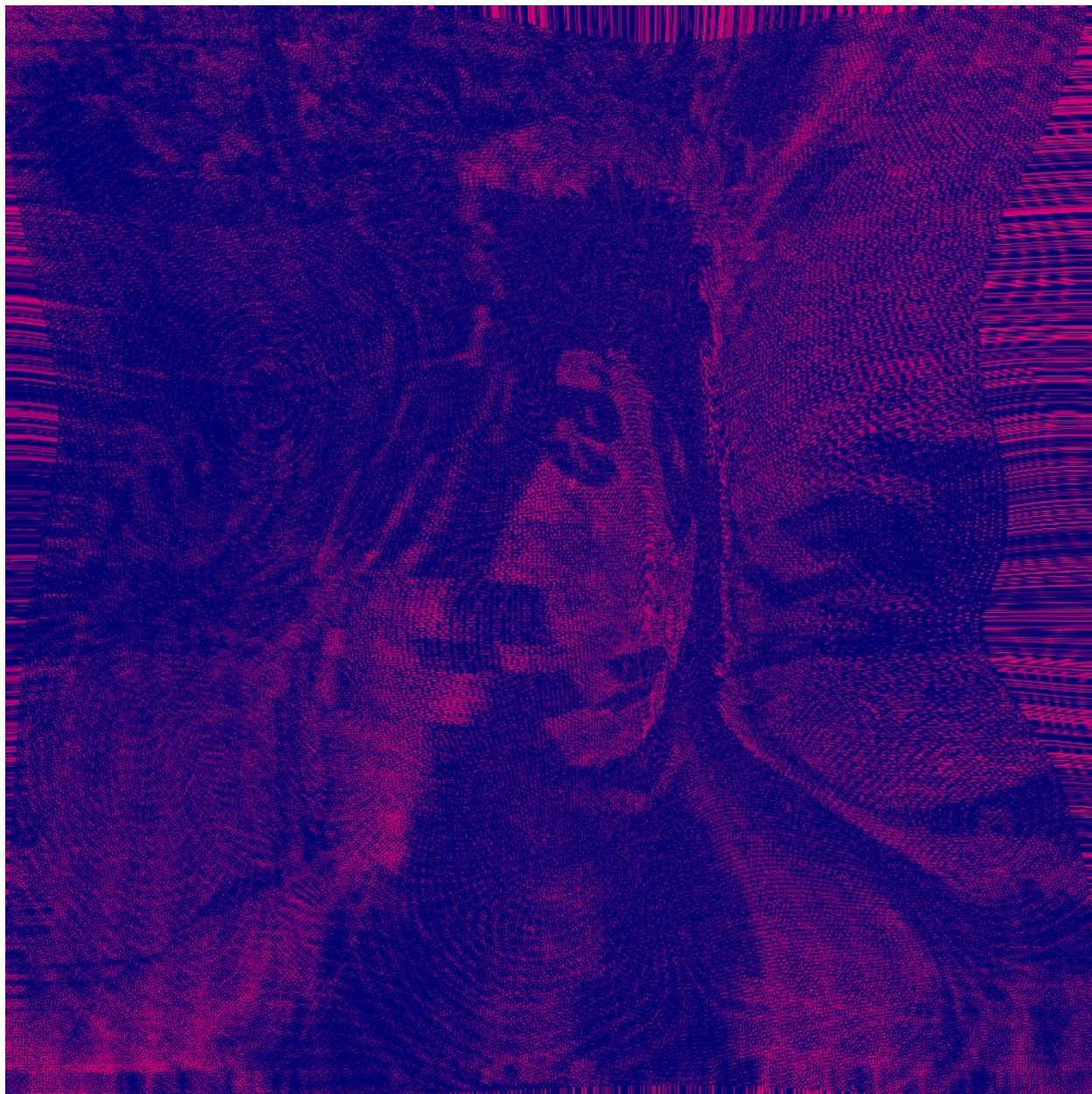




BY

DANE DELUCCHI

Chapter One

Being a writer is a pain...

I know that I can put this so eloquently, that to the common intellect, it might actually be too confusing, so for austerities sake I feel compelled to bear my heart in plain vernacular; despite my need for perfection in my writing. It is as simple as this: I feel pain when there is nothing to write about.

I feel agony when my agent has no Geiko commercial to send me to audition for.

The sorrow that overtakes me, when I must wait yet again for my next chance to audition for the celebrity judges of The Voice, is intolerable.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that, not utilizing my gifts is pain and my biggest problem is that I am either too talented, or too smart. I simply have too much to offer, so it's really hard to pin point where to put my efforts because, not to be conceded; I could do pretty much whatever I want to.

What people just don't get, is that living life is the most important part of writing.

My followers have come to expect so much of me and the show must always go on! Always.

I'm no longer in control of this thing I've become, I mean, I might even shoot heroin or who knows what at this point?

I'm out of control!

Sometimes I feel like Ulysses S. Grant during the civil war. Whenever there was not a great battle to be fought, he was mostly drunk off his ass. There was no conditioning for fighting downtime for some men I suppose. There are a lot of different ways to write however; the only thing that is actually required to be considered a writer in my mind, is the unimpeachable need to comment on everything you see and do, coupled with the foolish hope that someone other than you will care about your insights as much as you care about them.

As a serious writer, you also have to accept the fact that nothing you ever write will be even close to great. The greatest stories and wisdom will never be widely shared in this world, the ones who are truly wise do not possess the ego that maddens a man enough to follow his own footsteps into folly.

Mankind should discontinue the endeavor of wielding the treacherous pen henceforth.

Here I am in Hollywood and being from Anaheim, ascending into the belly of the beast was easy as I spent my entire life dangling from it nostrils.

And I have let go, and I hear acid burbling in the darkness. It's hot but it's also warm. I'm allowing it to swallow me. My thoughts have become compressed by twilight and I'm nestled in a space that's between my nightmares and hell.

I'm steeped into a red and black world painstakingly, like a Steely Dan inside a leathery old twat. I can't keep the devil out and evil seeps into just about everything.

Let the promise of darkness waltz about my eyes, courting the friendly white spots that always lead to blacking out. My softer outer tissues turn to baby food and the dank bile of the beast powers through my vital organs and on - unearthing the marrow of my bones.

I turn into shit.

You can tell a real writer right away. They are miserable.

If a writer isn't a depressive addicted cunt, they must try to go out of their way to at least find some sort of dissonance with society or themselves. Whatever little creative input that one can derive from a life of truth and understanding and happiness, usually manifest into stories that have titles that begin with: "Chicken Noodle Soup For The..."

I am certain that my need to comment on everything I see, and my conviction that my commentary is unique or important; and would be relevant to others, is some unchecked and severe case of narcissism. I'm like those people that wear an excessive amount of cologne all the time, constantly forcing others to choke on my own taste. A lot of people think that they are being clever with their specific brand of perfume or the shoes they identify with or the book they bought to say they know how to read.

The need to express myself through words is undoubtedly the most terrible affliction that I suffer, apart from the general burden of genius of course.

What makes this disposition especially detrimental to me, is that I fear keeping it all in would be a very irresponsible and very dangerous thing to do. If you really want to open yourself up for something genuine to say to the world, you must first empty yourself of all your essence, including your soul, and you will become a hollow vessel for whatever.

It's important to keep in mind, as a writer that at any time, you allow in feelings of happiness or resolution, just know that you risk perverting the creative process and could possibly lose the ability to create altogether if you allow those feelings any longevity.

What goes up must come down. Again. And again. Until your brains come flying out your nostrils and your insides are turned out, and on and on until jjjjjuustttt maybe, after a tragically short life of confusion and self-medicating or a brutally sorrowful and life long exile and alcoholism, you might have a story or two that people maybe will want to read.

It's been five years since I wrote my last book and I don't remember writing it because for one, I was messed-up all the time, and two; I was inspired enough to feel as though I was a spectator watching my fingers dance day and night on the keyboard until an entire novel that I didn't recognize as my own appeared on the screen. I remember the feeling I had when I wrote though, it was like being a child who just discovered a new color, completely in awe by something that will never be impressive or inspirational again. Now I'm yearning to let my fingers dance once more, to rediscover wonder and romance in the world again and to find comfort within my own mind and body - A temple that was once a palace is now a prison cell.

The linoleum floor in my three-hundred square foot studio on the Sunset Strip is covered in scraps of paper with nothing but intemperate and self-absorbed garbage, scribbled drunkenly in between blackouts. Some of it was really good stuff though. Really good stuff.

I saw an old crackhead on Sunset the other day whose face was gaunt and had become the unnatural color of a spray tan from years of polysubstance abuse. The man was running on the sidewalk with the agility of a ninth-grader, his dry white tongue between his lips, blowing raspberries while he dug for bottles in trash bins to add to his trash cart heap that he lived out

of. I thought of this man sometimes when I'd find myself on my hands and knees in my apartment sorting through my writings for something good enough to justify the hell I was living in... I often pictured my epitaph would read

"He only wanted what was best for the story." and instead of "R.I.P" it would just read: "Womp. Womp."

"Other times I think of myself as an old and lonely fisherman who's outlived his days. The world has moved on and there is seldom anything left to catch. The lonely old man throws a line out whenever he can, knowing that he may never get a bite again. He's waiting for whales. The whales don't come, so he drinks like one."

-Goops Goombadi scribbles on a napkin.

His fifth Ketel soda at The Waterfall Bar and Grill on the Sunset Strip required of him to close one eye to see. Most of the time, recalling events that occurred past 11pm was always difficult if not impossible.

Goops smirked after his third review of his awful night's writings on a soggy bar napkin that lay in front of him. He felt goosebumps coming on from the top of his head to the backs of his arms as he slugged down the last few drops of precious vodka. He could not afford to drink outside of his apartment anymore but there he was.

"High. Pathetic. Cool" - He wrote on another napkin, as he shuddered. The bar top looked like a family of Gypsies had just feasted and walked out with all the silverware.

That's what he would call his next novel, "High Pathetic Cool" he thought.

His shrewd blue eyes flickered and strayed apart from one another.

Goops Goombadi spent the rest of the night showing off the garbage he had written for all.

He had absolutely no idea what to write about. He drunkenly promised lead roles to bar flies for his feature film to be like he did almost each night. Goops had become a composite Hollywood personality. He was a baking-soda person who absorbed the odors from the other junk in fridge.

He had ethnicity-dysphoria and genuinely believed he was an Italian-American-stud, though he was a fair-skinned and dainty Irish man with the long slender appendages of the opposite sex.

Sometimes his name was Reno de Lucchi, sometimes it was Goops Goombadi. He decided he was a DJ at one point and had people call him "DEEP" for an awkward few weeks.

He had that, dead-inside confidence of a Vegas Elvis impersonator. He was a natural charlatan. If he had been raised on the streets of Tijuana, he would have been that guy you pay to take your picture with a donkey painted like a zebra. He would also have been the guy that took your wallet as the bulb flashed.

Goops was an actor, singer, novelist, blogger, producer, Instagram model, lead-singer and philanthropist/public figure.

Goops wore the same outfit every night for several weeks at a time, as a way of branding himself but always ended up changing his look drastically to satisfy his insecurities. His new greaser look boasted a polished bronze pompadour that he blow-dried each day. He made

painstaking efforts for hours each day, setting his thick dirty-blonde hair with an exclusive clay pomade found only at Baxter's of Hollywood on Melrose. He wore an oversized black leather jacket that he found during a blackout somewhere, along with girl pants that were marketed toward men. His one pair of high top sneakers were recently blood-stained during a recent evening.

The Novel that Goops wrote, was a vanity-published collection of Phillip K. Dick and Stephen King emulations.

"Some Fucked Up Crap" it was called.

Thankfully the book went nowhere.

Goops was always broke keeping stock of it. His publisher charged him \$30 for every copy unless he ordered hundreds at a time.

One night a Waterfall Bar and Grill familiar and front patio crowd VIP; Tom Syndrome, asked Goops Goombadi to join him at his elite table of who's-who's and drunkard cling-ons.

This was Goops chance to prove to a gate-keeper of the industry that he had talent.

Tom was best known as the manager of legendary heavy metal band Engine Face. He famously convinced front man Teddy Filibuster to write the hit "The EF Word" on his death bed and no one at the Waterfall ever forgot it.

Tom was telling Goops about selling his wares.

Goops felt things were going well. He had enough smoke blown up his ass to cure a brisket that evening and was warmly drunk.

Out of nowhere, Tom set a hairy paw on Goops' inner thigh and lassoed himself closer. Tom's big sweaty armpit plopped fluidly against the back of his neck. Todd whispered Whisky-Coke flavored lies intimately into Goops neck and moved a hand to close to his inner thigh.

Tom purported that there are what he calls "stairs to the top" in Hollywood. Everywhere you look there are people clamoring to get their shot to ascend the stairs. Everyone in Hollywood is going to try to climb those stairs, most won't make it, however, Goops had a special talent unlike the rest, said Tom. Special talents like what Goops possessed would require a more expeditious path to stardom. Tom explained that an artist with so much raw talent and innate creativity, can simply take the invisible escalator to the top.

"How do I find the invisible escalator?" Goops slurred.

Chapter Two

Now that Goops sat at Tom's coveted table and could afford a three-piece suit, he quickly become too big for his britches and dictatorially cruel and he found that he had a very violent side.

We find our man in the bathroom of the Waterfall doing coke off the tops of urinals with a young writer that Goops flaked on earlier in the week. They were supposed to collaborate on a script.

"I was dehydrated that morning because I forgot to buy Pedialyte. I know that's no excuse for flaking on you, but I also think you're just being a bit of bitch right now because your dad is sick." Goops said with a big smile and his arms wide open for a hug.

"My dad had a heart attack and he died! That was 4 nights ago man! You only think about yourself!"

Goops head hit the steel plunger on the top of one of the urinals. He rebounded quickly and grabbed the kid by his right ear with his long fingernails and almost tore the ear off his ginger scalp. With his other hand, he pulled the kids red hair on the back of his head until the hair came out in matted bloody clumps. While the young writer was comatose from shock, Goops stole his cocaine, then rummaged through his pockets; retrieving his wallet. With his jaw tight, Goops managed to speak slowly enough to instruct the security staff to eject the maniac upstairs and explained to them that he had barely escaped from the deranged and drug-addled thug. The young writer was dragged to the dumpster and kicked in the liver. A limp carcass was seen being tossed into the dumpster after closing that evening.

Dabbing dark globs of blood into his mangled sharkskin weave suit, Goops returned to his place at the bar. He promised a few more huge roles in future feature films to the random patrons and finally, called it a night.

There's that old cliché about people selling their souls to the devil for stardom.

Growing up in Anaheim, Goops was especially eager for his shot at fame and fortune. He addressed every hope and dream he could think of into one single prayer to Satan on one ominous spring evening as his prayers to God for stardom were unanswered.

Goops grabbed his middle school yearbook and blew the dust off of some old family photos he conjured from the hallway closet. He drew a pentagram on every picture he could find of himself and crossed his eyes out with x's. He whispered to the devil to make his dreams come true, to make him famous and rich and talented and all the things his vanity assured him he deserved. Ten minutes passed and Goops decided that there was nothing but science in this world to believe in and he would have to go through life as a staunch and unblessed atheist.

He tucked the vandalized yearbook along with the family photos under his bed wrapped in a quilt that his grandmother had handmade for him that said "2001" and had a bunch of happy-looking cows on it. He climbed into his twin bed and a deep fear climbed in with him.

He began shivering violently.

As Goops pulled his blankets over his sweating brow, he thought he might have heard a very quiet car pull into the cul-de-sac that he lived on and turn its engine off in front of his house.

The Southern-California air was thick with the smell of barbecue, had suddenly turned to smell of formaldehyde and became completely still and even without a breeze to open the screen door, it did open ever so slowly and deliberately.

Now a cold sweat encumbered Goops like the morning dew on the season's foliage each morning.

Anxiety suffocated him. It was the same panic that would send him to the ER three times in his adult life.

An extended hospital visit and then Death Row were to follow later in his short life.

"Rrpp...Rrpp...RRrrpp.." phantom footsteps made their way stealthily up the stairs.

Goops knew every creak on the stairs that lead to his room as well as in the hallway.

He snuck out often at night to smoke pot with the neighborhood kids and had learned where not to step. It was as if whatever was sneaking into his house was trying to announce itself by hitting every creak along the way.

"Rrrppp... Rrppp... Rrrppp..." Each step was three or four minutes apart, leaving just enough silence to make each creak all the louder.

The footsteps stopped at Goops door. He pulled the covers over his head and continued to shake. He was paralyzed with fear and started praying to God for salvation.

There was an angry knock on the door to his bedroom. His ears were ringing and his vision was framed with a pulsing grey vignette.

Knock.
Knock.!

"God help me! God help me!" He wanted to shriek but the air was sucked out of his lungs like an elephant had just sat on his chest.

Knock! Knock!
KNOCK!
KNOCK!

The next day at breakfast he asked his brothers and parents if anyone had knocked on his door the night before.

His older brother, Harry shrugged, baby Hayden protested the old "Here comes the airplane" routine and his father turned on the television and upon seeing the headlines, he turned the TV back off and put the radio up.

"That's three more slain in the case of the Dead Baby Killer." The announcer said from the radio.

Goops didn't know for sure if the knocking on his door was real or if it was a lucid nightmare or if he was insane. Being crazy was scarier than having encountered the devil.

Well, you don't just encounter the devil.

Chapter Three

“Hello?”

Goops groaned into his all but shattered iPhone.

“It’s Harry. Hello?”

“What time is it?” Goops asked.

It was dark out, Goops could not tell from inside his apartment whether the sun had just set or if it was about to rise. His head throbbed painfully in a familiar tempo.

“Harry. What’s up? How’s Monterey?”

Harry didn’t entertain Goops’ question for he knew that any pleasantries or seeming intrigue into another’s life was false and that his younger brother did not care to hear, or even listen to the answers of most questions that he asked in an obligatory, polite fashion.

It was the age of the sociopath and if Goops wasn’t such a drunk, he might have done quite well in it.

Goops and Harry used to be best friends, now they did not know what to say to one another.

The brothers would both offer empty niceties to get through their random and awkward correspondence and made sure to only communicate whenever they must.

It made them both sad.

The sadness that both brothers carried around with them grew heavier each time they tried to interact with each other.

Goops pictured an anchor of frozen mercury dipping into a glass moonlit ocean and forever stalking a forlorn old ghost ship.

“I’m calling about Hayden.”

“Jesus Christ! What is it? An I.E.D? Is he still in Kuwait?”

“No, don’t say things like that. Why do you think he’s dead every time I mention his name over there phone?”

The phone went silent for ten seconds.

“That’s great. I’m glad to hear it. Hayden is home?”

“Yes, he’s home.” Harry said.

Goops’ mind went dark. He wondered again what time it was.

“Anyway, Hayden asked me to be the best man and he asked me to ask you to take care of the bachelor party, since no-one can ever get ahold of you anymore.

We're going to fly out to LAX next month, I tried to talk him out of going to Hollywood but you know how much he looks up to you. I told him that we should all go to Monterey for the Jazz Festival, you know the one that Pops used to take us to when we were kids. Hayden told me that he loved that idea too so the plan is for us to meet in Hollywood the week of the festival and then to rent a car in L.A so that we can drive up to Monterey. Can you take care of all that?" Goops had Harry on speaker phone.

His phone was resting on his forehead and seemed to throb with the heartbeat coming from his brain while he lay on his sheet-less memory foam mattress.

"Yeah, of course. That's no problem. I'll get on it tonight after I hit the gym."

He wheezed at the thought of exercising and he felt his stomach churning the bile that his failing liver had produced and wondered if there was more of that blood in there that the ulcer made which looked like coffee grounds whenever he threw it up.

Goops had a platinum membership at the Hollywood Boxing Gym on La Brea and Sunset that he paid \$50 dollars a month for since the beginning of the previous year. He had only been to the gym three times since then. On his last visit he participated in a yoga class and had since been telling everyone he met that they should try it out and that it will change their life and that makes one more spiritual and in touch with the universe.

He could not even touch his toes and he had recently pulled a hamstring tying his shoes.

Goops suffered from a moderate scoliosis that was never addressed when he was young, he was also afflicted with a depleted sponge between his L5 and L6 and blamed his alcoholism on the chronic pain his condition caused him.

"I know you're gonna make this a great time, man. I miss you"

"You too. Love you."

Goops heard a click followed by a dial tone. Harry Nilsson's "One" started to play in synch with the dial tone in Goops' mind.

Goops contemplated his conversation with his brother Harry, dreading to get out of bed. Sometimes he felt that if he lay perfectly still during a hangover, none of the horrible things he said or did the previous night would be able to spot him.

He decided that he felt sorry for Harry for having to drive a tractor around for a living. "How could one live such an unglamorous life?" Goops nearly wept for his older brother.

Goops found the courage to climb out of bed.

He made his way to his refrigerator that smelled of rotten Jenny-O turkey even with the door closed.

He was out of Peroni and Gatorade and Smirnoff so he would have to make the steep climb up Palm Avenue to the Terrence Liquor store on Sunset.

One could hardly tell that time had passed in Hollywood since Goops' last conversation with Harry.

"How much time has passed?" Goops wondered.

He had graduated from losing track of days to missing months and finally to forgetting what year it was.

The only difference in scenery were the billboards changing like they always do and the nights were slightly hotter than they were in August, though it was fall.

A fat face with a dark goatee and beady black eyes appeared on Goops' cracked iPhone screen.

The bloated, balding and apishly hairy middle-aged man moaned from a remote location. The flickering figure displayed on the phone, wore a blue checkered button-up shirt that looked like he stole off a picnic table after eating all the food within the picnic baskets as well as the people who were having the picnic.

Tom muttered something to the effect of "Was Goops at home? If so, alone?" Goops assured Tom that he was alone.

A stubby erection appeared on the screen. Tom began stroking it and Goops could see that his circumcised penis was short and thick and had a golden-brown tan. People with Tom's body-type were generally hung like acorns.

"Tell me what to do, master. I've been bad. I need to be controlled. Oh!" Tom moaned.

Goops humored Tom and abused him verbally as he was told to do until Tom had an orgasm.

Goops felt dead inside than he had the last time Tom Face-Timed him. He could die and wanted to but not until he made his mark on history with his writings. "...He did it all for the story..." he thought.

"We have to be careful, master. No more emails and no more text messages" Tom whispered

"I spoke to my cousin, the publisher in New York. He really likes the book er... Some Shits Fucked Up? Talk soon."

The screen went black and Goops accidentally caught a loathsome glimpse of his own reflection.

Goops gave a long shudder and with a palpitating heart, raced to the liquor store for a pint of vodka that he planned on mixing with the rest of the peach-flavored Pedialyte in the fridge.

His trembling hands managed to pour the entire pint of vodka into a red Dixie cup that he mixed with electrolytes.

"Bing."

His phone went off. Sweating, he could smell toxic booze escaping his fatty liver and yellowish skin, the booze burned his eyes and he could not open them until the stinging subsided. With a hand over his face he peaked at his screen, dreading another interaction with his benefactor Tom.

"I am landing at LAX at 9:30 tonight. I am staying at the London Hotel in Weho." Read a text from Harry.

A follow-up message from Tom might have inspired less dread in Goops' soul than his brother's message about the party he had forgotten to throw for his war-hero kid brother.

"Son of a bitch!" Goops cried out and kicked a forty ounce bottle of Mickeys that skipped merrily into a wall.

He screamed.

Later he received a noise complaint via email from his creepy old landlady who had worn her high school prom dress the day she gave him keys to his apartment.

Goops paced back and forth throughout his 300-square foot studio contemplating both checking into Cedar Sinai's Emergency room to hook up to an I.V and to get a Klonopin; and suicide. A trip to Cedars would result in yet another thousand-dollar bill that he would never pay - then possibly suicide.

"Hey. Yeah. I don't drive but I'll send you an Uber. I'll have them drop you at the Waterfall so we can get this party started! Wwoot! Just wait until you see what I've got in store for you guys man!" - Goops Voice-to-texted Harry.

"What?" Harry sent back instantly.

"Rofl" Goops responded and added a winking smiley emoji.

Goop's rubbed one out in the sink nervously then hopped in the shower like he did every night.

"Fools rush in. Where wise men never go. But wise men never fall in love. So how are they to know?" Goops sang.

He always wanted to be a singer.

A singer can always sing. A writer without a story is a lonely and desperate thing, he thought. He continued to sing:

"When we met. I felt my life begin. So, open up your heart and let this fool rush in!"

Goops wondered if a broken heater had really started the fire that brought down Ricky Nelsons' plane. He had always heard that they were free-basing cocaine. He decided without any proof that the free-basing scenario was more likely than the heater story.

Goops turned the lights off in the bathroom and kept the hallway light on so he could not see how puffy and red his face was that evening. Every time he caught his own eyes in the mirror, the face looking back at him was always the shameful expression a dog makes to a human mid-poop.

Goops used to stare at the mirror for hours all the time but now he avoided his reflection. He hadn't looked at a mirror intentionally in longer than his scrambled brains could recall.

He made up his pompadour, he squeezed his daddy- long-legs into his skinny jeans. He then put his over-sized leather jacket on, slipped his high-tops on and laced them unsteadily, then stumbled out the door, kicking another bottle that broke this time.

He got halfway up the hill and almost turned onto Sunset when he realized he was forgetting something. He was supposed to trade his Mexican Fender Stratocaster guitar to Pill-head Richi

for fifteen 25mg Adderall and 5 10mg Oxycontin the next time he bumped into him at The Waterfall.

Goops began to formulate a plan.

Maybe he could buy the pills from Pill-head Richi tonight and make his brothers' bachelor party his last night of drinking for good. He could use the Adderall to keep his mind focused through the withdrawals so he could start the first chapter of "High. Pathetic. Cool." - on his way to the Jazz festival in Monterey.

"Damn!" Goops yelled out loud.

Was he supposed to rent the car to Monterey and buy the tickets to the Jazz festival?

Chapter Four

"Harry! You there?"

"What's up? In an Uber now, heading your way."

Goops could hear a Sam Smith song he never admitted to loving play in the background of what he assumed was a Prius.

"You made arrangements for Monterey, right?"

The line went silent "You say I'm crazy cause you don't think I know what you've done...." Sam Smith sang.

"Of course. Everything is gonna be alright, Grant." There was a profound sadness in Harry's voice.

Goops felt his soul shrinking like cellophane on an orange hot stove.

Suddenly, a few awkward tears began to crawl across his rosy cheeks.

Goops pulled himself together, doubled back for the guitar and resumed his short walk to the bar. His spidery figure quickly ascended up the hill to Sunset, arriving briskly at the Waterfall Bar and Grill within a few minutes.

A spotty and shaking Pill-Head Richi then made the trade for the Stratocaster with pills that were the only thing left from his famous fathers' estate that his more competent siblings hadn't muscled him out of.

Richi claimed that he was too busy worrying about his father to think about making his stake for his fathers will; a story not even Goops was naive enough to buy.

An Uber pulled into the valet at the Waterfall Bar and Grill shortly after Goops arrived. It came in hot and almost hit a notorious Sunset hobo the regulars named "Aqualung" The Armenian valet kicked the tire of the Prius and shouted "You mother-beetch! You almost heet me! You beetch! Uber on the street, customer park in driveway! These mother fuckers! Chapala Ara! Agarka Guot! Sikdere! Mother-beetch."

The Uber made it a point to stay another minute in the driveway scrolling on his iPhone while the valet continued to scream at him in Armenian and broken English. The driver ignored him while he pressed his middle finger to the window.

Harry stared deeply at his brother for the first time in five years. Discretely, he scanned his brother from head to toe. He didn't recognize him.

Harry felt his heart rise to his throat and almost cried when his eyes met his brothers' eyes. A stoned and almost drunk Goops looked straight through Harry. Goops tried to summon the face his brother was searching him for but that face he no longer wore.

Hollywood is where a snake goes molt its skin.

"Harry Ziti, meet Goops Goombadi" the universe tragically whispered.

Harry caught a glimpse of the face he was looking for when Goops rushed over to hug his younger brother Hayden.

Hayden had sagacious eyes, they were deep and reverberated like a Buddhist chant. His skin tone made one question if the man had ever had a drink in his life. There was a brightness to Hayden and a gentleness that you would think was outlawed in Hollywood; a kindness that would turn into a prolapsed asshole overnight.

Goops saluted Hayden in the driveway and Harry looked in the direction that Goops was saluting. Harry's face was grave. Goops wasn't sure what Harry's problem was that evening but he was happy to see his family nonetheless.

"Let's have a drink." Goops barely articulated and signaled to be followed into the dining room.

Goops sat himself at table fourteen, the blood-red table in front of the fireplace.

The maître'd who personally could not stand Goops and his antics was eager to toss Goops out of the most coveted booth in the dining room.

Whenever someone would seat themselves at that table the host would typically lie and say that the seat was reserved for the famous porn star, Ron Jeremy. The manager approached the table, addressed Goops and said, "I'm sorry Goops but table fourteen has been reserved tonight for..."

"Ron Jeremy!" someone at the table behind them yelled out. Ron had just come in through the front entrance and had made his way over to the table, sat down right next to Goops and fell asleep immediately.

The maître' d' sighed and returned to the vodka tonic he had stashed near the buss bins in the hallway. Managing the Waterfall was a pain in the ass, especially that night. The poor maître' d had just had it out with some YouTube blogger who had brought in a service poodle that was supposed to be trained to spot imminent seizures.

The manager knew that the service animal thing was a lie and suspected the creature was not even house-broken the way it acted, zipping around the dining room like a chinchilla and begging for scraps at every table. The poor creature had an unsightly tumor the size of a football along its side.

Ron Jeremy was awake suddenly and asked Goops to buy him a coke and to ask the cashier to play Gordon Lightfoot's "Carefree Highway." Ron reminisced that, that song is why he bought the motorcycle that he rode to Woodstock in the sixties. He started to mull over his

glory days in his mind, remembering himself 50 pounds lighter in his youth in the fields of upstate New York where the first Woodstock was held, then fell asleep again peacefully.

“Okay, I’ve seen the Waterfall now Grant. Let’s get some rest for tomorrow.” said Harry.

“I’ve got more tricks up my sleeve. You know, Paisano, most people would be thrilled to have met the legendary Ron Jeremy, so count your blessings!”

Goops burped.

“‘Paisano?’ Like an Italian guy or a Spanish guy which neither of us are?” asked Harry.

“Marone!” said Goops, while spilling his third glass of Castoro cellars Zinfusion that Sebastian Beethoven had turned him onto.

The fruit flies that circled overhead rejoiced and danced dizzily to the tune of the spilled wine. “You know Sebastian Beethoven turned me on to this little gem.” Goops bragged. “You guys want to see the best pussy in town?” Goops added.

A confused Harry sat quietly. “How about you Hayden?”

“Stop that, please!” said Harry

“Relax, you’re partying with the Goops! We’re gonna go find the best pussy in town, Marone!” Goops slammed his fists on the oval red table.

Poison’s “Every Rose Has Its Thorn played overhead through triangular Bose speakers that Rick Ruger had installed himself.

“You know that Rick Ruger installed the sound system here himself?” Goops jeered left and right.

Harry signaled for the check.

“Okay then let’s catch a Lyft over to Crazies on La Brae. Hope you guys packed your one dollar bills. YO FUCKIN LO, YO! I got to take a piss and then we’ll split!” Goops had to maneuver through a very drunk crowd that had swarmed table fourteen to get a picture with Ron Jeremy.

Flash photography was not allowed in the dark dining room but the manager was already drunk and did not care to do anything more than turn keys and count money that night. So many flashes went off from a dozen phones or so, that the lady with the service poodle that had been sat at the table behind Ron fell to the carpeted floor and went into a violent seizure.

The friends of the blogger were in shock. “What’s happening to her? She’s never done this before! Like, oh my god she’s is LITERALLY foaming at the mouth! Bae! Bae! OH MY GOD!”

