply. “I want to buy this place. Right now.” He started to feel comfortable. “I have ten million dollars burning a hole in my pocket.” He kissed Ashley’s neck. *Life is good*. “Would you live here with me?”

Things worked out well. Roy offered to buy Kenneth’s mansion but it wasn’t for sale at any price. However, Kenneth was set to shoot a movie in Ft Lauderdale and he allowed Roy to rent the place until the end of April while he was away. Sparks flew between Roy and Ashley for the first week. It was like they were young adults again. They took walks in Beverly Park and every now and then, they made it as far as Cold Water Canyon. Ashley loved life but she was torn. Her emotions were never stable. *I’ve been a prostitute too long. Now I’m damaged goods*. “I’m legally changing my name back to Bamin,” she told Roy one day when they were at the Franklin Canyon Reservoir. “Unless you marry me.”

Roy loved Ashley, but there was a problem. “When you went to the race track with Gary the other day, were you flirting with the horse jockeys?”

“Me?” Her face became flush. “No! Hell no!”

“I got feedback from him. There was a guy you were talking to. Four-ten motherfucker. Wearing a freaky Christmas sweater.”

“They all do that!” She had been at Hollywood Park with Gary Manheim while Roy flew to Ohio for business. “How did your trip go?”

“Fine!” Roy thought of a Metallica song. *I see faith in your eyes, broken is the promise, betrayal, the healing hand held back by the*

deepened nail. Follow the god that failed. “I’m changing religions.”

“What?” Ashley asked. “Don’t tell me you’re turning into a holy roller!” *We should bring a blanket one of these times.* She pulled Roy down with her.

“I’d never do that. Jesus was such a weakling.” He looked across the reservoir then threw a stone into it. He watched the ripples. “George Patton said something interesting. *The object of war isn’t to die for your country.*”

“Isn’t it, though?” *I fucked up. I fucked up really bad.* Roy’s *in one of his moods again.* She wanted to console him. Instead she let him vent.

“You didn’t let me finish. *The object of war isn’t to die for your country, but to make the other bastard die for his.*” Roy was proud. *She’s a slut,* he thought. He shook it off. “Jesus dies for what?” He looked at Ashley and wanted to have a warm feeling. It wasn’t there. “Beelzebub has been my prime deity since Yale. It’s time for a change.” Roy reached for Ashley’s hand and kissed it. “You said my heart has softened. I think it has. Valhalla. It calls to me. I was listening to *Immigrant Song* and it seemed so right. Valhalla, I am coming.” Roy decided to talk about his trip to Ohio. “The fix is in. I met with Walden O’Dell, CEO of Diebold.”

“What’s Diebold?” Ashley scrunched her nose and looked cute.

“They make ATM machines. They also make voting machines. With every ATM machine, you’re given a precise amount of cash back and you get a bank slip. These voting machines? They’re not accurate. They can be rigged. Walden already promised Ohio for president Bush. No different than Florida four years ago. There’s no paper trail. You don’t get a slip of paper like you do from a Diebold ATM machine. Ohio is a swing state and it’s important. It’s where I grew up.”

“Are you still rooting for the Browns?” Ashley was ashamed she remembered his favorite team. “I thought about you when John Elway beat them! Remember *The Drive*?”

“Fuck the Browns!” Roy was kidding. “They let me down too much.” He waited. “I still root for them. My dad was one of the main reasons we got a team back so quickly after Art Modell moved the original team to Baltimore and changed their name to the Ravens.” He got back to the Ohio election story. “John Kerry’s on board and isn’t going to raise a fuss. I knew him and George W Bush at Yale. John is

too much of a Communist and he knows it!”

“Is this right for the country?” Ashley asked. She ran her foot up Roy’s leg.

Before he could become aroused, Roy let it out. “You’re a slut, Ashley. I have no reason to disbelieve Gary Manheim about how you flirted with horse jockeys at Hollywood Park! You were invited into the stables and you went.”

“Get over it, Roy!” When Ashley got defensive, she liked to mess with her shirt and unbutton it. *Show a little cleavage.*

“And that, too! The first time you did it? I was like, wow! I’m going to get some! But it’s an old trick and our relationship has become muddled!”

At Kenneth’s party, they wound up walking from the Gazebo to the pool. There were twenty-five drunk people holding each other around the waist in a large chain and swaying back and forth. They sang Soft Cell’s *Tainted Love*. “You point the finger at everyone else but you’re the one who thinks your shit doesn’t stink, Roy!” Tears rolled down her cheeks.

It was abrupt. “I’m going to remind you of a story from Yale back in the sixties. Marco Quintin wanted to make it into Skull and Bones but was rejected. Another short shit motherfucker with short man complex! Bad grades. Rude. *A whiner*. In his mind, he was on the verge of getting in. But? He was the poster child of a reject! And he cried to your dad, the chancellor of the Board of Trustees. He literally cried! And when your dad wouldn’t overrule me, he pled to Steve Huber, one of my best friends at the time. Then he talked to you!”

“I remember what you said about his whining.” Ashley tried to think of the words. “You said, ‘*If you complain but don’t offer a solution, it’s called whining.*’ And the guy bitched, and bitched, and bitched. Barking like a stupid chihuahua!”

“That guy was such a faggot! He was getting off on playing the ‘short card’, you know? ‘Life dealt me a horrible hand so I have to leech off people who got it good’ was his attitude.” Roy shook his head in disgust. “You tended to nurture and console those fucking Cretins! That fucker always tried to get at me for rejecting him into Skull and Bones, and he tried it through you and my pals.”

“Don’t think about it, Roy!” Ashley was mad at herself. *I’ve always been in compromised situations and Roy just doesn’t understand.*

"I've become an outcast amongst my friends! Logan DuPont and Sebastian Reynolds threw me into that rehab facility. At first, I thought they did it for my own good. I mean, I have the weight of the world on me all the time. I started thinking, though, that the Machine and the Agenda can be changed. It can be modified. I suggested the inner workings shouldn't only be white men. I'm talking about the façade of our government. There's a black senator in Illinois. He was born in Kenya and his mother was a white CIA asset working for the Ford Foundation. His real father was black but he was raised by a step-dad. His mom did lesbian porn. We can fix the birth certificate and say he was born in Hawaii where he was raised. We can hide his mother's lesbian porn. He has charisma! We're fixing this election for Bush and we can fix the next one for him! He gives us what we need! This country pretends to be about diversity and I still have friends in the media who can deliver this."

"So Logan and Sebastian stopped talking to you because of him?" Ashley wondered. "Who is this guy anyway?"

"Barry Soetoro. He goes by something different, now. Soetoro was his step-dad's name." Roy thought about the inclusion of females in national politics. "I've talked to Warren Buffet and George Soros about these issues. We've discussed putting money behind Hillary Clinton as a possible candidate for president in 2008. Our guys let her into the Council on Foreign Relations so she's on board with all the right policies! And she gives the same façade as Barry. The country will have the image they so much desire, all the while, the Agenda won't be radically changed."

"You have your work cut out for you." Ashley noticed tension from Roy and rubbed his shoulders. "I'll be with you as much as you need me." She kissed his ear.

They traveled together. After April, they flew to Cabo San Lucas. They drank at the Cabo Wabo Cantina and partied with Sammy Hagar. They stayed at the Villa del Palmar timeshare. There were palm trees all around and a few extravagant swimming pools. They soaked in the Sun and relaxed on white lawn chairs. Roy Thurman was irate. "You really blue-pilled it, pumpkin!"

"Fuck off!" Ashley wore a large straw hat, cutesy oversized pink sunglasses, and had white lotion on the tip of her nose. "If this is another lecture, I don't need it."

"I have pictures of you with a trucker in Fontana, California. You went to a Motel 6 together." Roy looked over at Ashley. There

were fifteen or so swimmers splashing in front of them. “I want to take you to Hy’ Brasil and the opening will happen next month. The Contrarians are letting me into their group. One of their guys, James Richards, is an expert at vortices and portals. He knows the signs.”

“I helped the guy with his glad lock! Okay?” Ashley was flustered. “I had sex with truckers at the Mustang Ranch and I know these things! I carry around a glad lock key on my key chain in case they need one! You were away on business so I took a drive! I wanted to see Route 66 so I wound up in Fontana! It took me a couple of hours to get there and I was very hungry so I stopped at some diner! Some fucker put a glad lock on his air brake as a prank so I helped the trucker out!”

I’m not going down this path, Roy thought.

“And if you have to hear the whole story, I slept with three Los Angeles Lakers at the Ranch! Okay? One of them was a regular! Are you going to crucify me for that too? I thought you were over it!”

I’m not going to ask who they were. Roy speculated. *Michael Cooper? He had a good three-point shot. Kurt Rambis? At least he’s white and I won’t have to think about “once you go black, you don’t go back”. Norm Nixon? They traded him for Byron Scott. I’m kind of curious, actually.* Roy didn’t ask which Lakers Ashley slept with.

“You are the biggest psycho the world has ever known, Roy!” Ashley was horny. “You couldn’t stand your wife, Norah, so you had her killed in the TWA flight! Then you fell in love with some Asian chick, Maureen Li, and you made sure she was in the North Tower when it collapsed! What are your plans for me? When the shit finally hits the fan and you can’t handle your jealousy anymore, what are your plans? Are you going to blow up the Eiffel Tower while I’m on vacation in Paris?”

“London, actually, honey cakes.” Roy was humbled and was surprised he was telling her his plan B to get out of the relationship. “I was planning on taking you to see the Thames in a year. I’d be pulled away on unexpected business. You’d be sent out on a subway. There will be terrorist drills planned next July. They will go live. We’re making a list of who should be offed. We have patsies. They think they’re only part of a routine drill. They’ll carry backpacks and they think they only have fake explosives. But they’re real! And Giuliani? He’s going to be there. In my circle, we like to induce a lot of pain. We induce agony! He couldn’t stop the Towers from falling and he can’t stop this.”

"It's all a gamble when it's just a game," Ashley said.

"What?" Roy was perturbed and took off his cheap shades. "Are you citing Guns N' Roses?" He tried to control his temper. He leaned to Ashley. He touched his nose against hers. "I try with all my might to make sure you're good and safe." He wanted a margarita and walked away. He came back with two then handed one to Ashley. "You know what crazy thought just went through my buzzed-ass mind?"

"You're a piece of shit loser?" She laughed then licked salt from her glass.

"You can take the whore out of the brothel, but you can't take the brothel out of the whore." Roy felt better. He waited for a reaction. After a couple of seconds, he settled onto his lawn chair.

"Good one, dick face!" Ashley downed her drink and got brain freeze. "Did your mother teach you that?"

"Way back in the sixties after you slept with the jockey, my pal, Steve Huber, asked if we would ever get back together." Roy began to relax. He put his sun glasses back on.

"What did you tell him?" Ashley watched a group of teens playing in the water. She was ready for a swim.

"I wouldn't fuck her with *your* dick." Roy was at ease and couldn't remember feeling better in a long, long time. "We used to talk that way to each other!" He mused at the modern age. "I don't know what happened to people."

"I have a confession," Ashley said. "Remember when Channing showed up to the party? Right after we sang *Tainted Love*? He was standing right across the pool from us. You left to get beers and I flashed my tits at him! Ha, ha!" Ashley laughed. "I've always had a crush on him! Remember him in *Elixir Cottage*? My goodness! There has never been a better ass shot for a man ever!" Ashley checked Roy's face. There was jealousy but not a lot. "Yuuuummmmm! You know the scene, right Roy? Where he's naked outside facing the grizzly bear? I've pleased myself to Channing Manheim many a time."

Roy wasn't mad. "You know what fucked with my head that night?" He was miffed at the memory. "I was getting beers and there was that one fat actor. *Not Horatio Sanz*. Lonnie something or another. Was in a Western where he falls onto that huge cactus. The rattler bites him on the cheek."

"The dude with glasses who was trying to grow a mustache?"

Hardly any pubes?" Ashley considered the movie. *Fury Ranch*. It was one of her favorite.

"He was talking about gang bangs. I hate those people. They use their celebrity status to perv really bad. Some girl was sucking his cock a few days before. *Some prostitute like you*. I was awestruck before this. Then I heard him talking to his buddies." Roy loved Ashley. The candor in their relationship was great. "I kill guys like that, Ashley. Antaviliai in Lithuania. We torture freaks like him and then throw them to wild dogs."

"Do you remember the conga line around the pool, Roy? I think the song was *On and On* by Stephen Bishop. It started one way, then reversed. I was having such a good time!" There was an energy in the air. Ashley had never been so happy. "Do you know I've never been in a conga line before?" She took off her oversized pink sun glasses. "Thank you for taking me! Before I start talking too much shit and you start thinking I'm serious, thank you!"

Roy was at a loss for words. "You're still a whore!" He reached into Ashley's handbag and pulled out a Nokia cell phone. He dialed. "I'd like to order three extraordinary renditions."

Who will it be?

"Sakata Tara, Donovan Cobb, and Lonnie Donner."

Ashley heard Roy talk. She was curious about who was on the other end.

"Sakata and Donovan will rendezvous with me and my lover next month at the Loyalty Islands."

New Zealand? Really Roy? Are you chasing portals again?

"And Lonnie Donner will be taken to Diego Garcia. Give him the treatment!"

He's a celebrity, Roy. These things take planning unless you want a PR nightmare. The Agency can only do a few of these a year before raising eyebrows. Are you sure you want to play one of your real cards on that peon?