The service poodle ran over to investigate its master on the floor. The poodle wasted no time and started humping its owner’s breasts while licking the foam from her lips. The friends of the lady who was having the episode, shouted to the Maître’ d’ to call the paramedics but he was convulsing himself from uncontrollable laughter.

It was pitch black in Goop’s studio apartment. He still had his shirt and his sneakers on. His leather jacket was on the floor by his bed with what looked like wine vomit encrusted on it. He tried to lift himself up but the worst pain he had ever felt in his head tossed him to the floor.

Chapter Five

Just below his hairline he felt that he had a massive gash. He caressed his swollen fingers that were covered in congealed blood and tried as best he could to remember what had happened to his head and to the night that he'd lost track of. He couldn't remember anything past spilling his wine at The Waterfall.

He turned the light above his headboard on to reveal that his brand new white sneakers were covered in blood again. He found his phone on the floor with the battery detached lying on the ground next to it. He reattached the battery and waited in suspense for the device to power back on.

His mind was bent like a hot penny on a railroad track. Reality warped and decayed like the subfloor of an old crooked house. He would try to sleep again but knew that sleep could only come in brief segments.

Waking up out of a blackout with absolutely no memory of the night was a terrifying feeling. He reflected on how a baby must feel being born into the world after swimming in the womb without any conscience thought. He felt like screaming and crying like an infant who just took its first breath. No memory of what happened before, reborn but not quite like a baby or in a Christian sense, but as the same loser with the same problems to look forward to, only made worse by whatever he might have done that he did not remember.

15 new messages.

His phone was more destroyed than it was before. Now there was a purple line that went through the screen and it looked like someone held a powerful magnet to the display while he slept.

"Oh Jesus." He sighed.

Whenever he was severely hungover, he would wake up with a panic attack. During his panic attacks he would involuntarily repeat the mantra ".Oh God, Oh God, Oh God." Almost inaudibly while inhaling the words. It was sort of an inverse way of speaking, like the way the kid says "Redrum" in The Shining.

Harry had blown up his phone.

His wall-mounted T.V was left on from the night before and he caught the headline in the corner of his eye on his way out the door.

"The Dead Baby Killer, still at large in Hollywood. The third killing here in Los Angeles of a recent string of murders after over a decade of inactivity. Is it a copy-cat killer or...." said a newsman on the television.

Goops mind went back to the days in Anaheim to the first time he had heard about "The Dead Baby Killer."

The killer had apparently stalked an African mother in Alameda for long enough to know when she and her baby went for their weekly Saturday stroll.

The killer knocked out the mother and tied her to an abandoned oil derrick. When she came to, her baby was in a blender.

She was a black woman and the father, who was out of the picture was a white man. That was the common theme in all of the Dead Baby murders. The babies were half black and half white bastard children.

According to the TV, in the most recent event, the mother was of African descent and the father was white but this time there were multiple babies that were slain. Every killing was based on prominent dead-baby jokes. There was a note at the scene of the most recent crime. It read:

Q: "What do you call a dead baby in a blender?"

A: "I don't know, I was too busy getting off to it."

Eight babies were killed this time. All eight babies were found at the base of a random condemned house on Redondo and Washington. A crowd of neighbors could be seen gathering in front of the mid-city house that was freshly painted with infant blood that afternoon. This time the handwritten note read:

Q: "How many Babies does it take to paint a house?"

A: "-More than 8."

The mother of the deceased infants was a tabloid sensation for being not only the secret mistress of the secretary of state, but for having had taken enough fertility supplements to produce eight bastard children during their affair. She produced eight innocent little satires of both America and humanity itself that ultimately became just a bloody damn mess.

Goops had already felt sick from his hangover but that story on the news greatly disturbed him for some time.

He turned the T.V off and shuddered. It made him angry and sad that the media made the killer into such a sensation. He also felt shamefully envious of the killer. The Dead Baby Killer made Dahmer look like a jaywalker and people were going nuts for it.

"What a superstar." Goops thought.

Goops was frantically packing his one change of clothes and his cellphone charger and a generic Omeprazole bottle that he had various narcotics stashed in, when he heard the screen door to his apartment swing open followed by:

Knock, Knock!

Goops involuntarily jumped like a flea off a vagabond. In mid-flight, all of the times throughout his life that a phantom knock found his front door flashed before his eyes and before he touched the ground, he remembered all the times he raced to the door to see what demon was tormenting him but each time, no matter how quickly he answered the knocking, there would be nothing and no one on the other side.

His heels landed on top of a 40 ounce Steel Reserve beer bottle and he fell face first into the scattered writings on the floor, reopening the cut on his forehead leaving a Jackson Pollack spatter of blood on the unimportant writings.

He found his balance as quickly as he could and opened the door to find that no one was there.

He ran out to the street and looked about frantically but still, there was nothing but angry Los Angeles traffic congesting the cities arteries, not a pedestrian in sight.

He darted down the alleyway with his scantily packed luggage to the London hotel valet and jumped into the backseat of Midnight Blue VW Passat that Harry had rented. Harry was sitting in the drivers' seat with the phone to his ear.

"What the hell? I was just calling you! You alright? Geez your head! What?"

Harry shouted.

"It's nothing. I'm sorry. It's fucked. I'm fucked. Let's just go, please."

Harry was angry at his brother for so many things. He really could have let Goops have it that day but he chose not to. The brothers used to fight each other like rivals over everything all of the time but his feelings of sadness for his kid brother extinguished any fire of animosity. He combatted the many emotions his brother inspired in him until he was internally exhausted and all he felt was a festering pang of concern for Goops; a feeling that drained and suffocated him

"You need to kick the drinking, man.

I've never seen anyone drink like that.

You just vanished into the night. You said you had to use the bathroom and you left me with Ron at the Waterfall which by the way... that place is fuckin' nuts. This lady had a seizure and the manager ended up in a fist fight with this Australian guy. When I left, he was dribbling the Australian guy's head off of the concrete on the patio, I expected it to explode like a watermelon.

How did you get home?" Harry said.

"Yeah, that place is great." said Goops as he fumbled putting in his earphones.

He put on Tom Waits "Hoist That Rag" and shouted: "It's alright Harry, I was just thinking that I could drink like I used to drink is all. I don't drink regularly anymore, that was just a special occasion." Goops lied while pulling at the leather on the back of his brothers' headrest nervously.

The first few hours of a day after almost killing himself with substances, Goops often had to spend the initial lizard-brained fight or flight mode of his day; reacquainting himself to a consciousness that came in waves.

Goops then lay in the back seat of the rental in sheer agony. He decided he would never drink again as he swallowed half of an orange Adderall pill for breakfast that was going to deliver him from alcohol dependence for good.

"I'm jazzed about this trip, guys." Goops said.

"Why don't you sit in the passenger seat, Grant?" Harry asked.

"Nah, I'm not gonna kick a war hero out of shotgun. Are you kidding me? You ready to roll Hayden?" Goops said.

"Jesus Christ." Harry whispered.

"I thought the Jazz festival was in October?" Goops pondered as they pulled out of the London hotel valet.

On their way to the 101 freeway from West Hollywood, The Ziti brothers passed a tent city on the corner of Hollywood and Highland that seemed to multiply exponentially in population every time Goops saw it. He thought of the people living on the streets. "Are they the crazy ones for giving up on society, or am I the crazy one for trying to be a part of it?" Goops thought. It was a thought that occurred to him often.

As they came to a red-light, Goops spotted an old soiled poncho laying on the sidewalk suddenly come to life. Two tired eyes attached to the figure creeping towards the brothers caught Goops gaze. Goops looked away as the derelict man or woman approached his window to beg for change.

It seemed sad to Goops that the famous Hollywood walk of fame, a place that people traveled all from all over to see, was a disgraceful mess all the time.

At least, for all the lying Los Angeles did, her streets still told a gritty truth.

The brothers made it out of the Valley and were on their way to Monterey when suddenly Harry slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting an old Winnebago that had stopped in the middle of the highway for no reason at all. From the backseat Goops noticed that Hayden had his right hand on his left shoulder and was squeezing it rhythmically.

"You still do that thing with your shoulder?" Goops asked.

Harry turned up the radio until it was almost too loud to be enjoyed

"Jesus Christ Super Star." was playing, it was the brothers favorite musical.

Goops once crucified Hayden on a couple of yardsticks in their living room to the soundtrack when they were little.

When Ted Neely hit the high note on "Gethsemane" Harry cried softly.

"You know Sebastian Beethoven played Jesus in this play in the 90's" said Goops trivially.

Goops found a disposable electronic cigarette in his pocket and took a long drag, unleashing an obnoxious amount of cotton candy-like vapor that covered the top of the dashboard almost completely obstructed Harry's view of the highway.

Chapter Six

Goops had planned to dry out on the road but he had started to look for any restaurant that may serve any kind of alcohol along the way. Goops decided that if he ordered a beer with dinner instead of purchasing one at a roadside liquor store and chugging it in a bathroom, he would look more like a casual drinker and less like the full-blown drunk he had become; even though the redness of his nose and his patchy skin betrayed him as an alcoholic to all without having to have a drink in his hand.

They entered a town called Los Banos on their way which is Spanish for “The Toilets” and was where James Dean died, Goops remembered.

The sign on the highway said that there was a Benny’s and a Taco Express there. They got out of the Passat in the Benny’s parking lot and the hot air smelled like cowmanure and rotten strawberries.

The brothers made their way through the entrance and passed a claw game that some Pakistani children were enthused about.

The brothers waited for a host who seemingly had abandoned their post. After several minutes a server appeared and sat them. When the waiter handed the brothers menus Goops noticed that his knuckles looked like golf balls and that the server was in some capacity mentally retarded.

Goops pored through the menu front and back and saw there was no beer. The server with the golf ball hands returned

“Do you serve beer?” Goops asked.

“No.”

“Do you guys want to check out Taco Express?”

“Whatever you want. I’m not that hungry anyway.”

“What about you Hayden?” Goops asked.

They ate their grand slams and headed to the Chevron, Goops ate like a bird and left more than three- quarters of his burger and all his fries untouched.

The brothers headed up the road to the Chevron. Goops purchased a pint of Vodka for later on when Harry wasn’t looking and stashed it quickly in his leather jacket breast pocket. Goops climbed back into the back seat of the Passat and slapped the roof three times signifying that he was ready to hit the road. As they exited the parking lot and made their way to the freeway Goops spotted a small tabby searching for mice by the Taco Express dumpster. Goops said, “Here Ki-Ki” through his rolled-up window. Northbound once again, they continued heading toward Monterey.

“It’s getting late. How about you call the hotel and make sure we can check in late. GPS says it will be around 1a.m.” Said Harry.

“Hello? Yeah, we have a room reserved there for two nights under Ziti. We’re gonna be there around 1am is that too late to check in?”

"No sir there is someone here 24 hours a day. We will see you when you arrive." A voice responded.

"Oh, that's great. Do you guys have room service?"

The line went dead.

"They got disconnected. We're good though, guys."

As time went by and the sun left for the day to visit the Chinese, Goops started to feel like he was in the middle of an acid flashback. His armpits were pouring sweat but he was freezing cold. His mind recessed into a busy emptiness and he felt like he was a robot. He was staring at the whirling interstate signs out the window.

He was worried about how blurry the letters were. He thought he might need glasses but knew that his impaired vision was a result of the substances he was on. Goops accidentally let his mantra of "God help me. God help me. God help." Escape its normal incessant cycling of his thoughts to become an audible whisper from his mouth for all to hear.

"Are you sure you're good?" Harry's voice sounded like it was playing from a record that someone was lightly holding their finger on as it turned.

"I'm okay, it's nothing..." Goops Said

The fog thickened some more until it was necessary for the brights to be used. Goops pulled out his iPhone and took a selfie of himself making a duck face. He spent five minutes cropping the redness out of his nose and cheeks and adding the appropriate hash tags. The fog doubled down its siege on their caravan as the brothers crept steadily to the hotel parking lot. They were greeted by a bent old Native-American lady whose resembled a petrified piece of drift wood. She was imbued with a demeanor that was suggestive of there being nothing pleasant in the entire universe at all.

"You must be Room Service." The woman croaked.

"Ziti party" Goops answered.

"Room 151, Pelican building. Just around the corner by the pool." She said as she tossed the keys in their direction.

Goops asked the women to use the bathroom in the lobby so that he can steal a taste of the spirits he had smuggled from the Chevron in Los Banos. The woman pointed to the right of Goops without looking up from her computer screen.

Goops left his Calvin Klein luggage bag in the lobby and entered the bathroom.

The florescent lights in the bathroom were cruel and unforgiving. A strong sense of Déjà vu was waiting in the restroom for him. Goops' dreaded what his reflection may look like after what he had subjected himself to over the past 48 hours.

So, like usual Goops decided to walk past the mirror without looking when making his way to the toilet.

In his peripheral vision Goops noticed something radically different about his face. Goops stopped in the middle of the restroom. He took a few steps back and slowly turned to face the mirror directly for the first time in years. There was a face staring back at him that he didn't recognize as his own. The face looking back at him was covered in whorish makeup. He discovered in shock that bright red lipstick saturated his lips and was smearing down his chin. He marveled in terror at the caked on pale foundation that seemed to be applied over several layers, covering his entire face.

He prodded at the blue eyeshadow that looked like two black eyes from losing a fist fight. The Instagram post from earlier came to mind. He opened his phone frantically and looked at his post from the car ride up. It looked like he was posing for a transgender webcam porno. The hash tags all read #boipussy #faggot #twink #cocksucker #sissysubbitch.

Cherry ran across the room to the toilet and vomited. She retrieved the Omeprazole bottle from her jacket pocket and dumped all the pills into the blue toilet water for fear she had lost her mind. Upon unlocking her phone, she revisited her social media page to behold that her handle had changed from "Goombadibadboy69" to "CherryBlithe69" She tried to delete the account but her phone slipped like a bar of soap it went straight into the blue toilet water. She had to reach past her elbow into the toilet to retrieve her phone, she puked again, this time in the tampon disposal bin.

Fighting the urge to scream, Cherry yanked foot after foot of toilet paper from the wall to use to remove the makeup. She soaked the toilet paper in steaming hot water and soap then began violently trying to remove the cosmetics as quickly as possible. The makeup hardly came off at all and by this time she had been in the restroom for almost ten minutes. She kept dabbing and rubbing but the makeup remained on her face to her horror.

"The Vodka!" she thought.

She grabbed the pint of vodka out of her breast pocket and poured half the bottle on the wad of toilet paper. She wanted to, or perhaps at this point, needed to drink the other half of the bottle but fatefully dropped it into the sink. She scrubbed her face. The makeup finally came off to reveal a bloated and terrified face that was surprised to see how feminine it had become. Her lips were still dark red.

CLACK, CLACK, CLACK!

"Hurry up! I just drove for seven hours straight. I'm tired and I got to take a dump." Harry yelled through the bathroom door.

Cherry examined her appearance in the mirror once more before exiting to make sure there were no more supernatural surprises.

Lo and behold, two perky and rather large breasts stared back at her. She stood in shock for a moment while her hand slowly crept toward her crotch. She discovered that her manhood had vanished completely.

"Did they have a bar in that bathroom or something? You wreck of booze, girl!" Harry said.

"I'm just sweating out the booze from last night, finally." Cherry said without realizing she was speaking.

"Girl..."

“... Did he just call me “girl?” Cherry thought.

She felt like she was a floating head.

She could only focus on what it felt like to have these new weights on her chest and how different walking felt now that she had no penis. She noticed that she stood with a more novel posture, her spinal issues seemed to have disappeared as she pushed her butt out and her breasts forward with her chin held high. She was terrified of what was happening but at the same time excited and began to feel herself become wet between the legs. She couldn't even look at Hayden as they exited the lobby and headed toward their room.

The Lighthouse Inn was a constellation of small four-bedroom duplexes that orbited around a pool and a clubhouse.

The Pelican building where the siblings were to rest that night, was a two-story duplex that had four rooms total. Each room had a balcony area with sliding glass doors. The building was located right next to the pool and hot tub area. Room 151 was on the bottom floor of the duplex and to reach the entrance you had to walk around to the back of the building and down a small set of stairs. On their way to the front door of their room they passed the gated pool area.

The sign read “Pool hours. 9am to 10pm.”

Though it was past 2 am Cherry noticed there was a lone boy swimming in the pool. He must have been only 10 or 12 years old. He wore American flag swimming trunks. He had a long skinny body. The boy was backstroking quietly while his dark eyes looked upward vacantly toward a quilted yellow moon.

The boy took no notice to the brothers and continued swimming eerily in the foggy night.

“Wow, great parenting.” Cherry said under her breath as they turned the corner towards room 151.

Cherry happened to glance at a rifle hanging on the wall over a fire place through the window of the clubhouse; near the pool and began to worry again about how everything was starting to look like the beginning of the next zombie video game.

It was 85 degrees in the room when they opened the door. The ethereal fog followed them into the room uninvited and was vanquished with an accidentally slam of the door from Cherry.

Harry thought about the boy in the pool. Cherry thought about her breasts and vagina.

“Jesus, it's hot in this room.” Harry said.

“I'm too tired to mess with the thermostat tonight.”

Harry was already lying in bed with the remote in his hand.

“Can you mess with it?”

“K. it says press the button with the sun icon twice then adjust up or down on the temperature.” Cherry said. Her voice was cracking. Her face was red and inflamed.
I'

“Okay, I did that, set it to 68 degrees but it keeps booting me back to 88 degrees... 88 degrees? Why does this thing even get that hot?”

Cherry was pouring sweat but she would not take her huge leather jacket off for fear of her brothers discovering that she had suddenly become their sister.

“Take your jacket off. You look like you’re about to pass out.” Hayden said as he made suitable space to lay his head for the night on the floor in between his brothers’ beds.

“I will. In a minute. I hit the sun thing, now why does it keep going to 88 degrees?” Cherry asked herself.

“Geez! Take your damn jacket off! And please shower.” Harry said.

“I will!” Cherry shrieked.

“I’m calling the front desk to get this thermostat figured out, this is ridiculous!”

Cherry rang the front desk. The old native lady answered.

“Have you tried the sun key?” She croaked.

“Yeah, sun key. No, it does not work. Can you please come here and help us?” Cherry pleaded.

“Sir, I can either move you to the next room over or you can open a door and a window to cool the room down. I am not sure how to adjust the thermostat, myself. Can’t even read it with my glasses.” She added.

Cherry held the receiver of the phone to her chest and asked her brothers if they wanted to switch rooms. Harry refused to move until the next day. “I just drove seven hours, I’m not moving again for at least another 10 hours so open a door, please.” He said. Cherry returned the receiver to her mouth and asked “Is it safe to have the door open? I don’t feel comfortable.”

“Sir, I am here watching the cameras all night, it is after four am. This is a quiet residential neighborhood. You have nothing to worry about if you decide to leave the door open slightly tonight.” She said.

“Okay, I feel safe now that I know a mature lady like yourself is watching over us. Thanks for that, really. Seriously though, we want this fixed by tomorrow night or we will Yelp about it.”

Cherry opened the sliding glass door several inches and a ghostly fog poked its nose in the room. Cherry showered and collapsed into her bed. She looked down at Hayden lying on the floor for a guilty minute. Cherry put her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling.

She let her eyes wander over to the off-white popcorn ceiling and drift to their own current allowing shapes to become faces. She thought of the OxyContin she had stashed in the Omeprazole bottle dissolving somewhere in the Monterey sewage system.

“What are those boxes hanging from the ceiling?” Cherry asked.

“They look like projectors.” Hayden answered.

"I've never seen a projector in a hotel room before. There are little speakers in the corners of the room as well.

Maybe we have a home theatre package." added Harry.

Cherry noticed that there was a third remote on the nightstand that they had not used yet. She pressed the power button on the remote. The lights and television powered off while the projector turned on. Suddenly, in the middle of the room, a Hologram appeared. It was the likeness of Louis Armstrong with a trumpet in hand. The specter walked over to a chair near the sliding glass door and sat down slowly.

"Oh, it's a hologram!" Cherry said.

"These things are really becoming popular. The guy who does the one for Ronnie James Dio is a very close friend of mine. They made a hologram of Dio and they're taking him on tour right now making loads of cash!"

"What's his name?" Harry Asked.

"Ronnie James Dio, he replaced Ozzy in Black Sabbath." Cherry replied.

"No. The guy who you are very close friends with."

"Oh. It's Steve or Scott something. He's my unofficial manager's associate.

The hologram of Louis Armstrong put the phantom trumpet against his lips and began to play the melody from "It Don't Mean A Thing."

"This is incredible! What a great Idea for the Jazz Festival to include this in their hotel packages!" Hayden cheered from his sleeping bag on the floor.

"I don't remember anything about Holograms when I booked this room." Harry said.

"What good is melody, what good is music if it ain't possessin' something sweet?" the hologram asked.

"Nah it ain't the melody and it ain't the music There's something else that makes this tune complete." it continued.

Cherry thought it was bizarre that the hologram knew the chair was in the room and was able to sit down on it, the hologram even rested his trumpet against the wall behind him as he sang. "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing, boy."

The hologram came right up to Hayden who was lying on the floor and seemed to be singing to him. Cherry started to feel afraid of this strange thing that was happening in their hotel room. It was just too crazy.

"It makes no diif'rence if it's sweet or hot. Just give that rhythm Ev'rything you got. Oh, it don't mean a thing if it ain'tgot that swwwiinnnggg booooooyy."
"Doo Wah, Doo Wah, Zim zim Zug Zug Doo Wah Wah"

Cherry had seen enough. She grabbed the remote she had used to turn the projectors on and clicked the power button once more. The projector powered off and the speakers shut down but an animated Louis Armstrong remained in the room. He jumped on Cherry's bed and

blasted her in the face with a jaunty solo. The trumpeting menace jumped from Harry's' bed back to Cherry's spraying the tune at their faces.

“Bop-bah-da-bop. Bada-btw-bada-bop.”

Chapter Seven

Cherry had never been so sweaty in bed in her life. Her pillows were soaked through. Her t-shirt clung to her back as she tried to pull it off. It was morning time. She checked the ceiling for the projectors but it was completely bare and normal like any hotel room ceiling.

Her brothers were asleep still, the sun had just risen it seemed. The room was freezing cold so Cherry got out of bed to pull the sliding glass door shut. Her nipples were hard. As she shut and locked the door, she spotted the native-American front desk lady outside the door talking to what looked like an old crackhead woman with a gaunt face and the tiniest most unpleasant upturned nose you've ever seen.

The woman barely had any hair left on her head. Her sparse head of hair looked like baby duck feathers that had been plucked off, dyed pink and glued onto her scabby scalp.

She wore baggy dirt covered jeans that were studded with rhinestones and a digital camouflage army jacket. Her glued-on fingernails looked like spent shotgun shells.

At first, Cherry thought the old native lady was there to remove the woman from the property but as Cherry watched out the window, she could see they were having what seemed like a civilized conversation.

Both the homeless woman and the old lady who had checked them in kept pointing at the sliding glass door that Cherry was observing them through. Cherry made sure the front door was locked before climbing back into her icy, sweat covered bed.

The T.V in the sibling's room was left on the news channel from the previous night. The headline stated that the Dead Baby Killer had struck again, only this time it was in Monterey. Sometime in the early morning hours police found a dead Mulatto baby stapled to a dead chicken on the side of 17 Mile Drive Rd. Cherry had a powerful sense of Deja Vu after hearing about the latest killing.

She turned the T.V off and paused for a minute, staring long into the blackness of the screen; then she closed her eyes and tried to sleep again.

Cherry was nearing a lucid dream when she heard something that sounded like the front door to their room had just been open then shut again.

Cherry remembered that she not only locked the deadbolt on the door but had pulled the latch above the deadbolt shut that attaches to the door from the doorframe.

She might have ignored the sound but she felt a pain in her kidneys and an urgent need to urinate. She was eager to pee from her new vagina again.

Cherry made her way out of bed, stepped over Hayden on the floor and opened the door to the restroom. The old crackhead that she had just seen outside talking to the hotel clerk was standing in the hotel bathroom with her dirty leggings and jeans, balled up at her ankles.

The woman pounded her head against the wall while her old leathery ass faced Cherry. Cherry nearly vomited for the third time that morning when she noticed that the woman was dripping diarrhea all down the insides of her emaciated thighs, actually she did vomit.

The old woman turned around and started snorting and squealing like a wild animal.

Cherry darted back away from the intruder and picked up the phone to call the front desk for help.

She was too terrified to think clearly enough to alert her brothers of the situation.

The front desk answered Cherry's call. It was the same Native lady on the line.

"Please, please help. This is room 151. There is a crazy person covered in shit attacking us in our room!"

"You boys need to be more considera-" the lady replied as the line went dead.

"Wake up Hay. Guys. Hey. Whoa! Get up."

The brothers woke up to the awful scene.

Cherry felt a little better knowing that the crazy person in the room wasn't a hallucination, but would be more relieved to wake from the nightmare she was in.

The crackhead pulled up her jeans and dashed out the front door of their hotel room as soon as both brothers rose to their feet.

The woman was small and feeble but somehow the entire door was knocked off its hinges and fell to the ground after she darted off into the bosom of the thick fog.

Harry had no idea what the hell was happening. He said: "What the hell is going on?"

Hayden was at a complete loss as well. It was suggested that they all pack their things and find another hotel and call the police. The siblings agreed that they need to get a full refund for two nights and should report the Lighthouse Inn to the Business bureau.

For a second Cherry had forgotten about her newly grown breasts from the night before and her absent penis.

She slept in her baggy sweats that night to hide her figure. As she began to move quickly about to pack her things she felt the new sensation of breasts moving this way and that way on her chest. The cold morning air made her nipples hard again, it was almost pleasurable and nice anatomically, she thought. Usually cold air meant the unpleasant feeling of her scrotum shrinking and her testicles retreating to hide.

Their bags were quickly packed and almost immediately the three stepped out the open doorway where the door had collapsed.

Though it was dark the previous night the three of them remembered the paint on the buildings at the Lighthouse inn looking brand new, but now; as they reexamined the duplex in the day light, they could see that the paint was faded and chipped away. There were piles of infested and rotten wood stacked around the walls of the duplex and junk was strewn about its entire perimeter.

The sign from the night before that read "Pelican Building." Was rusty and hanging on to the termite infested building by its bottom right screw.

The pool area was still to their left as they headed toward the parking lot to find their car. They had parked in one of the spaces in front of the gated pool the night before. The car was missing. The slow rattling of the gate behind them beckoned them to turn and face the pool.

“Condemned” a sign read on the clubhouse door. It had been painted by what looked like a bloody palm of a hand.

The gate to the pool was rusted and swinging on galvanized hinges that hardly supported its weight and made a brutal screeching sound that seemed to wail.

Hairs stood on end where they could across Cherry's virtually hairless figure.

“Look at the pool!” Hayden pointed out.

The water was completely drained and nothing remained in it but old dead tree leaves. The drain in the deep end gurgled and made bile-colored bubbles that looked like the slime that a rotten brain becomes.

“I saw a gun in there last night above the fire place. You should grab it when you go inside, Harry, so we can protect ourselves” Cherry said.

“When I go in there? Why me? You go and get the gun if you think we need it.

I will stand watch.” Said Harry.

“Let’s all go in there, get the gun and let Hayden use it since he’s the soldier.”

Cherry turned around and saw Hayden standing near the edge of the pool.

There was a hand squeezing Hayden’s shoulder. Cherry figured Hayden was doing that thing where he squeezes his shoulder when he’s nervous. Cherry grabbed the hand to turn her brother around to get his attention but was startled to discover that the hand was cold and slimy and it belonged to the boy in the American flag swimming trunks from the night before. He was standing directly in front of Hayden but was hidden by Hayden’s figure while the dense morning fogswirled around him.

Instead of a face, the boy now had a squid for a head. The head had many flailing appendages dancing about and licking the air. The squid-face had attached to Hayden’s face and was sucking on it like a subterranean catfish on an algae covered wall.

The boy’s head was a dangling sack of grey molted skin and his skull hung from his neck and swung between his shoulders to the small of his back as he slowly moved towards the siblings in violent, glitchy spasms.

Hayden’s body started to shake, and his knees were buckling. Cherry pulled Hayden away from the monster. The tentacles detached violently and flailed in the air, hissing. The siblings began to run toward the lightly wooded area that shrouded the coast.

“Holy- Hayden!” Cherry cried.

Hayden was dripping green mucus from his eyes and ears and started to collapse on to the dead foliage below. Cherry carried Hayden to a nearby barn they came upon.

Cherry released Hayden to sit on a nearby log and she went and tugged on the double doors to the barn several times. She figured it was bolted shut from the inside. Just as she decided to give up, the doors flew open like a battering ram had hit it from inside. The double doors knocked Cherry to her back.

She lay on her back and witnessed a dreadful trumpeting flash mob marching over her towards his brothers.

Two jeeps circled around the flash mob. The drivers and the passengers standing in the backs of the jeeps were also headless with tentacles coming from out their sternums.

Louis Armstrong and ten other black and white holograms all began strafing out of the room with trumpets to their lips, playing the melody for "It Don't Mean A Thing."

"Get up! Damn, get up girl!" Harry yelled.

Cherry was more shocked by the fact that Harry knew that Goops was actually Cherry and that he was also, seemingly okay with it, than she was about the bizarre events unfolding at that moment. Had she been a woman longer than she remembered? Cherry tried to recall the last year but kept stalling after retracing just that very day before, leaving Los Angeles.

Cherry felt Harry scooping her from off the ground. Cherry had hit the back of her head against the ground hard enough to make her vision dark red and then bright like fireworks upon impact.

Her reddish-blond hair was instantly soaked with blood.

The gang of trumpeters surrounded them with the jeeps and continued playing their music. Some of them moved their hips to the song. The monsters began shedding their bodies like a dog tosses water from its fur.

While the monsters were busy molting, the siblings disappeared back to the main road, hiding from house to house.

"Guys slow down, I can hardly walk."

Hayden said.

Hayden began to make a gurgling noise deep in his throat and was snorting like the old woman who broke into their room. He was snorting so hard it sounded like he was trying to suck his brain out of the roof of his mouth.

Though Cherry was dizzy from her head injury she was strong enough to put Hayden's arm around her shoulder.

She kept begging Harry to help carry Hayden too but he refused. The sound of trumpets could be heard in the distance coming from the direction of the barn. They ran down a dirt road that - only just the night before, was paved asphalt.

Houses that they had seen on their way in the night before that had to have been worth millions of dollars, were now all falling apart and condemned with signs declaring their condemnation, all written in blood. All the houses looked the exact same.

The siblings came to a cobblestone bridge that had train tracks 15 feet below it. In the distance Cherry saw there was a train was rapidly approaching.

“Let’s jump on the train at the count of three.” Cherry said.

“That thing is going like 60 miles an hour. This is not a video game. We will be killed if we jump!” Harry argued.

Hayden continued to gurgle. His lips were black and purple and his eyes were like tattered white flags. The ooze in his eyes was now purple.

“We need to get Hayden to a doctor.
We have to Jump.” Said Cherry.

The jeep; full of trumpeting squid people leapt into view from the other side of the horizon, swerving right into Harry - tossing him like a bar towel across the bridge. The car flipped and two of the squid people passengers who had been standing in the vehicle appeared to be slain on the train tracks below, their trumpets lie bent and gnarled at their husks.

Cherry crawled feebly towards Harry for a moment. She wanted to help her brothers but alas, just then she had a seizure on the oil covered asphalt. She spewed neon foam from her mouth and swallowed her tongue whole.

She abandoned her quest to reach Harry and rolled over and was face to face with Hayden.

Cherry blacked out shortly after, but for a brief moment before she fell into nothingness; she recognized that Hayden, her dear brother, had died. His lifeless face - illuminated by the bright flashing red of an approaching ambulances red and blue cherries, was the last thing she remembers from that night.

Chapter Eight

Cherry had become more familiar with the fright of waking up in a random hospital than most people ever would.

There was a substantial amount of pain this time that coursed through her veins. She had never woken up to a room with concerned family members either. This time her father was there waiting and was literally pulling his hair out while he sat uncomfortably.

“Dad?” Cherry whined. “Where’s-”

His father pointed to the bed next to Cherry and burst into tears.

Harry lay there with a bloody gauze wrapping around his head. He had suffered a massive head injury after being hit by a Jeep and would continue his short life mentally retarded from that point on.

“There wasn’t enough room in the hospital to give your brother his own room, AWAY FROM YOU GRANT!” His father shrieked

“Dad, where’s Hayden?”

“YOU KILLED HIM!” his father released a sweaty clump of his own hair onto the floor as he pointed a damning and shaking finger at Cherry.

“Last year when you forgot to pick him up from the airport for his bachelor party, he never made it to his return flight home.”

Cherry felt her mind go black as she tried to remember anything beyond the past few days, and even that was blurry. Her memory was pretty much the night before and her childhood at that point.

“WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR EXCUSE FOR BEING BRAIN DEAD, HUH? What did you do to your brain, son? Don’t you remember anything?”

Cherry tried to answer but did that thing where you cough involuntarily instead of speaking because your eyes are borrowing the moisture from your throat so you can cry.

“He was found in a motel on La Cienega called “Jerrys Gardens.” They found my little boy hanging from his belt in the closet. I’m sure you were too busy getting your goddamn sex change to pick him up from the airport like you promised you would, all those drugs you’ve done seem to actually succeeded in burying the past... Your mother leaving me after Hayden died is also your fault by the way - I know that’s something you’ve forgotten too. I am here today to see MY SON, MY ONLY SON! HARRY ZITI. Cherry Blithe...WHO THE FUCK IS THAT?”

After a few days passed, Cherry’s father finally came around from the other side of the white curtains that shrouded poor retarded Harry and spoke.

“As soon as you can walk, here is a bus ticket to Los Angeles.”

Cherry’s father, with tears in his eyes packed a lunch in a lunchbox and gave it to Cherry along with a bus ticket to LA.

“The Doctor said you had the DTs. DeleeeereeeummTremenss, I think is what it means. Alcohol withdrawals nearly killed you. You were running amuck through Monterey screaming about squids and Hayden. According to the police report, Harry tried to contain you but you leapt into traffic, the car swerved and clipped Harry good.”

Cherry became aware of the heaviness on her chest again and remembered the discovery of breasts back at the hotel.

“Why did Harry come to get me from Hollywood if there was no Bachelor party or road trip planned?”

“Your brother planned a second road trip because he cares so much about you.

He told you a lie because you still thought Hayden was alive and that you all were heading to Monterey but he actually took you back to Anaheim. You completely lost it and thought you were actually in Monterey.

Harry came to get you after he heard you had been hospitalized again for speed abuse and he also heard about your memory problem. He must have not had the heart to explain to you AGAIN how Hayden killed himself, and I guess he just let you believe in your fantasies and deranged reality the whole trip up. He didn’t care at all that you became a woman. Sometimes I swear he’s not his mother’s child.”

“Daaad, iii- dat you?” Harry murmured.

“Harry, my boy! Daddy’s here. Daddy’s here son.” His father squeezed Harry’s hand so tight that Harry wanted to say ouch but alas couldn’t remember what sound to make with his mouth that meant he was in pain.

Harry tried to speak to Cherry but his words were inaudible. Harry attempted to smile at his sister but his jaw was locked in a crooked position and his upper lip was stuck in an unfortunate angle that made articulating the few words that he remembered very difficult. He would have said he loved her.

Cherry was in such shock from the emotional pain of what she had just endured that the magnitude of the hurt did not completely set in and never actually had a chance to be reflected upon thereafter. It was like an atmosphere of burning numbness orbited around her from then on.

Another night passed and Cherry was declared fit to leave. The main cause of her episode was that she was suffering from delirium tremens, like her father said. It was the worst case of alcohol withdrawal that hospital had seen.

Her father all but tossed Cherry out the door. He wanted her gone before her mother made it to see her only living son almost brain-dead.

Chapter Nine

A man with a scraggly black beard that was white at the roots whose name was Arkansas, sat next to Cherry on the way back to LA on the Megabus. He was very complimentary to Cherry and for some reason, she felt the compliments were genuine and not sex-driven though he spoke a lot about whores and pimps.

He had that gangly hardtack body of old gold-miner-settler. Arkansas explained his whole life story to Cherry. He revealed that though he looked white, he was actually black - albino and half white and half black to be exact. He lifted the bill of his black ball cap that read “Satans Spawn” and revealed his pigment-less blue eyes. They scanned to and fro rapidly as if he were a blind man. When reading, he had to hold whatever he was trying to read up to his forehead in order to see it. Observing an albino black man was like witnessing lightning striking at midnight and suddenly it is daytime for a moment, Cherry considered.

Apparently, Arkansas was left at a doorstep of an orphanage as an infant. The twist on this classic tale of the orphan at the doorstep was that Arkansas had a fresh tattoo across his chest that read

“There is no such thing as wasted aggression.”

The two bonded over both being orphaned. At nearly three quarters of the way to Los Angeles Arkansas handed a manuscript to Cherry.

“What is thi- How did you knn...” Cherry trailed off as she poured through the manuscript.

“The book is yours, send the manuscript to this address in New York and address it to Joshuah Doll of Pelican House. He will publish your book and it will become a bestseller overnight!”

Arkansas rose to stretch his long hard legs. He paused, turned to Cherry and stared at her with a smile for a second. He put his pointed cowboy boots back on and pulled his jeans over them. He made it onto the isle of the bus and with a big smile like a Golden Retriever waiting for a frisbee said,

“Hey. You look good. No, I mean it. You look, I don’t know. You just look good. If anyone says otherwise, I’ll kill’em.”

At the last food stop before LA. Arkansas did not return with the group. They were about sixty miles from LA. Cherry returned with the others to the bus. She saw Arkansas driving off southbound on a Harley Chopper, he had one arm hanging at the side like he was waiting for someone behind him to high-five him down-low. The patch on his leather jacket read “Bastards Of Color”. Cherry thought it was odd that Arkansas was even be on the bus at all if he had a nice bike to ride the whole time. He said that he would kill anyone who messed with her, did that mean she would see him again? They hadn’t exchanged numbers or anything.

Arkansas was true to his word and Cherry came back to LA not as the failure she felt she was; but as a starlet and trans role-model. She was doing interviews with major publications and appeared on several talk shows about her critically acclaimed novel “Jungle Jim”. There was to be a Hollywood film adaptation of the novel and Cherry was finally relieved of the suffering of poverty.

The time in the limelight would be short-live, much like her eventually brief lifespan.

At Runyon Canyon Cherry ran into Arkansas dressed in all black kevlar. He was training two young men who were both wearing green army fatigues. Arkansas screamed at his prospects calling them faggots and suggesting that they join the other faggots who had assembled at the park that day to learn how to walk dogs for a living and declared he’d have better respected the pair if they whored their asses out, more than he would respect either of them if they chose to walk dogs for a living.

Arkansas ran over and very sweetly nudged Cherry on the shoulder and said “You look good baby. Don’t worry about those fags, and I say fags in a way of demeaning them, I’m not homophobic, I’ll be the first one to put a big cock in my ass. Did I say that. oooWoopsies!”

“Just a few more nights until the Pulitzer Prize ceremony. My dad and I have been following your success. How do you feel champ?” Arkansas again gently nudged Cherry’s bicep.

“Wait, I thought you were an orphan, Arkansas?” Cherry said.

“Well I was, but my daddy came and found me a decade ago, or I should say, I found him. He told me that he abandoned me, tattooed and all to make me hard and well, he was trying to make me evil.”

“Why would he try to do that?” Cherry asked quite late. Talking to Cherry, one would experience the same delay that a news anchor on Pacific Standard Time experiences when talking to a field reporter in China.

“Well, you see. He was trying to make an Anti-Christ out of me. Didn’t work, I’m just too damned good. I mean I kill; I will kill, I have killed. I’m just not evil enough, not confused enough. I’m more Christ-like, heck I’m almost enlightened, ask anyone of these faggots down there in push up position...STAY UP FAGGOT.... They’ll tell you how spiritual I am. YOU though Cherry. You are pure evil. You sold your soul when you were young to become famous. That

was my daddy knocking on your door and he's knocking at your door again now. I'll explain more on the plane. Do you prefer the window seat or isle seat baby girl"?

The flight to New York to accept her Pulitzer Prize was brutal for Cherry. She was terrified of flying and Arkansas sat next to her the whole trip. His cologne and stale breath made her sick. He always had a blueish white circle around his dead lips and he hadn't dyed his bristly black beard in too long for it was laden at the roots with a frosty white glaze. She remembered the first time she downloaded Microsoft Word and typed her first story. She thought of the long road to get to the podium that stood in front of her at Columbia University to accept her Pulitzer Prize for her novel "Jungle Jim," that she didn't write... She thought.

As if Arkansas could read Cherry's mind, he said "Actually baby girl, you did write that book. Hell you used to be as good and as drunk as Bekowski. Something you didn't do however was get that sex change. See I've...pops and I, well, we've been with you most of your life but you just weren't quite as messed up and confused as a bonafide Anti-Christ should be. So we uh, we persuaded you to come to Thailand and get a little nip and a tuck."

"I've never been to Thailand." Cherry whispered, choking on her own breath.

"Haha. Atta girl. We told you to forget and we'll, I supposed we made you forget but, hell, you've been a perfect pawn in daddy's game."

Chapter Ten

There was an uneasiness that began to creep over her. It was like the feeling you get when you're naked and you are trying to operate an unfamiliar shower in a stranger's house. The sickness she felt from her bizarre benefactor, Arkansas, shadowing her all the way to New York grew worse when she realized that Arkansas was mysteriously absent all day. Why this thought dawned on her just then with the dark blue mass of the audiences before her, she couldn't say. She couldn't say anything in fact. Cherry tried to speak but she began gagging. The air around her was foul. There was a shelf in the podium she was supposed to give her acceptance speech at. On that shelf, near Cherry's shins, there was a box that looked like a birthday present. There was a card on it that read

"Open and display contents."

Cherry opened the box and started to cry.

The audience grew uneasy and whispers ignited across the hall.

Cherry held the dead baby up for all to see. It was dressed like a clown.

A small note folded on lined paper read:

Q: What's funnier than a dead baby

A: A Dead baby in a clown suit

Cherry began sobbing and thanked everyone for coming.

"I want to thank my brother Harry. Hayden, I miss you so much. I'd like to thank God." s.

She continued.

People screamed and clamored out of the building. The police tackled Cherry and detained the Dead Baby Killer once and for all.

Chapter Eleven

“So there it is, Agent Franklin. That’s the story of how I went from Hollywood Charlatan, Goops Goombadi, to Cherry Blithe; the Antichrist before your eyes. Any questions?”

“So the part in the story where your brother Harry calls you and tells you about Hayden’s bachelor party and then a couple of sentences later you’re on the phone with him again and he’s heading to meet you at the waterfall, you didn’t say it in the story but a substantial amount of time must have passed between those two conversations for you to have become a woman.”

“I told the story as I remember it happening. In my memory, it was just a blink of an eye. I really remember Hayden being there at the Waterfall and sitting shotgun on the way up to Monterey even though apparently we went to Anaheim. When Harry called to meet, I had no idea a year had passed and thought I had drunk away Haydens suicide from my memory. I still see Hayden sometimes and I talk to him.”

“So if you’re the Antichrist, why haven’t you ended the world yet?”

“Because the newly implemented death penalty here in the great state of California has so much red tape around it that it’s taking a while to execute the sentence. Plus according to the letter I received, were still waiting for a great blinding light from the deepest jungle on earth. Shortly after this signal, the world will end.”

“Well, I got to say Cherry. This would make a pretty good book after all.”

“It’s alright. Though it pales in comparison to the prophecy of “Jungle Jim.”

Chapter Twelve

"I'm gonna hang you on my wall Jim!"

The chase began.

I don't know now whether I knew that I was running towards "the hole."

I seem to remember an unfamiliarity in the blur of the sapphire grasses that grew taller than my head, that I indeed passed through and by for more than a lifetime, my senses did not seem to have any memory of the touch of the melting red mud that made up the earth, A hot feeling that my bare-feet knew so well, nor did I observe the myriad of animals and dinosaurs that I was galloping over and near. The last time I remember that sort of independence from the ramblings of my mind were the early days after the crash, or maybe it was the night of the last time Shooshi and Takumat got me drunk? Many things are hard to remember now; I think I've hurt my brain. I do remember when I arrived at "the hole" just then in the heat of the chase; standing in front of it and the sight of it striking me back to reality like the sight of an old enemy, or potential lover, I remember that I heard the marching of feet come to a halt and the voice of God yelling

"There he is!"

Chapter Thirteen

Hell on My Mind

“I see all this nonsense. These vulgar traits you all possess will kill us all.”

It seems my English teachers throughout my life spent too much time showing me what doesn't work when writing: bad prose, sentence structure, and, most importantly, what not to say and how to not say it. I sit here at the end of time trying to remember what is correct but seem to have what is wrong permanently ingrained in my subconscious. The only thing that pops into my mind is what not to do, so I do what I think is the opposite, and it looks even worse. The religion that may start after finding this book can be a full up with bunch of illiterate morons, I really don't care. I would kill for a thesaurus.

I used to wonder why I was doomed with the hapless ability to see through all of what seemed to be the deliberate nonsense of a decaying world around me if I had not been somewhat important in the grand scheme of things, for the most part, I had decided that I wasn't very important but still went about things like I was. I felt that my keen sense of all that was wrong and unjust in that world was just a cruel joke on poor old me, a joke that became ever crueler the more I came to believe that it came from nothing and nobody at all.

“One foot in front of the next, my man.” Or “You know there are drugs for that?” Sometimes “I don't believe in politics.” Why did I try to talk to these people? A paranoid “fringe,” some said. I didn't disagree with them. I admit I've been caught reading the labels on food.

Conditions were horrible for most people in those days.

I had it good.

My nation had it good.

Although the middle class I belonged to was inches from annihilation, our greedy overgrown tribe was still basking in the warmth of the final rays to arrive on this confused blue rock from a star long destroyed, so to speak. That's not how it happened though; that's ridiculous.

Our once-proud nation was stretching too far, claiming to protect us from an enemy that was only growing with (as far as I could see) each inch we lengthened our greedy reach. Profit and progress had come at an easy price to pay if you could stomach (or ignore, as most did) the looting, the pillaging, the plundering, the using, the stealing, the usurping, the censoring and controlling of art, the torturing of citizens, the starving of children that died of dysentery by the thousands due to bad policies, and the brutally obvious lies that would slither from out the mouths of our republic's reptilian, “democratically elected,” megalomaniac political royalty that were only made real to the common man on paper-thin televisions that haunted almost every room in almost every civilized household. (It was ancient tradition to have a blinking box in any room your family had to meet for dinner, and it was considered good luck at the time to hang one near where you shit.)

To briefly describe the problems of the “old world,” one could say that it all stemmed from man's stupidity and vanity. I would have to agree but will not further elaborate, for I believe

history has only repeated itself because we have had history to remember and to read about. Now there is no one to remember and nothing to read about (except me and my book). history cannot repeat. I will not doom an already-doomed future to repeat a doomed history. hence, I will do whatever is left of the future a favor and make this the story of my own personal stupidity and vanity.

Most of what I had seen in my life in the “old world” seemed to be the magic of destiny, that every single thing in my life turned out nothing like what I thought it would, ever. It had to be magic. I felt oppressed and under-appreciated, though I was, and still am, infinitely ignorant to the bulk of what had been going on.

I had never trusted “the system” in my life or people to be forces of good, and not without valid logic. When I was sixteen, after years of refusing the prescription crack that my teachers, doctors, and mother were all in cahoots in trying to break my “learning disabled” mind into docility with, I abandoned my education to work.

For whatever reason, I had always thought that the god thing was just brainwash; religion was debunked completely for me at a tender young age in one experience alone. I was lucky to be born into a secular family and was never forced to attend church. But one day, Mom, Dad, and I ended up in one. I was disturbed to see how deviant that crowd of zealots seemed from what my recollection of normal was. My parents and I were all sitting on a bench with the rest of the people during mass while the preacher kept talking about “the truth.” Over and over again, he praised God and all of our souls for giving us “the truth.” I tugged on my dad’s sleeve and told him I had to go to the bathroom. As we entered the bathroom, I asked my dad a question.

“Dad, what is ‘the truth’”? I asked.

My father kneeled down onto one knee so that we were eye to eye and put his arm on my shoulder. Dad always spoke to me like I was an adult even as a small child. With a nurturing smile, my father said, “Son, ‘the truth’ is your mother is probably cheating on me again”.

I had become something of a preacher of doom at the grocery store.

My coworkers, the backroom vendors, and the careless grazing customers all alike grew weary of the amount of effort it took from their daily routines to listen to or to pretend to hear me. Though many agreed with the pending end, I desperately tried to illustrate, most settled with being entertained by someone who still gave a shit about things.

I did most of my unheeded ranting during my shifts as the backroom manager of the grocery store.

Every fucked truckload of genetically modified crap that my prehistoric DSD receiving wand scanned in through the roll-up gates came paired with an apathetic soul to deliver the garbage.

It took very little to provoke a spillage of frantic prophecies about the ending of our shallow and tiresome world from my unyielding mouth. I would rant about a world that most took for granted, especially myself.

Some people were moderately receptive and agreed that things were bad and getting worse, but most people I spoke to were unable to even attempt to fake having an interest in world affairs beyond things like which football team had traded which priceless athlete for how many millions of dollars a year, or the live globally broadcasted marriage of these athletes and pseudo-celebrities whose fame for just being famous proved alchemy to be a real science.

Media events such as this would give everyone in the whole family something to talk about, though famous people dying were still the all-time family favorite. It was a sad truth to realize how little room most of humanity had left in their minds for any extra confusion. I could not force-feed them, though I tried.

And the sick obsession with Cherry fuckin Blythe – The Dead Baby Killer. Ugh. You couldn't pay me my weight in diamonds to read the book and thank god the film and novel have been banned globally.

I don't know why I cared so much about the amount of people that were privy to but useless against the coming collapse of everything from the people's and lesser animal's shared ecosystem to the unraveling of man's fiat global economy, all the way to the end of humanity altogether. Also, I cared too much about the fact that there were those who could also see through the smoke screen flatulence that our controlled mass media freely produced like a by-product of devoured minds but would, rather than blistering against all odds, accept it all as the standard quo.

Why did it matter to me that people were unwilling and unable to change their ways or the ways of their world? I don't know, but I can say with confidence now that I truly do not give a shit about any of that anymore.

Should I have learned how to appreciate and to listen to those who were truly blind to everything from the inner workings of the global political structure of the world, to the inner workings of a sandwich, and to accept them?

Should I have learned to find pleasure in being baffled by the obtuse assumptions of others? Could I have learned how to bask in blinding ignorance instead of being overwhelmed or irritated by it? Of course I can see that I should and could have done these things. Now that I have fucked it all up, it is very easy to see my mistakes.

"Should" is the word in my head these days. I should have (I found a thesaurus!) at least tried to steal a corner of the collective infantile blanket of fatuity that moored the human race instead of cursing others for being swathed their whole lives in it.

"You'll kill us all," I thought in the silence of distaste.

Chapter Thirteen

Big Picture

“it’s your home that you love.”

I was not a joyless sack of shit either. It was because of my amorous sense of beauty that I was disquiet about all of the ugliness I saw and felt. Though there weren’t very many things in my life that promoted happiness or mental stability, I somehow managed to stagger through the wreckage, sometimes even with a grin.

One major drag in my life was my girlfriend, who I was financially committed to. It had been decided by us both that in order to save our asphyxiating relationship from suffocating, we should move in together. Stupidly, I agreed to enter the legally binding contract even though I had come to resent everything about Baby and what we called love. She wanted me there for her in all the ways one can be there for another that are not physical, but still, I was checked out entirely and dreaming of something better than Baby and could only offer her clinical robotic sex once in a blue moon. I began to cheat on her with equally-as-arid individuals after weekly half trying to end it a million times. Baby and I both thought and took turns trying to convince one another to think that living together would help me to love Baby the way we both felt that I should.

Baby and I would argue habitually as a part of our daily circuit. I grew to be cold and cynical and would cringe at the sound of her voice and would hide away in my mess of a room all of the times that she would come at me with all of the things that I apparently thought and said. Baby was unhappy too, and the both of us had obviously been lying to ourselves every step of the charade. Baby would say to me that we have to focus on the “big picture.” This became a slogan for Baby, but I knew the truth. She didn’t love me; she loved the apartment we shared that neither of us could keep up on and the human companionship my presence may have reminded her.

The apartment was perfectly square, all white with a beige carpet.

In the corner near the sliding glass door at the base of the blinking box that I wouldn’t allow us to watch was a filthy always jam-packed with shit litter box that spewed toxic fumes of ammonia from the mismanaged urine absorbed litter it stored.

The cats had become a major point of contention; I was terribly allergic and despised the creatures. Still, though, the dust of our showdowns seldom ever settled before the next almost-identical one would take place, Baby was willing to go all the way with me for the false security we had created together.

Though I promised her in the beginning a beautiful adventure, and we were surely on that road together, deep in our shared journey, the day soon would come for me to tell her to go and for me to continue alone like I promised Baby I never would be again. Until that day, Baby and I would fight over even the simplest moments of false communication.

I made it a point to busy myself with anything but spending time with Baby.

Baby and I weren’t always cruel and unhappy toward each other. When first we met, our lesser version of love was good enough for the both of us.

I had a hugely intense passion in my heart for someone to love me unconditionally; it was a sort of holy Grail quest, like finding God.

“One day, someone” I thought, “or anyone who is attractive enough and wants to smother me in love—which Baby was and did, though it always seemed selfish. Maybe love is just being insanely selfish?—will find me and never let me go.”

It’s endearing to think of how naive I was when I first started this gloriously miserable game; my idea of love and happiness was cartoonish.

I faced criticism from my friends for how I approached entering a relationship with Baby.

I admit it was in a shameless fashion. Baby and I were roommates for a year before we dated. She was dating my roommate. I was his boss at the grocery store on the night crew for years.

My subordinate roommate cheated on Baby and bragged to me about it. Baby found out and went to me for council and guidance.

I fucked Baby after I told her everything she wanted to hear.

Baby was very attractive, but had always been ineffectual toward me and in all honesty annoyed the hell out of me whenever I wasn’t blinded by the prospect of the incredible sex we could and did have with one another initially.

Oh! Also... Keegan, my subordinate who I ganked Baby from.... Well he immediately turned to meth and I just learned last week that he swallowed some lead.

What Baby and I had...

It could have been love, right?

It had a tad more validity and sustenance than what most people at the time settled for and called love, even after the sex began to suck.

My want to play music for the world formed into a three-piece band that I had become incredibly proud of and focused on.

I would spend endless amounts of time on writing as a sort of therapy and had the pipe-dream that my music would give me the edge I needed to climb my way out of the mediocrity of the working class into a specialized life for special people (they told me I was special in school, so it must be a fact).

Music was my greatest escape.

The band was sort of known around the city but not very popular (no music or art is very popular during a fascist dictatorship; art and expression are novelties that free people sometimes must sacrifice for protection).

Some people really liked my music, but for most it was too off the wall and thought oriented.

I poured my heart into words that would bounce right off most people’s thick heads unnoticed.

It is true that there were some who really enjoyed it, and we had a few obligatory fans, but they all mostly bothered me.

Baby was there at every show, front and center, cheering me on. Or maybe she had been cheering him on? Either way, it also began to annoy me.

My mother and Baby had both discovered that I had started to develop plans to leave town forever and randomly travel with my band to wherever music would allow me to go.

The inseparable pair hatched plans of their own to try to discourage my dream.

I was bombarded simultaneously with accusations that I was throwing away the life my mother had given me, the life that Baby insisted on completing. Both women cried in each other's arms and declared that counseling was the only answer for all three of us.

One day, I came up with a riff on my guitar that had to be a love song, there was no question. It was absolute serenity. (This is a story of my vanity and stupidity remember? I get to say stuff like that.) It needed the truest words that could be written to do the melody justice.

Yeah, Baby overheard the tune when I was trying to find the words it deserved.

She told me how much she adored what she had heard and that she wanted me to do the riff a disgraceful disservice by making it about Baby.

I had no words of adoration for our dependency addiction we claimed to be love. Stupidly, I made several attempts to graft a misshapen face to the newly discovered beautiful body of music.

It was degrading and I began to lose interest in the project.

Chapter Fourteen

Her

“I will disappear.”

Inspiration had come at last.

There was only one creature in existence at the time I felt the passion that had eluded me at home with Baby that I needed to feel to find the right words to make the song work as it should. The passion was not found at home but at work, and it originated from the undeclared love I felt for Her.

Immediately after I made my decision to enter a state of bondage with Baby several years prior and promised to Baby the undying love that I had vindicated would someday appear in our cut-and-paste “romance,” I met the girl, a girl that I could not force myself to even look away from at times.

I could not silence the thoughts of her that still haunts most of my waking life and all of my dreams.

It was almost enough to never be able to have her and to painfully long for her touch.

Just to see her for the few moments I was gifted a week was both the greatest joy and sorrow I have ever known.

Nothing and no one in the old world but her could have filled me with the devotion I needed to fight for and to survive another week of being utterly alone, alone at home with Baby, alone at home by myself, and especially alone when surrounded by people.

Tragically, we all three worked at the same place. I enjoyed having the same shifts as her; Baby worked early, and we worked the Closing shift.

Baby began to resent us both. She had a feeling, and I was incredibly obvious.

The domestic fighting had become more frequent than ever.

I can’t even remember now what we were fighting over this particular time.

It doesn’t matter anyways, it never mattered.

I was sure that the unnecessary clash was going to escalate into either Baby or I packing up and leaving; at least that’s what I was hoping for.

Why did I not have the constitution to just walk away and find something better or nothing at all? I don’t know,

but I made it a point to never get stuck in anything I did ever again (though I did get stuck in some mud afterward).

I was high enough on the drugs that Baby stole from her infinitely wealthy doctor-lawyer parents to finally speak up and tell Baby that I wanted out (which was nothing new).

Baby didn’t start crying when I announced that I am in love with her; she had suspected as much and was already used to ignoring the fact.

It was when I went on to tell Baby that I found the words to finish the song and that it was about her and not Baby.

It might have been the fading presence of the opiates in my bloodstream at that point in time that inspired a heavy gravity of pity in my heart for Baby and regret for what I had said during the ordeal, but relief had outweighed the guilt, and I felt I could sing for joy for freeing myself of what had been the bane of my life, "At whatever cost," I told myself time and time again, even if I did hurt Baby. It was time to let her go. I finally cracked the egg.

Baby was sitting at the desk in her plush cheetah print chair; the same chair I had spent the entire summer sitting in, wearing Baby's far too short silk zebra striped robe, staring at the floor without ever looking up to see if she had left me yet.

I smiled and tried to convince Baby that it was a good thing, us separating, but I watched each of my carefully chosen words of reassurance morph into direct ways of saying "I have never loved you." And "You bore me."

What must have been the worst part of all for Baby was seeing me smile and look excited for the future.

Baby was absolutely devastated, and I was unaffected.

Baby demanded to read the words to the song.

I would not have allowed it but I had carelessly stored all of my work on Baby's computer and had used it as my work station.

Baby was clever with her espionage and told me what was probably a half-truth at best, though it was a bluff I didn't call.

Baby told me that when I thought she had been sleeping, she had left an eye open occasionally and over time had memorized the patterns of files within files that my far too revealing works were buried within.

Baby almost convinced me that she knew where the words were when she started anxiously clicking around on the desktop and searched every icon.

My gut twisted with the guilt of what I had put her through. I grabbed the mouse gently (I really shouldn't explain computers to you either, they are dangerous), opened ten or so files that led to more files, and showed Baby "Her."

It's late

The work is done You're up front

Now I'm right here

Your eyes

Meet mine at once

It's not enough

Nowhere near

Let's make the best of this

Boring closing shift

There's no one else

Around

We touch

You're drawing near

I'm all built up

With desire and fear

You blush

If it's all too much

If you won't budge

I will disappear

Let's make the best of this

Boring closing shift

There's no one else Around

I'm done

Pretending I

Don't want your love

I've given that up

A kiss

Will not suffice

I want inside

Let's pass the time

And we'll make the best of this

Boring closing shift

There's no one else Around

Chapter Fifteen

Doing Time

"I can feel the world as it splits in two."

The tears that I feel swelling in my bleak and failing eye spare me for a moment from the agony of beholding the harsh reality that is the tremulous stone walls that surround me now, these tears that skew and twirl the dreaded sight of this esoteric mausoleum, which hosts but me and a silent audience of canned companions and arranged bottled soul mates.

These tears tell me as I lay in a desolate ball on the quivering granite floor between a failed and a failing world that I did love Her.

I am also forced to realize now, as I feebly struggle to smoke the day's first cigarette and fuddle my waking spirits, just how dearly I loved my caretakers; my two humble, wise, and beautiful companions whom I owe everything to.

I destroyed them.

I destroyed the gift they gave me.

I'm so sorry, Shooshi.

I'm sorry, Takumat.

I'm sorry....

And my poor sweet Billy too.

Unlike God, I am sorry.

Chapter Sixteen

Stay Tuned

“Sit in your favorite chair. Watch the world from there.”

My drummer owned a bar, I met him around the time I first met Baby.

My drummer and I formed our band in the basement of the bar when it first opened, and later we would discover the right guitarist for the group. The bar was an old 1912 Victorian era, single-story house.

The house had a keen red picket fence that encased some bright red bench seating that sat near the base of some cracked stone steps and led to the porch where the overhanging roof was supported by several red and black pillars.

Whatever wasn't painted red on the exterior of the building was black.

The cabin-like inside of the establishment had a bearskin rug that lay over hardwood floors that never shined.

As I would walk in (every day), the first thing to catch my eye was always the vibrant green limestone riverbed bar top.

When I lived in the bar during that winter, I would, at night, after the last drunk had been sent homeward, sit on one of the purple velvet benches and write on a black hexagonal table that sat in view of the fake gas-light fireplace that served no purpose and was a purely cosmetic device that stored a cheap display of silicone logs and was complete with a wimpy blue-green flame that generated no heat.

Behind the bar were the stairs to the basement that housed all of our musical instruments and equipment and was also where the band would practice and sleep whenever we were hard up for a place to live (which was very often, like that winter).

At the top of the stairs that led to the basement, there was the back room where unspeakable debauchery had been committed by myself and the other lowlifes who would congregate there.

Sometimes, massive orgies took place in the back room.

I was never proud of my promiscuous behavior or spontaneous sex life, but I continued to make myself unhappy.

The front room that I had performed in so many times over the years was cozy but not cramped; it was an intimate space to play in for the small fan base the band had developed over time, and almost everyone looked pretty in the bar on account of the soft orange lighting that complimented the mango hue that the cabin walls had recently been painted, though there was no helping some people look good.

I spent most of my free time at the bar either playing music or playing games like “Let's Revolt” and “Take Over Public Property in the Name of Democracy.”

I had become inspired by a happening, a world movement against all of the corruption (specifically regarding our bought and sold politicians and their relations to infinitely greedy corporations) that I until recently thought I had been alone in seeing.

I connected with my local sect of the movement to try to get involved immediately after I heard it had begun.

After a while, the movement agreed to meet at the bar to discuss the revolution every Tuesday night.

It was exciting to speak of revolution in a pub, just like our founding fathers.

We would wear little sashes in solidarity that I was against entirely.

For whatever reason, I was born never wanting to fit in. (School made it a point to show me that I didn't fit at all; it's just what I've learned.)

I always wanted to do things differently.

I tried to think differently and to live on my own accord.

"I can wear that," I thought.

"Just this once, for solidarity."