"Who is it?" Ashley asked. She thought she would be brushed off. She looked around. When she was sure no one was looking, she slid her bikini bottom down a few inches. The hair on her head was a natural tomato color. The carpet matched the drapes.

Roy muffed the cell phone with his palm. "It's Cornelius Stuart! CIA! He's going to kidnap some people for me!"

A month passed. The feud between the Scoundrels and Contrarians within the Illuminati faded. Roy wanted to reform the

organization. He worked hard with Hale and Preston Bancroft. Sakata Tara and Donovan Cobb were living at their old place across the river from Manhattan on the Jersey Shore when they were abducted by government agents into a nineteen-sixties black Dodge van with a primed side sliding door. Lonnie Donner was picked up by an agent disguised as a prostitute on Hollywood Boulevard in California. She was pudgy, and her skirt was so short her panties showed. They had different destinies. Sakata and Donovan were taken to Wellington. Lonnie was taken to Diego Garcia where his left pinky was cut off upon his arrival. A finger was lopped off every day for the next four days. Then his torturer, known as the Djinni of Djibouti, took a machete and slammed it down onto Lonnie's arm as it was strapped and extended onto brick cubes. He lost everything up to the elbow. He was taken to the San Francisco Bay and dumped inebriated onto the shore. The media reported he had a boating accident water skiing. Jay Leno joked a man his size wasn't meant to be on two skis, let alone three or four or five. The buzz was that he drank too much, blacked out, and his arm found its way into the tow boat's motor when he tried to climb back onboard. Lonnie Donner wound up at the same Red Rock Recovery Center where Roy and Gary struck up their friendship.

Roy's cronies weren't kind to Sakata and Donovan. They were kept under tight lock and key at various safe houses. Roy worked close with Donovan's best friend, Preston. They were able to acquire the original Minnow from Gilligan's Island. Preston believed it had a special magic. If things went wrong, Preston believed he could lose Donovan's trust. He had a method to his madness. He let Roy operate with diabolical behaviors. In the middle of June of 2004, James Richards said it was time. Sakata and Donovan were brought out of their New Zealand safe house and they joined Preston Bancroft, Hale Bancroft, Roy Thurman, Ashley Marglini, Larry Warrick, and James Richards on the Minnow. They sailed to the Loyalty Islands.

Lightning flashed out of nowhere.

"See the spiral? You don't get lightning patterns like that every day!" James Richards pointed into the distance.

"I'm scared," Sakata said. She poked Preston on his side and hoped it hurt. "Why are you dealing with this crazy motherfucker?"

"I can hear you!" Roy Thurman was twenty feet from her.

Sakata walked to Roy. She spit on his chin. "Fuck you! I will kill you when I get the chance!" She turned her back on him then walked to Donovan.

Roy watched her walk. "I can save the Contrarians!" He didn't wipe the spit from his face. "I know how you felt in 1913 when we left you out of the Federal Reserve! My own guys are turning on me!"

Donovan said, "Suck a dick, Roy! You didn't need to kidnap us to bring us here! All you had to do was convince Preston that it was in our best interest! Civil conversation, you know? And we didn't have to be scooted from one safe house to the other!"

Roy stormed over to Donovan and got in his face. "I know something you don't know! Planet Earth does not matter anymore! Not in the dimension we're used to!"

James Richards got between them. "Assholes!" He stepped away and yelled, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" He looked across the sky. "It's closing up, idiots!" He pointed. The lightning was dim. It started to look regular. "It's alive, you morons! It's a dance! We play this dance!"

"Negative energy?" Sakata asked.

"It's like a neighbor, beautiful lady." James felt bad. "Your neighbor invites you over for a barbeque. Tells you to invite a friend. And then you start bickering in the first five minutes. Your neighbor is going to make an excuse. He's going to tell you the barbeque is off. He's gotta take a casserole to his grandma and he forgot about his promise. Some other time."

The sky calmed. Their chance was over.

In early October of 2004, Roy Thurman met with James Richards at a Comfort Inn in Portland, Oregon. They were in the lobby. "I bought the Love Boat."

"What?" James asked Roy.

"I bought the literal Love Boat. You know the one from the TV series? Back in the seventies?" Roy was usually certain about his decisions. He currently felt like a loon. "And I hired Doctor Drew and Adam Carolla. And I got Doctor Ruth Westhiemer and Seth MacFarlane. They will be with us."

"The gods got to agree with what you're doing." James Richards scratched his chin. "It could work."

"I promise mediation. If I feel like blowing up at Donovan, I will talk to Drew or Adam. The other guys? I just want my bases covered."

"I think it can work," James said. "The next vortex is on Halloween in Madagascar."

"I'll arrange the logistics," Roy said. He held James tight. He

let him go. "I wasn't always a jerk. This world made me hard. But I'm ready for amends."

"Donovan will know you're trying." James considered an uncomfortable thought. "Are you still keeping them in safe houses and black sites?"

"No," Roy said. "I mean, yes and no. They are kept in special places. They are bouncing around Caribbean islands. It could be much worse."

On October 31, 2004, there were five hundred specially-picked guests sailing on the Love Boat near the Comoros Islands northwest of Madagascar. Dark clouds pounced. Lightning lit in a web from north to south and east to west. It spiraled and danced. The sacrifice was good for the gods. They accepted the energy of those cruising inside the huge sea vessel.

"Roy? I have never been this afraid," Ashley told her lover. "I feel like I'm walking on egg shells. Any little move could upset this whole process. We can be left out again."

Roy consoled her. "You're the most beautiful person I have ever known. I have hated Donovan Cobb all these years." He approached Ashley and held her. "He's a better man than me," he whispered to her. He was on the verge of tears and shook them off. He stepped away from Ashley then turned his back on her. "Marvin Hagler fought Sugar Ray Leonard in 1987. Great fight! Classic! No one knew who the judges would pick and, sure enough, it was a split decision." Roy turned and faced Ashley. "You know what Ray muttered into Hagler's ear when the twelve rounds were over?"

"Piss off?" Ashley guessed. "You're a mamma's boy and she dresses you funny!"

Roy thought her comment was great but held back laughter. "You won! You're the champion!" Roy was serious. Of course, Ray Leonard denied saying these things later. Roy Thurman had his sources, though. He was sure Ray conceded defeat. "The judges gave it to Ray. I feel like that guy. I feel defeated by Donovan. I bought this boat! I'm taking us through the next portal! But I feel like a piece of shit!"

Ashley walked to Roy. She rubbed his beer belly. "You are perfect in what you do! You had those talks with Gary Manheim about Saturday Night Fever! You keep going back to this." All of a sudden, Ashley felt shame and she turned from Roy. She splashed herself onto their cabin bed. She talked. "Am I a good girl or a cunt, Roy?" She

reflected on her years as a prostitute. "All of us believe in ourselves when we're younger. *Before the world screws with us*. I'm still the same child I used to be. I can play Twister in five minutes if you get the right people around me. I can play Life. I have an urge to play tag. I want to play Simon says." She sat up from her bed and faced him. "You have to believe you're the same kid in Ohio who collected Matchbox cars and Hot Wheels! You liked Tonka trucks! You're still here, Roy! You must believe!"

The island of Hy' Brasil was amazing. The Love Boat easily made its way past a swimming Plesiosaurus then reached the Cliffs of Insanity. Preston Bancroft was helping passengers board life boats to reach shore. He spoke to Roy Thurman and Ashley Marglini while he did this. "I have kept secrets from Donovan for years." He lowered a rubber boat full of people down. "William Goldman came here with my father." He chatted with a nervous family then returned to his conversation. "Sid and Marty Krofft? Where do you think they got the ideas for Sigmund and the Sea Monsters? HR Pufnstuf? Land of the Lost? They came here!"

Roy was humbled. "I will be in silence for much of my time here." He watched three pterandodons glide overhead. "I am dumbfounded."

"I wrote to Daisy before we sailed here," Ashley said. "I figured we might never see our normal world again."

"What did you tell her?" Roy asked.

"The last words I heard her say was 'good morning' and that was the day you came to take me away. Daisy was always my favorite person. She was dedicated and she made small things feel huge. I would bake a meatloaf and she would make me feel like I cooked five Christmas dinners!" Unlike the movie version of the Cliffs of Insanity, the Hy' Brasil version featured baskets for people along with giant hoists. Before long, Ashley was talking to Roy high above in a plush meadow. There were four-leaf clovers everywhere. Unicorns pranced around. There were edible chocolate carnations. A honey-flavored river gushed along the banks. "This island is self-aware," Ashley said.

"It functions in our fifth dimension. Humans can't comprehend why things work the way they do." Roy walked with Ashley then they reached a cobblestone path. There were gold bars, crystals, and gems scattered along the side. Roy looked down at a gold bar. "This is the original Yellow Brick Road." Roy was sure of it.

"We can live here forever," Ashley said.

"We have to talk to the magician first," Roy said. "He's a cousin of Merlin."

"What's his name?" Ashley squinted. The Sun was in her eyes. She noticed something strange about the ball of gas in the sky. It looked larger. And it was more red. She didn't say anything about her observation.

The path they traveled hugged the cliff's edge. Roy looked into the ocean. "The Love Boat? It was built in West Germany during the early seventies. It's actual name is the SS Pacific Princess. I was able to bring a few hundred people. Most of them were friends and they came willingly." There was a lighthouse in the distance on a desolate large rock. Roy guessed it was abandoned. "About a hundred people came against their will. Mostly, they were Donovan's associates."

A fifty-foot anaconda slithered between Roy and Ashley then passed them along their gold-plated road. Ashley was not startled. *Isn't that a tropical animal?* she wondered. "So the magician? Roy? You didn't tell me. His name?"

"Myrddin. *Myrddin Embreis, actually.* Cousin of Merlin, like I said." Roy hated explaining complicated situations. This was quite complicated. He felt compelled. "In our world, in the third dimension, we have come to know Myrddin Embreis as Merlin. It's a corruption, though. *A confabulation.* Merlinus Dubrius Ambrosius was the actual Merlin. They lived in the sixth century. Merlinus crowned King Arthur in Carlisle. Myrddin, on the other hand, was a soothsayer. He was a druid priest in service of the god, Lug, the overseer of Ireland. He was a shapeshifter and became a horned beast known as Cernunnos."

Ashley looked into the violet sky. Gamera flew above them and disappeared beyond the horizon. *Could that be?* she wondered. *Nah. I am most definitely dreaming.* She clapped her hands together. A hundred feet ahead, there was a fork in the road. One path continued along the cliff's edge and the other turned inland. *Should I ask which way we're heading?* she wondered. *Nope.* They walked. When they got to the fork, they headed inland. At the junction, there was a crop circle the size of a football field. It featured circles and connecting lines. *There's a blue orb coming out of that thing,* she observed. *Does Roy see it?* She kept her thoughts to herself. "Myrddin is significant for what reason?"

A three-foot-tall black bunny hopped past Roy and Ashley. Roy behaved as if it was a regular incident. "He has a rival.

Abhartach. Dark magic. Vampire.” Roy considered his story. There were a lot of muddled things. He was trying to get it straight. “Bram Stoker never went to Romania. He wrote about Dracula and people assumed it was based off Vlad the Impaler, but it wasn’t. Abhartach is the original deal, darling plum. He lived in the fifth century and was an overlord of Ireland and lived in Garvagh. Blood sucker. *Literally*. Such a menace!” A porcupine skirted across the path in front of them. Roy laughed. “The locals got so perturbed with Abhartach they went to another town to hire someone to kill him. Cathain was their guy. He killed Abhartach. Buried him standing up.” Roy reached for Ashley’s hand and squeezed it. “Abhartach resurrected. Came back. So Cathain killed him again. Guess what?”

“Abhartach came back again?” Ashley thought about Jason Vorhees.

“Yeah, he came back! So Cathain had to figure out what he was doing wrong. He discovered Abhartach was marbh bheo. A walking dead!”

Thick fog descended on Roy and Ashley. There were others strutting ahead of them. They were no longer in sight. Ashley looked back. Nothing in sight but whiteness.

Out of nowhere, a cloaked gruffly man appeared. He presented a scroll. “This is the map you’ll need.” He handed it over to Roy. He turned away.

“Who are you?” Ashley asked.

The mage ascended and took off into the sky.

“That was Vortigern,” Roy told her. “He fought the Saxons.”

“How do you know this?” Ashley demanded. She hit Roy on the chest.

As quick as the fog came in, it lifted. Roy was amazed. “I paid fifty million dollars for that Love Boat, sweet cakes! Do you not think I paid for some intel on this place?” Three ostriches ran past Roy and Ashley. Roy unrolled the scroll. A detailed map was printed on some kind of animal skin. “To our direct east, we have Lughnasa. North of that is Carlisle, Arderydd, Snowdonia, and the Forest of Ewing. Southeast, we have the Kingdom of Ossory which is surrounded by Dublin, Waterford, and Limerick. This is important! If we have to travel back to our world without the ship, we need to be there! Vital! Keep that in mind! The Kingdom of Ossory has a limestone passage called Dunmore Cave! It’s a portal.” Roy studied more. “West of Ossory are the Caha Mountains. *Sandstone*. There are more passages

there! Antrim, Galway, Kerry, Louth and Cork.”

Ashley grabbed the map. “What’s this in the northwest? I bet we’re going there!” She laughed but didn’t believe it.