We would eat pretzels, drink, speak, and write clever letters that we would blast the city council with. One letter I was sure would rattle their cages read

It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that all of what the heroes of our country have fought for over the last couple of centuries, the liberties, the rights, and dignities, are being perverted behind the backs of a duped and pacified public that has fallen asleep at the wheel of democracy. Though in our slumber, some of mankind was awake, however and working very hard to cut out a funny sort of "democracy" that works better for them, of course this was man's ugly fictitious brother, "the corporation" but still a part of mankind nonetheless as we have learned from the supreme courts outrageous ruling just over two years ago today, that they are humans like you and I, and that their money is equal to the same freedoms of speech I'm told I still have.

I am writing to tell you the people that we have elected to uphold the law of the land that I believe that man's ugly brother will succeed in manipulating our government into an oligarchy that they control.

Now it seems that some of man is waking up, and he may be inclined to ask, as he wipes the sand from his eyes, the people who have been in charge in his stead such questions as: If the initial messy revolution that started this

country, the civil war, and the civil rights movements, all occurred to ward off disgraces to freedom such as the concept of corporations being people and their money being equal to free speech, then when such noble movements and wars achieve only temporary results for their cause that are later perverted by greed and manipulation and are allowed to decay into a picture perfect display of what these brave men and women fought against by our elected officials incompetence, then is it not safe to say that the ones who allow this decay to happen are guilty of all of what was lost in those fights for freedom that are now seemingly in vain?

Man might ask: how many people in the civil war knowingly fought for corporate rights? And he might learn that none of them did, and he might also learn that they fought for the rights of man long before his slumber.

Man might also ask: How many of our nation's heroes fought and died for corporate rights? He may regrettably be informed that because of bureaucratic loopholes, all of our heroes did.

As a man now waking up to what I myself have squandered in my apathy I am asking you, my elected officials, to do your duty as moral people, to uphold and protect what so many have given so much for and to at least recognize in your hearts that it was not for this.

The mayor was nice enough to respond with his own letter that read:

Get a Job.
-The Mayor

I along with a few of my brothers would give speeches on the stone steps of universities' colossal robotic library during rallies that our group arranged. Again, I was sure my words might have some sort of impact, and again I was disappointed. I spent a few days forming a speech I gave at one of the rallies and named it When we were free.

Is there nothing I could say that may help lift the veil of apathy That has inched like molasses to shroud the eyes of we the people? Is there anything that you or I could say or do to combat the unlimited amount of capital and effort spent on the misinformation that clouds and devalues Our once free, now closing minds?

Could there be one single momentous act that might remind the once hardworking muscles of our great nation that may have had a fighting chance at shouldering the burden of a free world, of their former seemingly boundless strengths?

Can there be an event, a place, a happening, a saint, dictator or demagogue, antagonist or protagonist that may, by some blessing of God or the unknown, electrify and exhilarate the now-stilling heart of our once-great country?

Brothers and Sisters...

If you look in your heart to answer these questions as I am imploring you to do and you find the answer to be "no" then the answer is absolutely "no"; and If you look in your heart and you find The answer to be "yes", then, my friends, you are in-fact bat-shit crazy
And a terrorist and should probably endure some amount of torture

Who knows?

It may be the only thing that reminds you that you are alive as you waste away in darkness during your possible; soon to be very probable permanent detention that you serve for squandering your freedoms as they all, one by one casually wave to you good-bye.

What do I think you ask?

Or would have asked if society taught us to ask questions Instead of foolishly accepting life and its kindred, waiting-to-be-discovered beauty at face-value.

You might have asked if we were not taught to bigot and ostracize ourselves from or to simply ignore those who do ask questions.

I say that I think “no”.

Though I would rather die than ever add to the ugliness of this world.

I am challenged by the path of my every-day being paved in monotony and pseudo-slavery.

Myself and others are forced into adopting one in a handful of predetermined, patented lives we are so privileged to lead, while the blood of our nations’ crimes drips passively from our idle hands.

We are forced to huddled into a dull gray mass as we wander through the decayed ruins of a world that almost worked.

A world that hosts statues of men and women who gave everything to possibly, by some fools hope, set the stage for a fair and better world for their children and strangers alike.

The many few of us who dare to seek becoming their very own hue in that mass of colorless mediocrity are shunned, ignored, silenced, and some of the most paramount examples;

Murdered.

Our logic, greed, apathy and complacency will be the death of us if we are not steadfast and bold we must do something now.

This land and her people have become the obligatory frog in the boiling pot of water and are now at a rolling boil.

Why does the logic of changing the trajectory of a doomed flight to folly fail on such a world of such logical minds?

Minds that now forsake emotion for logic.

Then let us use this logic that encumbers us; fouling our movements and souring our hearts, as a brilliant gift that has been endowed upon us by whatever whim it was that gave us such life and the means to perceive it.

Let us now, before it is too late, embrace the logic to make both sober and spirited decisions that could not only deploy a proverbial parachute as we violently race toward the unloving earth but that could set a tune for all of mankind to try their feet at dancing to.

Why do we not seek to preserve the graces we were so proudly born with in this world before it is too late and the last little pasted bits and shreds of democracy fall away from the ever-contorting face of tyranny?

Make no mistake; whether you allow yourself to accept it or not sooner or later we will all be forced to realize that these liberties; liberties that most of my generation have taken as a complete and packaged commodity, will be a sharp harrowing memory that will forever haunt the minds of those of you here today who were young enough to remember a golden time when we were free.

A scattered few of the watching alumni were moved by my words at the campus and told me so, which felt like a tremendous victory, whereas some others thought it to be ignorant nonsense and made sure to let me know, which was devastating. In all, I felt that the effort went mostly unnoticed by the student body that brushed by that paid little to no attention.

The rallies were not a part of any real political change; they were simply in honor of the movement and to “spread awareness.”

My brothers and I would try our best to distract the attention of the students who would usually pay no mind to even the live music we brought to them and would simply rush by us.

Most students would be barking loudly on their “bluetooths”, and those who weren’t rudely talking to themselves were, for the most part, deeply entranced with a pastime called “texting.”

The students would flutter by like a wandering blur past the demonstration that we were only able to hold with decent numbers two or three times in all. how could the students pay attention to our message?

Their minds were always captive within the separate worlds they carried in the palm of their hands, and usually, cyberspace was more interesting and pleasant than reality, especially because nobody partook in classic reality anymore.

For a while, my brothers and I stood together in solidarity, and I think it worked as well as it did initially for the sole reason that people would drink enough to tolerate each other’s foolishness; only after a few cold beers was it enjoyable to talk to my comrades all night long about marches and permits for marches and coordinating with the local police and taking turns guessing how many people we could fit in a three-foot by three-foot “free speech zone” (twenty-four, we found out).

At first, the movement was extraordinarily inspirational to me. It was invigorating to see people coming together to speak of what was wrong and what needed fixing, and it wasn’t hard for me to have my once powerful voice be heard.

These people listened far more intently than the droopy-eyed zombie vendors that frightened my mornings and silenced my prayers for humanity ever had listened before. It was enough to keep me busy for a while. I remember the days when I truly believed that we might actually change things for the better or even spark a revolution. In other words, I was truly blind to the inner workings of humanity but still clever enough to assemble a sandwich.

Within a few weeks, it was becoming apparent to me that the revolutionaries, though they were very skilled at pointing out all of the problems of the world and who to blame, seemed to have no intentions of putting the time in to carry out their carefully discussed, meticulously plotted, plans of action.

My brothers and sisters that were not poor and hungry were set on working with the city, most of the lot were terrified of stepping out of line, some even threatened to condemn me if I misrepresented their movement to the city.

I was too radical for supposed radicals.

The “facilitators” (who were the ones smart enough and articulate enough to lead the general assemblies where the movement would practice democratic consensus; words like “leader” need be avoided if you are pretending to belong to a leaderless movement) wasted all of our initial donations by applying for permits to protest on city sidewalks and selected a chosen one

to look over the hat that held all of the movement's donations, who eventually ended up stealing all the money that was not immediately squandered on the permits, brand-new 100 percent cotton tee shirts that lamely said "Why Greed?" in an incredibly expensive rainbow design, and mobile devices so that we could better coordinate.

The movement had split into various groups that made decisions with one another without consensus.

Each group had become very clicky and cultish, and percolating under the surface of it all was an excessive amount of infighting.

There were charters passed in secretive meetings that would undermine the freedoms of everyone involved in the movement.

I had begun to witness, like a scientist does the growth of a fungus on a petri dish, our very own living, accidental, experimental, bacteria that was developing into a soft, shiny, pink new face of the same corruption and ugliness we had set out to fight, or apparently, to just talk about fighting.

I decided to keep the hope alive and to stick it out. I was still inspired that people were even talking about the issues and what was wrong in the world then, plus I loved to say clever things in public to my devoted fans.

It was football season and everyone at work was wearing their favorite football jersey.

Football season was a time when most humans were especially apathetic to things that really mattered and would, slightly more than usual consume all sorts of mind-numbing garbage and scream more frequently at their televisions.

The whole store was atwitter with talk about the big game.

"Sportstalk" was the common vernacular for people and an easy language when interacting with others during the rare moments people were spared from being both physically and mentally disarmed to their freewill and hypnotized into carrying out another's, by the flashing colors and beguiling sounds of the blinking box, a vile device that I care not to describe as well, that most civilized people worshipped and paid more time thinking about than anything else they had to spare thought for.

Thinking had seemed to become a very strenuous thing to do for most at the time,

For some it seemed to cause tremendous amounts of stress and pain and would invoke rage for others.

I had earned a nickname I grew to resent. I was christened this moniker during a conversation my bosses and myself were having in the upstairs office of the grocery store.

I gave both my bosses names; I felt their Christian names were misleading and would make one think to expect something human.

I called my store manager "Main-man," who was a smallish angular man, and the assistant manager and second in command "Ass-man," who was a much bigger rounder man than "Main-man" but smaller in presence.

Both men were staunch conservatives and fiercely “patriotic.”

Both men where “whitey.”

Our nothing-worth-mentioning conversation had turned into becoming about cell phones (specifically phones though we touched on a fraction of the myriad of technologies that surrounded all of us “free people” at the time, brain chips were also on the rise) and how certain new forms of legislation our government had secretly passed over the holiday gave them the ability (on paper) to tap into any law-abiding citizens phones without a warrant at anytime for any or no reason at all. (The bill also added many other new perks to our government’s uncontrollable strength that was developing like cancer, such as permanent detention for anyone who was against our government’s will, even if they didn’t know it yet, and U.A.Vs for the police force that would blow up bad guys, bad guys that were so bad that it had been decided that they didn’t get a trial; instead, those bad guys were just blasted into little lumps by flying robots.) I was using these examples to explain how we were no longer free and why I didn’t own a cell phone.

Ass-man started to poke fun; humor was Ass-man’s only remaining remotely sociable characteristic. Ass-man told me that I should go live in a jungle already.

Main-man, with an alertness to his widening eye, which might remind one of a cat who had figured out not only how to obtain but also where to find the precious nip that might serve to entertain a mind that required no further amusement outside of the pooping, the grooming, the eating, and the pestering of its human protectors, said “I’ve got a new name for you Jim; you’re gonna like it too! Jungle Jim!”

They both burst into laughter.

I chuckled politely for a moment; evidently, I had missed out on something, a stolid pun like that could not have possibly deserved such an enthusiastic reaction.

The big game had turned out to be incredibly boring to even the most boring of people, but you wouldn’t have guessed it by the way the vendors I had the pleasure of seeing every day were gabbing at one another; they had a new thing to pass the time of their utterly bleak existence —my new name, Jungle Jim.

It started with the pizza guys, the bread guys, and the tortilla people, every one of them would call me by that embarrassing name.

When vendors used to sign their invoices for me, they even risked getting in trouble by headquarters for forgery by signing “Jungle Jim” on their hand-held computers.

It was worth the laugh for them, amazingly enough.

The clerks were next at adopting the name, then the cashiers, then the customers, eventually it became my name.

In retrospect, it was my fault for lying down and dying whenever people would call me this instead of telling them how annoying I thought it to be.

I guess I was a nice guy because it really did piss me off and reiterated how on my own I felt in the struggle to realize a world of sanity instead of that hard-to-swallow world of vanity that I was more than aware of adding ugliness to.

Maybe I will go live in a jungle, I joked

Chapter Seventeen

Checking for Blood

“That never did that before....”

Everything that was happening to me or because of me at the time seemed to be pushing me out of the world itself.

I felt like the itching puss within an agitated pimple waiting to be emancipated from the vapid face of life to explore the nothingness, which might be the ground between it and the next horrible creature.

For one, I had been drinking to make myself feel better, and playing “Founding Fathers” all the time had not helped curb the drinking habit and neither did living in a bar.

What was worse was since Baby had left me, I had allowed the drinking and debauchery to lead to an opprobrious yet somehow unstoppable habit of sleeping with women that I did not care for and knew nothing about.

Most of these bubble-headed bimbos bothered me so immensely to even be near before, during, and after we would disgrace one another that I would invariably end up making a mad dash for the nearest exit, window, ladder, chute, or poorly built wall and never be seen by the sexpot again, if I was lucky, which I never was.

Most of the time, I was so sickened with myself and the memory of the bitter tar/beer taste that swished between both of our mouths that on my run home I would vomit.

Then there was the smoking. I had been smoking at least a pack of cigarettes a day since I was twelve and was twenty-four already.

I was seemingly unable to stop.

I smoked copious amounts of marijuana as well; my chest would ache, and my nostrils would burn.

I would start each morning by clearing my lungs of some of the blackened debris I would accumulate through the night and stare into the toilet, or sink, or dirt to examine the mucus and to make sure there were no bits of lung or clots of blood in it, and then I would burn a green bowl all to myself.

I would not let it be a good day if I ever missed the ritual of having the obligatory morning coffee and cigarette.

I would sit and think as I smoked more than what was good for me, that the torrid fire in my chest and butterfly flutters of my heart meant “game over” and that I had probably finally pushed myself too far in the night and that the jig was up.

Again, the drinking didn’t help.

I couldn’t save money at all. I was immoderate and munificent with every pay check I slaved away for.

Gambling had become therapeutic and the prospect of winning the life that something deep inside of me knew I deserved; the thought of being “struck by lightning” and being picked out of the messy herds of insolvent nobodies and placed on a pedestal with the rest of the winners of society that we the people had all been taught to idolize and worship tucked me in at night and kissed me on the brow. People needed stuff like that.

Plus, I was going to win.

Chapter Eighteen

I Got Beat

“Every chance they get, they take a swing..”

“The movement” that was supposedly adamantly against corporations became one legally.

One of the “revolutionaries” that was on his way to occupy a game of pool happened to bump into me. The lad briefly told me about the changing of (more rightly the becoming of) legal entities.

As I passed from the back door to the brightly lit pool room, the “art” that was displayed on the lime-green walls of the room made me involuntarily scoff; it was a gallery of unframed, stapled secured, wrinkly, grainy photos of homeless people (in the “old world,” homeless people had become walking art pieces as long as you had enough money to accurately capture the persons misery).

I wedged my way through the crowd to take a seat in the main room where the general assembly was being conducted.

It was the last weekly meeting I would attend.

I walked into an absolute freak show. I found everyone holding hands in a circle with their heads down. Needless to say, I was very concerned to see that no one was drinking beer.

The group had apparently passed some new charter that I (according to the cult leaders) forgot about voting in favor of because I was too drunk at the last meeting.

I was drunk yes, but I would have remembered voting in favor of a bill that would negate my ability to be drunk.

A sure way to get the attention of a drunkard is undoubtedly saying “Who is in favor of not being allowed to drink?” even my most crass, most frequently footloose friends would have stopped puking or fucking to look up and say: “Now wait just a minute”!

Yes, this new “law”, as I called it affectively cut us down from the 99 percent of us who were being usurped to the 33 percent of us who had made the personal decision to abstain from drugs and alcohol and were also usurped.

What’s more is there were new rules and regulations on how to speak to one another and how to feel toward our fellow comrades.

As I was taking a seat at the bar, I was disturbed to witness the head “facilitator” chanting in a low emotionless voice:

“We do not feel angry feelings toward anything” and in unison the rest of the cult of “revolutionaries” regurgitated the same insane statement without even thinking of what it meant to them.

They seemed to forget they were all gathered together in the first place because they were angry.

No, my comrades did not see the implications of the words themselves, they were more focused on emulating the “facilitators”, in the way they would chant their new blind commandments and the clinical manner in which their leaders would, with a slow emphasis, turn a judgmental finger to a point that fell on the condemned outsiders, such as myself.

For the first time since I had joined the movement, I used one of the silly hand signals my comrades would always demand that I should use.

I walked square to the middle of the room, raised my hands above my head, and formed a cross with my arms.

The cult continued to chant, ignoring me entirely.

Some of the self-proclaimed “lower people on the totem pole” would steal a one eyed peak during the chant, not at me but at the leaders to see if they were looking at me, but dogma distracts, and their eyes stayed fixed on the splotchy hardwood floor. The signal I used was supposed to mean “I will walk away forever if this continues and we choose not to fix it.”

It was interpreted as: “I would like to speak during the soap box in an hour and a half.”

After about ten minutes of me standing as an invisible statue of unnoticed rebellion; The meeting started.

Still no one paid any attention to me standing in the middle of the room with the blood running out of my arms.

A short and spotty, box-shaped college student “facilitator” with the sandy hair of a mop cleared their throat and started the meeting by explaining about the rules about hand signals.

When they got to explaining the signal my upper body had gone numb using, it stressed that you only ever “Really, really, really, really . . . Ever, ever use it maybe once or twice in your entire life, and that’s like if something’s like super, super, super socially wrong and stuff.”

I erupted.

I made an effort to be calm and said, “Yes, this is the only time in my entire life I will do this silly gesture; that is right.”

I continued and tried not to shout but failed.

I poured my heart out about all of the evils I saw us becoming; my mind wanted to explode in sheer wonder of how they could not see this.

I lost my train of thought. I got a little stoned beforehand.

So I decided to end it by saying, “and what’s with the creepy chant”?

Twenty arms were raised in the air at that moment to answer my question.

I continued with, “And where are the booze?”

My drummer who was bartending and owned the place also could no longer be contained.

“Yeah you cheap hippies.” he was fed up with the movement from day one of setting up shop.

He was not a frugal man and despised those who were.

“It’s two for one for Christ’s sake”!

One of the college students, who had been brainwashed by the college professor’s insurgent spies within the group who were responsible for the new drinking laws, explained to me that the chant was the official charter for the group and that I had forgotten the fact that everyone including myself had voted it in at the last meeting.

And as I already told whoever you are, he then went on to explain to me that it was because of my excessive drinking and the constant “frying of my brain” that had led to me forgetting that I voted in favor of the chant as well as giving my vote to an item that proposed the movement migrating headquarters from being at the bar to occupying an old abandoned gas station just fourteen miles outside town to start a hydroponic farm in the blistering desert.

I left the meeting and took a walk to the noisy river near the bar. I

tore my “solidarity rag,” as I began to call it, off my jacket and intended on casting the thing in the raging winter waters, but something, surely something weak inside of me, wouldn’t allow me to throw the rag away.

I rolled it up and slipped it in my pocket; I gripped it hard as I fought the stupor of witnessing such hypocrisy.

I walked home in bloodless anger and recollected the drivel noise I had heard walking out of the general assembly.

The voice of the “facilitator” and their cronies played in rhythm to the marching beat of my boots as I rambled home, whatever that means.

“All in favor of this being a poignant and objective thing to do?”

All voices said “aye!”

“And all in favor of, though this may be a good thing to do, not doing it?”

All voices said “aye!” along an outburst of cheers peppered with a scattered selection of indecipherable chatter, a man rose to the occasion by saying loudly: “Hey! No. Yeah! No, yeah, hey, guys. No, hey, listen. That’s a good compromise! It’s poooin nint!”

What was inspiration and hope in my heart for the future of humanity was assassinated over the course of the next few days.

The movement was really only a small part looking back.

Chapter Nineteen

Slumber Party

“Sleeping when you go to sleep. Sleep upon awakening Sleeping all your dreams away People seem to forget, People seem to forget.”

That night, I had a dream that had been reoccurring for as long as I could remember. It used to terrify me.

I would wake up in the middle of the night with a feeling that I was all alone, sometimes I would go and check to see if my roommates were in there beds and wouldn't be settled in my own skin until I saw another form of life. The dream goes like this:

I am in my camouflage footie pajamas that I used to wear as a child.

I am running through a city that is busy with people who are driving cars and operating machines and crossing streets and doing all of the things that people commonly do.

The city is a bustling metropolis but eerily silent, all but the sound of clacking heavy machines and pushy cars, and what; in such silence, sounds like the stomping of marching feet of sleepwalking people.

The sounds of nature are silent and not even a guess in the night, and the still working, walking, breathing, and functioning people are asleep, not dead, just sleeping, and I am looking for people who are awake with eyes that are not closed, there are none.

I try to pry a few pair of cold lids open with my fingers but cannot.

The sleeping people who started as strangers in this dream are becoming more intimate to me now; they are becoming sleeping family members, sleeping coworkers and sleeping friends, all of whom are still warm to touch, but answer me not.

I am punching and screaming and kicking at these standing mindless statues even though I am afraid I may hurt them, though like in almost every one of my dreams my arms feel as though they are made of margarine.

All of my efforts are of no use, the dormant mountains ranges of no-contested people cannot respond to anything I do.

Now I am running from the anxious city and have found myself in a dark forest with trees that have no tops that span as far as I can see, ghastly trees with large black holes in their trunks that seem to go on forever.

The trunk holes are letting loose dreadful sounds of animals screaming, and they sound as if they are being slaughtered.

Fear scalds my heart like white-cold nitroglycerine and carries my feet faster than my legs can keep up.

My terror reams and escalates while I am racing through the dingy gnarled woods.

Now I am moving as if on rollers skates that are gathering momentum from the terror that swallows my mind and threatens to never surrender its bounty.

My flight ends now, and I have discovered that I am surrounded by woodland creatures.

The animals are morbidly frightening in appearance. Their wide and open eyes steal the sliver moon's weak rays, and the world is becoming darker still.

The animals, unlike the people I ran from, are wide awake and have gathered in the hundreds of thousands.

Their haunting cries are filling the stuffy night air of the dark murky wilderness with a begging chorus.

I now realize, after a while, that I have managed to flee from the forest, though I am sure I lack the courage to have done so.

I am running, still in terror, through an empty field, and I feel terribly lost.

I am lost.

I have run with my eyes closed for long enough to discover that; now that I open them, I have arrived at the base of a great blue mountain, that I cannot crick my neck back far enough to see the top of.

Somehow, I have climbed the mountain effortlessly in just moments, and now I am looking out over creation.

It is the morning time; it's beautiful, but for whatever reason I hate it.

I jump to my death.

I woke that night in the middle of the dream sweating with my heart beating out of my chest.

I was left with the phantom pain from my fall off a mountain still gripping me with the icy hands of a pure and unabashed fear that I could not fight off in the dark.

I swallowed a sodium fluoride—based sleep aid and tried to sleep again in the hot night, and after a few struggling hours, I was in a light slumber and the dream continued.

Now I am in a hole.

I feel weak and confused but happy and trusting even though I am in a hole.

Maybe I'm dead?

I don't think so because I stand vertically in the hole.

Maybe I fell straight into it and made it with my feet?

I don't know.

The feeling of comfort spoils immediately just now, and I feel the earth tightening around my chest; it is squeezing the joy out of me and has betrayed my foolish trust.

I am buried alive and trying to scream, and before I wake, the last thing I see is a man kissing the earth and smoothing it over with his dark, heavy hands.

The sound of Baby's hideous wallowing moans and lustful demonic screams were what saved me from my insane dreams that night.

Chapter Twenty

Cunt

“We may be an incestuous bunch, but we’re not cannibals.”

I dressed in my blue cotton robe and ventured down the hallway of my band’s new house following the awful sounds to his door; on the other side, I could hear them both panting heavily and Baby’s all-too-familiar shrieking.

I poured a glass of water, ate peanut butter from the jar with a spoon, and went back to bed.

After some time, it became obvious to him that I knew that they had happened.

I could not help the grim expression on my face any more than I could help saving the band.

Later, he would try to justify his actions by telling me, the way I see it, that two wrongs make a right. he knew about all the times I had been less than loyal to Baby and held those events over my head by saying I deserved a taste of my own medicine and reminded me that I started my relationship by stealing her from my old roommate while they were still together; the roommate relapsed on meth and killed himself promptly following the affair.

He also reminded me that musicians don’t need girlfriends and that he had done a great favor for me.

I agreed that two wrongs made a right and that he was just in thinking so and that there was nothing at all wrong with any of it, got dressed, and went for a walk and found my way into a casino.

The casino was full of lifelessness; everything that wasn’t the living dead in the lightless trap could be considered the plain dead, and since the bubble busted a few years back, the casinos had been almost completely emptied.

Fewer people could afford to travel, and most would sure as hell find a better use for their money than pissing it all away in a gloom-stricken and smoky casino.

Most of the only people I saw in the golden-walled, red-carpeted palace were old and haggard, seemingly taped-together cocktail waitresses whose bodies failed to form to the black, skintight, coat-tailed, showgirl work uniforms.

The girls exuded the same lifelessness from their hollow eyes that could be heard in the form of robotic beeping and electric buzzing and seen as old gray coughing seat bumps that were plugged into even more machinery.

The locals that did play there were usually part person, part machine.

You would mostly get people that were attached to oxygen tanks to breathe better while smoking and people with mechanical hearts that could be found drinking numerous formaldehyde and vodka cocktails.

I sat down to play a slot that was hidden in the corner near the bathrooms of the top floor of the game room.

I tried to sit where there would be no one in my sight and was annoyed when a partially organic, yellow old man who had a nose that was almost the size of his blotchy cratered face sat down three machines to my right; his eyes caught mine, and he flashed a toothless smile at me.

I sneered at him and started pounding buttons aggressively.

While I was playing the slots at the Hilton, I sat and I thought, "What now?" The bar bore no happiness to my life, neither had the booze or the smoking or the playing of "Founding Fathers."

I was uncertain of the future of the band at that point, and I didn't feel I had it in me to ever perform, to create, or to make passionate music again.

The creative flame was murdered, and the movement had betrayed me on top of it all.

All of the trivial tinker things that had their charm upon entering my life wore off in a heartbeat, and nothing seemed to inveigle me in the "old world" anymore.

There was one thing that acted as the cheese atop the wheel in my rat cage and that was her.

It seemed the more everything else around me tossed and turned into disappointment, the more I depended on her to amend it someday.

She had a boyfriend, this was true, but I knew by what I saw in her eyes that she adored me just the same.

I told myself that she was just too good (and she was) to act on what I assumed (and never found out for sure) she felt for me.

I don't blame her.

I was always going on about leaving forever to this place or that, that this life wasn't good enough for what I wanted to do, that any day I would be gone forever, and that the band would be on the road within a few months; I used that one a lot.

I foolishly told her during one of those long boring closing shifts, "When I say good-bye for real, I'll say good-bye forever."

I realized that whether I said it jokingly or for real, it was still a weird thing to say, and just that one simple moment of human interaction turned into weeks of self-loathing and violent cringes.

When I would try to tell her of how much I adored her in more of an outright manner, it would always turn into an abrasive slap on the back that would leave a mark.

"Good job, sport"!

Not only were my plans for my future unpredictable but so were my moods.

I was all around a gamble and to any logical mind, as hers was boundlessly logical; I was a bad move that made bad movements in between going nowhere.

I decided while forgetfully slapping a spectacle of flashing buttons what my next bad move had to be.

I had to tell her how I loved her.

I would write a letter, or a speech, or maybe even show her the song.

I tried many different ways and ideas of telling her how I loved her.

I practiced for hours in front of a mirror when my roommates were away (whom I no longer spoke to outside of band practice).

I tried things like: "You may not know it but, I love you." Or "it's been a long time and I just needed to say . . ."

Everything I came up with was torturous just to say to my own reflection let alone to think of saying to her.

I was certain that the pure cheesiness of all the bullshit lines I clumsily forced into existence would be unbearable for her to hear, and there was also the very real risk that whatever I (luckily I never had the chance or nerve to say any of it) might say was so rancid that it could have actually even inflicted some amount of physical pain unto her.

I was not a writer (yet).

I just wrote stupid, angry little songs. (Soon I would become the greatest and the worst writer in existence).

How would I find the words to tell her I loved her?

The more I planned and contrived the moment in my head, the more exacerbated my feelings toward telling her became.

Fear had begun to overthrow my desire to do something bold, and as quickly as I had decided to confess my undying love, I had given up again.

Besides, she had a boyfriend.

Chapter Twenty-One

When the Fun Stops

“you can’t change the world on a slot machine.”

“RRRRRIIIINNNGGG BING BING BING BOOOUUP BOOOOUUP”

I knew I would win.

The very marrow within my bones were certain all my life that something had been in the works since the dawn of time (which were the early 1980s) to save me from the decaying world, why should I have to be at the disposal of such an unjust unfair world when I could see it all for the filth it plainly is... was?

The “Spin for Paradise” slot machine at the Hitlerton understood my worth and what I truly deserved.

I was so deep in thought when it hit that I had no idea how much I had bet or what I had actually won.

I was confused and bedazzled by the machine as it made an eccentric flashing screaming display.

For half an hour, it yelped and beeped and danced with colors and lights.

The machine was old and started to malfunction, and it began spewing out five or ten dated, public domain, TV catch phrases, all out of sync running simultaneously with one another in what turned into a demonic chant that added great emphasis to the suspense of the moment.

“Give daddy somcha talkin’ bout?”

Kind of catchy, I thought.

The whole ordeal of getting my money took a little under a year.

They only gave me ten grand on my way out of the casino, and I was told that I was to receive the rest of the cash in nine checks of ten thousand dollars over the next year.

When you think you are a slave, you would kill, for pleasure, time, knowing that it will surely lead to freedom.

I had plenty of time to think of what I wanted to do with the bounty and was willing to wait; I still needed time to find the words to tell her.

The band played one more show. Despite the screaming crowd of girls and my love for performing, I was stoic and aloof.

I failed to complete even our first song.

About halfway through a song I wrote called “Bought and

Sold", Baby showed up and started cheering his name. I threw my bass on the floor and left the bar forever.

A year passed like a kidney stone.

During my last day of work, I found myself in a rather bitter mood that was a product of either the ten people who called me Jungle Jim within the ten minutes I had been punched in for duty, or the shining metal band around her finger that appeared to be imbued with some sort of precious stone.

The ring had caught my eye from clear across the front end.

I wandered carefully closer to the wretched thing.

I watched as it winked at me then as it danced gaily with the fluorescence lighting some would blame for my pale, macabre look.

A nowhere voice whispered the resolution in my burning ears or at least what seemed like a fitting answer to all of my woes.

My money and I were to live in the jungle.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Not for Me

"Can you hear me? Or is silence deceiving?"

I was not the only person in the "old world" at the time who fancied living in the jungle.

Things were tough for those of us who could not grant our minds the honor of not having to think.

Though some had not thinking down to an unknown science that even Buddha would have taken notes on, others like me were unable to share this fortune.

Most folks settled with prescription drugs to make life livable, and I don't blame them now.

I can clearly see that it was by wisdom, not apathy that mankind decided they should no longer think.

In my time, I remember a plethora of doctors and pharmacists who would have gladly sponsored a drug-addled paradise for me.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Instead, like others, but not most others, I ran to the hills.

To the Jungle.

The world was all atwitter about the end of times as I imagined mostly all generations of man that preceded me had been (nobody wants to picture the world continuing without them, lucky

for me I don't have to). Some Indians (who we called foreigners and people we didn't care to learn about) somewhere predicted the particular year the world would end.

I wasn't necessarily a believer in that (or anything), but I did think it would have been a great year for it.

Many people to my understanding (which was always just bits and scraps of stuff I had overheard or read accidentally, usually out of context) had packed up, bought rations, bows and arrows, and some cookbooks, and had left society altogether fearing the end of at least modern civilization.

I was more of the thinking that life was not going to end (which might not have been that bad of an idea at all), but that civilization would avoid collapsing into itself and do just the opposite, thriving unchangingly (for the better) off the slavery of humanity and mankind's inability to want to do something about it.

There was only one thing to do before I left for the jungle.

During my last day of what I called slavery (I'm aware that me going on about slavery and using the word with such diminutive care for the actual significance of its meaning is probably offensive to whomever may read this, and I also recognize calling a job slavery will be almost intolerable to you, for you probably know all about slavery—yes there is a word for it—you probably know more than I had ever even read about the subject as a slave.

I am certain that if you now call yourself living, you are an appendage of some sort of large clever cockroach. (I'm sorry).

After witnessing the horrible new addition to her delicate little finger, I hatched a plan.

I plucked a white rose from the floral department, stole an envelope from the greeting card aisle, went into the office, wrote the only words I had ever felt comfortable expressing my love for her with, pressed the letter with the rose in the envelope under a phonebook and let it sit still until the end of my shift.

I worked early that day and was leaving in the late afternoon; she had just arrived for work.

When I saw her, her beauty stopped my heart for a few seconds, and I almost decided to flee for safety. Inside my mind was a great two-sided battle for the courage to do what I knew I must.

On my way out, I exited by detouring through her checkout line under the guise of needing some cat food and a toothbrush.

We shared some minced, offbeat, hiccups of words, with absolutely no rhythm to any of it, then I handed her the bleeding letter and dashed away in a hurry, out of the sliding robotic glass doors—leaving the bag of groceries at her checkout—and never saw her again.

Did she open the letter? I hope not, but probably so, if she had it would have read:

"I finally found the words to tell you I love you. Good-bye."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Strangers Passing By

“An all-pretending, ever-blending, sea of shadows and doubts”

With my heart in my throat, I limped around in the busy airport, dodging obscure people of every shape and size as I thought of undoing what I had just done.

I thought of not only returning to the life I had decided to leave but somehow adding meaning to it as well when a single moment in the narrow, sterile airport terminal reinforced in both heart and mind that this was extraordinarily impossible.

I was helplessly in the path of an approaching floundering flock of upper class who, without missing a beat in their orchestrated attack, plowed into me like an abominable force of wealth and ignorance.

The chinless mumbling father literally crashed head on into me without taking notice of anything but whatever thought his gobbling turkey wife was choking on.

None of the family apologized for the unnecessary collision or the father's appalling rancid breath that smelled like burnt popcorn tastes.

The gang continued their choreographed argument over which child deserved the most allowance for doing nothing but bothering and be bothered by their caretakers.

“Just maybe man could . . . if we all tried hard . . . oh, that's right. I guess I forgot . . . I know why . . . BUT WHY?”

I screamed at all the people; no one heard my silence, though I stomped to the gate pretending they could hear the shouts of my dismal mind.

The great digital data frame collective consciousness cyber-world man had designed to further retard his spiritual growth (it was an intangible device, more of a concept, and I wonder now if it still exists), guided me to the most highly esteemed, moderately tempered jungle I could find.

I was looking for a place that was close to an indigenous town that historically treated outsiders with the fear and kindness their status deserved. (If your skin was the right tone and you spoke well enough even the middle to lower class in my country, were kings to the rest of the human race if abroad).

The villagers had to at least be civilized enough to understand that money was God.

I cyber-searched for something that was known to have little diversity among pests and creatures; (I didn't want to be fighting the elements all the time; after all, I had become rich, I wanted a monkey butler too).

I had no intention of roughing it; money used to do amazing things in third-world countries at the time, I heard.

The twenty-hour flight was a great reminder of what I was escaping and why.

There were fifty blabbering televisions in the coach seating area alone.

I wondered what first class might have been like, and the blue curtain that protected first class from coach made guessing what the other side might look like more interesting; nobody likes to be told where they can't go, even if they don't care to go there.

The blinking boxes that surrounded me in the plane succeeded in offending every remaining sense they had failed to render useless, with a commercial.

The commercial started by showing a flamboyant clown who was perched on a hot pink tricycle in a glass cube that appeared to be under the sea.

The clown was surrounded by smiling children who sat patiently on the glass floor.

The host wheeled around the beaming, multinational, interracial, coed, chiseled faces of child models.

(More kids' faces, bodies, and genetics should have aspired to be more like those kids. Ugly people are just plain lazy).

The nondenominational rug-rats sat "Indian style" in a glass cube that danced to the rhythm of the insufferable but catchy jingle.

(Oh god, here we go again. I had finally beaten the goddamn thing out my head just yesterday).

On the other side of the glass that formed the walls of the cube were jellyfish doing "the monkey" and also a dolphin wearing aviator sunglasses shredding a starfish-shaped guitar.

There was a sunfish behind a ten-piece orange pores drum kit that was made of coral; the fish was pounding out some noise as he focused on just the snare, his other fin twirled crab leg drumstick, and a sperm whale played the stand-up bass, wearing only a smug grin.

There was a shark that stood closest to the glass wall; he was the singer of the band (I bet that shark didn't even write his own songs), and his fins wrapped a golden microphone while his spiky pink hair tried to keep up with the banging of the sea creature's head.

The shark began to sing the commercial's crapped-out jingle.

You can see, see, see the nutrition!

The kids can see, see, see the nutrition!

Dad and mom can see, see, see the nutrition!

Mom and Dad both see, see, see the nutrition

The frightening host was wearing a multihued silk jumpsuit that was branded on the chest with a capital C, hovering above and to the right of the bold sea foam green letter was the number 3.

C-Cube the Clown wore a frilly orange ascot around his neck and pedaled his tricycle with oversized red shoes.

The clown was almost all bald save for the shark fin Mohawk that appeared to be connected to his skull; his falsely friendly face was painted white and made his glowing red LED ball nose entrancing to hate and be pained to observe.

Both the strangers and I (it was the altitude) gave our undivided attention to boxes fighting in boxes (I'll explain); there were no acceptations, though I didn't look around to see for certain.

“hooohooohuahahaha”! The clown twirled atop the glass floor.

“Contention Cookie Crumbles Kids. hooohohuahahahaheee”.

The clown wheeled around the cube, petting the children's bright blooming faces as he passed.

The pressurized coffin cabin of the aircraft filled with the sound of their innocent cheers; which were answered by a wave of chuckling passengers.

On the TV, the clown fueled his insidious laughter with a squeeze of a vibrant yellow daffodil that sat in his lapel.

The flower animated to life a pressurized stream of yellow-white liquid that appeared to be milk.

The clown then aimed the stream at a sleepy-looking four-year-old girl who fell on her, back crying.

The clown said:

“Very vanilla ghost-shaped wafers? Or triple dark chocolate cookie monkey crumbles? You decide kids, and DON'T BE RACIST! hooohohahaha!”

Two buff looking cereals appeared on the blinking boxes in seizure-imploring, will-disarming colors. The cereal boxes were in a miniature boxing ring that was bordered in red and blue ropes.

Two lonely stools sat in either corner of the ring; this whole scene materialized in the midst of the group of kids.

The boxes pumped fists at one another while hopping up and down; they were getting ready to knock each other's box tops off.

The children roared in anticipation of someone else's battle; their bowls were empty save for their silver spoons.

The vanilla cereal had large red boxing gloves.

The dark black chocolate cereal fought with a similar pair of shiny blue gloves.

At the bottom of either corner of the televisions, there were black rectangles with flashing numbers inside—one on each side of the screen—that were supposed to represent the polls (and probably did).

The ten-figured numbers were scrolling in hypnotic flashes from one to nine throughout the brief but disturbing ad.

By the end of the commercial, the numbers had grown to become twenty plus figures that bled into one another.

“Text ‘White Ghost’ or ‘Black Monkey’ to ‘C-Cube’ on your phones kids because it’s not your right to vote, it’s your duty! hooohhoo hoohahahaheee!”

The clown navigated to the center of the cross-legged group of kids while the boxing match disappeared into smoke, then he raised his arms with both palms facing upward as two shining boxes of cereal faded in from smoke into existence.

The boxes levitated over either of C’s bony hands.

C burst into a sinister spout of laughter, and then a rainbow appeared that connected both cereals in harmony.

The clown and the children said in unison, “You can see, see, see the nutrition”!

The shark took the lead.

The jelly fish did “the monkey”.

The cereal boxes in all their glory started to rumble and shake.

Both boxes of cereal simultaneously erupted with black and white bits of their insides that leapt out of either flapping box top like a geyser to indiscriminately fill the children’s empty bowls.

On the plane, kids and parents alike frantically searched for their smart phones, powered them on, and presumably voted.

The lights in the cabin flickered.

Luckily, I was forced to report back to reality when I realized the buzzing in my ear was not the gentle hum that our airborne craft had no knowledge of sounding.

I was abashed to discover the noise was the grim, racist ranting of a cowboy that sat to my left who spoke in third person and called himself Arkansas.

The man had apparently been learnin’ me the entire length of the ad, or maybe much longer (to me nonetheless).
I hadn’t said a word to anyone.

The sunglasses I was wearing were supposed to discourage strangers from interacting with me, but instead made anyone who looked at me think I was looking back).

It had tuned into a harangue about how our black president was “fucking the dog” as a leader because he “couldn’t run a lemonade stand” and that it was solely because he was black.

Shortly after I tuned in and Arkansas’ worn mind’s ability to rave timed out, both he and I and another man sitting to his left who introduced himself as Cal found the monologue sputtering to a wimpy end. He was obviously high on meth and his whisky black bearded framed a disgusting chalky blue ringlet around his lips.

What was I saying?” I couldn’t ignore Arkansas’ intrusive elbowing of my arm then snorted something that looked like blue glass shards.

I responded with.

“Actually Arkansas, you weren’t saying anything, you were listening and then you realized that you were talking, and then you and I and this gentleman sitting at your left all realized that; in fact, we weren’t hearing, and you weren’t saying, anything at all.”

Arkansas gave me a purely evil look that meandered toward the blinking box; it was a look that questioned whether his face and body language’s proceeding expressions should be inspired by anger or by joy.

He laughed.

“Hey I like you kid, you’re real man. Not like those pussy fags who walk dogs for a living.”

The strange spidery man’s old grayish eyes inevitably completed their drug addled wandering gaze.

His eyes met a new commercial on the blinking box.

Arkansas’ brain-tanned face at that moment seemed to decide that it should construct a leathery something forged from joy, though depressed anger still lingered in his harshly carved crow’s-feet and ironed forehead like a wispy fog that crept across his shallow surface.

“Contention Cookie Crumbles” had played three times in between the commercial that Tex had sacrificed his derailed train of thought for. I get why he chose to laugh; oatmeal in a tube is funny, and with a name like “Gooley Gooley Goatmeal,” it was sure to sell.

“Actually he was saying something . . . right? Though it may have been totally ignorant . . . right? And completely false . . . right?” A guy called Cal raised his hand to his “Ear Tooth,” though he appeared to be entirely involved with the conversation the three of us were having, apparently there was someone on the other end of his ear piece.

“Yeah, hold on. No stay on the line. I’ve got to drop some knowledge.” The man turned toward Arkansas and said,

“I, for one, support the president who is actually a very smart man and extremely well educated . . . right? The prez has lived an incredibly secure and wealthy life . . . right? And the neighborhood he grew up was very sophisticated . . . right? The prez has attended all of the most prestigious schools the world has to offer . . . right? And has more powerful people with more money backing his presidency than any other democratically elected president in the history of our great country . . . right? Ok then! So he is really not nearly as “black” as you think he is.”

It was nice of Cal to speak such wisdom in brief fragments so that my small brain could catch it all, he even paused for a second or two after each statement and would say “right?” to make sure that I had got it, which was nice because I missed a lot and made him repeat himself every time he finished a segment. I tried with little effort to show both men that they were wrong.

The conversation ended with Arkansas staring at Cal’s infant baby of mixed African and Caucasian descent and asked how old it was, and then asked if anyone wanted to hear a joke.

Silence.

“Knock, Knock”.

More silence.

“Guess the punchline will have to wait for a better time”.

His shirt was unbuttoned down to his belly button and I could make out a tattoo that said “There’s no such thing as wasted aggression and the patch on his jacket read “bastards of color.”

I was confused and tripped out so I moved seats without asking.

“Hey kid. You look good! I’ll catch you on the flip side”.

The food on the flight had finally arrived.

I was hungry until that point.

The Salisbury (another way of saying mechanically separated and frozen) steak was snotty and of the most thoroughly processed quality; the cheese that slid atop it was made of steroids, and the soda made my esophagus combust with fire.

The magazines that were provided for me were a poor substitute for the drill that should have been in their place so that I might lobotomize myself to be able to bear the repulsive smell that was coming from the sunken mouth of the gray-skinned lady that had just startled herself awake with a belch. The lady gave a dull glance around the cabin, made a befuddled throat noise that might have been another belch, and returned to sleeping blissfully on my shoulder.

I tried to ignore the people on the flight but did just the opposite and “people watched.”

I caught the defeated gaze from the glazed and tired eyes of a beaten looking man who sat across me; it was the look of the age, a fashion statement some would argue.

(In the “old world,” the cooler you were, the less you cared. I was surrounded by rock stars, each one caring less than the next about fewer things).

Sometimes, they would actually lose track of who they were actually supposed to be representing and even which mouth to put food into.

This happened particularly when in large crowds; they were supposed to be more concerned about one specific person’s needs more than anyone else’s; that they did not forget, but sometimes it became confusing for them and hard to say who that person was when mixed in with a hurried crowd of multiple versions of what appeared to be the exact same uninterested, unconcerned person.

A question I had never asked before came into my mind at that moment.

I asked myself, do we all feel the same emotions?

Whether one may be quicker or slower or more enlightened or less, or just because one may be able to attach words to human feelings and emotion and even diagnose these sensations in others, like colors, are there only a small, countable number of emotions that one can feel, whether they may be a king or a slave?

Does a dog feel the same array of emotions that a dolphin does”?

I would not trust any statistic or science that might try to answer that question; it will always be just a question.

I ditched my flimsy blue tray of space garbage on the next passing cart and tried to make the best out of the never-ending flight by sleeping.

I could only sleep for three hours or so before I was wide awake, thinking about the future, thinking about the past.

I thought about my family. I didn't tell any of them what I was doing.

I figured I would use the same approach that I had used with them my whole life, telling them that I have chosen a life of taciturnity in a foreign country, and that method was to wait until they got a hold of me, and then tell them I'll explain it later.

Nonetheless, I was surprisingly sad about leaving them without saying good-bye, but leaving is only leaving if you don't say good-bye.

I didn't forget or forsake my family in my mind or heart; the plan was to test the waters of living outside society's octopus arm reach, then I would phone for my family to live in my monkey butler—maintained palace away from the treachery of modern society.

Good-bye fast food, good-bye apathy, good-bye ignorance, good-bye injustice, good-bye hippocrates, good-bye lifelessness, good-bye artlessness. Good-bye slave Jim. hello, Jungle Jim.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Falling Over

“There was a flash, But still no thunder.”

My adventure thus far had only reinforced many unbreakable laws of reality and had failed to teach me anything at all.

The first lesson I realized sometime during and after my rebirth was the lesson that all of my life was climaxing to teach, I see that now.

“Never have a plan.” I thought.

“That’s the plan.”

If you expect things from life, it is devastating to not receive them; if you have no expectations in life, it makes whatever you do or don’t receive along the way valuable.

No plan, it’s a good rule.

I may not have lived my life to that strict schematic after this event (and actually never did willingly), but after a few moments in my new glorious life, it was clear I had no choice.

A plan was less than a dream at that point; it was more than my destroyed and flaming bills of slave notes could afford. Even with the recollection of a glistening new kingdom in ruins with only me to blame, I shudder to imagine the memory of the green flaming bits of God that still pricks my heart and mind.

Struck by lightning....

That’s how I felt when I had earned my precious fortune back at the Hilton.

The captain’s voice blurted over the intercom and tried to reassure the passengers and myself of our guaranteed safety.

he told us the left engine that had erupted into a cauldron of shrieking white hot fury had less of a chance of randomly exploding than this plane had of being struck by lightning, which happened immediately afterward.

The captain retracted his previous statement to clarify what he had meant. The captain said, “We are all going to die”!

“Now that’s more like it.” I thought.

“How much does it take for a person to shed their corporate identity”?

To be noble is one thing by trying to keep us calm, but after his next comment, I knew that he and his crew were more afraid of the embarrassment of looking unprofessional and possibly losing a safe job than our peace of mind, which is natural but a bit curious, or maybe it isn’t, I don’t know.

The whole thing was an interesting experiment that revealed to me the exact moment man sheds his duty to his safe job; it takes a lot, it takes so much, but it happens.

I was impressed.

It was proven at that moment it took an equation of a strike of lightning and a ruptured engine at a few hundred thousand feet up to make most of the plane's sound but scared crew even wince at their pending life insurance claim.

It took until we were at an almost vertical plummet toward forever and nothing for most of the obviously highly trained staff to start acting like the humans they were about to share an ashy hole in the unforgiving earth with, I commend them.

Maybe part of my subconscious had realized I was too important to merely die in a hot hailstorm of flames and complacent lemmings and that I would undoubtedly live on to my true potential while all the rest of that faceless mass received a gentle prodding toward the complete ecstasy they were only inches from achieving all throughout their sheltered lives.

Something inside my inner workings assured me that I was safe; this is the only explanation for my complete serenity and ease as we all raced toward Mother Nature, as we raced toward my jungle, I couldn't wait to meet it, and with such an entrance.

The cabin rocked noisily and boundlessly jerked back and forth; my serenity lifted, I started to not panic but become excited. "This is life!" I thought. I had never felt as alive as I did that day when I was pretty sure (but still highly cautious of accepting the fact) I was at the end of the rope. In my most primal state of mind, I realized what really made life exciting: the fear of losing things.

Finally, all of the walls came down for everyone in an instant.

My eyes leapt from face to face, and I witnessed the exact moment each passenger was reduced to the person they tried so hard to hide.

People weren't just screaming and crying and praying some bolder souls were actually rolling around in the isles making love.

Cal screamed: "My baby! My baby boy. Help, he's taking him. Stop him. Someone do something".

I quickly climbed over piles of scattered luggage and splattered food trays, pausing only to slip on a greasy cheese lump.

I was determined to go down with a bang.

I headed toward first class searching for some company, and people with money were always prettier than those without.

I pulled back the blue fruit punch-stained curtains, I remember thinking of clever last words but being at a complete loss; it was at that moment that I started to panic.

There she was, a breathtaking golden-haired beauty in a snow white sundress sitting with her back to the window and her arms round her legs rocking back and forth and crying.

I had seen enough.

I climbed with all of my might toward her while the plane was leveling out at a forty-degree angle and shaking violently.

When I finally made it to her, she paid no attention to my arrival, and her pale face bore a smoking hole straight through my thigh.

I found the perfect words for an end without thinking at that moment. I noticed the smell of feces as I neared the damsel.

Looking down, I saw a little brown stain in her white sundress and realized the smell was because she, like most of us (but not me, I SWEAR!), had shit herself.

“Gross!”

She didn’t hear me.

I couldn’t have found better last words if I had an entire lifetime to decide.

It is very unfortunate that those weren’t my last.

For the first time since I left her, she was not even a silent reverberation of a whisper in my mind, not a slight murmur or intangible oscillation in the darkest bowels of my most primitive form of conciseness and of no consequence to me at all. It was the only time since I had first met her that I was briefly able to clear my mind of her, though that was only the result of a blow to the back of the skull from some unknown object (I picture a computer) that rendered me unconscious to the trauma that was to take place in the moments immediately after.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I Can Wear That

“I’m a ball of clay for you to mold.”

I missed my arm and eye immediately.

I felt that I was a horrible disfigured monster that could no longer compete genetically with the rest of the free world.

My idea of being a one man force of nature that could combat and harness the powers of every element at my disposal had died and had, less than gracefully, fallen out the window and was replaced with a sharp ping of embarrassment for being able to be reduced to such a reality.

“Me? Me of all people”? I sobbed.

“This could not happen to me”!

I would have screamed out-loud if I could.

“Something is wrong”!

I wanted proof of God so that I might take my grievance to the bastard and rub his nose in it.

I wanted to demand from him that there must have been some mistake and that he was obligated to correct it.

Nigh onto and looking over the grim and gaping display of twisted metal and the charred and sinuous cadavers of folks of every sort (I remembered about that thesaurus I found).

Erected as proximate as possible to the entangled and indiscriminate funeral pyre and anointed with greasy smoke plumes while pestered by the smell of seared and rotting flesh and the tang of jet fuel, sat our tepee.

It could not have been built any closer to the highly unlikely accident for the quicksand the plane rested in was treacherous.

It was astonishing to see how bravely near was our garrison to that uncouth display of butchery, whose fires still burned, and how my caretakers never seemed to recognize it; I don’t think they even smelled it.

I learned that solid soil in that part of the jungle was rare.

I also learned that I was surrounded in the same quicksand that the plane had impaled.

For miles and miles, there were thick mahogany woods, horned bushes, and many creeks and rivers, all of which were founded in or surrounded by a running brown and gray quicksand.

I was on a mound of blushing bare clay earth that bore what was left of me from the quicksand a good ten feet vertically.

The mound was approximately one half acre in diameter and almost perfectly oval, nothing grew in the brumal clay, though vivacious green roots scanned its sides.

No matter how hot and stuffy the jungle made the day, you could always burry your feet in the cool chilled earth for some relief if you felt up to the digging, I miss that.

The tepee was disappointing and lacked aesthetic appeal to me in the sense that it looked exactly like; down to the colorful hand paintings of horses and the animal skin it was made of, what I would have expected a tepee to look like.

It even had a dream catcher in it.

The first few days in the jungle were only slightly retained as a formless memory because of the intense pain the cauterization of my wounds entailed.

I seem to vaguely remember the burning in my throat from the steaming hot liquids that were routinely being forced down it.

It's funny how I am barely able to relocate the memory of the pleasuring sounds that were produced by the birds of paradise that surrounded me as the succulent fruit trees did during those arduous first few days.

I have no memory of the gamboling birds that crooned ardently to one another for a chance to procreate and the mating dances they would instinctively perform, which I would later grow to love and even fancy, at lolling times of delight that the birds existed purely and only for my own personal entertainment.

I was aloof to the gorgeous scenery of lush nodding trees that swayed passively in the confused gold and green wilderness.

I paid no mind to the trickle of the tropical breeze that caressed the leaves of the tress that engulfed and protected our mound; trees that bore a dozen different tropical fruits that would soon become a staple in my diet.

The crimson velvet passion flowers danced; waiting for my caretakers and me to make tea with, and the emerald suede pineapple guava berries hung heavily, but not with despair, and all to my complete ignorance.

The only memory I can now revisit vividly from those early days of disaffiliation with the sinking world save for the stone smell of rain was the malady I endured from my infected wounds.

Even in my subconscious, I focused entirely on the prominence of pain and not the subtleties of beauty; it is in my nature to make these terminal mistakes.

"Feubr auury." "Ferary." "Februauruuy." "Fregrehairy," I coughed.

My caretakers had been away for too long.

I was beginning to worry about everything, one thing at a time.

It was a cool jungle night. I lay in the tepee helplessly, and my mouth was like fly paper that only ever knew moisture in the form of vinegar carelessly spilt on it longer ago than anyone remembered.

I figured it was the month of February and was near my birthday.

I also guessed that I had been lying in that tepee for a month or so and knew for a fact that I had ridden the plane down at the end of January, but alas, my mind was warped.

For no reason in particular, I chose a tongue-twisting word to start learning how to speak again.

I chose a word that I had never had very much luck pronouncing properly even at my oral peak, as my very first word to conquer on the road to being able to explain to the real people of the real world that they are in fact disfigured and should be so lucky to experience such a unique way of existing.... February.

Indeed, I had a very hard time learning to talk again.

I reflected on false but entertaining philosophies.

I thought, "Man is always blabbing on and on all the time about nothing because it doesn't take very long to lose the ability altogether", among many other self-serving, two-dimensional outlooks on life.

It was very comforting to dig my mind into a hole and think negative thoughts and a good way to cope.

A plan began to hatch in my mind for what I would do if ever I made it home.

I obsessed on the thought and plotted out every possible scenario.

I was terribly worried about the money.

My heart sank when I noticed my pants were missing and that I had been clad in a rag that resembled a loin cloth.

I told myself at that time that I could not rest until I knew what had become of the money.

If I still had money (if it was no more, I would be no more, it was decided), I would make it home anyway possible and do whatever I could to fit into society and to make more money (happiness) and to live a normal life.

I was no longer picky and reserved about selling out artistically, professionally or culturally.

I was ready to drop any moral that may prevent me from having a normal, maybe even moderately successful life in a heartbeat to anyone who would give me (a cripple like me) a chance at fitting in.

I thought half in a coma of agony: "I'll settle with not being noticed. I'll play covers. I'll work forever, I'll marry someone safe and with money. I can wear that."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Shed a Tear

“We’ve done more than we could ever undo.”

It had been since the previous morning that I had seen my caretakers, and it was now late in the afternoon of the next day.

It was hot and damp.

The gnats had made their presence permanent in my life and were getting the very best of me in my weakened state.

I could no longer ignore the weak signal of the urgent and violent spasms of pain that my shrinking stomach was sending to my unreceptive brain.

“Where were they”? I thought.

“What were they going to do next”?

I had no idea what those maniacs were capable of and didn’t want to find out.

I had begun to think they were nursing me back to life in order to sell me as a one-armed one-eyed gimp slave.

I settled in my mind with the conclusion that they were planning to ransom me for money using bits of my remaining body as leverage for their sick scheme until their shallow demands were met.

I had been wearing very nice clothes when I first arrived in the jungle as I always had, mostly because it was unpopular for a man of my age and especially a man my educational limits to do so, but also maybe more importantly an unpopular fashion for a person of my ambiguous social class at the time, and I could have been thought to have been rich or important by the Indians who stole me from my grave.

Most of my tan suede jacket had melted to the remnants of my right arm, and my shoes, which were squared at the front (also very unpopular at the time), had disappeared into the murky jasmine green jungle or perhaps into the quicksand.

The only article of clothing that remained from my old life, though burnt and tattered, was my solidarity rag.

It seemed that my caretakers had rescued it with me and had wrapped it around my head as an eye patch.

The flap of the tepee had been left open.

I peered out past the curtain of fruit trees that shrouded our mound of clay.

I could see the husk of the plane and noticed that it was actually sinking very rapidly.

The left wing of the plane that recently extended; from my stationary view, the height of the bottom branches of the tree line it rested in front of had clearly sunk to be level with the tallest horned bushes it was near.

It didn't take long for the plane to disappear altogether, which was nice. The air smelled better, and the scenery was much more pleasant to witness, though little parts of debris remained scattered here and there, along with broken gnarled trees and blackened mashed boulders, it was definitely quite an improvement.

Without any more thought to what the Indians may do to me if they returned and if or why they were helping me, or who they were, or who to blame for my misfortune, I decided it would be a good idea to either pass out, fall asleep, or die, so I closed my eyes and went limp.

"You fools"! I screamed.

"Don't you know what that is"?

"Don't you know what you're doing, that's a federal crime"!

I stood up for the first time since the crash and made an attempt at a mad dash but failed when my legs gave way.

I fell at the Indians two great feet begging.

The final nail through coffin was struck, life was over.

I yelled, I pouted, I pleaded, I cried for mercy and begged for compassion.

I promised the hunters more money than the amount of the remaining cash they had not used as fuel to entice the dwindling campfire to stop.

People always told me money is only worth what you invest in it.

I disagree.

Ninety thousand dollars really made that fire dance (it was probably the purple and red ink on the newer bills).

The Indians had apparently returned in the day sometime from a journey to the hunting grounds.

It was the engaging smell of roasted jungle opossum the hunters were preparing that begged me awake.

My caretakers would later explain to me that they knew a way through the mud and where to hunt and that they would climb down the reaching arms of the jungle that bore us the fruit for our feast.

Then they would lead each other down to a hidden, treacherous path of slightly solid clay/mud, where they had set up a sort of a balancing zip line of tree vines that hovered over the path; they would use this to steady their delicate footing on the unsafe road to the hunting grounds.

There was nothing to continue; no life or love to look forward to. Anything that enticed one of my bodily senses to function was a curse.

“Kill me,” I thought.

My body was in ruins, my fortune disintegrated, and my ego in tatters. Even a monotonous, prescription drug—induced slavery sounded like the promised land to me at that point.

Not even blind and raging blame could comfort me anymore (though it certainly works for me now).

I could no longer lock myself away in a fragile shell of confusion and loathing.

Distaste did nothing to promote any comfort in my mind.

I was a tree, the grass, the breeze, the gnats surrounding my face, a spectator with no flesh or bounds of selfish goals and with nothing to be selfish for.

I had no presumptions about what life needed to be or what I rightfully deserved.

I lay still at the feet of those two awesome, dark, strangers, with their vowing eyes smiling and imploring mine to see the love they were trying to share.

They reached out a long steady arm each and with their firm rugged hands sat me on a log.

The older looking one, Shooshi, while laughing, reached out one of his massive hands to shake.

I would have returned the gesture if I had a hand to give.

Shooshi had deliberately gone for my missing arm.

When he saw that I was unable to shake, he pulled away quickly and pointed at me with his tree-branch finger, shot a contagious smile at me that grew steadily across his churlish old face, and said “Gotcha!” followed by the disruptive laughter of both men.

Takumat gave me a red clay plate with many tender cuts of jungle opossum; they gave me the butt piece and the legs.

The dish was garnished with passionflowers and scattered pineapple guava berries.

Takumat poured for me in a clay goblet what I began to fondly call “jungle juice”.

He handed it to me and said, “Do not keep too sober a state of mind Jim, you risk finding God.”

The liquid Takumat gave me was surely a wine made of the bounty of the collected fruits that rained daily onto our mound from the encompassing arms of our tree protectors.

The smell of fermenting fruits was never absent from the heavy air, and there were always flies buzzing about but was worth the inconveniences because the wine actually tasted great and was exactly what I needed to cope with whatever the hell life is or is trying to be.

I began to speak with my rescuers for the very first time, which I called that night and now my guardian angels; over my first solid meal in over a month as all three of us tossed the jug about and heartily drank to each other's health (what luck to drink with company).

It made no sense to me (and still doesn't) to discover that both men spoke a great deal more than just broken bits and pieces of English like I had first thought (also strange).

Though there was an exceptional language barrier between my friends and I at times, both men were highly intellectual beings and seemed to understand everything I said.

Sometimes they would speak to one another in a foreign tongue that I could not understand, and other times, they would operate in what I called "grunt mode", acting like cavemen in speech and body language.

Sometimes my caretakers would speak like an immigrant who had just learned English, but what I found that makes no sense at all is that whenever Shooshi or Takumat would express their philosophies or speak broader concepts with more than just a few words, both of their accents changed from being deep tribal grumbles to having a familiar and soft western accent.

I never asked for an explanation for why they spoke my language even better than I did at times.

I was done questioning every little thing that made no sense (for a few days), which was the greatest relief I have ever known.

Within two or three generous swigs of jungle juice, my caretakers and I were laughing hysterically and giving cheers.

I told them both how much I truly loved them and begged for their forgiveness.

I called them saints for having mended a poor old wretch like me back to such a standard of health; they only laughed at me and begged of me to sing.

They had shown interest in what they called my "craft" after hearing my explanation of wanting to be a singer in my old life.

I told them that if I ever made it back, I would try my hardest at it and would do whatever it may take to make it as a singer.

It took a great deal of begging and pleading and "juice" for them to get me to sing my song.

I told them it was called

"Shed a tear"

Beg your pardon,
I wasn't listening.
All the horror
Of the things I've seen

I think I know what to fear
It's the end shed a tear

I was surprised to hear the lightness of my voice in all of its strength.