“Sheol? Also known as Hades? Yep. That’s our quest.” Roy licked his lips. “That’s the land where Abhartach came from. When Bram Stoker wrote his novel about blood suckers, it was originally called *The Un-dead*. And it wasn’t about Count Dracula. It was about Count Wampyr.”

Ashley was giddy. She held Roy at the tummy as they walked. “I never knew you were a nerd, Roy! You know so much!”

There was a puddle in front of them. “Quicksand, precious!” He yanked her. “This world is way different than the one we came from!”

As they scurried along, there were six skunks. Roy tried to pet one in front and was sprayed. “That felt good,” he said. “Tomato juice, I guess.”

“I know who I am, Roy! Snowwhite! That’s why I fell in love with those midgets! The horse jockeys, you know? And they all had their separate personalities. And I boned one for some reason! But I felt like a strong person around them!” She felt satisfied. “When I was around you, I always felt stupid. You always had something smart to say from your Yale classes, but the midgets were stupid! And I felt *soooooooo* good around them!”

“I have so much shit I’m going to fix while we’re here in Hy’ Brasil!” Roy sniffed his arm. *Smells like Heineken*. He shrugged. “I captured the Contrarians. Connor Milton has been kept here. He had a zoo for exotic animals and cryptids in Mexico. Here? He keeps unicorns. Centaurs. Griffins.”

“You’re such a dick, Roy!” Ashley slapped Roy’s cheek. “Why would you keep a unicorn in a zoo? They are beautiful creatures! Let them roam free! Like the ones we saw after we climbed up the Cliffs of Insanity!”

“Hey!” Roy rubbed his cheek of the sting. “We’ll fix that later!”

“Green scales fell like rain, Roy!” Ashley thought about Puff the Magic Dragon. “You can’t fuck with a person’s inner child!”

“First of all, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Roy tried hard to please Ashley. *You bite off what you can chew*, he thought. *I thought I was managing things in bite-sized chunks*. “Second of all, unicorns are ugly creatures. Not the fun ones we saw

prancing around earlier. The ones who made it to our third dimension are incredibly hideous! They wound up in Siberia and look more like rhinos than pretty, fluffy animals!” A herd of goats was visible in the distance and they scooted along the rolling meadow. Time slid on. That was the best way to explain it. The Sun in the sky didn’t travel in a straight line. Rather, it roamed around randomly as if being a lost child. Before long, Roy and Ashley were hoofing it in the middle of the massive goat herd until they reached a rocky hillside. There were a couple of decrepit leafless trees. “This is it!” Roy was excited.

“This is what?” Ashley looked around. There was a large crow perched on one of the tree’s higher branches. The fat bird was perhaps two feet tall. “This place is weird, Roy.”

“Behind these trees.” Roy grabbed Ashley’s hand and led her. A subtle rock protruded outward. It was the entrance. A path led them along an S-shape to a classic rounded wooden door built of vertical planks. There were red candles flanking the door held in place by decorative pewter skeleton hands. The lighting wasn’t strong but Roy could see a metal knocker. It was the face of a skull and was meant to be knocked by banging its swinging jaw against a square silver plate.

Bang, bang, bang!

“What are we doing here?” Ashley waited. There was a furry thick spider crawling along the left skeletal candle holder. It was striped orange and black. “A tiger spider!” She giggled.

The door opened. It was Vortigern. He was cloaked and waved Roy and Ashley in. Roy considered the spider. “Orange and black? It’s Halloween! How appropriate!”

The floor was cobblestone of differing rock sizes. The room wasn’t large. There was a simple tiki oval table in the middle. Torches in the corners offered better lighting than the red candles at the entrance. “Halloween?” Vortigern asked. “On this side, we call it Samhain. Quite a magical period.” He led Roy and Ashley through the small quarter then opened the door on the other end. “Time here is different than in your world. I was flying around giving maps to your friends as they reached the top of the Cliffs of Insanity. Some of them were wearing wrist watches.” They were in the middle of a huge cavern which served as a dining area. Six lengthy tables were in the middle. Barrels of beer lined the walls. A huge candle chandelier hung from a beam above them. “I told a group to hold their watches next to each other.” There was a fire pit on the far end. They walked. “They were all startled as they watched the seconds hand. Some were

spinning around like merry-go-rounds! Others moved at a snail's pace!" Vortigern convulsed in hearty laughter. "You would think I'm a madman, but I'm not." Beyond the fire pit, there was a stream and there were a few canoes fastened to a hickory rail. "You should have seen their faces! The watches were moving fucking backwards!" He unfastened one of the ropes and stepped into the back of a canoe. "Get in, guys."

Ashley was hesitant. "Where are we going?" She sat in front.

"Samhain?" Roy asked. "I haven't heard that word in a long, long time." He sat in the middle.

They rowed along the hidden curvy stream within the cavern. Vortigern said, "Your destiny is to die here, Roy."

"Die?" Roy asked. He was bothered but not afraid.

"Yes. In Sheol." They rowed past a small waterfall. "You will become a dark haunted petrified forest. The stench will be horrible. It will smell like rotting corpses for eternity. *Three thousand of them.* Nothing will grow there. Condors will be your best friends and they will feed off zombies."

A wild cluster of bats was agitated then broke apart in maniac shrieks. "It's the Twin Towers thing, isn't it? I have to pay for that, don't I?"

"Up ahead!" The stream took a hard right and they paddled to a smooth rock island perhaps the size of a garage. Vortigern pulled the canoe to a mooring post and tied the rope to it. He got up. "Let's go."

"Where?" Roy looked around. Besides the post, there was nothing. He looked up. There was a thin seam through the stone roof. A dim ray of light made its way through. He pulled up Ashley.

"When can we eat?" Ashley asked. She was nervous. "It's been a while."

The sound of bats and waterfalls echoed throughout the littoral walls. Vortigern raised his hands and clapped. He chanted.

O fortuna velut

Statu variabilis

Semper crescis aut decrescis

Vita detestabilis!!!!

"I remember my Latin!" Roy pulled Ashley close. He whispered in her ear so as not to disturb Vortigern. "O fortune, like the Moon, you are changable. Ever waxing and waning, hateful life."

Nunc obdurat et tunc curar, Vortigern went on.

Ludo mentis aciem

*Egestatem potestatem
Dissolvit ut glaciem
Sors immanis et inanis
Rota tu volubis!!!*

Vortigern's chant became louder and the cavern shook and tremored. His voice drowned out the shrill of the distant flying rodents. Roy continued to quietly translate for Ashley.

*Status malus, vana salus
Semper dissolubilis
Obumbrata et velata
Michi quoque niteris
Nunc per ludum dorsum nudum
Fero tui sceleris
Sors salutis et virtutis
Michi nunc contraria!!*

"I know this!" Ashley tugged Roy. "*Excalibur!* When King Arthur's guys go to fight! And it was in *The Doors* as well!"

*Est affectus et defectus
Semper in angaria
Hac in hora sine mora
Corde pulsum tangite
Quod per sortem sternit fortem
Mecum omnes plangite*

"Everyone weep with me," Roy whispered to Ashley. It was the last thing to translate. He looked to Vortigern and noticed tears coming from his eyes.

A mist descended similar to when they were given their map. Vortigern was frozen in deep reflection. He turned to Roy. "You don't have to die, of course." Vortigern waved his hand in a circular motion. A spectral hologram appeared in front of them. "You're familiar with the Ghost of Christmas Past?" he asked. "Charles Dickens?"

Roy Thurman was mesmerized and walked to the image. He nearly stepped off the island rock. "What is this?" He was watching himself.

"It's you, Roy!" Ashley stayed behind. "You're in an office." She wasn't sure what she was seeing. "Why are you dressed as the Joker?"

Roy didn't answer. He reached into the mist and tried to touch the image. It had the quality of an old fashioned projector shining a movie onto dry ice. When he disturbed the mist, the image briefly

became distorted. “That was me three years ago to this day.” He remembered reciting Albert Pike to an empty room.

“Your makeup is all fucked up, Roy. Who put that on you?” Ashley Marglini finally walked to Roy and put her hand on his shoulder.

He didn’t turn to her. His eyes were glued to the projection. It reminded him of what a witch would see through a crystal ball. But it was much larger. “Holy fuck!”

“What is it? Darling? Don’t scare me!” Ashley pressed her breasts against Roy’s back. She reached around and cupped Roy’s balls.

“Are you seeing this?” He turned to her. “Are you seeing this?”

Ashley studied his eyes. They were frenzied. “Roy? You don’t scare me too much, but right now you do! Even when you grab me tight, I’m not afraid.” She saw fury and confusion. “You have so much control of your realm! You even subdued your nemesis, Donovan Cobb! It took you a while, but you did it! All the while I knew you would! He was formidable and we knew it would take time. But you never wavered and you knew you would get it done! You said it was like the I-formation and you had to pound the defense until their legs were weak! You’d get them in the third and fourth quarters!” Ashley looked more into Roy’s eyes. “You don’t know what’s going on, do you? With all your preparation and studying, something is new and you didn’t expect it.”

Roy turned back to the image and put his arm around Ashley. “Are you seeing this?”

“Real question? Is this a real question? Are you wondering if it’s a delusion?”

“Of course it’s real!” Roy pointed. “But are you seeing this?”

Ashley looked. “You’re in the corner of the room as a ghost. You’re dressed in a cloak like Vortigern’s. You’re watching yourself speak into a Victorian mirror.” She watched the sequence. “Now? You’re walking to a table.” She observed, “And you just knocked off a stack of papers.”

“*FUCK!!!!*” Roy’s thunderous roar bounced off the stone walls and startled the bats. They shrieked back in a serve-and-volley of bizarre entities.

“It’s true, Roy.” Vortigern was solemn.

“I’m Beelzebub?” Roy was at a loss and sat. The stone below

him was cold.

Ashley remained standing. She asked Vortigern, “Can you show something a little more pleasing? Maybe a childhood birthday party?”

Vortigern consoled her. “You have to deal with this. It’s the only way to avoid Sheol.”

Roy curled into a fetal position.

Vortigern spoke to him. “*In the beginning was the Word.*”

“I know.” Roy rose. “*The Word was with God, and the Word was God.*”

“I don’t get it,” Ashley told the two men. “You have to explain.”

Both men looked at her like she asked who won the 1985 Super Bowl. Vortigern answered, “Roy is the counterpart to everything that is good and holy. He is Shiva the Destroyer. He is Beelzabub and he is other manifestations.”

Ashley was concerned. She thought about her role in wellness peer counseling from her youth before taking off to Nevada. “Am I his principal enabler?”

Vortigern shook his head. He was baffled. *Roy’s engine. This is Roy’s engine. But it’s not her head. It’s her heart.* “You have no blame in this.”

“How hard is this to beat?” Roy asked Vortigern. “Have I sinned mortally?”

Ashley wore the pants in the relationship more than Roy was comfortable. Roy knew all the theories, though. He realized there was a power so great in the Universe that anyone could piss it off and regret it in any dimension. “Fate!” Roy yelled.

“You can change your fate, Roy. But it’s not like tying your shoes.” Vortigern thought of a modern reference Roy could relate to. “Moon landing. That’s what we’re talking about.”

Ashley laughed. “Remember when we were partying in Cabo?” She kissed Roy’s chin. “*Hey! Only fools rush in!*”

“Wise words of Sammy Hagar.” Roy felt better.

“*And only time will tell if we stand the test of time.*” Ashley tongued Roy. They were happy.

Vortigern spoiled the mood. “I need to show you something, Roy.” He waved his palm at the mist. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. You must remember that!”

Ashley stared at the haze and waited. She felt like a teenager.

“Ooooooh!” It was her childhood home. “I love that place!” She thought about the good times. Her life was checkered. The bad parts were quite bad but the good times were worth remembering. She played alone in the front yard with a red, bouncy ball. She chased a butterfly. She climbed into her treehouse. “Those were good times.” She interlocked her fingers with Roy.

“What is this?” Roy demanded. The images changed. There was a horse jockey walking to Ashley’s front door.

“No!” Ashley cried and pled. “Don’t do this!” Her stomach sank. She watched a thin, thirteen-year-old version of herself open the door and hand over a can of Budweiser to the short man. She stepped onto her porch and scanned the outside so as to make sure no one saw him arrive. His vest was padded and featured Yale’s blue and white colors. LUX ET VERITAS was inscribed across his chest. His racing silks were brown and his small boots donned mini silver stirrups.

Roy’s jaw dropped and he let go of Ashley’s hand.

Ashley watched a teenage version of herself making out with the horse jockey in her living room. She let him take off her white t-shirt. There was a b-cup bra remaining. They continued to kiss hot and heavy.

“What is this, Vortigern? Why are you showing us this?” Roy was angry. He was mesmerized.

“It gets better, Roy. It gets way better.” Vortigern watched Ashley go to the ground. She rolled with the munchkin on and off a faded oval rug. “Why? You are on a quest. You will not reach your goal unless you know everything.”

Ashley approached Vortigern and stroked the upper part of his cloak. “Do we really need to go here?” She was humble. “I told Roy a lot! Vortigern! I told him a lot!” She thought about the Los Angeles Lakers. “He knows about the truckers and the basketball players!”