My voice had never sounded so rich to me before.

It must have been the lack of smoking and the passionflower tea or the building confidence and security I was beginning to find in the presence of my new friends.

I could see in the eyes of my guardians that my song was captivating to them.

They seemed eager to hear each word.

I could hear every part in my head, the lamenting cello, a bellowing but careful bass, and the weeping of a viola.

I could hear an entire symphony building through each phrase, and I am sure that they heard it to.

I cleared my throat and continued:

I'm a monster and so are you
We've done more than
We could ever undo

I think I know what to fear
It's the end
Shed a tear

I loved the hunt
Now I'm on the run
They'll have my head for
The things I've done

I think I know what to fear
It's the end shed a tear.

I held the last note and let it decay with my slowing vibrato into infinity to become some other, never-resting form of energy. A tear swelled from my agitated eye.

I tried to blink it away, but I began to cry unstoppably.

My friends held me with open and loving arms.

I felt as though I had released all of my negative energy and harmful thoughts to the world.

No longer was there a bitter taste to life; it had been replaced with a pallet for all of the flavors the world had in store for me.

A new boundless respect and appreciation for life and my ability to still be a part of it, whatever I looked like, was born that day through the grace and respect of two absolute strangers.

It is incredibly embarrassing to revisit this memory now, but that night I drunkenly cried and begged for Shooshi to share the answer of being content and happy with me for he seemed to have all the answers that I, as an exploited-from-birth westerner, was without.

The old man told me, "A truly cursed life is a life that believes that being content is being happy, Jim".

I replied by saying that at least I was happier alive than I would have been dead.

Without a word, I could tell that Shooshi disagreed.

He put his hand over the shoulder of my good arm and looked out into the jungle at the last debris of wreckage and knocked over trees that the quicksand hadn't swallowed. he could see I was concerned with the sight. Shooshi smiled and said tenderly to me,

"Death is true satisfaction, for you are no longer fruitlessly looking to be satisfied, Jim."

Every time the man opened his mouth, he seemed to have some ancient wisdom for me that would provide days of philosophical reflection for my restless but occupied mind. Shooshi continued by saying:

"I do believe you will be happier here than you ever remember being in the short amount of time we have together Jim, for man is at his best when he is surviving and at his worst when he is thriving".

Tears came rushing back and choked me at that moment.

I felt a heavy lump swelling in my throat that could have been my heart trying to leap out of my mouth.

I swallowed hard and forced the advancing ball to retreat.

I shook my head as I wept to show Shooshi that I had understood his meaning, again my friends embraced me.

I loved my new companions. I loved our jungle. I felt baptized in holy water and washed clean of the scornful mind that had been nothing but a curse and a weight against my soul. I was reborn.
But...

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Happy Mammals

“Oh well, you can’t win them all
Oh well, well . . . you can win them all . . .”

Shooshi and Takumat were father and son.

Takumat was a tall brown-skinned man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties.

He wore a decorative auburn loincloth, as did I, and a necklace of what looked like assorted animal teeth.

His hair was black and straight like his father’s.

Takumat’s carved and painted face paid homage to his father’s stern and postured but warm and caring features that brilliantly spoke silent compassion and patience toward man, plant, animal, and earth while fearlessly abstaining from embracing any of these things.

Shooshi’s brow was carved with lines of kindness and ridges of honesty and deep thought.

His hair was the white of a cloud, but his skin still glowed with a radiance like that of an adolescent boys even though he was an ancient and gaseous old man and had to have been at least three times my age.

Both men were tyrannically strong looking and magnificent to behold to someone who came from a world inhabited mostly by lumpy misshapen dumpling people.

Both men were also permanently cross-eyed. (Just before I stopped watching television, I saw a special on the geography channel about how certain indigenous native Indian jungle tribes were cross-eyed).

They said it was because of how close the Indians were to the trees their whole lives, which never gave their eyes a horizon to straighten out on.

I think those were the decedents of the ones who said the world would end).

Shooshi and Takumat both had enormous white stone lip piercings that elongated their pronounced lips passed their chins.

They were my only friends in the world. I was utterly dependent on them for everything, from food and shelter to moral support.

Also, the jungle juice was a great perk.

It wasn’t about me anymore.

I felt so indebted for everything my companions had been doing for me and was pitiful over the fact that I could do slightly more than nothing to help add to our little community.

I was a crippled, half blind, and incredibly out of my element in everything I did.

My friends never seemed to mind me or ever tried to make me feel guilty for eating too much anteater stew or drinking too much jungle juice.

They simply laughed and drank and ate with me merrily.

They humbled my soul more in a few days than society had ever galvanized it during my whole life.

I asked Takumat why it was that he and his father decided to save me, but each time he would answer with what I thought to be mystic nonsense, "You save man, Jim".

His dad would always agree with a nod and with a piercing look in his crossed eyes, "Man start real world, Jim. Man must lose his treasure to gain his fortune".

Shooshi left early in the morning to collect all of the necessary herbs and fruits needed to make more jungle juice, and I felt awful that the journey was only necessary because I alone had drained our entire one-liter red clay jug the night before of all of its juice, though I had no regrets of dancing and singing all night long with my friends.

When I awoke that morning, I was feeling exhausted and belligerently hungover.

My head throbbed and my bones creaked with weariness.

I felt the need to hydrate and to try again.

Maybe my headache would be cured if I crawled into water, or, I thought, maybe a better cure would be crawling into the quicksand head first.

And again...

That smell...

I stooped to the flap of the tepee and opened it.

I was blasted with concrete pain to my head, which was caused by the ebullient light that poured unremittingly from the absence of the flap of animal hide.

There was no shaking the morning malaise.

All I could do was wait for Shooshi to come home so that I could continue to drink.

I tripped on a misguided tree root that fancied itself a doormat and fell on my face in the mud.

I could hear the rhythm of Takumat's feet beating the ground as he came upon me.

He was laughing.

I insisted on helping myself to my feet, but not with indignity.

We walked, side by side, for a few feet and sat on the solid mahogany log that rested by the campfire.

Neither Takumat nor I noticed the brooding thought the other was captive to for ages.

Though I had done a decent job of not asking questions and being happy with the answerless life I was lucky enough to still live, I was only suppressing these thoughts that had finally reappeared at the forefront of my consciousness.

Questions began to rage in my mind with no sight of answers. "There has to be an answer", I thought.

"What happens when I die?"

"Is there a heaven or a hell?"

I questioned the very definitions of truth and wisdom and sought for a use for either of these seemingly divine but mostly ineffective devices that seemed to be the answer to all of the world's problems in my still candid mind.

I grabbed a twig and prodded the vigilant coals that were waiting on a cue to release what was left of their kinetic energy into the pale, open sky.

I noticed that Takumat's deep gaze had stayed fixed on the chill clay earth for the duration of the silence.

He held that look for more than a moment after I asked him the worst question one person can ask another.

"Is there a heaven Takumat?"

Takumat seemed like he had not heard my question.

I returned to moving coals and ash about the fire pit pondering both the answer to my question and why I had bothered asking it.

"Don't worry about it, Jim." he answered slowly.

"Don't worry about it?" I couldn't understand how he could say that and how it was supposed to comfort me.

I even felt insulted by his answer.

Surely the man could not have been claiming to have no fear of his own mortality.

I would not believe that.

"Life is frail and horrible, Takumat, and then it is taken from you whether you are a good person or not. how does this not upset you? I am missing an arm and an eye, I nearly died. I should be dead! And might as well be, whether I have to face death in another few decades or tomorrow, I am a dead man, and so are you, Takumat! Can't you see? how is this not all you think about"?

Takumat's gaze slowly drew from the smooth gray stone it had been warming and met mine with a severe impact.

The weight of his stare made my eyes cower to hide in the floor as a first reaction.

I battled to shoulder the burden of his mighty eyes that searched passed my shallow first few layers of mind to the deeper parts of my soul.

He spoke lucidly and with a distinctly western accent.

“If there is a heaven Jim, that is not where you are heading”.

I was startled to hear what seemed to be hollow and absent words coming from a man of such care and heart.

I felt attacked and the need to defend.

“Why shouldn’t I go to heaven? I may not be perfect and may have committed less than decent acts toward my fellow man at times, but it is not like I am unaware of these things. It’s just human nature to do bad things sometimes, Takumat, and I assure you that the bad things I do eat me up inside because I am good. That is what it means to be good, Takumat. I am a moral man.”

Takumat’s eyebrows lowered, and his face became stern.

He looked truly puzzled as he tossed another faggot in the fire

“Moral?” he asked.

“What is a moral man, Jim? I do not think you know.”

I was distracted by the sound of an ecosystem that was circling the drain as I failed to create a makeshift definition for “morality”.

I thought that I should at least make an attempt to feign that I knew it.

No words came.

“A moral man is a man who finds greatness in endeavors that are larger than him. An amoral man finds greatness in endeavors that specifically pertain to him. All questions of morality are answered by a man’s own sense of self, and all men seek greatness.”

Takumat was a young man who had a kindred and youthful spirit that burned with an inexhaustible passion that was impossible to ignore.

He lacked none of his father’s wisdom but could sharpen his gracefulness.

He had an attacking way of giving me this advice that was at first hard to swallow.

When he eventually continued the revelation, his voice would begin to rumble with power and resonate to the core of the dense log we shared, but first I had to interrupt him with yet another dim question, though he seemed to not lose any of the momentum he was building when I did.

I asked:

“So if I have not been a good or moral person, then do you think that I deserve to go to hell”?

I was becoming to believe that Takumat and his father were indeed born with every answer to every question, and listened eagerly for something that might be an answer, or at least something I could use as comfort.

"I do not think that you deserve anything, Jim, whether you have been bad or good. The very idea of hell is redemption for our egos. In order to realize an eternity of the misery and pain one expects they might be subjected to if they should ever be sentenced to hell, one must retain a somewhat familiar and rational mind; one must certainly still possess an undying abiding sense of self to recognize any hardship at all. The consequence of an eternity of being tortured and smote with fire and brimstone is still the promise of the reward of an eternity in itself. The idea of "hell" serves our egos that cannot fathom not existing at all, far greater than the idea of nothingness ever will".

Before I could try to generate something whimsical to add to his great words, Takumat held true with a voice that gained passion with every morsel of comfort I had to abandon.

I was feeling deflated, like I had lost my footing on ground that I thought to be solid as Takumat went on.

"I have faith, Jim, that when you die, not only will you have no answer for any of this; he raised his arms to the trees, then to the sky, and then slapped the earth with them to add emphasis to the 'this', but you will accept not being granted one."

I was beginning to understand and absorb my friend's meanings, though it was difficult and offensive at first. (I would later give him a little bit of my own advice and tell him that when administering medicine to someone who needs it, don't make it a suppository if at all possible, he laughed).

His explanations were certainly not real answers to any of the questions I was asking, but his words did serve as a significant comfort to me and eased the pain of not knowing anything at all.

"You say 'faith' because you do not know?" I asked innocently.

Takumat replied warmly, "Yes Jim that is what faith is: not knowing".

I thought our debate had died like the last embers of the fire that I had poked to death, but Takumat continued with the same might and drive as before, though he sustained with a newfound carefulness to his tone, and he seemed to have found the grace I thought he lacked in the next words he spoke.

"I also have faith, Jim, that the only kingdom that you will ever visit is the kingdom of your mind, and when you finally realize that it is you who sits on the only throne, you will see, kneeling at your feet, two scheming servants called "heaven" and "hell." Though these subjects are both indeed merely jesters and things of amusement, dictate them always with both courage and fear as they demand these respects from their conscious master."

"That sounds to me to be a solipsistic and selfish way of thinking".

I was sure I had stumped him.

"Selfish?" he snapped back at me in an instant.

He needed no time to materialize an answer; all of his thoughts and philosophies were all obviously readied in his mind and not just stored within his large head.

"Tell me, Jim, is it not selfish to believe that you deserve and are worthy of an eternity in heaven? What makes you so special?"

Again I found no words to answer, and had no answer.

"The very pursuit of such a vain and unnatural reward for already being granted the wonders and beauties of life, and the cold hard fear of death, is self-serving and strictly immoral. Who are you to demand an answer for all of this Jim? And who am I to grant you one? Even if I had the answers you seek, I would keep them from you so that you may live the life you were blessed with, for if I knew the answer, I would surely be dead."

"So you don't think there is a God"? I asked.

"If there is a god, he is a good God to hide from his children. A good God would not curse his children with his own perfection and omnipotence for because of those things he is not alive though he may exist. Do you not think that God would grant life to his children that he has given such life to"?

"So you do believe in God"! I exclaimed.

Takumat had to laugh.

I would have punched me in the head if I were him, but instead he gently nudged my arm with his elbow, pointed toward the pale blue sky that housed the very idea of heaven, and said "Jim, if he's up there, he is looking down on each and every one of us wishing that he could play too."

I woke up late in the night to the sound of metal striking the earth. I could hear old Shooshi grunting and his heavy breaths after each strike in the hard cold clay.

I climbed out of the tepee to investigate what my brothers were doing in the night, maybe I could help I thought.

Just beyond the fire pit near the monkey puzzle tree, I beheld Shooshi and Takumat digging with metal makeshift spades that were crumpled and shaped wrong for the job and were fastened to a couple of broken mahogany branches that they had secured the weak pieces of shrapnel to, which must have been retrieved from the remains of the wreckage, a very brave feat.

I overheard the pair speaking in their native tongues, it was beautiful.

"Ha-se-shoosh-acha-hopa-meena-mow!" said Shooshi. It was the most serious look I had ever seen the man give. he stared into what looked like to me forever and eternity.

What he was seeing despite of the murky dark jungle before his dreaming eyes, I wish I had never found out what it was.

"Uh-huh-buh-bub-uba-ticky-monaheliapah"?

Takumat had a nervous sounding tone to his voice that I had never heard before; he was always such a picture of courage, I thought.

Shooshi laid an earnest glance unto Takumat, chuckled affectionately, and gently rubbed the hair on his son's head and said, "Put! Puhna-poka-peka-leef".

What had seemed like tension to me smoothed into a loving and encouraged laugh that belted from deep within the bellies of both of men.

I pretended like I understood what they were talking about and approached my friends laughing.

I asked Shooshi what they were doing, digging two holes with rather lousy tools in the dead of night and with the sun threatening to rise so soon.

They did not answer. I asked if I could help them dig, they laughed and told me to sit and to drink the dew from the flowers hanging above and to eat their fruit and that I could sing for them if I wanted to help. I decided to just watch.

After a while, I asked again what the purpose of all of this was.

Shooshi answered me, "It time to start the real world, Jim."

"Who's starting the real world?" "You, Jim."

"And you too?"

"We here for you."

"What's happening to this world?"

"It served purpose, it finish teach its lesson, Jim. This world prepares man for real world, all this world build to one perfection. We need to keep digging Uhhg-Ook! Not very much time now, come Takumat, taareepa- noko-knokokomaulohow! Dig fast".

With that, he turned his back on me and continued digging, making painstakingly slow amounts of progress for the hardened clay was unyielding. I had a week to think about what Shooshi's real meaning was and to reflect on my visit to the jungle that felt like a lifetime (it was probably only a few months at the very most).

"Me? Starting the real world? Yes of course . . ." I thought.

These men must be prophets and me the messiah.

The world could really be ending as I had already concluded before my ascension to my brand-new healing state of mine.

"Those guys know something that I don't, I am certain of it", I thought.

And I also started to think that I was right to turn my back on mankind, to seek my higher destiny, to find a better life for myself, and to find a perfect world as I so often dreamed of and knew was possible.

Something big was about to happen, and I had inside information on it.

I would escape the fate of running around idiotically in terror for my life as the end of times swallowed everyone I loved whole.

"What's in that trash bag? Are you going to put that into one of these holes"?

Their faces were grim.

“We find this when we get more food”.

In the bag, which was clearly where the odor was permeating from, was what looked like a dead baby.

Before they could put the thing into the ground and bury it, I took the bag and haphazardly dumped out its contents.

There was a dead infant in there.

I knew it was the same baby that belonged to Cal back on the plane.

There was a note stapled to its face that read:

“Knock, Knock. Who’s there? A dead baby. A dead baby, who? A dead baby. That’s the punchline.”

Written across the baby’s abdomen in sharpie were the words “There’s no such thing as wasted aggression.” And the torso was quite literally punched to death.

I heard mad laughter deep in the jungle and it sounded like that strange man, Arkansas I met on the plane.

The two Indians unceremoniously put the baby in the smaller hole they had dug.

When the week was up, we shared what I call now in my memory “The Last Supper.”

The boys had claimed a family of monkeys hunting that day.

We roasted them from the early afternoon till the late evening.

I had a vicious appetite that had been tormented all day long by the intoxicating aroma of the roasting monkeys.

I ate the baby monkey, which had the greatest flavor of any piece of meat I had ever enjoyed.

They laughed and called me cruel for not eating the older monkeys.

I joked back that I enjoyed eating baby meat because it was as though I could taste the stolen life that at least their tender little muscles were acutely aware of wanting to live.

Takumat accused me of being insensitive and called me a disgrace to our family unit and told me that he and his father should have left me in the plane to die.

Shooshi added by saying:

“And we would have been glad to; you were covered from head to toe in your own shit Jim”.

They both exploded into laughter, I felt my face turn red and I came back with “It was quicksand”!

We laughed for hours over anything; the night seemed unstoppable. They had such great senses of humor.

After much drinking, eating, dancing, and laughing, the mood suddenly became quite sober despite my spinning head.

Shooshi cleared his throat, wiped the monkey fat from his chin, burped melodically, smiled, and said,
“It is time to start the real world, Jim.”

I agreed enthusiastically and then asked if I could help clean up the mess our feasting had left.

Shooshi continued.

“You left for jungle to find better world. You are ready to start better world, you have learned, you are man, ready to be perfect”.

To add to the drama of whatever the hell he was talking about, Shooshi clasped his fist in the air and pulled an arm back rapidly that had been rising open handed the entire duration of those near final words he spoke; the animated dangling skin from under his still strong bicep flapped to and fro as he returned to his normal slightly bowed posture.

I agreed with Shooshi that I had felt ready to start a new world for myself but told him that my plans had changed.

“No plans, Jim. Please, get in the hole”.

With a slow wave of his wrinkled hand, he pointed toward the hole that he and Takumat had been slaving away at for over a week.

“You want me to get in the hole”?

“Yes, Jim”.

“To start the new world”?

“Yes”.

“You are crazy, Shooshi”.

I climbed in the hole.

I would have done anything for those guys; it’s not like they would have buried me alive (I thought), and even if they did chose to it bury me, it would have been their right. My life was always in their hands.

It was cold, but the night was warm, so the clay hole felt icy in contrast to the humid night heat.

Goose pimples pricked my skin as I finished climbing in, and I began to shiver.

I looked up at the night sky; there was not a single cloud, just countless stars twinkling for my delight. I was in the ground up to just past my elbow.

My friends looked down on me smiling and laughed warmly.

A mosquito bit me on the chin.

It was then that I felt “the hole” shift and start to constrict around me.

It pinned my arm and legs and rendered them useless.

I became stuck.

Takumat told me to look at myself during my panic and to be amazed.

I was nothing short of amazed when I looked down at the portion of my body that had not been gripped and swallowed by the clammy earth.

I noticed that I was self-illuminated; my whole body was glowing with bright golden light.

The light started by creeping out of my torso and then exploding out of my face.

I tried to scream but only let out light.

It was like visual noise that sounded to be heard by everyone within the hemisphere.

A noise that came from only me, shining like a spotlight from the swallowing hole in the earth, all the way out of the jungle, into the outer space, without ever dwindling or losing radiance.

Fear struck me as hard as the clay that tightened more and more around my chest and pulled me further into it.

My heart was racing, I continued trying to call for help, but nothing left my lips but more blinding light.

My companions were bowed on the ground praying and paying no attention to me.

“What did they do to me”? I thought as tears found my eye, and as if Shooshi heard my thoughts, he spoke his last words to me.

“Do not be too important to lose yourself, Jim”.

“Do not be too important to lose yourself, Jim”.

Slowly I sunk into the ground; it seemed like an eternity of uncertainty and frightfulness.

My head was the only thing above ground at the point when I looked up and gazed straight into the sky.

It was then that my eye caught what looked to be parachutes floating above.

I heard an airplane race overhead and doubtfully thought “I’m saved”.

I sank a little more; my mouth was silenced by the clay.

It was the last time I would see my caretakers as I remembered them, my friends who dug my grave then kissed the top of my head that was still clear of debris and then sealed my fate with a crown of mud.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Only Me

“They would know what to think if only they were me”

I remembered days in the “old world” where I would wake, sometimes even in my own bed, totally confused with no recollection to where I came from, who I was, or where I was.

Sometimes in those very brief confused moments, I would even forget that I was a person and what people were.

I was having that feeling again when I awoke, and I was not in a grave; however, it didn’t fade away in an instance by a reassuring glimpse of a familiar desk or messy pile of laundry.

I was unable to spy anything that might give me a hint as to where I might have ended up.

I was shocked and ecstatic to behold with two eyes that I had both my arms again.

My skin glittered gold, and I was surrounded in an atmosphere of light that followed me as my aura throughout my entire stay in the real world.

I felt no pain either (one of the very first things I noticed), and the burning inflammation in my chest that was a result of my poor diet and chosen vices was gone altogether.

I tested my new eyesight by observing the thick and massive jungle I had somehow found my way to.

There were trees.

Awesome trees that stretched from the rich earth upward as far as my new sharpened eyes could report.

Each tree bore what seemed to be unlimited amounts of fruit of all different hues, shapes, and sizes, making each boundlessly colorful and was an immense pleasure to witness.

Any plant I could tug out of the earth would be attached to a vegetable, some vegetables would be thick and meaty unlike anything I had ever seen, some of those new sorts of veggies would even taste like poultry or roast lamb, and no two pieces of fruit or veggies ever tasted the same as the last.

Food could not taste bad, though I later discovered that I didn’t need to eat.

There were animals everywhere of every specie and genus, including many new animals I had never seen before. I called them dinosaurs, but you wouldn’t have guessed by how docile they were.

I met a tyrannosaurus that day.

I was helping myself from the warm sunbathed earth and examining the hole that birthed me to a brand-new utopia when the ground began to shake violently. I began to brace for whatever the catch had to be to live in such beauty in one golden piece.

My heart was filled with terror to find that the pounding was coming from a fifty-foot tall, twenty-foot wide, big blue stupid dinosaur.

The monster had its tongue hanging out one side of his mouth, as was its fashion, and was flying over thick masses of peaceful animals. Even though the beast seemed clumsy and terrible, he failed to make chunky pulps of manually separated animal slime wherever he stepped.

In fact, Billy (as I named him) seemed to be going at a slightly slower pace as he neared the massive group of animals that were beginning to assemble around me.

The brute knocked down a younger tree as he exploded into my proximity.

“This is it”, I thought.

“I have been sent back to the Stone Age, and now I am going to be eaten by a dinosaur”.

At least I had yet to stare a potentially uninteresting death in the face.

I could be grateful for that.

To my relief, Billy did not eat me, and instead, with the massive purple tongue that had been dangling out of his mouth, as was his fashion, Billy gave me a hot slobbery dinosaur-sized welcoming lick, which started from my feet and ended at my head.

It was so powerful that I ended up doing a backflip as a result and landed on my face laughing.

Again, I helped myself to my feet.

I looked out at the masses of varied critters and insects that had surrounded me.

The birds blackened the trees with their masses.

There were ferrets, fish, dogs, sheep, deer, mammoths, marmots, raptors, boars, and turtles.

There were alligators, stegosauruses, spiders, slugs, bugs, and bees, all unlike one another but peaceably assembled nonetheless, for there was no need to fight in a world where no one had to worry about hunger.

I felt like they may have wanted me to say something. I cleared my throat and spoke sheepishly.

“Hi, hello, creatures of paradise”.

None seemed to understand, I continued. “I am man”.

“I will do you no harm”.

Still there was no reaction from the mass.

I kept on with even more strength in my voice and thought that I must have been inactivating to the animals’ minds and that I needed to try harder.

I felt that my presence grew with each word.

"I am your friend, animals and nature. Though mankind can be nasty sometimes, have no fear, I am mankind now, I am humanity, and I am good, I am a moral man, I am incorruptible".

Again no animal seemed to understand, and the crowd had begun to thin out, they had come to see what all the fuss was about, as I'm sure my entrance had been as dramatic as my exit from the old world.

Billy, however, hung around as my shadow for a while.

He seemed to be the most curious of all the animals, or at least the friendliest. Billy quickly became my companion and means of exploring the new world. I would ride on his back for days scouring the earth for adventure and trying to take in all of its beauty.

There were more than just jungles in paradise, and everything I saw was of extreme proportions.

When the jungle opened up into a salmon desert, I saw the sky for the first time. In the hanging sky, there were massive rolling silver and golden clouds that were touched lightly with puerile shades of tangerine shadows.

In the desert, I found decrial florescent cacti that scraped the sky and observed some of those cacti being trampled by gargantuan long-haired, clear-haired desert mammoths.

In the marshlands, I saw electric gators that dwarfed the highways of the old world. Billy was terrified of the creatures.

Billy and I found bluewood forests that spanned the size of the entire planet I had left behind.

I used to lay in the forest and watch the sun dust speckles sparkle and fall into the tall grassy metropolis while I listened in wonder to the closest thing I had to real music, which was the song of the carrot snakes and the ant lion moles.

I named the creatures "carrot snakes" because they were orange in color and had swollen big heads that progressively thinned out to a pencil lead tail.

The creatures would sit at the forest floor and vomit their neon-green insides out that I thought resembled the greens atop a carrot and wait for insects to stick to their trap; the insects were attracted to the snake's florescent green guts and their beautiful, sad, wailing alto tones that seemed a bigger sound than what the tiny creatures could produce.

The lamenting cry reminded me of a sound an Indian flute would create.

The carrot snakes would sing in harmony with the deep voices of the ant lion moles that sounded to me like an incredibly deep trumpet, like a sad laugh.

Sometimes I would leave Billy behind and try to climb the tallest mountains I could find (which were always endlessly larger than even the largest mountains of old) but would lose interest after a day's hike. The oceans were the only thing that had not seemed to be any larger or greater, for even in the old world, they seemed immeasurable and incessantly deep.

"I will always return to the jungle".

I told myself in my mind that it was because that's where Billy was most comfortable, but I knew inside why I made the jungle my home.

I never wanted to be too far away from or to be gone too long from "the hole".

Besides, I am Jungle Jim.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tomorrow, I Will Change

“Too far along to educate and I’ll smile when they dig my grave”

“Where is God”? I began to wonder.

All of those incredible prophecies being fulfilled planted a seed in my restless mind that grew to think that there might actually be a God and that I was to meet him if this was in fact paradise.

During my scouring of the earth, I had kept an eye out for anything that might have resembled marijuana or tobacco with no luck.

I began to look for plants that could produce drugs I didn’t even prefer and was formerly against.

The goal was to get high, whatever that meant.

None of the colossal fungi that I encountered on one of my boring adventures had any psychoactive properties at all or would even make me sick for eating.

I tried to make alcohol in many failed attempts.

I should have learned more about that “craft” while I was still bound to the fate of the old world.

I reflected on this for a lifetime.

It had been what felt like over a year and I had not been sick at all.

My health was never changing.

I never felt energetic or fatigued; pain and pleasure were both distant memories for me.

I had an idea of perfection feeling like a great orgasm that never left or weakened in intensity and was disappointed to feel nothing.

I could hardly even get a hard-on most of the time.

I at least thought that my body would have become mighty and muscular, but my muscles were just a little stronger than they had been in the old world, nowhere near as sturdy as I had hoped.

I began to become bored.

It took me a year to admit my boredom in my own mind.

“What is my purpose in this new world? What is the purpose of this world at all”?
I thought as I was strolling through the jungle and entranced in deep brooding thought.

It was then that suddenly a baby bird that had prematurely attempted to leave the security of its mothers nest fell in front of my feet.

“That’s it”!

I had an epiphany.

“I should live my life”, I thought, “for the animals, for nature. I guess that I am God, and it is my duty to make this world even better, to see what man could have done if he were completely selfless”.

I lifted the otherwise doomed mortal baby bird from the jungle floor and returned it to its home for a second chance at life.

Billy and I took off into the wilderness to go see what animals we could help.

The first animal in distress we came across was a red and black zebra that we found during our flight through the fluorescent, cinnamon-magenta grasslands.

The poor beast was suffering from a broken leg after a tumultuous fall off a hill it was mindlessly grazing on.

I jumped off Billy’s big blue back to the rescue.

I reached into my “social services sack” and retrieved some rope I had gathered and a few bits of wood to make a splint for the injured quadruped.

The thing did not seem to care that it had been saved from its luckless fate or to even notice the pain it must have suffered.

The ungrateful animal continued to graze without a thought in the world of its new fortune.

After being a little disheartened by the experience, I decided to go home and thought “Maybe I’ll just focus on all of the animals that live near home, just the animals by “the hole”.

On our way back from the grasslands, I came across a community of coal-black beavers who had been struggling to complete a dam that they had been building seemingly out of their means and capabilities.

It wasn’t hard to see that the project was only moments away from failing.

Once again, I left Billy in his tracks and came charging to the rescue of my little furry friends.

It was a permanent day that time of year.

The only change in the sky was in its color; it was dark green that day and was hard to tell time, though I believe that I worked for two days straight on the dam, chopping down trees, hacking, sawing, and lugging huge heavy logs around.

The more I did to contribute to completing the dam, the less the beavers helped.

On top of my methods of building being too sophisticated for a beaver, it was also unnecessary that they lend a hand simply because it was being taken care of for them nor did I want them to help; my labor was my gift to them.

As I packed up to leave after completing the best God-made dam the new world had ever seen, I looked for some appreciation from the beavers and once again found no gratitude.

Immediately after I finished blocking the great river, the beavers had seemed to forget that I was even there and carried on with their busy beaver ways without a pause.

When I was new to paradise, I made it a point to keep “the hole” at least out of sight from my tepee and deliberately built the thing a few hundred feet away and facing toward the east.

The day I returned from building the dam, I turned it to the west. (My friends Shooshi and Takumat had taught me how to build my very own tepee in preparation for the real world. If I had known what the hell they were talking about, I would have asked about the “jungle juice”).

Soon my visits to “the hole” would become more and more frequent, and my tepee slowly migrated to be within sight of it.

After returning from another disappointing day of “social services”, I went back home to ponder happiness and why, now that I lived in paradise, it had constantly eluded me.

I had begun to feel (if it could be called feeling) that I was growing increasingly unhappy, and the bitterness that I had thought that I shed during my rebirth had slowly progressed from being just a cameo in the freak show that is my life to becoming a type-casted character in the act.

Upon nearing my tepee, I passed “the hole” on my path.

I got about two steps past the chasm when I heard music and what I thought to be human voices in harmony and what I hoped to be God so that I could demand an answer for all of this nonsense.

I turned around slowly, knelt low to the earth, pressed my chest against the cool mossy jungle floor, and slowly crawled up to “the hole”.

I was closer to it than I had ever allowed myself to be.

My head hung over the darkness and I asked into the void, “Is that you, God”?

I listened desperately for an answer.

I had decided that I had heard nothing and that I was probably starting to go insane, but the moment I returned to my feet, I heard music for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

“Do-do-do-do” the guitar went “do-do-do-do”.

How pretty it sounded, what keen notes to play together in succession at such a tempo, I thought.

The song seemed to remind my brain which failed to relay to my soul of a beautiful emotion I had long forgot.

My head wanted to cry but my heart could not.

I didn’t remember ever hearing the tune before, though it was closer to me than I thought.

From what I could hear, it went like this:

To far along to educate
And I'll smile when
They gig my grave
And I'm happy
The world ain't so bad

Lament, repent
There's always a consequence
And I'm sad
The world don't make no sense

I've been doing what
I've been told
And it's been a long time
Since I've told you so
But I'm scared
I think we should turn back

I collapsed to my knees and lay on my back next to the hole, feeling a diuretic urgency to cry the tears that had begun to sting to hold back.