“Why Roy met you as an eighteen-year-old woman, you hid this from him!” Vortigern waved off the image just as the jockey pinched open the front part of Ashley’s bra. “You made him believe you were innocent! Norah, his future wife, suffered from competing with you! And when you resumed sleeping with horse jockeys, you made Roy believe it was a first! *Revenge sex!* That’s how you explained it! But you don’t understand the domino effect of your actions! This traumatized Roy! He plotted the nine eleven attacks with his Skull and Bones buddies! He framed patsies and developed a network of torture sites around the world.” Vortigern waved his palm.

“I told you it gets better!”

Age fifteen. There was more than one jockey at Ashley’s door. There were six. “I told you I was Snowwhite!” She let them in. A keg of Budweiser was in the living room. “Dad went away a lot.” The clothes came off faster. “*Kama Sutra*. That’s what that is, Roy.”

Pain. Distrust. Shock. Fascination. Bewilderment. Curiosity. It was a swirl. “I don’t get it.” Roy watched the hologram projected upon the mist. “I don’t get it.” He felt alone.

“It looks like a bad porno. I know.” Ashley felt shame, but she also felt proud. “Those were such amazing times, Roy! *The sixties!* Sexual liberation! I hitchhiked to Woodstock but I never told you!” Ashley laughed, but it was dry and sardonic. “Gas, grass, or ass!” She confessed and hoped it was good enough. “I didn’t have gas or grass, so guess how I made it there?”

Vortigern showed slices of ten other orgies with different horse jockeys. Then he showed the horse fluffing.

“I got paid about a thousand bucks per session, Roy!” When the fluffing was shown, Ashley requested, “I’d really like Roy to see me getting banged in a VW Bus on the way to Woodstock! Could you conjure that? Vortigern? Maybe wave your hand?”

“I don’t think you get it!” Vortigern was irate. “It’s not about you!” He pointed to Roy. “It’s about him! Don’t you understand. You are a minor player in the grander scheme of things!”

Ashley was sad. “Oh.” There was a lump in her throat from all the crying she had been part of. She turned away from the men and considered diving into the water. *I could swim away from this. But where would I go?*

“I don’t need it,” Roy said. “Vortigern? I don’t need it. I don’t need her. I don’t need you. I don’t need this quest.” An energy surge bolted through Roy’s body. “I am Ozymandias. Destroyer of worlds.”

Ashley felt something. It wasn’t like anything she felt before. She looked at Roy and saw him change. His face became pinkish then red. His skin became scaly. Yellowish curved horns sprouted from his forehead. “You’re the thing, Roy! I know it now!” She thought of a Terri Gibbs song from her youth.

*Somebody’s knockin’
Should I let him in?
Lord, it’s the Devil
Would you look at him?
I’ve heard about him*

*But I never dreamed
He'd have blue eyes and blue jeans*

"Roy?" Tears swelled in Ashley's eyes. "It's that time." She walked to him. She planted her forehead on Roy's chest. She dug it in. She wanted to talk but she knew the sooner she spoke, the sooner they would part. When she couldn't handle it anymore, she said, "It's time for us to part."

Roy cried. And as Ashley held him, a pointed tail ripped through the rear of his pants. "*If I could start again,*" Roy told her. He couldn't stave the tears. "*A million miles away. I would keep myself. I would find a way.*"

Ashley embraced Roy. She turned to Vortigern. She yelled, "It didn't have to be this way!"

Bats were startled and flew in all which directions.

"Bitch!" Vortigern holwed back. He pointed his finger at her and swirled it. "You will be a newt!"

Ashley could feel Vortigern's magic wanting to transform her. She fought back. She cupped her hands upward to the sky. She summoned powers of her overlords. She was never deeply religious. *There are no atheits in foxholes*, she thought to herself. She considered the magical movies she watched over the years. There was nothing she could draw from, but she thought of a video game she took a liking to. *Mortal Kombat*. It was a leap of faith and she cupped her hands together and directed them toward Vortigern. *Lightning in her palms like Raiden*. She shot it at him and knocked him off their island rock. "Fuck you!" She yelled at him. She sulked to Roy. "We split. It is now!" She snapped her hands above her head. In an instant, she wore a purple robe with yellow stars and crescent moons. "We have magic in our souls," she told him. "But we are not stronger than them!" She referenced Vortigern wailing his arms, trying to keep his head above the surface. "Collectively, they are stronger than us! And you have to believe I never meant to hurt you! They will tear us apart if we allow them to!"

"Ashley?" Roy held her. "*Sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight,*" he whispered. "I know our time is limited. And I have a quest. I have to make things right."

She kissed his neck. "You think I'm a slut. I know you do. But I can make things right, too. But we can't be together and you know this." Ashley pushed Roy back then snapped her fingers again. This time, she turned herself into a three-inch flying pixie. She still

wore her purple robe. She buzzed to Roy's ear. "I will travel to our third dimension! I will have a cloak of invisibility and I will whisper wisdom into our loved-ones' ears. I will warn them of treachery! I will guide them to goodness." Her tiny tongue licked Roy's left cheek then she flew upward. "We will meet again on the *Twelfth of Never!*" She darted through a crevice in the cavern's ceiling.

Roy marveled at her. He stared upward for a while hoping she would come back. He looked down at Vortigern flailing in the stream. He looked at his... *claws*. They were no longer human hands. "Vortigern? What's next?"

"I can't swim!" Vortigern yelled.

Then it ended. He stopped struggling and rose above the water. He stood on top of it and grinned. Then he turned into a burgundy sea serpent. He spoke to Roy, "We will see each other again." He submerged himself and swam away.

The mist was still thick around Roy. He looked into it and concentrated. "*Shazam!*" he muttered. There were images appearing in front of him. "Holy crap!" Roy identified them as Zeus, Mercury, Solomon, Atlas, Hercules and Achilles. "What the fuck?"

"You summoned?" Zeus spoke.

"I'm on a quest. I must save my soul." Roy reflected on all the horrible things he involved himself with over the years. "I never believed you were real. I admit it." He looked at his arms. They were red with leathery scales. Large bat wings protruded from his back. His feet were hoofed. *Seems I have become an orcus.*

"Nothing is easy," Zeus told him. "Nothing good is free."

Roy wept. *This is Triumph. I can't believe this!*

Zeus continued, "But I can tell you where to start."

Hercules cut in, "Take a look inside your heart."

As if queued, Atlas solemnly finished, "There's an answer in your heart."

The mist disappeared and so did the six immortal men.

Roy Thurman bent down to the canoe he arrived in. He took the map Vortigern had given him.

It was different. The ocean was gone. In its place, there was The Realm of Doggerland.

"What the shit is this?" Roy yelled into the cavern. He waited for the immortal men to return but they didn't. He waited for mist but it didn't come. "*SHAZAM!*"

am, am, am, am, am, am

An echo, but nothing.

“Shazam, bitch! Shazam, mothefuckers!” Roy’s eyes were wild. Not even bats responded. “Shazam! Ashley? Shazam! Vortigern?”

Nothing.

“I’ll have to do this one on my own.” Roy set down the map into the canoe and thought about paddling away. There were large wings on his back, though. “Might as well give these a try.” He flapped them. Not to fly, but to test his control. “These are mine!” His bat wings were thin. “In the third dimension, these could not possibly hold me.” Roy flapped harder. He rose a few feet above the island rock.

Take the map.

Roy stopped flapping and fell to the rock below. “Who are you?” He crouched and looked around in a desperate frenzy. “Where are you?”

Atlas. It is me. I am in your brain.

“Schizophrenia!” Roy yelled into the cavern. “Nooooooooo!”

It’s okay, Atlas told him. It’s only schizophrenia if we’re malevolent.

“You’ll guide me? I need to earn my way back to good standing.” He thought about different scenarios. “Donovan Cobb. Take me to him! I need to make amends with that man.”

Look at your map, Roy. There are details there. West of Lughnasa. That’s where you’re at. This is the Enchanted Chamber of Lihuna. There are towns to the north. Cagueux, Urkas Phuz, Vedta. Then, just west of Carlisle, you’ll see Nern Kolduhr. That’s where the passengers of your Love Boat have settled. Donovan is there. Hundreds of others.

Roy Thurman flapped away and joined a minion of bats.

Each town has a magical area like the one you came from. The Mystical Shrine of Cagueux is ahead. Get out of this cavern. The Sacred Obelisk of Urkas Phuz will bestow special blessings. You are a shapeshifter, Roy. You don’t have to remain in hideous demon form. You can earn your way back to normalcy. You can return to your third dimension, but have to follow the rules. I did not make these rules. I observed them and I’m passing on my knowledge. At the Ineffable Sanctum of Vedta, you’ll acquire grace. It is not perfect grace, but it’ll get you along.

Roy Thurman shot out of the cavern’s exit but his compatriot

bats remained behind. The sky was bright, but it wasn't violet anymore. It was pink. The Sun wasn't reddish. It was turquoise. "Do I get to meet Tim the Enchanter?"

What?

"Just feeling delirious, Atlas! I mean, what the fuck is with the sky?"

Oz, Roy. You're in the original Emerald City. The streets are lined with gold bars and the sky changes at the whim of the Wizard.

"Wizard?" Roy flew and could see Cagueux on the horizon. "Merlinus? Myrddin? Which one of those cousins is the real thing? I have to know this! Who runs this place?"

Neither of them. Jonas. They work for Jonas.

Roy ziggled and zagged through hundreds of humongous dragonflies. "How hard do I have to work? Atlas? I'm not much for taking orders." There was a Roman aqueduct flowing along green rolling hills. Roy traced its marble as he rushed along. He was impressed. "This is screwing with me!"

Fuchur was a furrywhite dragon of prominence in the land of Hy' Brasil. He caught Roy Thurman and flew next to him at every turn.

Roy reached the outskirts of Cagueux. "Atlas! Where are you?"

There's an answer in your heart. Atlas was faint.

Nern Kolduhr was not a whole lot different than a typical twenty-first century American suburban community. *It looked master-planned with it's curvy roads and scattered cul-de-sacs.* There were stores for wares and supplies in mini-mall-type layouts at various intersections. Blacksmiths forged metal objects here, and tailors hand-crafted clothes there. The difference between Nern Kolduhr of Hy' Brasil and Rancho Cucamonga of modern California was technology. Donovan Cobb and Sakata Tara took a liking to the place and rode around on separate horses. There were peculiar qualities of Nern Kolduhr which elicited surreal vibes. For example, the horse carriages were tagged with automobile emblems such as Mercedes, Volkswagen, and Ford. Also, there were billboard signs. Instead of monstrous corporate entities, the billboards advertised local bakers, butchers, glass blowers, shepherds, and soothsayers. Pterodactyls flew in the sky but never attacked people. In the center of town, there was a park. It was circular and perhaps a half mile in diameter. In the bullseye center, Stonehenge stood in perfect form. It's thirty upright sarsen pillars formed a perfect outer ring holding up thirty horizontal stone beams

three stories high. Inside the metasphere doorways, a central trilithon was flanked by two on the left, and two on the right. Small bluestones were situated in perfect symmetry for social and religious rituals.

Donovan rode around town on an ivory Clydesdale named Brutus. He loved to ride off into the hills and explore the trails. When he was in town, he was intrigued by the different types of cobblestone pathways. When he first arrived in Hy' Brasil, they were haphazard and made mostly from regular rock. Nern Kolduhr had fantastic masons. They worked with granite, marble and brick. Their designs varied in pattern and color. *Vincent Van Gogh would be proud of these guys*, Donovan mused as he rode to Stonehenge Park. As Roy Thurman was transformed into a demon-like beast to the south, Donovan was on his way to meet with Sakata and a group of others. *If I stay around long enough, I might want to become a stone mason.* Donovan rode along sporting chain mail armor. *I need to buy a lance. I definitely should have a lance.*

Fifty yards south of Stonehenge, there were onyx chess boards engraved onto dolomite tables. Sakata Tara watched Dorian Sampson play Desmond Severns. Dorian played with red ruby pieces and Desmond played with green emerald ones. "Can you hear him?" Desmond asked.

"Hear who?" Dorian moved one of his ruby knights. He was getting better and was ahead three games to two. They planned a best five-out-of-nine session.

"Don't play dumb." Desmond took one of Dorian's bishops. "Roy. Listen to the wind. You can hear him."

Dorian didn't want to play dumb. He opted for sarcasm, "Oh? That he's Beelzebub and he just found out?" He slid his rook to the far right-hand corner. "Check."

Desmond moved his king upward and out of danger. "You were quite predictable when we played at Starbucks. I learned chess when I was eight. My uncle taught me fundamental strategy. Develop your pawns in a zig zag pattern. Control the center of the board with your knights. Control the longest diagonals with bishops. Each piece has a point value. One for pawns, three for bishops and knights, five for rooks, and nine for the queen. When you trade, make sure you come out ahead. If you make an even trade, make sure it's to gain better position on the board."

"Yep." Dorian was ashamed his strategy was so transparent and juvenile. Further south, there was a modest stage. There was a

troupe of medieval musicians tuning their instruments. “They’re about to play again.”

The minstrels wore matching clothes. Their trousers were puffy and colored in maroon and apricot stripes. The psaltery player plucked away and asked the cittern player for a C sharp. They calibrated. The chittarone player ran a few scales. The dulcimer player seemed to be the leader and spoke to the twenty or so people in attendance. “We are the *Troubadours of Gagger* and I hope you like our stuff.” He turned back to his percussionist and waited for him to slam a gong. The music began.

*Saturday in the park
I think it was the Fourth of July
Saturday in the park
I think it was the Fourth of July
People dancing, people laughing
A man selling ice cream
Singing Italian songs
Everybody is another
Can you dig it? Yes I can
And I’ve been waiting such a long time
For Saturday*

“I hope it’s as good as the last set.” Desmond contemplated his move. He sang quietly with the band. “*People talking, really smiling, a man playing guitar, and singing for us all.*” He took Dorian’s rook with his queen.

Dorian sang, “*Will you help him change the world? Can you dig it?*” He took Desmond’s queen in a straight sacrifice.

“*Yes I can, and I’ve been waiting such a long time. For today.*” Desmond studied the board. “We’re almost at a stalemate position. Do you want to call it quits?”

Sakata had been quiet. “I want to play the winner.”

The guys set up for a new game. Moments later, Donovan rode in on his Clydesdale. He told them, “We don’t have a lot of time. He’s going to be here any minute.”

“The Devil?” Dorian Sampson asked. “We can hear him, you know? We can hear his thoughts whisper on the wind! We can hear him struggling with his lover, Ashley Marglini.”

“The wind travels slowly, though. It’s delayed what you’re hearing!” Donovan dismounted his horse.

“*Nice threads!*” Desmond said. “You look like a real knight!

Where'd you get it?"

Donovan was embarrassed. "This?" He looked down at his chain mail suit. "There's a mini-mall about a half mile north of here. I found a few amethyst, diamond and garnet crystals along the road. Took them to *Dhegbur Wares* next to the *Aethalas Coffee Shop*. You know the one next to *Rulgrugmogh Feed*? That place!" *These locals don't know anything about economy*, Donovan thought. *I mean, these crystals are everywhere.*

"So the Devil is coming! Roy Thurman, it turns out, is the Devil! And he's headed our way!" Dorian moved a pawn.

"Between me and you, I didn't know he was the Devil when he hired me! That thing about the Dragon's Triangle?" Desmond noticed Dorian experimenting with moves. After moving his knight out, Dorian threatened with his queen.

"You're the physicist! Desmond? You tell us what we're in the middle of!" Dorian opened up his far left pawn allowing his rook to attack.

"When I was in college, I learned the three theories of time travel." Desmond looked at Donovan and Sakata to make sure they were listening. You have a fixed timeline, a dynamic timeline, and the multiverse." The troubadours finished their song and Desmond clapped. "Play some Dokken!" he yelled to them. The troubadours started playing "Tangled in the Web" which was originally performed by the Dokken-adjacent band, Lynch Mob. Desmond screamed, "*This rocks!*" He listened to the music then turned his attention back to the chess game and the people listening. "In a fixed timeline, nothing can be changed. George Washington will always be the first president. JFK will always be assassinated in Dealy Plaza. Ronald Reagan will always propose the *Strategic Defense Initiative*."

Dorian Sampson quipped, "George Washington was not the first president. It was a black man."

"This again?" Desmond Severns asked in frustration. He shook his head then addressed Donovan Cobb. "You Contarians are freak shows!"

"Our break from Great Britain was in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence. By 1781, we had our first president of the United States with the passage of the Articles of Confederation. He was named John Hanson and he had ancestors from Liberia and Sweden. He's a black man and was on our first two dollar bill." Dorian looked at the chess board. "If the Devil is coming, we really should wrap up."

“More bullshit from Corey Smith?” Desmond swiped the emerald and ruby pieces then put them in a cloth sack. “Why don’t you tell Donovan about the other gobbledygook you’ve been talking about? Tell him about Doggerland!”

“Doggerland is simple. And it’s factual.” Dorian looked at Donovan. He wanted to make sure there was patience on his face. If he looked jostled, he wasn’t going to explain. “The Bering Strait is out there between Russia and Alaska. We learn about this in grade school. The Indians came from Asia. That’s what we’re taught, right? A land bridge.”

Sakata said, “You don’t have to explain anything.”

“I have to,” Dorian told her. “In Britain, they had the same thing going on! There was a land bridge between England and France! *Doggerland!* It extended toward Sweden!” He fetched a map from a bag. “This map keeps changing!” He turned to Desmond. “Tell them the rest about time travel! And the other dimensions.” He told Donovan, “This guy knows so much! He just falls into denial.”

Desmond blushed. “The second theory of time travel considers a dynamic timeline. This means you can change history, but there’s a paradox involved. Let’s say, for example, you go back and kill your parents when they first met each other. Well? How are you going to be born? You’re not! Therefore, how are you going to grow up in order to travel back in time in order to kill your parents? Can’t happen. But somehow, it’s the basis for the *Terminator* movies. Reductio ad absurdum. Illogical absurdity.”

“Sounds stupid,” Donovan commented. He stood above his lover, Sakata. She winked at him. Donovan pulled her up. “I saw the most beautiful gown in the world. I want to buy it for you!”

“At Hazel’s? That one?” Sakata faced Desmond, “What is the third time travel theory?”

“It’s not a theory!” Desmond growled. “We’re living it!”

“I have a comment about Roy Thurman, by the way,” Dorian said sheepishly. “He thinks of everyone but himself as Cretins.” He spread his map onto the chess board. “In the south of Doggerland, you can see the Alps. I’m a biologist. I know what I’m talking about. *This is where the Cretins come from.* We can call a person a skunk because he stinks, but it doesn’t make him a skunk in real life! We can call a person a pig because he doesn’t clean up after himself! But he’s not actual swine in the literal sense! We can call a person a chicken because he’s a coward! You get the hint, right? No feathers coming

from his arms.”

“*Dickweed!*” Desmond barked. “You sound like such a geek when you get technical!”

“*Dickweed?*” Dorian was caught off guard. “You got that word from me! At the cemetery! And now you’re using it!” He spoke to Donovan, “Cretins have thyroid problems. They grow up undersized and with pronounced goiters. It’s a hormonal issue stemming from irregular iodine deficiencies!”

“*Nerd!*” Desmond yelled. “You should listen to yourself! You sound like a regular Poindexter!”

Dorian Sampson’s nerve was touched and he felt compelled to defend his honor. “I’m the alpha in our relationship! You’re using my word, dickweed! You’re jealous of my knowledge! You have no clue what it’s like to be a biologist! Do you know some people consider us to be a soft science? Like sociology? They say our scientific method is flawed and can’t be duplicated consistently? Evolution is considered a theory after all these decades!” He looked at Desmond with disgust. “And somehow? You’re theories of time travel are taken with interest!” He told Donovan, “I know what’s going on with bunnies here! You know, the large black rabbits? Have you heard of insular gigantism? Akin to insular dwarfism?”

Sakata said, “No. Please enlighten us.”

“In Polynesia, there are thousands of islands dotted throughout the ocean. Animals grow up in isolation. *People grow up in isolation.* Homo floresiensis was recently discovered. *The real life hobbit.* That’s how this miniature genus of humanoids was described. And the animals? Elephants become small. *Insular dwarfism is what it’s called.* And the rats? Huge! *Insular gigantism.* The pigeons? Take a wild guess!” Dorian waited.

“*Your mother?*” Ashley Marglini commented. She was a pixie appearing out of nowhere.

“What?” Dorian swatted at the air. “Are you seeing this?” He swatted more. “What the fuck?” Dorian swatted as if being attacked by a demon-possessed mosquito. But it was Ashley he swatted at.

“I’m not sure they can see me,” Ashley whispered into Dorian’s ear. “So you better pretend I’m not here. Or they’ll think you’re crazy.”

You’re right, Dorian thought. *I know how the medieval folks treated crazy people. Cut out parts of their brains. Left them to rot like undead zombies.* “The pigeons?” Dorian mustered. “The dodo

bird! The dodo was actually a type of pigeon left to mate on an isolated island! Like Hy' Brasil with it's big bunnies and crows! It creates strange creatures! Mainstream biologists ascribe to the belief of phyletic gradualism. *They believe it takes millions of years for organisms to evolve.* They give everyone else a bad name! Here they are telling religious people God has nothing to do with the process. And they're telling atheists it takes eons for mutations to effect the gene pool! Things change quickly, though! The volcanic blast in Sumatra killed ninety percent of all humanoids! This was only seventy thousand years before we were born! The strongest of the strongest survived and our human lineage became solidified. Remember the *Six-finger Man* from Princess Bride? It didn't take millions of years for him to grow an extra appendage! What if he was a stud and mated with all kinds of women? What if six fingers was the dominant gene? This is *punctuated equilibrium*. We see it on islands, and we see it when extinction-level events happen! Cambrian explosion! Then ordovician-silurian extinction! Devonian! Permian-triassic! Triassic-jurassic! Cretaceous-tertiary! Life changes quickly! Cladogenesis!"

"Roy's coming," Ashley whispered into Dorian's ear.

He tried to ignore her.

"I'm going to tell you about the third time travel theory!" Desmond watched Dorian swat away. "Before I do?" He got into Dorian's personal space. "I see her! If you think she's invisible, she's not!" He told Ashley Marglini, "*Shoooo!* Fly away, you little weirdo!" Desmond watched Ashley dart to the troubadours. She whispered something into the singer's ear. Seconds later, the band was playing "Breaking the Law" by Judas Priest. "The last theory? *Multiverse!* More than just comic book fodder! Right? Someone needs to tie up plot holes! How convenient, right? Just make up a multiverse where everything is possible! Abraham Lincoln assassinated president John Wilkes Booth! The Indians discovered Europe! Marilyn Monroe is ugly!" Desmond Severns stood up and sang aloud with the band. "*So much for the golden future, I can't even start. I've had every promise broken, there's anger in my heart!*" He told Donovan Cobb. "I wanted to believe it was all fantasy, but it's not. I studied physics at a quantum level. You think we're in the fifth dimension? We're not! We were, though, when we climbed the Cliffs of Insanity, but reality changes. The most extreme quantum physicist believes there are ten dimensions. The first dimension gives you length. Two points give you a line. The second dimension gives you height. X and Y coordinates. The third

dimension is where we came from. The fourth dimension introduces time. The fifth?"

"*This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius,*" Sakata sang briefly. She stopped. The men watched her. "Finish your story."

"Do you know what the double slit experiment is?" Desmond asked. "Are you aware that even in our third dimension, we are mostly empty? Electrons buzz very, very far away from the nucleus? This is an understatement!"

"Double slit? Tell me." Donovan scratched his chin.

"Are electrons matter? Or are they energy? Does anyone know?" Desmond turned to Dorian. "Mister Know-It-All? Do you have the answer?"

Dorian shrugged.

Donovan gestured downward toward Sakata. "Hand me that canteen."

"We were all drinking." Sakata handed it over.

Dorian said, "Jonas makes good wine! You don't have to wait for it to be fermented! Pick the grapes along the river, give it to him, bam! Fucking wine!"

"The double slit experiment? This is where Einstein becomes a moron!" Desmond slammed his palm onto the map. "He was such a genius in his early years and he gave us the theory of relativity! He refused to see quantum behavior. He had a block! He didn't have the proper instruments, I'll give him that! He was stubborn. He debated Neils Bohr! By 1961, Claus Jönsson proved the nature of electrons! His double slit experiment was confirmed by Pier Giorgio Merli, Gian Franco Missiroli and Giulio Pozzi."

"What happened?" Dorian asked.

"Set up a wall with two vertical slits. Put a paper behind the wall. Shoot BBs randomly. The paper behind the wall will have two vertical clumpings. Electrons behave like this." Desmond looked at Donovan, Sakata and Dorian. "*Sometimes!*"

"Sometimes?" Donovan asked.

"Yes," Desmond answered. "This infers electrons have the same quality as matter." He noticed Sakata looked confused. "You've been to the beach, right?" he asked her. She nodded in agreement. "Instead of shooting BBs, imagine you allow water to run downward into the same wall with vertical slits. Where will it splash hardest on the far end? If we measured this pressure across the board? Would it be directly behind the slits? In the middle? Some unpredictable area?"

"I don't know." Sakata didn't understand what Desmond was getting at.

"Well, it's not the same as shooting BBs. There would be a few vertical lines which are consistent. The reason? This is typical of how waves behave. Sometimes, electrons behave like solid matter, and other times they behave like waves. *Almost like they're alive and they have whims.* It gets better, though." Desmond looked at Sakata and thought she was content. "There are more complicated experiments with double slits which involve sensors and mirrors. Basically, we're anticipating electrons being shot off at the speed of light. We're trying to predict if we will have a matter or wave result. We are turning sensors on and off quickly. The electrons can't outsmart us."

"But they do," Donovan recalled. "I've heard of this, I'm pretty sure. The Delayed-choice Quantum Eraser. I've discussed this with Sakata's cousin, Satoshi. It was developed by Yoon-Ho Kim. Electrons travel back in time in order to fudge the predictions of experimenting scientists."

Once Desmond realized Donovan understood, he continued with dimensions. "The fifth dimension overlaps with our third dimension. Keep in mind, we are mostly empty space. Electrons fly so far away from the nucleus. If we had the single proton of a hydrogen atom scaled at the size of a golf ball, the electron would swing out a mile and a half outward and be the size of a pinpoint. Get it? So our worlds can easily intersect! *Right on top of each other.* Somehow, in my personal observation, one of the worlds behaves like BBs and the other like ocean waves. One emphasizes matter, and the other electricity. Next, we have the sixth dimension. It encompasses all universes with the same beginning as our own. In my circles, that's the Big Bang. There are those, of course who believe the universes have different starting points. This is the seventh dimension. Each universe has a fate. Now, in the eighth dimension, each universe has a different starting point and there is no predictable destiny. There are an infinite amount of outcomes for an infinite amount of universes."