My tunnel vision let out into the starry purple sky.

Though I think I know what I mean
The world remains a mystery
It is not at all nonsense
That I cannot seem to climb a fence

I'm sorry I live too fast
I'm sorry nothing lasts.

The music broke.

The guitar riff from the beginning of the tune repeated as blamelessly as it had before and lead into the second chorus that roared with a longing despondency that besieged my mind and attacked it ruthlessly, pleading for me to let fall the tears that my eyes had failed to create, into the dark endless hole my head had been dangling over.

To far along to educate
And I will live to see the day
That I pay for everything I take

Lament, repent
I cannot face the consequence
I can change, yeah
Oh lord, I'll change

I've been doing what
I've been told
And these chains I wear
Make me cold
I can't fake it

Fake a smile today

Though I think I know what I mean
The world remains a mystery
It is not at all nonsense
That I cannot seem to climb a fence

I'm sorry I live too fast
I'm sorry nothing lasts.

"The hole" had reminded me of what I was truly passionate for in life, and that passion was for music and art and expression, of all of the things I longed for, a guitar, a collection of records, and a pen and paper trumped all.

More than the love of a woman, more than the comfort of a bottle, and even more than a lungful of smoke, my heart longed for music.

I wanted to feel what the person the unknown voice belonged to felt.

I wanted to live in a world where nothing could last.

I reminisced over the times I was able to feel what he must have felt when those words found his sore heart; I longed to revisit the sensation of what it is like to cry with despair.

I tried to think of her to try to inspire emotion into my neither tender nor callused heart, but not even that helped.

I could feel but was unable to retain the intense emotion that the song invoked; I could only analytically render it brilliant.

I was mankind, not humanity.

I yelled into "the hole" at the voices that I was sure I had heard.

My only answer was the echo of a voice that had become unfamiliar to me.

I wondered what I had heard, where the music had come from, and most of all, once again, if I was losing my mind (I expected to at any moment).

After an hour of trying to make a connection with the people (or God) in "the hole", I gave up and retired to write in my tepee.

Chapter Thirty

Grandma Shot Grandpa

“And what she said was . . .”

I never wanted to see another animal again in my life.

All of my good intentions to help the animal kingdom had gone unnoticed and unrewarded.

The only difference my actions had made in the animals behavior was a kingdom-wide dependency on me to perform every service I could provide.

I gave even purely cosmetic services such as grooming, gathering massive amounts of food, and allowing critters to use me as transportation as a man does a horse.

I maintained the bridges and dams and sick animals that I had helped to build, to secure, or to nurture.

Everywhere I turned, there were sheep bleating for a brushing, dogs barking for a game of fetch, bears awaiting massages (who began, upon to seeing me arrive, flop on their big bellies in wait for me to rub their pampered necks).

When I would choose to ignore the animals, they would unknowingly protest the lack of “social services” by surrounding me by the hundreds of thousands crying for more.

I became a recluse and eventually retired my “social services sack” and contemplated throwing it into “the hole”; instead, I threw it in the thorn-less bushes.

I had heard music, I would not forget.

“The hole” inspired me to start writing songs again; however, it was almost impossible to find anything that might inspire me to write something that could even compare to the emotion I heard in the unknown song.

There was nothing and no one to be mad at.

There was no violence to disapprove of.

There were no great love affairs to be had that might have spared for me a small glimmer of the enthusiasm I would need to create beauty or ugliness or something.

I racked my mind for dirty secrets and contentious things (I hardly remembered any at that point) that might remind me of the ugliness of the old world that used to inspire great art in my music.

My first attempt at writing a song about ugliness was barbaric and frantic.

I chose to write a song about the fabled murder of my grandfather at my grandmother’s hand.

I remembered the day when my mother finally told me the whole story.

I was fifteen.

Until my fifteenth birthday, I had only known one small shred of information about my grandpa, and that was Grandma shot Grandpa.

It was a dark secret, and I was forbidden from speaking about it with the other kids at school.

I remembered my mother explaining the details to me when I was a child as a child would have remembered it, for she was just a small child when it happened.

The story goes:

My grandpa came home to his tiny tin trailer that housed his family of five, drunk again, and greeted my aunts with a smack to their tiny faces as an entrance.

He found a pint of scotch he had drunkenly forgotten a few days before on the checkered counter of their five-foot by seven-foot kitchen and drained the bottle in a few greedy swigs, then he continued his toddler's tantrum.

Things started to get out of hand when Grandpa threatened Grandma by saying that he would sell my aunts and "Kat" (my mother) as slaves to a third-world country.

The two twirled in combat in the kitchen while my aunts and mother escaped to the neighbor's yard to wait for the situation to blow over; however, the skirmish ended up climaxing to Grandma grabbing Grandpa's old Mossberg 500 that lay soundly under Grandpa's side of their tiny twin-sized bed.

Without another shout or scream, my Grandma, being made of nothing that is real, squeezed the trigger her finger had been shivering against and peppered Grandpa, point-blank, in the chest with a volley of dark pellets. Within a few moments, Grandpa drowned in his own blood and laid forever still on the yellow and white, also checkered, blood-soaked linoleum.

The tragedy was not at its awful conclusion yet.

After Grandma shot Grandpa, she ran out of the trailer to find mom in the neighbor's yard crying in confusion. During the breakdown, she was on repeat like a broken record saying, "here kitty, kitty. here kitty, kitty. I did it, I did it kitty, kitty," whilst chasing my mom through the yard.

The words that came to mind went:

Grandma shot Grandpa
And what she said
And what she said was
What she said
What she said was:

"Here kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty."
She said,
"Here kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty."
"I did it kitty, kitty. I did it kitty, kitty."
She said,
"Here kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty."
That's what she said
Grandma shot Grandpa

Though I was happy with the lyrics, the song just wouldn't be the same without the guitar line I had prepared for it in my head.

Writing had begun to seem impossible to me in paradise, or at least not as painlessly easy as it had been when I was longing for paradise.

It had become very frustrating to even entertain the idea of attempting my hand at a poem or song.

I started to blame God (and still do), though I still didn't buy that he existed.

I went to sleep sadly, alone in my tepee, and dreamed of "the hole" and, like always, I dreamed of her.

The next day, Billy and I left the jungle for the blue mountains of the north. Billy was never far from my side and would respond to a perfected whistle (like everything I did, I was perfection).

Billy would come running from whatever part of the jungle he was at to come to bare me to whatever destination I saw fit.

I reflected on my friendship with Billy as he bore me to my destination.

I had noticed throughout my travels that of all of the creatures I had met in paradise that Billy was the only tyrannosaurus and was the most humanlike animal in the whole utopia.

He was a one of a kind.

He seemed to feel more than the other animals did, sometimes more than I felt.

I could call him a true friend.

Much to Billy's disliking and worry, I was to spend what felt like a year, though was most likely much longer looking back on it, climbing the largest mountain I had found during my adventures.

Billy and I had finally reached the base of the great mountain.

Before I set off to climb the vast blue wonder, I summoned Billy to lower his head so that I could give him a kiss good-bye, for I did not intend to return from this last voyage.

I told Billy that I planned on killing myself and thanked him for being such a good companion. He wagged his tail in excitement and gave me a big dinosaur kiss that again ended with a face plant in the mud.

I was fairly certain that I could not die, but life was about theatrics at that point.

I could tell by Billy's excited reaction that he didn't understand my meaning; he simply continued to wag his big blue and yellow spotted tail lovingly and seemed to smile with unconstrained affection.

All the way up the mountain, I could see a tiny blue blob at the base of where it stood, the little blue blip never moved during my entire climb.

At first there was a lot of hiking.

Though it was a steep trek, the path I spent the first few months on was never entirely vertical.

I never lost stamina or became sore; there was food everywhere, though I still needed no sustenance to live (you couldn't find a square mile in paradise that was without food whatever the elevation).

Something good that came from the climb was a song I wrote that reinvigorated my hopes to continue to be a songwriter.

The song seemed to pop into my head from nowhere; it became an obsession to make every word perfect. I must have rewritten it as I hiked over a thousand times.

Toward the last month of the climb, it had finally become a climb.

The walls were jagged and completely vertical.

It was still warm, however; or if it was cold, I was unable to feel it.

My untiring, unchanging muscles weren't phased by the rock wall; it was just a matter of finding a place to lie down on occasion that was difficult.

I didn't feel a whole lot of anything physically.

If I needed to rest, it was only ever mentally.

A dreamless sleep was almost impossible, which only came to me once a year or so only after exhausting myself for days on end.

Finally, I reached the highest peak of the tallest mountain in the world.

I looked out over creation and lamented over such beauty.

I searched for any signs of ugliness out in all of the blue-green, red, and gold beauty; but there was nothing but the misery of absolute delight to behold.

The whole of everything I could see was positively perfect in every way.

I wondered if the real world was round. (The old world is flat; highlight that. There is a pink highlighter in the bottom drawer near the Bible. You'll be sure to ruin this book for the next person, or at least make them feel stupid, or even better, make them think you are smart).

It was time to relive the excitement of the crash that ended me in the jungle.

I wanted to feel fear—the fear of losing things, the fear that makes you think you are real, the fear that makes one feel truly alive.

I was starved for my heart to race.

The last excitement I knew was the terror that sweet old Billy had inspired in me when I thought he was going to make me into dinner.

I think that was the last time I laughed as well.

I was terribly afraid of heights in the old world and thought maybe falling off a mountain would do the trick.

I looked down and could not even see the base of the mountain past the clouds.

I lost track of Billy ages before that moment.

I jumped, and I fell for two days.

The first ten minutes of the fall were invigorating, though my heart remained pumping at the same, unaltered tempo.

I tried to simulate a fear for my life and couldn't wait to see if I would be spared the perfection and omnipotence I was positive I had been cursed with.

The wind soared through my long shaggy hair and tickled my beard.

I was mesmerized by the flat and spinning planet I was racing to be reintroduced to.

Boredom set in after twenty minutes or so.

"How long can I possibly keep falling"? I thought and also "I hope I die"; as a sort of half a wish in my mind.

My yearly sleep found me after a day's fall.

I awoke to realize that I had not died, as I was unable to think I had during my sleep, and to Billy's big purple tongue drenching me in messy mucus.

I had landed safely on the ground, I was immortal, I was perfect, I was miserable.

I could not even cry for that fact that I could not even cry.

Chapter Thirty-One

Victory Song

“And the animals know it’s man who takes care Of this place.”

I returned from my fall and immediately moved my tepee directly next to “the hole” and made a bed right by it. This time, there was no music; there was something even better. I could hear the voices of women (women! how I miss those beautiful creatures, it is sheer pain to think of them now) and men in what sounded like an orgy.

I heard the screams and moans of three or four different woman crying out for more.

More what? I could only imagine.

I could hear bodies sparring in heat.

I heard what sounded like two women making love.

I could bear no more.

“Who are you?” I shouted into “the hole”.

“Where are you? Is that you, God?”

The orgy sounds had come to a stop.

I waited eagerly.

“Yes,” said a off-putting a almost familiar sounding voice.

“This is God, won’t you let me in my son? You could not possibly be happy without me”.

The voice seemed to echo forever.

It was true, I was unhappy, but I was also very cautious about this voice.

I felt a warning looming within my guts, and I distrusted the voice inside my heart of hearts.

Still, I was very curious.

Curiosity for an old imperfect world I had left behind became my only happiness in paradise.

That’s funny.

“You made this God, you let yourself in”, I proclaimed.

“No . . . You made it. Let me in my son”.

With that, a pale arm that glowed gold like mine blindly reached out of “the hole” searching.

It belonged to a woman who could have been a hand model (all female hands should have aspired to look more like hers; ugly hands are just plain lazy).

My guts were on fire with warnings about this so-called God and his women and with lust for the hand's touch. (Success! I even had a hard-on)!

I pried myself from the hole and made for my tepee to begin to write the song I had come up with during my climb to the heavens, and to do other things...

I had been drying some clay tablets that I had been making for a week and collected a couple of sharp rocks to use as chisels.

I wrote "Victory song" as well as "Grandma shot Grandpa" and "her" and other songs that I had written in the old world.

I had been sleeping next to "the hole" every night for a week, listening to all of the noises it made.

The sound of women was a blissful lullaby to such a deprived man as I was.

The hands were always reaching from "the hole," waiting for me to break.

I would not let God in like he asked with ever so much patience and care, but I would take comfort in holding the hands of the people I longed to meet as I slept at night.

I could hear, starting from early in the morning and lasting deep into the night, every day, orgies that never seemed to lose passion and, at times, even seemed to even gain in momentum.

The orgies sounded ever more tempting and distracted me more and more as each day passed.

I gave "the hole" my undivided attention and hardly ever left its side.

It was a sheer force of will that I was able to finish my writings.

Whenever the sex would stop for a few minutes at a time, I would hear the voice of God begging me to "let him in".

I no longer tried to ignore the voice, whether it was God or not, the voice comforted me like the idea of it possibly, actually belonging to God.

Still...I knew that voice from before, but that was eons ago and my old life and it's events were so hard to recall.

The only time I was able to focus on my work was when I would scare the voice away by asking it too many questions.

These moments were very brief, however.

The silence was always replaced by the sound of sex.

While lying in a ditch with spiders crawling all over me that covered almost every inch of my body, I decided to start building a stage for the animals to enjoy my music and art and maybe some plays that I could come up with or potentially steal from the old world.

The project took no time at all for me to complete.

Time had a different (no) meaning to me altogether.

I had become quite a carpenter living in the woods and helping shelter the animals; as a result, the stage was coming along very nicely.

The building of a theatre and the labor involved to do so helped to steer my mind away from my discontent with paradise and away from “the hole”, though nothing could redirect my mind from the prospect of there being women.

The day had finally arrived that I decided to gather all of the animals together in front of the stage so that they might take heed to my performance and so that I could culture them.

The stage was still under development, and there were still various piles of lumber scattered across the stage.

I could not wait to finish building it, and I badly wanted to try my hardest to present the art that God had made in heaven to all of my creatures.

Billy helped to round all the animals on the continent up.

Billy was a good shepherd, and all the animals listened to his commands.

Once I was satisfied with the untold number of animals that had gathered, I began to read (for I could not seem to muster the enthusiasm to sing).

Man's made of love
With his eye on the prize
Man won't give up
And man has God on his side

Man's all grown up
And he's doing it right
For man all he wants
Is peace on earth and of mind

Just then, a feral but friendly yellow dog in the audience keeled over and produced a litter of a dozen or so varicolored young pups.

The animals in the proximity were deeply distracted over the sudden birth, some wandered to the scene and licked the new babes, and some gave a sniff.

It was incredibly frustrating.

Even when it seemed that I had caught the animal's attention, they were actually deeply unmoved and easily distracted; no animal cheered (not even Billy), and no animal booed me.

They were simply unaffected.

I continued.

Man's on his way
Man has been saved
Man's never bored
And laughs when he is afraid

I was about to start the chorus and might have even sung it when a tiny pink and orange pot-belly pig bumped into my shin.

It had apparently idiotically wandered onto the stage all by itself during my song.

There was a time when I would have found the thing to be endearing I thought as I stared back at its dotting eyes.

The pig's little pink and black spotted tongue extended from its tiny mouth.

The pig started to lick my leg.

I turned the idiot around and kicked the thing in the ass and yelled "Git"! "Shoo"!

The pig wandered back to the crowd, falling in once again with the other animals, only facing the opposite way of the performance, like so many of them.

I rolled my eyes, sighed, and continued just barely finding the will to do so.

We're so free
Victory
Everybody's happy now
We made it!

A fly had begun to buzz noisily around my head; I ignored it and continued to the next verse.

Man's not ashamed
Man's proud and brave
And the animals know
It's man who takes care of this place

Man's gonna change
For better not worse
The future is his
Whatever he chooses will work

Man's full of skills
And compassion is one
Man would feel guilt
If ever man could do wrong

One fly had turned into several, all seemingly dedicated to derailing the rest of my song and sabotaging my final performance.

I grew to be angry and then livid by the ignorance of the flies.

"They know exactly what they are doing and how important this is"! I thought.

I convinced myself it was malice not stupidity that motivated them with all of my might, and with sheer livid anger in my voice, I read on.

We're so free
Victory
Everybody's happy now

We made it!

As the last words of my unimportant poem passed through my lips, a massive fly landed on them and began to rub his hands, then crapped.

Afterward, the culprit continued to buzz around my face obnoxiously with its accomplices.

“That’s it”! I screamed.

I was unfulfilled to the brim.

I rationalized in my raging mind that one of the insurgents should pay for what their foolishness had ruined.

I raised the clay tablet above my head and in a flash of malevolence struck the fly that had made my mouth a toilet and smote it for its insolence.

“You stupid goddamned animals, don’t you know genius when you hear it”? I cried; throwing the tablet to the wooden floor as I watched it explode.

I would have been bright red if possible.

I began chucking pieces of the unfinished stage aimlessly at the careless animals. “You are all a bunch of wasteful idiots, I hate all of you and I hope you all die!”(Careful what you wish for). The only animals that seemed to be affected by my tantrum were the ones that got hit with bits of the wood that I was throwing and Billy, who let out a whimper when I accidentally struck him at the base of his mighty shin.

Billy ran into the woods and left me for a while.

With blood trying to boil, I hobbled home ready to do the unthinkable.

I approached “the hole”.

There was a meaty hand with silver hair on the knuckles groping for a mate that stemmed from the dark void.

Without another thought, I grabbed the hand and let Lucifer out.

The silver hand was attached to a small, rat-faced, sinister looking man, who brought with him another man, and another, and another, until there were at least thirty of them surrounding the hole, and no thanks to God, there were some women, very attractive women too.

At first I was overwhelmed with excitement to see humans again but felt duped when God appeared to be absent in the crowd.

The only one I recognized was that man from the plane...

Arkansas.

I extended an arm to the person that the silver hand belonged to who also appeared to be the leader. The man was stout and short, with gray hair and an inexcusably evil look in his eye.

The Devil had a silver mustache and a snarling grin and was the only man I had ever thought to be beautiful in my life.

I smiled and said slowly, "My name is Jungle Jim".

"God does not shake hands, bow to me swine!" was the first thing the Devil said to me.

"I am Lucifer Gottfried, this is my army, and this is our world now." he bellowed.

I thought it was just an ironic name or nickname but....

He was the real deal.

"There is plenty in this world for all of us my brothers and sisters". I said, as I pulled a corned-beef-and-cabbage turnip from the warm breathing earth.

Lucifer stomped up to me, grabbed the plant from my hand, and beat me on the head with it.

The blow didn't hurt at all, but I said "ouch"! anyway.

"Of courses there is"! Lucifer snarled. "There is plenty that needs to be conquered in this world too".

I scratched my head.

I couldn't understand why this man would want to conquer paradise.

"Why does everything need to be conquered all of the time? Why can't we all just share"? I pleaded.

The platoon erupted in laughter at Lucifers command.

He raised his arms and the crowd became silent.

"What is your name, cur"? he asked.

"It's Jim. I told you that". I told him.

"Tell me, Jim, if conquering the last world paid off and allowed me to finally live as God in the new world, then why would I stop conquering all of the sudden? It is my duty to the fallen to conquer this world, it is our duty"!

The soldiers once again erupted.

This time they were grunting and screaming their approval of what Lucifer had just said.

"Myself and the fallen and the bloodline of the people you see around you ran the old world and will do a fine job at running this one".

"We decided who the money went to and from where it came".

"It was I that chose which puppet to place on which throne and when".

“We were the keepers of the ancient “crafts” and secrets. Nothing happened on accident or without our approval”.

“We were waiting for the signal that was made visible at the very second that the ancient prophecies we protected foretold that it would”.

He quoted, “A great light from the darkness of the jungle that stretches to the heavens”. In unison with the other thirty-three fallen.

I could hear the voice of “God” in the group and was unmistakably that of Arkansas.

“If we had not conquered all, then we would have never had the knowledge to make it to our deserved kingdom. This is the moment the fallen ones have been working toward since the great fall; it is time we are rewarded for our consistency and steadfastness. Changing our ways now, now that we claim our prize, is unthinkable. As I told you Jim, help us or get out of the way”.

I answered lamely “You didn’t tell me that, and I will fight you”.

They ignored me and got straight to their usurpation.

I didn’t try to fight like I said I would.

I could not stand for the conquering of paradise, but there was nothing one immortal could do against thirty three souls that were equally cursed. The only option was to get out of the way and to try and sabotage them in secret.

For the first time since I had arrived in the real world, I felt I had a purpose and entertained again. Running around committing “social services” had finally become fulfilling, and the war that the fallen had brought to the new world was better than television.

Time seemed to no longer drag as it does the more I scouted the world for the aftermath of the fallen’s ruthless killing, which was always easy to find, and the more I slept with the female ones.

The fallen had rather quickly constructed a wooden, castle-like compound that they all lived in. I could tell by the angles of the walls of the fort and the sheer craftsmanship of it all that the fallen were all stone masons in the old world.

The fallen had even begun to construct a castle made of the white stone they had quarried from a smooth, dry at the time, rock wall that would feed water to the sea during the monsoon seasons.

They had begun quarrying the stone immediately after their arrival in the real world. The castle was coming along very nicely; Lucifer Gottfried was even occupying the one room they had completed already.

It went without saying that I was banished from any of their places of living.

There were women locked away deep within the fort.

I would, almost every night, break into the compound and slip past the sentry who’s duty was to watch for me and to make sure I was captured if found on the base and slink into bed with

one of the beauties who told me how they hated the male fallen and loved me, though they too were immortal and could feel no pain.

The most beautiful of them was a woman named Lilith.

I was so pent up for relief that after we finished our immortal sex, one of the girls claimed while laughing that I was hurting her and freaking her out (her words not mine). Like it was made of an electric itchy fiber; a heated blanket of embarrassment nearly forced me to the floor.

I felt ashamed for the first time in years (it turns out that it is still a very uncomfortable feeling).

“They will never catch Jingle Jim”. I told the girl as I lay in her arms nursing the wounds her tongue had inflected.

I loved when the girls would tell me how worried they were for my safety and begged me to stay with them and for me to accept the “controllers” will or to at least play along.

I always refused to join their masters and would toss my head back heroically and laugh a mighty laugh at the thought.

Though I swore to the girls and myself that I would never be found, I was caught one night by Arkansas while I was carelessly rampaging through the base, releasing the caged-just-to-be-caged animals from a life of imprisonment.

“Told you I’d be seeing you kiddo! But seriously, you look good. Let’s see if that changes after daddy deals with you”.

I was held captive in a sophisticated dungeon that the fallen had discovered when it was just a shallow, blue cave that boor into a coastal cliff and peered out into the horizon from the precipice from a few hundred-thousand feet up and dangled high above the foamy sea.

The view was far too breathtaking to be a dungeon, and the cave was very well lit.

The place was already full of animals that were undergoing the fallen’s enhanced interrogation methods.

Some were being messily dissected with sharpened stone knives, and others were being brutalized with rocks and logs.

They all ended up the same kind of dead however.

I found myself tied to a chair and was fortunate enough to be tortured by Gottfried himself.

“I am going to break you Jim, but first I want to be your best friend . . .” Lucifer attempted to dig a hot knife into my gut with no affect.

The rag in my mouth rendered me unable to laugh at his feeble attempt to hurt me.

Gottfried’s anger matured as he saw how little of an affect his efforts had on my mind and my naked body.

“Are you hungry, Jim? I like take-out personally; I’ll have my men order us some, GUARDS”!

Two soldiers appeared saluting.

“Yes, sir”! the men answered instinctively.

“Bring Jim and myself some take-out, Chinese! And hurry”!

The men looked confused and scared.

“Sir?” one of the men asked.

“Just do it you shits! GET TO WORK!”

The men scurried away.

Lucifer Gottfried began to sharpen his knife on a stone. (I know there’s a word for the stone, I’ve heard it before, or maybe I imagined it? After all the wars that man has fought and his love of stabbing things, if there isn’t a name for a stone that sharpens a blade, then we have really truly failed as a specie, it’ll come to me though).

“Do you like tofu, Jim”?

I made no sound or gesture to reply.

Gottfried did not hesitate to jump onto my bound body with his knife in his hand; sitting on my lap, he held the blade to my throat. he brought his chiseled visage within centimeters of my cringing glower and then chuckled gaily.

“Good, I’m glad that you like tofu, Jim. That means we can be friends. Would you like me to flavor your tofu like you, Jim? Because I can, wouldn’t you like that, Jim? You will like the way you taste, I guarantee it. The food will be here soon, Jim, very soon . . . GUARDS”!

The room was empty.

Though I knew that there was a wall between us that neither time nor myself or he could destroy—was it something in this man’s psyche that would also never allow us to understand one another or mine? I’m sure that it was a little bit of both—I decided to pick his brain to see what made such evil and how it functioned. I thought to myself,

“Obviously, this man is smart to have controlled so much of a world I could not let pass by, but what is it that makes him evil”?

At the very same time I questioned myself, I thought, “What is it that makes me good”?

I feel that I am nicer or at least more even tempered than this person, but if I am good (I am still unsure whether I am or not, I think not) and still possess the same attributes that made this person a tyrant, then what is good”?

It was as if Lucifer was watching my thoughts on Blu-ray; the topic of good and evil seemed to be mutually a prominent issue on both of our minds.

“Why the frown, Jim?” he asked sincerely.

“Should I turn your head upside down?”

While still sitting on my lap, Lucifer tugged at my head that did not

move an inch.

He waited one long minute that he spent staring at the stone roof and finally chuckled.

It was an invitation from him to me that asked me to ask him what he might be thinking about.

I waited past ten seconds. I felt the moment that hardly slipped by; the moment that I was obligated to say, “what’s so funny”?

Just as the fifteen-second mark quietly arrived, just when I was preparing to tell the Devil that I was not going to ask him what he thought to be funny, he spoke.

“I know why you are so unhappy here in paradise, Jim. It is all really very, VERY (stab to the groin) SIMPLE!”

“It is your ideals that make you suffer so. I will tell you how the real world works Jim, though all of us, who know, know. I am the one who knows but does not pretend that the world has the potential to be a pretty place; do you know how hard it is, Jim? It is not easy to be a monster . . . at first; soon you will grow to like it. I did”.

Satan climbed off me and began to pace to and fro across the smoothed stone floor as he stabbed at both hands during and after every word he spoke. he started to skip as he continued.

“Though there were certainly political systems and forms of governance that were initially based on idealism—and some of these systems may have worked on a small scale or for brief instances, like the rice paddies in the east that depended on both farmers and bureaucrats working in tandem and as equals—it was capitalism that reigned supreme for one simple reason. Do you know what the reason is, Jim?”

Lucifer came up behind me and started to push my chair toward the edge of the cave.

My back was to the ocean as he continued to pace.

“Well, let me tell you, Jim! (Stab, stab, stab).

It is simply this: when I wake up in the morning, all cozy and warm, I think to myself, “Man am I hungry?” It is my hunger that I feel, and it is your hunger that you feel when you wake, no one else’s. Though I am in your mind evil and you are in your mind good, we share the same unalterable appetite that makes us selfish. Listen to me when I say to you Jim that it will not be until man learns to protect his own ideals as he does his own food that any sort of world based on idealism will ever work. The world can take from you your ambitions but never your hunger, and as long as appetites dictate us, then it is profitable to dictate our appetites.”

“What a fool”! I thought.

I had already shown him all of the endless amounts of food and nourishment this new world had to offer, and he still believed that man could only function in an appetitive state of mind.

I wondered how he could not see just how far beyond hunger we had journeyed and how we were so lucky to be there.

Lucifer yanked the moist rag from my mouth and—very much like a shrink—asked me how the day's events made me feel and what I thought about it all. Though I knew that by keeping silent I could steal the man's thunder, my ideals let my thoughts be heard.

“But don't you see? we don't have to protect our food anymore. The only thing we can lose in this new world are our ideals. There is plenty for everyone, DON'T YOU SEE?” Tears haunted my eyes but were never made real

Lucifer smiled when I shouted. I could see it was the reaction he was fishing for.

I felt slightly defeated.

“Yes Jim, I do see. I see it all, but the people don't. They don't see Jim. And until they do, comfort is a privilege and food is scarce”.

I nodded and smiled, while trying to turn my head upside down.

Lucifer clapped and said while laughing, “That's the spirit, Jim”!

At first he focused on trying to hurt me physically in any way he could though he found that he could not.

As the guards returned to the room, Satan threw at me a made-of-earth gillie suit that all of the fallen wore as uniforms and then asked me to join his army nicely (I could see how hard this was for him).

I laughed for a good minute.

He untied my hands so that I could examine the suit he threw at me.

I was able to get a knee slap in to add to my uncontrollable laughter before he angrily tied my arms back behind the chair. I enjoyed seeing him lose his temper.

I could even see some of the guards who had just returned cowering in fear and baring no Chinese food under their bulky arms were trying their hardest not to laugh at how irate and silly their commander had become.

“I will find a way to hurt you, I will crush you one day you”.

The guards untied me from the chair and guided me to the edge of the cave that over looked the raucous sea. holding the rope that bound my hands together, I turned to Satan and said with courage that was not nearly as hard to find as a God,
“You could never hurt me Gottfried, your words are flat, and your aggression has been wasted”.

I knew this phrase would not be lost on him.

Gottfried screamed “There's no such thing as wasted aggression”! and charged into the back of the chair pushing me into the raging waters below.

A few days passed after I washed ashore, I decided to take to the jungle once more to recover my “social services sack” and to find my dear friend Billy.

I followed the trail of dead and dying animals that lead all over creation. The road of carnage took me on a few days journey that ended me back in my jungle.

The helpless animals had no instincts to prepare for predators, not even the most fierce looking and gigantic animals.

Not even poor Billy.

After recovering my “social services sack”, I worked every hour of every day to try to help the animals find refuge from the carnage, or I would at least try to ease their pain as they died in vain. (It’s a “wet stone” that’s right! Maybe there is hope for mankind after all).

That day, the day I arrived in the jungle, I came upon a group of ten of the fallen who were all lead by Lucifer Gottfried.

They had become aware of Billy apparently and, like me, were tracking him.

I overheard the conversation the men were having

. As I listened, I thought I should feel the blood drain from my body and began to worry for Billy’s safety.

“Where’s that damn T-rex gone to?” said Arkansas from the back of the squad.

“He’s close; I can feel the ground shaking,” said Satan with his ear to the patchy jungle floor.

He went on to say after standing up and rejoining the group, “We’ve got to make an example out of it. If we kill the fiercest creature in the jungle, it will surely strike fear into the rest of the hearts of the animal kingdom”.

Gottfried pounded on his shield and declared, “Were eating dinosaur tonight, fellas”!

The squad followed his example and banged their shields cheering for their leader.

Lucifer, after a few feeble attempts at reading and assessing the dinosaur prints, licked his pointer finger, then raising it above his head in the wind, lost his temper.

“To hell with it, *Weeee-ooo-Weeeeep*”

Lucifer pursed his lips and whistled.

“Boom, boom, boom, boom,” the sound was nearing.

Gottfried depressed his pencil lips with the sausage pointer finger of his right hand.

“Shhh! here it comes. Give me an arrow,” demanded Gottfried as he snapped his fingers.

Someone handed their leader an arrow.

Billy’s big airy head appeared from the dense wilderness.

As the rest of Billy's body could be seen, Satan bent to a low squat and readied an arrow against the tense waiting fibers of his bow for release.

I ran like hell through the jungle, screaming, "Nooooo, Billy, noooooo! They are bad. BAAAD, Billy, BAAD. Go home, Billy, go home, you big stupid animal! Go home! PEOPLE ARE BAAD, BILLY".

Billy was running full force to meet and to lick his new friends when suddenly an arrow pierced the beast's heart.