"What more could there be?" Sakata asked. Her mind was blown.

"Well, in the ninth dimension, we throw out the laws of physics. Okay? In the tenth, anything possible exists." Desmond Severns took the ruby king from his cloth sack.

"In your field, this is as far as it goes. Usually, right? Why did you say you believe in eleven dimensions?" Donovan was curious.

“Even in the tenth dimension where everything is possible, there are rules. We just don’t know what they are. You could draw a comic dragon and it will manifest itself somewhere around us. We don’t have to know why. It doesn’t have to coincide with Newtonian physics. It doesn’t have to be composed of atoms from our periodic chart. There are still rules of some kind, though. We don’t know what they are. They are there, though.” He tossed his ruby king into the air. It became a dove and flew away. “This is the eleventh dimension. *Insanity*. Not only are there no rules. The behavior of the eleventh dimension *defies* rules. On purpose! Belligerent! As if the function of all its action is to figure out a norm and intentionally break it!” Desmond looked into the hazelnut sky. “Here comes the Devil!”

Roy Thurman flapped downward with his large bat wings and landed on the southern end of the Stonehenge monument.

Ashley had been buzzing and singing near the troubadours then she flew to Roy. “I don’t know how to get to the third dimension! Tell me how! I remember you saying something about Dunmore Cave and the Caha Mountains. I don’t know how to get there!”

“I have business to settle with Donovan.” Roy flew down and joined the group near the chess table.

Donovan looked into the sky. Clouds became instantly dark. Thunder was loud.

“Do you know what it is to be the victim of success?” Roy asked. He willed himself to appear as a regular human but to no avail. He expanded his wings wide. “Have you heard of too much of a good thing? No good deed shall go unpunished?” Roy brought his wings inward. “How did you relate to the *cool kid* when you were in high school?” Roy allowed his wings to expand and contract but he didn’t fly. “You know? The kid who had it all? Rich family, nice car, hot cheerleader girlfriend, athleticism, and intelligence?” Roy believed he intimidated Donovan because of his demonic appearance. “I was that kid, Donovan! I know you Cobbs had money, but you didn’t have the hot girlfriend! You weren’t the school quarterback!” Roy was livid. Lightning sparked the sky and he believed he was the cause of it. “In any given high school across the USA, the story is always the same! The players are interchangeable. You have your jock, your goddess, your geeky math wizard, and your acne-faced misfit.” Roy studied Sakata, Desmond and Dorian. They seemed concerned. “You know the one I hate the most? *The poseur!*”

Donovan took time to evaluate Roy. “Those horns? How do

they feel?" He wanted an answer but there was nothing. "We've been here weeks, you know? We arrived on the same boat, but your time has only elapsed for a few hours! Your buddy, Gary Manheim, told us about your talks! You both hate people who tax your energy. I understand what you're saying about the poseur archetype. I think about *Single White Female* when I contemplate this idea. I've seen it. I've experienced it, believe it or not. Success breeds copycats. It attracts *poseurs*! If you will!"

"There is no rest for the wicked." Roy blew smoke from his nostrils. "Money is the root of all evil!"

"So they say!" Donovan laughed. He thought of Pink Floyd. "But if you ask for a rise?"

"It's no surprise they're giving none away!" Roy felt good inside. *I was hoping it would go like this.* "I call it the *Pied Piper Phenomenon*. My family has insane amounts of money. *Billions*. Do you know what compels people to hoard troves of gold?"

"You know the Cobbs have money, Roy!" Donovan looked over at the Stonehenge monument. He watched Ashley zoom in and out between pillars as if she were racing in a slalom. "What are you getting at?"

"Fear, Donovan," Roy said. "Fear. We better own every penny on the planet or else we'll be ruled by somebody else." He thought of a metaphor. "Have you heard of the story of the golden rat?"

"No," Donovan responded.

"A guy was checking out cool items at an antique store." Roy turned briefly and whistled. "Come here, Ashley!"

"Is this the one about dildos and the thermos? Thelma told me about this one if that's what it's about." Donovan wondered.

"No! The man came across a foot-long golden rat. He had to have it and bargained with the shop owner. After some haggling, the golden rat was his and he was on his way. The man admired his new purchase as he walked down the avenue. He passed a dumpster and a few rats jumped out and followed him. The man thought it was odd then walked faster. He passed an alley then thirty rats came out of nowhere and chased him. He ran down the street with the golden rat. Before long, there were hundreds of rats hunting him. The man heaved as he ran to the beach pier. Right before the rats could get him, the man hucked the golden rat into the ocean." Roy allowed time, anticipating the upcoming punch line. "To the man's surprise, the hundreds of rats jumped into the ocean!"

“So? What’s the big deal?” *This guy’s a total dip shit*, Donovan assessed.

“The guy watches the rats drown then heads back to the antique shop!” Roy said, “He asks the shop owner, ‘*Do you have any golden Democrats?*’ Funny!” Roy laughed loud. “When I first heard that joke, it was a racial slur, but I crafted it into my own thing! I told that joke countless times at parties and always had everyone laughing!” Roy saw the frustration on Donovan’s face. “The Pied Piper Phenomenon? It’s the same thing! I’ve tinkered with my barbs—*my mental gates*. George Steinbrenner has this thing going on! Too much of a good thing! Every kid grows up wanting to wear Yankee pinstripes! You have the luxury of turning good athletes away! But you get your share of irate hooligans every now and then and they spoil it for everyone else!” Roy looked at his claws and held them up to Donovan. “Do you think I wanted to be so mean that the Universe turned me into this?”

“We’re here for a reason, Roy. I never liked you and you know that but I’m willing to try to coexist somehow or another.” Donovan watched Ashley fly over. She hovered at his nose. “How did you become a pixie?” he asked her. “You’re such a cute little thing!”

“Do you remember Zola Budd?” Roy held his palm upward. Ashley flew onto it.

“Bye, Roy!” she said. “In front of the center trilithon, there’s a flat rock called the Death Stone. Turns out it’s a portal to Regular Earth.”

“How do you know this?” Roy asked.

“There are six ghostly immortal elders inside. They told me they know you. They’ll lead me to where I need to go!” Ashley buzzed away then turned around. “The Earth is flat here, Roy! It extends infinitely in all directions!” Ashley jetted away.

Roy was sad. He had to finish his business with Donovan. “Zola Budd was a total nobody until she tripped Mary Decker-Slaney during the 1984 Olympics! That became her claim to fame!”

“Will you ever see Ashley again?” Donovan pointed to Stonehenge. There was a blue orb inside the middle. “You still have time to say goodbye!”

“What’s done is done! Wasn’t meant to be!” Roy implored, “Do you know who Sam Mildener is? He’s a phony war correspondent featured on the *Conan O’Brien* late night talk show! He’s a bumbling idiot, though! Old! Gruffy! What in this picture does not look right?

And it's great comedy because he's situated next to an articulate, intelligent, attractive lady! But that's my life, man! I have peons tripping me just to get into my game! I have witless jack offs believing they belong in the same vicinity as me! Do you know how much energy it takes to stave these ass junks out?"

"Cretins, Roy!" Donovan liked the Clydesdale he had been riding. He looked at Roy in his demonic form. *I want to become a dragon.* He looked toward Sakata. *Me and you can be dragon lovers and fly high.*

"Your sarcasm does not amuse me." Roy held up his right palm. He produced a suspended fireball. He let it blaze for a few moments. "I am learning to be me. But in a different form." He allowed the ball to fade. "Do you know who Sidd Finch is?"

"A myth. Baseball pitcher. Could throw a hundred and sixty miles per hour." Donovan rubbed his left cheek. "Went to Harvard then studied in Tibet." *After witnessing a herd of unicorns, I ought not be so quick to call certain stories myths.* Donovan continued his recollection, "Learned yoga from Lama Milaraspa. Decided to pass on baseball because he loved to play the French horn!"

Roy Thurman gestured to Desmond Severns as he sat quietly at the chess table. Roy told Donovan, "I had a talk with Desmond at the Dragon's Triangle! Do you know what he told me about the eleven dimensions?"

Before Donovan could answer, Desmond explained, "They're ass backwards. At our Regular Earth, we're taught the first dimension is a line, the second is a plane, and the third is space. Somewhere far out there in the infinite boundary of our human intelligence, we get the eleventh dimension. The stuff we were talking about minutes ago! But it's ass backwards. The eleventh dimension in Ultimate Reality is actually the first dimension. How else could anyone explain the Big Bang? The Big Crunch? The Big Rip? Something from nothing? What came first? The parking lot or the marketplace? This isn't hard to answer! It's not one of those mind-boggling chicken-and-egg questions! We had chaos at the marketplace and we needed order! We developed concepts of money, standing in line, and parking cars between slanted painted lines. Today? An architect might consider streets and avenues before designing a mall. He might even lay out the parking structure before considering where the first mortar brick will be dropped. In school, the authorities want us to learn order before knowledge. They give us geometry and they keep it simple. Lines,

squares, cubes. You can graduate as a senior in high school without being taught about the Mirror Universe! You won't learn theories of the Steady State, Tired Light, Plasma Universe, 4D Black Hole Mirage, Living Universe, or the Bindu-Vipshot!"

"I've sent my share of enemies to prison, Donovan. Am I ever there to testify in court? Of course not! I send my henchmen to do my work! Preston has produced movies describing the wicked deeds I've been part of." Roy was proud of his strength. "Deputy pulls over car. Breaks a taillight with his maglight. Cites him for broken taillight. Now my enemy has a choice. Cower down and accept it! Run away like a fraidy cat! Or he can challenge the System! He can get rowdy like you did in Ventura! He can become angry at which point he's accused of being on narcotics! Officer demands he get out of his vehicle for a field sobriety test. If he resists, cuffs are put on!" He knew the System well. Before falling out of favor with his Illuminati buddies, Roy implemented many of his own codes and rules. "I found something out in California where you were arrested. The Mexican Mafia controls the prisons because they are largest in number. Desmond, here, had excellent sex with sociology teacher, Emily Kipton from Emory Middle School. She could tell you about collective cultures as opposed to individualistic ones better than me! Do you know why demographics are changing so quickly in the Southwest? Mexicans and other Hispanics are collective cultures! That means if you fight one bean, you fight the whole burrito! In prison, they typically put short guys in charge of gangs. You know why? As a group, they figure if you're fucking with that guy, you'll fuck with anyone else. A chain is as strong as its weakest link. It's a curse to be a large man in a Mexican click! They are islands. They are left to fend for themselves."

"There has to be a down side!" Donovan pounded his chest. "And speak truthfully now that we're candid! Did you usher in the sudden demographic change? Dorian's a biologist!"

Dorian Sampson held up his hand as if being called on in a class room.

"He believes your Illuminati buddies have created a new kind of slavery. In Europe, you're using Arabs. In Asia, you're using any number of types of people, but the closer to the equator, the more likely." Donovan watched Dorian rise to speak.

"Skin pigmentation is always darker at the equator as opposed to the North and South Poles. It's a pigmentation issue! Ergo,

Philippine citizens have darker skin than Japanese.” Dorian expanded, “Of course, we have the phenomenon of the isthmus in Italy—a sect of land which extends southward and produces an opposite result than regularly expected but that’s an exception to the rule! White people had to become more crafty over the centuries as they traveled to the southern and northern extremities. *Their culture is what distinguished them from their ancestors who remained in between the Tropics.* They developed more sophisticated writing and navigation systems. Necessity is the mother of invention, keep in mind. People lost their pigmentation as they gained complicated educational institutions. It’s not to say white people are inherently smarter than everyone else, but we reached an apex sooner. I’ve studied replacement theory and I believe your group of Scoundrels created public policies which gave ordinary white people in the modern world a disadvantage as it pertains to economics, which of course, drives everything else.”

Roy contemplated what he heard. He took a few moments. “At the equator, people like to fuck! Think about it!” Roy waltzed around and let his wings spread. “It’s a paradise out there! Great weather! The whole enchilada!” He walked and didn’t want to give away the answer. “Did my group of Scoundrels plan the Twin Towers attacks? Yes! Are we selling junk bonds to foreign governments and passing them off as triple A investments? Yes! For those of you not in the loop, these are technically known as consolidated debt obligations! *CDOs for short!* We have one of our puppets, George W Bush, telling the American people he wants everyone to own a home! So they believe him! Just like they believed bin Laden masterminded the events of nine eleven! We know they can’t pay off the simple-to-get home loans provided! Banks want to steal their collateral! Jobs aren’t going to last! It’s a changing economy! America’s going out of work because they whine too much! Some desperate fuckers in Indonesia want to produce our goods! Some coerced children in Africa will do it! Some tricked fools in India will answer our customer service phone lines a half world away! And the suckers in Scandinavia? They are buying our bogus CDOs and expecting giant returns! Their pensions are being sacrificed! *Woopsie! We didn’t know these bonds were going to crap!* Our guys operate Fitch, Moody’s, and Standard & Poor! If they say it’s a good investment, people believe them! If the president tells them to wage their futures on stupid ideas, it’s going to happen! America has decades of credibility! No one will doubt us!”

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiccccccccckkkkkkkkkk

faaaaaaaaaaccccccccceeeee!!!!!!” Donovan roared. His chain mail snapped off of him. His trousers tore as if he was turning into the Incredible Hulk. But he grew much larger. He was a green dragon two-stories high when all was said and done.

Sakata Tara had been listening patiently. “It’s time for you to see who I am.”

“Be a green dragon like me,” Donovan said. He hunched over and licked her face with a split lizard-like tongue. His eyes were slits like cats and they were yellow where they should’ve been white.

“I don’t want to be a dragon,” Sakata said. “I mean, I like dragons, but I don’t want to be one.” She clapped her hands above her head a few times. Rain instantly poured down on them. “I am Izanami no Mikoto.” She blushed. “I don’t need to shapshift into anything. Not just yet.”

“Who am I?” Donovan asked.

“You are Izanagi no Mikoto.” She walked over to Donovan’s leg and hugged it.

“Enough with the crap!” Roy flew into the air. He stayed suspended then came back down. *Lightning flashed*. He asked, “So all bets off?”

“Because of your stupid shit consolidated debt obligations?” Donovan’s rage simmered down and he became a man again. Since Hy’ Brasil was a place of magic, he wore his regular trousers and chain mail armor again. “We can work things out.”

“Do you know why I brought up Sidd Finch, the pitcher?” Roy asked.

“Hit me,” Donovan said.

“He pitches on a farm between Cagueux and Urkas Phuz at the *Field of Dreams*. They were playing the 1994 World Series when I flew by,” Roy said. “And do you know why I brought up Honus Wagner? Well, he was batting against Sidd. They noticed me after I landed near the bleachers. Nothing but ordinary people watching except me, a hideous orcus. They game froze and they all stared. I gave them a ‘pardon me’ and flew away.” Roy reflected. “I had a Honus Wagner baseball card when I was younger. I mentioned this at the 2000 meeting in New Zealand. I also had a bike and it used to be customary to put baseball cards between the spokes.”

“The 1994 World Series was cancelled,” Dorian Sampson noted.

“I hope you didn’t put your Honus Wagner card between your

spokes!” Desmond Severns said.

“This is the point,” Roy explained. “Too many people don’t understand value. You can’t replace a Honus Wagner! You can’t just run down to the local candy store, buy a pack of Topps, and expect to find one in there! People want things and they don’t know why. Jordache jeans are popular today and they’re unpopular tomorrow. You have to toss them out and buy Guess jeans!” Roy walked to Dorian and told him, “In this land of endless possibilities, the 1994 World Series was played. The White Sox were beating the Montreal Expos, two games to one. Mike LaValliere was having a heck of a game with a couple of home runs and a couple of doubles when I passed through. I found these things out from a fellow orcus when I reached Vedta.” He stood back. “I had a buddy when I went to Yale. *Marco Quintin*. He wasn’t tight with me, but he was okay. He wanted to get into Skull and Bones. He didn’t appreciate the value of our group, though. He’s the dipshit who would’ve put Honus Wagner baseball cards into bicycle spokes. He’s out there trying to figure out what’s popular! Jordache jeans? Guess jeans? But he’s behind the curve!”

“What happened to him?” Donovan asked.

“It turned ugly.” Roy Thurman levitated into the air. He started to sing and the background troubadours became silent.

Goodbye to you my trusted friend

We’ve known each other since we were nine or ten

Together we’ve climbed hills and trees

Learned of love and ABCs

Skinned our hearts and skinned our knees

A murder of crows flew near Roy and settled onto the Stonehenge monument. They began to caw and a few seemed to join the singing. Roy’s voice was raspy and out of tune.

Goodbye my friend it’s hard to die

When all the birds are singing in the sky

Now that spring is in the air

Pretty girls are everywhere

Think of me and I’ll be there

Donovan didn’t sing. Instead, he recited the next line to the Terry Jacks song, “We had joy. We had fun. We had seasons in the Sun. But the hills that we climbed were just seasons out of time.” He watched Roy’s face and noticed he was crying. Like the Dracula character in the 1992, his tears weren’t saline. They were diamonds.

“This is somewhat ominous. I have concern, Roy.” Donovan thought of the possibilities. “That Stonehenge monument can take you to Amesbury, Britain in our 3D world. You can start a nuclear war if you reacquire your human form.”

“Sing with me,” Roy wanted. His heart felt heavy. He continued along with the crows.

*Goodbye papa please pray for me
I was the black sheep of the family
You tried to teach me right from wrong
Too much wine and too much song
Wonder how I got along*

Donovan thought, *I’m not singing with this guy.* Somehow, Roy touched Sakata’s heart. She sang with Roy and the crows.

*Goodbye papa it’s hard to die
When all the birds are singing in the sky
Now that the spring is in the air
Little children everywhere
When you see them I’ll be there*

Because Sakata joined, Donovan trusted the process. He sang.
*We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the Sun
But the wine and the song like the seasons have all gone*

Roy said, “I thrashed that motherfucker to shit!” Thunder roared behind him. “Marco Quintin tried to get revenge on me!” More thunder. “He conspired with anyone I talked to.” Thunder. “Trust me when I tell you I had better intentions for planet Earth than Jesus Christ! I was working on utopian cities of the future! I had plans where robots would do our house cleaning! Computers would take care of all our finances! I was ahead of my time!” Roy darted upward and circled a few times. The crows joined him then he was ready to talk some more. He levitated in front of Donovan. “And this piece of shit made me realize the reality of what we have. You can please some people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time! Steinbrenner has twenty-five slots he can fill for his opening-day roster! How many assholes are pissed they didn’t make it? Thousands? Millions? Steve Sax can’t even throw an accurate baseball to first base! And he’s a second baseman! He makes the roster and you’re a Little Leaguer saying you can make the throw! So you’re going to conspire against the New York Yankees because they didn’t recognize your talent!” Roy’s anger ended. He floated to ground level. “Marco Quintin? He seemed like a decent person until

he got rejected! He blew a fuse! It was over! It was like watching a chicken run around with his head cut off! Have you ever seen that? The body is an amazing thing! You don't need a brain to function! Cut off a chicken's head and the body will run wild! I've seen it happen! And when Marco was rejected into Skull and Bones, he buzzed around campus like he was still alive. *I'm talking about alive in spirit.* He went through the motions of showing up to classes, but he wasn't the same."

"Roy?" Donovan requested, "Let's sing the rest of the song."

*Goodbye Michelle my little one
You gave me love and helped me find the Sun
And every time that I was down
You would always come around
And get my feet back on the ground
Goodbye Michelle it's hard to die
When all the birds are singing in the sky
Now that the spring is in the air
With the flowers everywhere
I wish that we could both be there*

"I have a buffer system, Donovan," Roy said. "Marco Quintin was the first pariah I've met in life. You hope you arrive to campus and everything's going to cool down. But it doesn't! *Poison the well!* I was never a man of clichés, but this is where it began! This took the cake! Little Mister Quintin refused to move on! He locked on me! You remember standing in line coming back from recess during elementary school and the guy behind you steps on the back of your shoe giving you a flat tire? He pretends it was an accident but you know the truth! He's a piece of shit loser and for some mysterious reason, he feels the need to be in your world!"

"Roy?" Donovan no longer believed Roy was an immediate danger to his loved ones. "I get it. I really do. The Contrarians have always gone through this. We don't feel this as intensely because we are the Dodgers. In the baseball analogy, that's how it works. You are the Yankees and everyone wants to play for you, but we have some loyalists."

"Loyalists!" Roy Thurman lit up. "That's the key! I actually believed in the words of Doctor Martin Luther King Junior when I first heard them! Do you know I was in the DC mall when he spoke? Then I found out he was a philanderer and he was speaking with a forked tongue! He was cheating on his wife! Our guys in the Army special

forces were in line to shoot him but an owner of a diner got to him first!”

Donovan turned to Sakata, “I told you James Earl Ray didn’t do it!”

Sakata giggled.

“Loyalty mattered to me more than anything else after Marco Quintin campaigned against me. It used to be *character*. Because of the MLK speech, right? I was living on campus at Yale in New Haven and people were growing their hair out. *It was just the times*. But I skipped the hippie crap because of Marco! You need to have a home base! You have to remain conservative when idiots are looking for the smallest reason to talk shit! That faggot was a square peg trying to get through a round hole! He managed to taint a few of my acquaintances! This is sad because they were people I liked. So I cut them off. You understand, Donovan, about collateral damage!” Roy looked at Sakata. “When the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, innocent people were obliterated. But we had to do it for the greater good! It was the only way to end the fighting!”

“You’re wrong, loser,” Sakata told Roy. “The Soviets were marching from the northwest. We were about to surrender to Stalin but Truman dropped the bombs for political reasons. So we would bow down to America instead of Russia.”

“You’re splitting hairs,” Roy claimed. “I developed a buffer system because of how Marco Quintin reacted to his rejection! It’s not enough to ignore the pariah! You have to defeat his supporters! *Collateral damage!* Like the dumb shits who built the Death Star! Fuck them! You took a job constructing a device which is supposed to end my world? Fuck you, homo! So I dropped classes from teachers who were sympathetic to Marco.” Roy’s fury was at a peak. He threw lightning from his claws into the thunderous gray clouds above. “I watched Marco talk to my love, Ashley Bamin. She was on campus visiting her dad.” Roy’s fury was strong. He channeled his rage into the sky and it responded with the brightest lightning bolt Roy had ever seen. The bolt struck Stonehenge and knocked large boulders off pillars and out of place. Some beams thudded to the ground. “I approached Ashley.”

“Yeah?” Being magic and all, Donovan knew he could summon objects and conjure people. He produced a few Skittles and popped them into his mouth.

“She told me the truth,” Roy said. He was embarrassed. “He

wants to get inside my pants.”

“So?” Donovan asked. He offered a few Skittles to Roy.

Roy took them. “Everything changed.” His head slunk down. A few scales fell from his forearm. “I don’t care about character, Donovan.” Roy’s energy rose and he faced his long-time nemesis. “Ever since that moment I cared about loyalty above all else. Back then, Ashley gave me enough loyalty to last a lifetime.” Roy turned away and faced the destroyed Stonehenge monument. “Steve Huber was my most trusted ally at Yale. He was dealing cocaine and I contemplated turning him in. *Ratting him out, you know?*” Roy turned to the group. “But he was also loyal and I let him stay around. I even set him up with my personal connections. Steve was the most prolific drug dealer at *Studio 54* after we graduated college.”

“Roy?” Donovan confided, “We’ve had time to talk about our situation while we waited for you.” He walked to Roy and pulled him along by his left wing. They got to the edge of Stonehenge. “We are both alphas.”

Sakata, Dorian and Desmond followed Donovan and Roy. Sakata spoke, “We have solutions we believe you can deal with.”

Roy asked her, “You’re willing to deal with the Devil? You want to sell your soul like Robert Johnson in Rosedale, Mississippi?”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Sakata said. “You are an alpha and so is Donovan. You need to be the leader of your own world. We can coexist in this large Universe of ours. You don’t need to control everyone’s life!”

Roy was humbled. He bowed his head. “Do you know I know Dana White? I was a big mixed martial arts fan for a while. I helped organize the first Ultimate Fighting Championship in Denver back in 1993. I cleared the way and made sure the proper permits got passed. I made sure there was adequate insurance. We had lawyers lined up for a number of different scenarios. We were criticized.” Roy’s head rose and he was proud. He looked ahead into the wrecked version of Stonehenge. “We were alphas. Not just the fighters. The promoters and everyone behind the scenes. It was the best idea anyone could think of! Why not settle the debate? You have all these disciplines! Tai chi! Judo! Jujutso! Taekwondo! Traditional boxing! Muay Thai! Karate! Sumo wrestling! Greco-Roman! The list goes on!” Roy posed. He rose his claws and lifted his right leg. He pretended to be the Karate Kid. “*Wax on! Wax off!*” He let it pass and walked into the middle of Stonehenge. He felt an energy and was scared of it. He

returned to Donovan at the edge. “Moms cried to us! *What’s this going to do to my son? It’s such a bad example! We already have too much violence in the world!* And college professors cried out! *This is the sign of a declining empire! America is on its last leg! This happened to Rome with their gladiator sports!*” Roy blushed but no one could tell because his face was already red in its demonic form. “The Spice channel was getting popular around this time! You know that soft porn! And kids were staying up late at night trying to watch some distorted tit or bush from feeble scrambled video signals delivered by their cable channels.”

“Somehow, that made it more arousing,” Donovan agreed. “You’re watching these squiggly flesh objects then, every five minutes or so, the screen would be almost perfect. And if one of these chicks was naked at the time, holy fucking shit! Yeah. I know what you’re talking about!”

Sakata poked Donovan’s gut. “You stop feeding this filthy man’s argument!”

“He’s the Devil, honey bun!” Donovan kissed her.

“Sex and violence! All peaking as the Millennium is approaching! Just like Rome with the Colosseum! Lions eating Christians and everyone is cheering! Legendary orgies! Grapes dripping on everyone and togas hitting the floor!” Roy soared high. “It felt *soooooooooooooo* good!” He came down. “At those early UFC events, every fighter was the toughest man on his block! You can trust me on that! Put these guys in a round robin! Something’s gotta give! Everyone’s an alpha male until the bell rings!”

“There is no bell in MMA fighting,” Dorian commented.

“Shut up!” Desmond scolded. “Let these guys talk!”

“You have a group of alphas and let them fight! Fuckers start behaving like betas in a heartbeat!” Roy faced Dorian. “That’s what Donovan is getting at! And my whole life, I wouldn’t budge! No one is going to push me around! I pushed for social acceptance of the Ultimate Fighting Championship and I had greater plans! Of course, we could not do this in the United States of America. Even with my pull, there was internal dissent. I wanted to replicate the Roman Colosseum experience! I wanted to see my enemies thrown to lions! Literally! We would have to do this in Africa! Or Asia! We would have to find a place without interference or regulations! I wanted to see sword fights with limbs getting hacked off! Battles to the death! I wanted to see jousting! I wanted to create a spectacle fifty times larger

than what the Ultimate Fighting Championship became!”

“What happened?” Donovan asked.

“It didn’t materialize.” Roy scratched his chin as he thought of how to explain it. “Polarization,” he said. “We had idiots in our Illuminati group who were fine the legal process in America. It wasn’t fun to jump through figurative hoops, but they were willing to do it. On the other end, I was seen as a guy who wanted no regulations at all. There was always someone darker than me, Donovan.” Roy could never remember calling him by his first name and realized he reached a certain level of familiarity. “I was shown I was Beelzabub and this is how I turned out. I am not evil. In my mind, I am definitely not evil. There was always a person who wanted to incorporate something more sinister! *Cannibalism*. There’s an island out there I’ve never been to but they actually put those plans into motion. That’s not fun! See what I’m getting at? Let’s suppose someone’s into kinky sex! Tying ladies up in leather and whipping them a little. Making them beg for mercy then beginning sexual activity. There’s always a strange fucker out there who blurts out, ‘Then we can shove night sticks up their assholes!’”

“You’ve done this?” Donovan asked.

“No! Not the night stick thing!” Roy reflected on nights with Norah. “I’ve tied my wife up to the bedpost a few times, but it wasn’t my fancy. We didn’t do it anymore.” He felt something changing inside of his skin. “My point is I’ve become the Devil. I am Beelzabub, Prince of Demons. I am not stupid, though. I am not pro-pain. It’s just an incredible misnomer.”

“Propane?” Sakata asked. “Maybe butane?”

“I am not *for* pain,” Roy clarified. “I am for pleasure! I have guidelines. I am not trying to save humanity! That’s an exercise in futility! I have a circle of loyalists! Though I am not for pain, I am quick to inflict it! Nip shit at the bud! Hit them with a full force early on! This eliminates unnecessary fighting down the road!” Roy felt his blood literally boil. “There is no fence sitting! Are you familiar with trench warfare?”

“Why did you bring us here?” Donovan asked. *He needs a therapist*, he thought. *He believes I’m his best bet to sanity*.

“You don’t have a picnic between warring factions!” Roy wanted to invoke a lightning strike but was unable to. “You dig yourself into trenches! You wait for the enemy to make a desperate move.” Roy’s wings started to wilt like dying flowers. “I made it to

Hy' Brasil with this man!" He walked to Desmond and patted him on the shoulders. "My life took new meaning, but it wasn't over night." Roy's wings wilted until they were gone. A puddle of black crap remained under his hoofs. Then his claws began to change into hands. Roy cried, but tears of diamonds did not trickle. They were liquid. "The last time I was truly mean was when you were released from the mental institution." Roy's skin became flesh-colored and his hoofs became feet. He hugged Donovan and whispered, "You're the better man than me." He backed off. "I had all this momentum of hate and revenge. I spoke to my partners atop the US Bank skyscraper in Los Angeles. The plan was to ruin you!" The last part of Roy's orcus form to disappear was his mustard-colored horns. They shrank until they were gone. "On the way to my hotel, I was caught in deep contemplation. It took me a few hours to realize I have to quit persecuting you. But I knew there would be a serious challenge. I had to ask myself if I had the courage to do it! You know the Agenda, Donovan! You know the risks of deviating from it!"

"Thank you, Roy." Donovan shook Roy's hand. They were now both in human form. Roy's sole piece of clothing was a brown loincloth. "You can use a tan!" Donovan said, then laughed.

"We are both alphas." Roy was determined to reach his conclusion. "I meant to break you! I meant to turn you into a quivering beta."

Sakata was relieved. "This is what we talked about! I was a teenage J-pop singer when I met Donovan." She kissed his neck. "I was an alpha female. I had to take charge. I was a perfectionist in many ways. I toured around the world and I was demanding. The backstage environment had to be conducive to my pre-performance needs. Lemon water. Tsubaki flowers. Stuffed animals. I was planning to go solo when I met Donovan at Lailai Degei, Fiji. But I realized we don't have to be alphas or betas. *There is something called a gamma.* I learned this! We can be demur around respected elders and wild around raving teens. We don't have to have a take-charge attitude in all situations!" She held her sweetheart. "Donovan is my alpha. I am his beta. He is the driver and I am his willing passenger. If you have someone with vision and benevolence, there is nothing wrong with ceding power." She let go of him then asked Roy, "Have you never been mellow?"

"Because of my position, I have been prone to certain tendencies." Roy Thurman felt shame in his near-naked attire. He

thought about Michelangelo's sculpture of David. *Nude. There is a difference between naked and nude. I feel naked before these people. Maybe my gut I'm ashamed of? Maybe my pasty skin?* He looked down at his loincloth. *If this was a leaf covering my cock, I would probably feel more dignified.* "How many Chuck E Cheese pizza parlors do you think I own, Donovan? If you had to guess and you were on a primetime gameshow?"

"Five?" Donovan wondered what Roy was getting at.

"None! Never would own one! I would lose my reputation as a bad ass! Then rivals would treat me like I was soft!" Roy wanted to cry. He wanted to trust Donovan and Sakata. He wanted to let down his guard and be accepted into their Contrarian group. On the surface, he was already accepted. Donovan's best friend, Preston, helped pave the way to Hy' Brasil, but there was coercion and blackmail involved. Roy Thurman wanted acceptance in the heart. He wanted forgiveness. He wanted to get across that he knew the error of his ways. There was a movie Roy watched as a thirtysomething, *Savannah Smiles*. It was about a rich, bureaucratic politician running for public office. Someone recommended it to his wife, Norah. They went for a family night out at an AMC theatre. They brought their children, thirteen-year-old Annie and nine-year-old Byron. Roy didn't expect a lot. It was a Disney picture. He heard rumors about the plot and figured he would relate to the politician. Here he was, a rich lobbyist banker in Washington, DC with his two children. But something peculiar happened. Savannah, the character played by Bridgette Andersen, was neglected by her parents. She felt lonely so she ran away. She took refuge in a stolen beat up car driven by a couple of criminals. Roy cried when he watched the movie. He related to Alvie, a gruffy character played by Mark Miller, who was busted out of prison by his friend, Bootsy, a bumbling slob. In the movie, Alvie reflected on what hardened his heart. In a flashback scene, he was on a farm as a young child and the rest of the kids were on a flatbed lorrie speeding away from him. He chased them but they only laughed and waved. He was just a tiny outcast biting their dust. But he ran, and ran, and ran. "Have you ever played, whack-a-mole? Donovan?" There was distance in Roy's eyes.

"Yes! At Chuck E Cheese's! I liked the colored styrofoam balls! I was a teenager and probably too old to go in, but I had fun with cousins there! Great birthday parties! And I liked the game where you roll the ball and try to land it in the small circle!" Donovan remembered the prizes he would get from tickets dispensed from the

games. "And I liked the shows by the animatronic band!"

"My life became whack-a-mole." Roy was still thinking about Savannah Smiles. "I have a lot of people coming after me. They want my money, my influence, and my connections. As a fellow alpha, you understand my circumstance. Betas don't know what to want. They don't know who to like. So I tell them I'm into Winger. A half-joke! You remember the eighties band? My life is a heinous, never-ending EF Hutton commercial! They always want to know what I buy! Who do I like?" Roy thought about a David Bowie song, *Major Tom*. "They want to know what shirts I wear! They want to know what stocks I buy! *How do I get rich like you?*" He licked his lips. "I have to throw them off trail! I have to throw the scent off. I happen to like Winger, Donovan. *Headed For a Heartbreak* was a good song! And then I watch them buy the cassettes. They want to be like me! Flattering! But it's only an image of me!" Roy was lost and in deep thought.

"Preston Bancroft is my best friend." Donovan Cobb approached Roy Thurman and held him in a tight embrace. "I know." Tears streamed down Donovan's cheeks. "I know." He let Roy go. At a distance he said, "I know."

Roy looked to the grass below his feet. "You motherfuckers!" There was no anger. It was resignation.

"Preston Bancroft partied with Mike Judge." Donovan sobbed more. "It's war, Roy, and you know it! All is fair in love and war!"

"Beavis and Butt-head was this mega breakthrough in cartoon satire." Roy whimpered. Some of his tears were salty, but a few came out as diamonds. "Why did you pick on me? I know the Scoundrels and Contrarians have been at it for ages, but I got the joke! I am Stewart Stevenson! I am the running joke in your world and MTV is decimating my life to the entire globe! You're not going to come out and explicitly say 'fuck Roy Thurman' but I got the message!"

Donovan Cobb paused. "You're Roy Stalin from *Better Off Dead...* as well. You know that, right?" He looked at Roy Thurman and waited.

He nodded in agreement. He no longer felt sorry for himself. For the first time in eons, he respected Donovan's Contrarian group. "When I was a kid, you said what you meant and meant what you said!" Roy felt frisky. "*I'll kick your ass, motherfucker! Stop looking at my girlfriend!*"

Donovan knew Roy was making a point. Roy had no girlfriend

around. Nonetheless, Donovan felt scared. He believed something could tip.

"You Contrarians are in the arts. You beat around the bush. You communicate with euphemisms, implications, entendres, symbols and innuendoes. You *never* say what you truly mean." Roy admired them. "I am a banker. The IRS has sent men to prison for being a penny off when paying taxes."

"It's all about survival," Donovan said. "But it gets fun." There were always opposite sides to the coin. "I hate snarky people, Roy. In my circles, there are those who go too far. I wish they would talk shit about me at parties. But they don't. They make fun of one of my friends or one of my so-called bad features. I hate snarky people and I believe it's relative."

"I watched *Savannah Smiles* with my family in the early eighties." Roy cut to the chase. "Public place. Theatre. Popcorn. Kids. Wife." He knew why diamond tears trickled. He had the option. He could become an orcus again. "I watched the kid run after a truck!" Roy Thurman chose to remain in human form. "I'm the kid! Donovan! Don't you understand I am the kid?" Roy cried and it was all liquid. "I thought I was the rich politician sacrificing his daughter for a career, but I'm the kid! I'm the motherfucking kid chasing the flatbed and trying to keep up with the children around me! I grew up as a sordid individual, but I used to trust! I used to believe!"

Donovan Cobb remembered the movie. "He catches up to them, Roy. The truck stops. They let him on."

"Fuck you, bitch!" Roy was angry, and his skin became devil-red. No horns grew. No wings sprouted out. "Yes! He caught up to his siblings and friends or whoever they were!" Roy puffed and smoke shot through his nostrils. "His trust was shot from a stupid prank!"

A decision had to be made. "Roy? I like that you're trying to change. I like that you saw the light. I like that you opened your heart and became vulnerable." Donovan thought of "Nothing Else Matters" by Metallica. *So close no matter how far. Couldn't be much more from the heart. Forever trust in who we are and nothing else matters.* "Your twin flame went through the orb!" Donovan gestured to the glowing blue sphere. "You must chase her! Go into the 3D world we came from and make things right!" *Never opened myself this way. Life is ours, we live it our way. All these words I don't just say. And nothing else matters.* "This crap has to stop, though! You can't lock onto people you're jealous of and ruin their lives! You can't make

unilateral decisions for grown adults! Not without their consent! You can't chain people up like dogs and expect them to adore you!" *Trust I seek and I find in you. Every day for us something new. Open mind for a different view. And nothing else matters.*

"You think I'm like Marco Quintin, don't you?" Roy felt as though he was melting. "It's all relative, right? I had some jackass festering me, and now I'm festering you. It's hypocrisy, isn't it?"

Donovan held Sakata's hand and they walked to the orb. "Roy? We're staying here in Hy' Brasil. Me and Sakata like it here. The world over there? It's ruined for me. I'm on no-fly lists because of the shit you did to me. I can't live like I planned. But here? I can make it here! I can become a knight! Instead of drawing comics about dragons, I can become one!"

For once in his life, Roy was at peace with Donovan. Roy walked to the edge of the orb and put his hands around it as if warming himself near a campfire. "If I go through, it's not to chase Ashley! Our relationship is damaged pretty bad." Roy morphed himself. He became the abominable snowman from Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the Christmas claymation special. Except his fur was green. "Donovan? I know my part in the world. I know what I'm good at! I scare people! I *like* to scare people." He hugged Donovan. "I'm going through that portal. I'm going to wind up under children's beds and in their closets. Only the naughty ones, though!" Roy let go of Donovan and grabbed Sakata. He held her. He was tempted to tongue her in the ear but didn't do it. He wept instead.

Sakata and Donovan watched Roy walk into the pulsing electric orb. They waved, then he vanished. "Did you mean it? Donovan? We're staying here?"

"*Take care, asshole!*" Donovan yelled. He swelled up but stopped shedding tears. The orb vanished. "We're staying, Sakata. Regular Earth has nothing for us."