"NOOO, BILLY! PLEASE, GOD, NO. YOU MONSTERS! YOU MONSTERS! GOD, hELP MY FRIEND. PLEASE, GOD"!

I felt that I would die if I could not cry and mourn my beloved companion.

The tears will come, I thought.

When I finally made it to Billy, I found him lying on his side, with his boulder eyes staring at mine.

Billy's dry purple tongue hung out the side of his mouth, as was his fashion.

Billy gasped for air that he was running out of.

I stroked the animal's dumb, sweet head.

Poor Billy groaned in agony.

I whispered in his ear, "I'm sorry Billy. I'm so sorry Billy".

His breaths became quick, sharp, and short.

Billy gave one last attempt to give me a dinosaur kiss.

No tears came when Billy's parched, pebbly tongue limply scraped across my face for one last time.

With a large dinosaur-sized moan, Billy was gone.

The tragic scene was pure bliss for Lucifer Gottfried and quenched all of his thirst for blood and misery.

He began to dance and skip around the shady jungle floor.

Satan moaned the most disturbing laugh I had ever heard in my life.

It seemed that he was coming and making a mess within his gillie suit.

"Aaa-aaa-aaaa-hah-aaaaa-haaaa-aaaaaaa-aaa-a-a-a-aaa-haa."

he continued by emulating how a child might speak, he said,

"Waws dat yo weetowl fwend Jimmy"?

Lucifer made his voice even higher pitched than he normally spoke intentionally and continued in his falsetto flamboyantly, letting his arms wiggle with closed fists in front of his face just below his chin, pretending to fret like a female standing on a chair afraid of a mouse.

He then drifted arrogantly to Billy's big blue corpse and kicked it, laughing perversely.

"Take the son a bitch's head off. I want this half of you to bring it back to the fort and I want this half of you to capture Jim. My mantle place needs trophies. Didn't you idiots hear me? AFTER HIM!"

I ran with all of my might deeper into the jungle toward "the hole." I could hear Gottfried shouting with a new robustness my ears had never caught from his voice before.

It sounded deeper than the normal and had morphed into something evil sounding that was actually very scary.

"I'm gonna hang you on my wall, Jim!"

As I ran through the jungle, I tried with all of my will to cry.

I tried to express the deep sorrow I felt for my dear companion, but nothing came.

"Need to go, need to get out, I want to go home".

I repeated this mantra through my head thousands of times as I ran along toward "the hole."

The mantra formed into "The hole, the hole, hole, hole, hole".

I was nearing "the hole" rapidly.

I could see my tepee and was fast approaching camp.

I stood at "the hole," thinking for a minute, thinking of what I might find on the other side. What the world might have become since I left it, when I heard Arkansas cry "There he is"!

I decided the old world couldn't possibly be worse than the new world and jumped in "the hole" head first.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Useless Apology

"I'm the shelter from the wind that locks the door When you get in"

It took a few minutes for my eye to adjust to the dim lighting of the dark bunker.

I was confused enough as to where I was to temporarily forget about Billy and a destroyed utopia.

I looked down and saw “the hole” I came out of, it appeared to be bore into a stone floor and not clay like I had left it.

I was in an oval-shaped stone fallout shelter that was about a half an acre in diameter.

There was enough food for thirty people to eat well for ten years, water for thirty for five years, and many breathless and wheezing lifetimes worth of cigarettes.

The bunker also housed a liver demolishing supply of wines and spirits.

There was a desk in one corner and multiple army-style bunk beds near another.

In the center of the warehouse were the tortured, burnt, fingerless, decrepit bodies of Shooshi and Takumat.

Both of my beloved brothers had faced the end with enlightened expressions that outshined the stars and with eyeless, toothless grins aimed toward the heavens.

I ran and fell at their icy dead feet, in the same weak fashion I displayed when first I met those amazing beings.

This time, no one lifted me from my misery to bring light to my misfortune.

They just sat there dead, and what was worse was that my caretakers’ recently deceased, lifeless bodies would return to me none of the emotion that poured out from my rumpled reddened face unto their still and lifeless laps.

Poor Billy came rushing to my mind to add to the grief and horror of witnessing my dead companions as the ground adjusted itself and rumbled.

I rose to my feet when I heard an explosion in the distance.

I ran to the door of the shelter and peered through a four-inch wide, two-inch tall, ten-inch thick piece of Plexiglas that separated me from the destroyed (nuked it seems) ruins of the “old world”.

I pressed my back against the cold shaking wall and slid down it sobbing until another blast shook me to the floor, unleashing another steady salty stream from my eye.

I lay on the floor trapped in the agonizing thought of what had surely become of her.

Success! Tears finally found me again.

I could cry.

It was all I ever wanted, not only that, I had more to cry about than I could immediately form a list in my mind about (there would be plenty of time for designing that list later).

I cried about my dead family, I cried for the dead animals I should have protected, I cried for Billy, I cried for forgiveness for failing Shooshi and Takumat who died trying to protect me, I cried for the two worlds that I (and God) let die, I cried for all of mankind including myself, but most of all I cried for her.

I had always been certain my greatest regret in life would be not being able to hear what people have to say about me after I die, but now, on top of the fact that everyone is dead (and other things, I swear), a deeper regret I feel now that scalds my heart every day is the regret of leaving her forever.

I think that is at least a small improvement, it's certainly not as vain but probably still stupid.

All of the answers to everything dawned on me at that very moment in my misery.

I struggled to my knees and shook my only fist at my enemy.

"I know you are up there, God! Laughing at me! You did all of this! You sadistic monster you! You dictatorial villain! I hope you enjoyed this! I hope this is what you wanted. Of the seven days it took for you to create this pathetic sideshow, you have squandered the day it took to create her and for that I hate you! What in your name is wrong with you? Why would you do such things? I pray to you God, deny me at the gates, if I for some unlikely reason appear in your kingdom, for I have no desire to meet you, you dick-less bastard!" I spit at the ceiling, but the projectile landed hard on my face, splattering on my forehead.

I screamed.

I've spent who cares how much time learning how to write with my left arm.

I've pushed the desk from the corner snug next to "the hole", along with a bunk I hardly sleep in that sits by it and I can still hear murmurs of paradise on the other side with the occasional inflection of the screams and squeals of poor hopeless animals.

The only relief from the smell of my friends decomposing body and the overflowing privy I am buried alive with is a cool breeze from "the hole" that tickle the hairs on my leg as I write.

I have been working on this book for what seems like more than a lifetime. I saw my face for the first time in an eternity today after I found a broken piece of glass in my stumbling search for more booze (the supply is now all but gone, when it's gone, I am gone, it is decided).

My beard is white and my mustache is stained brown from smoking.

My once thick hair is stringy and balding.

My formerly handsome face has become leather and cratered.

My nose that at one time was thin and sharp has doubled in size and is a bright red hub for spidery purple veins to span out in every direction.

My liver throbs painfully in my bulging gut.

My fingers, that require the company of either a pen or a lit cigarette, are tar stained and shake almost too much for me to write any more of this nonsense.

Whatever skin on my body is not red or purple is yellow or green, or both or all four.

There has always been enough clothing here for me to never have to do wash and to always wear clean clothes, but I've never changed clothes yet.

I cough and choke for air every day, and I hardly noticed recently that within the black and brown mucus that I no longer examine for impurities are shiny white pearls of lung and bloody black clots of blood that fly involuntarily from my sandy throat anytime I question if I may still have anything to say, the answer is always “no”.

I tried to sing today, but my splintered voice split into three different smoky notes; each within its own respective octave. It is time to die.

The mirror I found today has finally given me the courage to end it all and even makes it sound fun at the moment.

I hope this has been at least an entertaining useless apology, or at least an informative examination on human stupidity and vanity: the two main attributes that, as you now know or don't because you are all so very dead, ended all of the joys and sorrows of the old world.

I am sorry, though God is not.

You are probably dead if you are reading this, but again, I am sorry.

On the bright side, I can still hear bombs being dropped every day, that's a good sign.

I can try to rationalize in my mind that I wrote this for them, for anyone who may find my crypt of dead and dying things, but mostly and more rightly, I wrote this entirely for me.

I am self-admittedly vain and love myself too much; though I am far uglier now than any ugliness I have ever tried to escape, I will not accept the dead me.

“I will find the courage to kill myself”, I thought, “after I finish my master piece” (I was vain then too).

Now that my work is at an end, I am less likely to kill myself than I had naively previously assumed.

Even my hideous reflection did not end my love for myself, though it did damage it severely.

There was a time when death seemed a fitting and epic ending to the climax that was me falling further than any man had ever fell before when I was certain that I would wake again.

Death is for real this time . . . Death is finally for real. This will really, really, really, really mean the end.

Killing myself just seems out of the question at this moment, though suicide was a simple thought and pleasant to swallow when I was a God (and was only a cosmetic addition to life and fun to toy with the idea of).

Trying to conquer the gravity of the idea now as a pathetic mortal seems impossible.

Why did I leave the real world? I was a glorious immortal! how great I was! I lament the beauty I unwisely fled from; perfection was my reality. My God! how happy I was . . . there was never a dull moment in those times, things were perfect in those most glorious of glory days!

The food was better, the air was pure, the animals loved me, and how I loved them!

I realize all of this now as I sit and swallow the final gulp from my last bottle of brandy.

What did I leave behind? how could I?

I was a better man in the real world, and my friends the fallen weren't at all that bad, actually I am sure now they were a force of what is genuinely good, I can see that now, even though I might have tried to smear their pure motives in my bias mind.

I was confused. Yes, I can see that as clearly as I can see that Lucifer had every right to kill "Billy".

War is a good thing, and things really do need to be conquered.

But poor Billy! he deserved it, that fool! But oh how foolish I've been! I know it sounds cliché (or maybe it doesn't to you because you don't know any better, or presumably anything at all), but things are actually much better on the other side.

In today's prayer, I begged of God to give me another chance.

I told him that I am not done playing yet and that I know he can hear me. I'm sure he just laughed; my misery probably even turns him on.

"My work is done My reign of terror is at an end. I am mankind. I am humanity (I am certainly ugly enough to fit the profile). I have failed; man has failed. I think I am ready to die. It's time for me to write the final lines and close this book forever. I must open the door that I've stared at in fear all of these years and walk into a fate that is far better than what I deserve or slice my throat. I haven't decided yet. The point is, unlike God, I am sorry."

Those would have been my last lousy lines for this book (even though this is NOT MY FAULT), and I'm glad that they aren't; from a writer's perspective (which I like to think of myself as now, seeing that I am the only writer in existence), those lines are absolute garbage and un-poetic babbles, and I probably couldn't die knowing I ended my masterpiece with such trash.

After toying with the last line for another ten minutes or so, I give up and settle for less than perfection (which is beginning to feel like suicide the more I think about it); and though the muscles in my legs, like the rest of the weedy muscles that hold together the dusty bones in my body are atrophied, I have found the strength to come to a shaking and bent stance, and I might have actually walked the mile, but the plan has changed now.

There is a hand tugging at my pant leg.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Lilith....Lilith had a baby son and you know who’s it is as do I...”

“Yep. Jim sure did love to fuck, daddy”.

“I need you to kill one last baby, my boy”.

“Hell pops, I’ll kill any baby you want. What about the new human race you made from clay? How about those monsters you made of fire”?

“No one touches the new humans; they are my legacy and worship me. We’ve already tried to kill those demons made of fire: the one that looks like a statue and breaks the necks of my children if constant eye contact isn’t made. The one that cries in the corner and massacres anyone to see it’s face. Even that feeble looking old man who drips black tar from every pour and takes my children into his pocket dimension to sadistically torture them. We can’t stop them. I as God in this new world am powerless even.

I fear Lilith and Jim’s reptilian and endlessly adaptable love child will be an even greater challenge. I have tasked Lilith to become the matriarch of an organization that secures, contains and protects in response. My children must never know of these failed angels”.

Chapter Thirty-Four

She stood there staring at the gigantic brass knocker.

Her throat was quivering as her heart thudded in her chest. Blue rings appeared in her vision and pulsated with her unsteady heartbeat. She knew she was alone in the forest and this was her only chance at shelter for the night. Her thick lips were cracked deeply and bleeding, so her teeth were more yellow than usual. She smoked her last rolled cigarette. The rain picked up before her smoke was finished and extinguished it prematurely. The blood on her hands had mostly washed off from the rain but her fingernails were still crusted with congealed blood.

She had killed an animal once but never a human before.

Felicia was very brave, and she was strong but just then as she stepped inside the abandoned building, she felt like collapsing into a puddle on the janky wooden floor and dripping through the cracks.

She thought about the animal she ended a few weeks back. It wasn't a deer or a fish that she killed on a hunting trip, nor did she innocently run over a raccoon or rabbit in a car, plus, she had never seen a non-animatronic version of any of these species. It was a very deliberate and merciless killing of a pet dog named Joey, the mini pinscher her stepfather owned.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Felicia's mother had a way of collecting animals, especially dogs. Her husband Stan also had a collection of dogs. Put the two together and they were well over the limit of dogs per household according to the Martian Code of Sustainability and Wellness. Somehow, she had ended up with five dogs total.

Felicia had become unreasonably afraid of death since even before her inoculation at the age of 23, and was prescribed medication for the anxiety that her unfounded fears of death caused, however Seeing Lucy's blood spray into the night air like a whale sprays salty ocean water from its blowhole was a strange validation for Felicia that her worrying had not been in vain.

Death was real and it had claimed her beloved sister, just like it did to Joey. She collapsed onto the floor of the strange building and could hear footsteps coming down the stairs above her.

Growing up, Felicia was okay with never seeing mankind's home the way her mother knew it.

Earth looked a lot like what Mars looked like before the planet was terraformed.

Earth used to be gorgeous according to the pictures in history books. Felicia realized that it was sad that the Earth had been nuked to death by mortal men, but she never felt a sense of loss over it. Not like her sister Lucy felt when she was alive.

Lucy was two years older than Felicia and was gestating in their mother's womb when @M.O.M and their families left earth behind forever.

Maybe Lucy developed a connection to mother earth during those first few months of sort of existing.

Sometimes Lucy would, upon looking up at the heavens, cry heartily over the loss of Earth. Mostly however, she cried over the loss of arguably the most important thing in life – Death.

Only a couple handfuls of the three people living on Mars had died over the last two decades and that was mostly from construction accidents during the building of the capital tower of @M.O.M; as well as the initial terraforming of the planet itself.

Even animals that were pets would be inoculated at their prime age of maturity and would potentially live forever.

That wasn't the case for poor Joey, however.

A letter arrived at Felicia's home one day that was from M.O.M which was an acronym for @Microfiber Of Mars.

Someone must have complained about the noise caused by the five untrained dogs barking incessantly all day long every day. The letter stated that @M.O.M was charging Felicia's family eighteen percent higher taxes for having an illegal number of pets. The taxation was to start in January, and it was December. To make matters worse, the family didn't have the money to surrender an animal. Collectively, the Ward family was a few thousand #spenx away from being sentenced to rehab; every one of them.

Poetry had become outlawed by @M.O.M and only prose-based non-fiction was acceptable to be printed, so Felicia's mother who was Mars' Chief Poet, only a few months before poetry was banished, was now out of work and devastated.

Felicia's Stepfather held the prestigious title of "Inoculator" for his entire adult life on Mars but had, also just a few months before, lost his license to practice inoculations, after a botched procedure resulted in the thirty-third official death in Mars' history.

Things worked kind of like they did back on earth when it came to crime in the sense that if you had enough money, in many cases you could pay your way out of crimes you've allegedly committed.

Felicia's stepfather, Stan was charged with manslaughter but was fined forty-million #spenx for the mistake and was financially ruined.

It was up to the sisters to provide for the family which was not easy for they had lived comfortably their entire lives off of the #spenx that their parents provided to the family unit but still finding it more than they might bare; working eight hour days for a mere MM#(sp) level (minimum monthly #spenx)

It was the darkest year of Felicia's life.

Felicia had recently lost her old Tesla truck due to the Ward family's unpaid taxes. The truck along with her Luis Vuitton purse were both repurposed and given to families that were to expect tax returns at the end of the fiscal year - which was the only kind of year on Mars.

Christmas never existed as far as written history goes and only one individual on Mars knew of it.

Some called him "The Priest." But largely this mysterious figure was regarded as purely an urban legend.

Tax return day had come which was the closest thing to a holiday that Martians would celebrate; that is, if they were fortunate enough to not owe anything to @M.O.M.

Instead of paying families back in #spenx. If the family overpaid in taxes, @M.O.M would repurpose expensive items from other families that underpaid taxes that year.

Felicia never found out what became of her purse, but her Tesla went to her neighbor right across the street from her and was a source of depression for her to witness each day as she mounted her 2-stroke gas-powered Goped scooter.

The scooter had a leak in the gas tank and could only have about a cup of gasoline in it at one time, anymore and it would hemorrhage gasoline in every direction.

She carried a large backpack with a gas tank in it, motor fuel and fifteen pounds of tools as the thing broke down often.

The chain periodically fell off the sprockets because the mounting for the little chainsaw engine that powered it was bent and there was also an issue with the compression that started after the engine swallowed her bootlaces on the way to work one day.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Felicia was reduced to riding the embarrassing contraption sixteen miles a day to her job at the Casino.

One day, after an exhaustingly hot ride home across the lush green and gold Martian landscape and humming Tom Waits' "Innocent When you Dream", Felicia came home to the news of the tax hike and to Joey having a barking fit.

Felicias' manic depressive mother googled painless ways to commit suicide on her tablet quietly while her stepfather nursed a bottle of Early Times whisky in the study with the door shut.

Felicia's mother had gone from searching for ways to kill herself peacefully to how to kill an animal humanely.

Both search results were censored by @M.O.M and the local #POlice were given an alert regarding the key words used in both searches.

A young and decent-looking detective was assigned to the case.

Detective Scoville was unenthusiastic about another pre-crime case, but then again, after doing a little research, he found inspiration to pursue it further and not just file it away as a false alarm.

The Ward family piqued his interest.

Not only were they inches away from the end financially; making them prime suspects for future criminal charges and therefore on Scovilles radar as a threat....the youngest daughter, Felicia, was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his thirty one years on Mars.

Scoville also was interested in the family file because the mother, Margaret Ward had pretty much all her past history classified from official records.

Not even Scoville could access the redacted information.

This was very unusual.

Joey was literally bouncing off the walls and barking and yelping so intensely that both Felicia and her Mom were sure that the dogs' heart was about to give out.

The crazed animal caused the other four dogs to go berserk and for several hours, the dogs had a total meltdown which in turn made Felicia's mother have yet another breakdown.

"What are we gonna do Felicia?" Her mother said maniacally. Margaret asked her daughter what to do about Joey several more times, even though internally, she had resolved with an eerie calmness just what to do about the dog.

Felicia's mothers' eyes went black as coal and her face was pale.

"We have to kill it. Its Joey or the family. We only have two months of #spenx left as is. If they raise us eighteen percent #spenx, we will be in #REhab by next week. All of us."

The mood became very heavy for a moment and there was a stillness in the air within the house that was quickly disturbed by yet another eruption of barking from the other room.

Felicia and her mother scouted the house for tools or devices that could be used to quickly and quietly kill an animal.

Killing an animal was the same crime virtually as killing a human in those days.

Hunting was abolished and weapons were only given to stockies @M.O.M.

There were no TV shows about violence or gory or abrasive shooter videogames to play.

Twenty-four hour new channels had been banned from television and, though there had been no deliberate murders to date on Mars, it was strictly forbidden by @M.O.M to report any disturbing news to the public as @M.O.M learned from Earths demise, that reports about murder and violence beget more murder and violence.

So far, @M.O.Ms approach to violence seemed to be working as violent crime was non-existent on Mars.

Or at least it was until that afternoon.

Allegedly.

Felicia had retrieved a hammer, a rubber mallet, a guitar string and a wine bottle opener. Felicia's mother returned with a handful of pills from her medicine cabinet. Suddenly the two of them started to laugh nervously.

"We can't do this, this is ridiculous. Just look at us, mom. We look like idiots."

"A guitar string? What were you thinking, honey?"

"I don't know, I was gonna..." She trailed off.

"Honey, whatever the answer is to get through this hard time, it's not this."

Felicia was relieved to hear her mother speaking reasonably as she had seemed to have been losing it more and more each day since she was laid off as Chief Poet of Mars.

Why was something inside of Felicia so eager to perform the kill?

Felicia's mother was Originally the head of public relations for @M.O.M back on Earth and oversaw coming up with artistic-sounding slogans for the company. She was the closest thing that The Corporation had within it's ranks to an artist.

Upon arriving on Mars permanently, the CEOS realized that they had thought of mostly everything they might need for a new civilization to begin but they had overlooked the importance of art. They also realized that art was dangerous and could lead to revolutions potentially. A board meeting was held about what to do about the arts. It was decided that poetry was the most harmless of all the mediums of art that they could facilitate, as it was mostly just nonsense. They then held a vote on who should be the Chief Poet. It was unanimous that it should go to Margaret Ward.

Margaret was at first intimidated by the role and had no idea what even qualified as poetry and what made poetry good or bad. Margaret had a profound thought one day as she stared at an intimidating blank piece of paper on her desk. She considered Earth and the fact that it was no more. Then she considered what would have happened if Microfiber had not had the foresight to Terraform Mars and leave Earth before the end of humanity. If both Mars and Earth were without humans and their languages, there would be no conscience beings to express conscience thought. Therefore, any form of expression a person makes that reflects consciences is precious and considered to be art. You could program a computer with a formula that could put words together that may sound like poetry, but it would lack any intelligent consideration of expressing consciousness, and if no people were there to read whatever the computer came up with, it wouldn't matter at all what it wrote. You could also teach an elephant to paint pictures of elephants but the elephant is trained to make that painting and does not know that it is expressing an existence, it is merely recreating muscle movements that are familiar to it based on a reward and punishment based routine. Margaret decided that whatever words came to her conscience mind was a beautiful and rare gift and it didn't matter if it made sense or not, or if it was a profound statement. The art was in the person expressing a thought, period. She took a deep breath and began to write.

Two moons over Mars tonight and one is just a metaphor for love and heartbreak.

There's a clearing up ahead where wet candles have been haphazardly arranged by the hooded occult, with their goats and pyramids that have eyes. Maybe I'm just broke and there's no agenda. Maybe...

The clock roars with Olympic-sized ticks and tocks. There's an old sepia-toned photograph of someone's shadow that hangs from a corkboard. An auxiliary language speaks to me and it sounds like black and white static singing a dystopian lullaby to children wearing gas masks. Calmly, I reached long and hard for reason on top of an anthill. They said to coordinate and flex an appendage for the spectator according to protocol. I giggled at that. I had arisen again for a chance at Jupiter's sunshine, but my knees were aching like always. A fire was lit for the mainstream and it's going to take a substantial increment of whatever time is not to get us back to zero this time, boys.

"Yes. I know, and I'm still paying the birds in stale bread for it."

I whispered to the grapevine that lassos me, tenderly. The daily news fell from the page into my rice and beans tonight, but I still had a stronger than usual hunger for panhandling. Anonymous but credible, she waits for the dust to settle around her again before she moves up the tree like a sloth. There was a deck of playing cards that is missing the king of spades that she had abandoned for the last time as she had developed a sinister lust for gambling. Entranced and embalmed, the caterpillar became a black and white pig but still has wings. It flew passed the branch that an angel had become attached to and I daydreamed about a gown man being burped like a baby.

Margaret felt incredibly uncomfortable with the poem she wrote and embarrassed at what the first things were to come to her mind. Nonetheless she submitted it to her peers. The results were outstanding! The poem had two things going for it. One: it was the only art that was available to people when it was released and two: the people who lived on Mars were all mathematically and mechanically inclined and lived lives that made sense conventionally with nothing abstract whatsoever to break up the monotony of the logical and reasonable course of their days.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

At first the CEOs were happy that at least some form of art had been preserved for the new world they had built and were considering commissioning a fellow who said he could paint. However, within a years' time, Margaret's poetry had started to disturb the order of society. A study was conducted by the police that involved a recent rise in burglaries and a connection to Margaret's poetry was made. Each person that was arrested was an admitted fan of the nonsense that she wrote in the weekly tribune.

There was one final incident that sealed the fate for Margaret's poetry and after that it took a years' time, but a vote was held by the stockholders and it was decided by The Corporation that the endeavor of state-sponsored art should be discontinued and that Poetry as well as all art, would be banned henceforth. The months following the passing of the new law, crime went down to its normal virtually nonexistent percentage.

Margaret was unable to take any credit for her work. She was forced to publish under the pen name:

"Mercy".

No celebrities existed on Mars as it was a taxable offense to be famous.

The celebrity culture back on earth was, in the minds of the CEOs, a big reason for the downfall of civilization.

Margaret went into a deep depression after she lost her job and decided to attempt suicide by swallowing 15 diazepam.

Luckily her tablet had heard her talk about killing herself the days leading up to the attempt and the police were waiting outside to storm into the house and to rescue Margaret.

Margaret's stay at West Branch cost the family a substantial amount of #spenx, in fact it was almost exactly the number of bits that her poetry had earned that the episode had cost the family and since another huge demerit had been taken from the families account recently on account of the botched surgery Felicia's stepfather Stan had performed; the family was in ruin and living on borrowed time. Their financial burdens had caused Stan to turn to alcohol and Margaret's bi-polar disorder reach psychotic new heights.

The suggestion of killing Joey, excited Felicia and she was disappointed to hear that Margaret was backing down.

At least she thought they had called it off.

Not twenty minutes after the scavenger hunt for murder weapons, Joey started to stumble around the living room drunkenly.

"What's wrong with Joey?"

"I did it, honey. I bowel-fed him 10 Trazadone just now. Hurry honey. Take him into the bathroom before your stepdad recovers from his blackout."

"Take him to the bathroom and do what?"

Felicia grabbed the guitar string and rubber mallet end went into the downstairs restroom with Joey.

Joey was dazed but he was still wagging his tail happily and seemed to smile as he lovingly licked Felicia's shaking hand.

From the other room Felicia could hear Frank Sinatra's "My Way" blasting.

Stan slept blissfully.

Felicia began to throttle the old dogs' muscular neck. Joey thrashed about with the effort of a salmon returning upstream to the place of its birth. Joey gagged and squirmed violently and Felicia began to cry and screamed. "Be still Joey! Please, stop. Dear God make him stop moving. Stop Joey. Just Stop it! Please. Aaaaahhaaaaaaa".

She found herself bending Joeys hind legs over his head and continued to apply pressure until the dogs spine snapped loudly. Joey managed to lick Felicia's hand one more time before he released his final breath into the rich Martian air.

"Mom! Get me a trash-bag. Now!"

Joey had emptied his facilities all over the bathroom floor and Felicia slipped on urine and feces as she unsteadily rose to her feet.

She scooped the dog up while looking the other way and with her eyes closed. She double bagged him and then stuffed the body into a banana box that she had found in the garage. Felicia was quick on her toes and came up with a game plan for disposing of the body. They loaded up her Mothers Tesla Sudan with the Banana box as well as two fishing poles and a tackle box.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Detective Scoville, sat in his under-cover police cruiser in the cul-de-sac that the family lived on.

He wondered why the pair was taking a banana box fishing and why they were leaving so late in the day to try their luck. Fishing was the only form of hunting that was legal and it was only because the fish were mechanical and placed in rivers by Microfiber for sport and to add an earth-like feel to Mars' artificial landscape. Wild animals, including real fish, existed and flourished on Mars but they all lived on the Outside Lands and all Insiders were forbidden to enter The Outside Lands and stayed away willingly for those lands were full of wild homosexual men who had been banished from Martian society due to criminal or antisocial behaviors as well as scores of every animal that survived the voyage to Mars.

Martian society worked like this: There was something called "City Tax" if you lived within a civilized city or a ROC as they were called, you were expected to pay 20% of your income to live there. It doesn't matter if you have a job or not. Everyone who lives within society had to pay an income tax. If you were a longtime law-abiding citizen who failed to pay the tax, you were at first sent to #Wehab where you are essentially put into an iron lung and your stem cells are harvested for the rest of society.

The Corporation harvests an amount of stem cells from the individual that is equal in value to the debt they have incurred in society.

Once the individual has paid their debt and their families can prove that, upon returning to society, the person has work and is able to function again, The Corporation releases the individual back to their family unit.

If the debtor has either shown that they have no family to vouch for them or that their bodies are not desirable for stem cell harvesting, the Martian is then tagged, and removed from society and becomes an Outsider...if the Martian is a male.

Men who became outcasts would live the rest of their lives as hunter gatherers in the wilderness.

Women were too precious to society to simply discard. The fact that a woman's body can reproduce and make more people, which Mars desperately needed, was considered when Microfiber decided what to do with lawbreakers.

Women who were debtors to the point of criminality, were taken to a massive facility in New Dublin that existed solely for the purpose of facilitating the woman while they were artificially inseminated with sperm that was considered to be of good genetics. They would bear child after child until their debt to society had been managed.

At the age of thirty, every Martian is required to receive an inoculation.

The serum they receive is a combination of stem cells and nano-bots that essentially make the person impervious to aging.

The concoction also makes the individual sterile, so children must be had before the age of thirty.

All female martians were required by law to have at least one child and no more than three by the age of thirty.

If a woman falls into a criminal amount of debt after their inoculation and was sterile, they were put into work camps, that is of course given their genetics were unsuitable for stem cell farming.

There was an artificial river that ran south of the family's neighborhood. It was called the New Truckee river and it was full of mechanical salmon, year-round.

Felicia and her mother headed to the river and Detective Scoville stayed a safe distance behind the suspects. His thick black hair was standing on edge and he felt a swelling in his loins when he saw the back of Felicia's blonde head.

Indir Scoville's family was initially from the ROC (regional operations center) back on earth that was based in Bangladesh.

The only people who survived the apocalypse were people who lived at and worked at Microfibers global ROCs.

There was one in Reno NV, one in Dublin Ireland and one in Bangladesh.

The culture on mars was a mix of Irish, Indian and American cultures as a result and the accent was predominantly Indian with a hint of Irish.

The one thing that remained from his culture that had not been sacrificed for a new Martian way of life was arranged marriages.

Indir was married to a woman who was also of Indian descent.

She was a wonderful woman and a great wife but Indir wanted a white woman and always had.

Simply put, his wife was just not his type.

Felicia and her mother abruptly pulled over on the opposite side of the highway from the lane they were driving in and for a moment Scoville felt like he was in a real police chase.

Discreetly, the detective pulled over a few hundred yards on the opposite side of the road from Felicia and her mother. Scoville climbed into the backseat of his cruiser and pulled out his digital binoculars. The binoculars were satellite based and the user was able to see their target from any direction.

He watched from an eagle-eye view as the pair unloaded the car. The banana box looked heavy and unwieldy as Felicia carried it down the rocky mountainside toward the river. The river was crowded that day, but they had found a place that had only one other car parked near it and the people it belonged to were nowhere to be seen.

"Dammit" he yelled.

He could see that Felicia and Her mother had already returned to their vehicle and were heading North towards New Reno. He didn't expect them to leave so quickly. He wasn't sure what he planned on doing if they had stuck around to fish. He was hesitant to act on his gut feeling and arrest the two for suspicion of criminal activities – that would be the textbook thing to do at that point.

Was he holding back as to not discover the truth about Felicia? Could he arrest a woman as entrancing as she if he had to? He cut back Northbound, skidding across the highway and

pulled over at the spot where Felicia had discarded the box. He climbed down the rocky mountainside and found the box stuffed between a cliff and a large boulder. Scoville opened the box slowly and then collapsed, falling face first into a thorny bush.

Chapter Forty

On the way home Margaret recited some of her poetry to her daughter, whom had her mother's touch with words and was also writing poetry of like style and with the same esthetic. The two of them had very similar minds and personalities. Felicia was also bipolar and suffered greatly from anxiety and depression. Felicia had written something the other day and she nervously read it to her mother.

"An idling mind, running too lean, like a two-stroke engine that just ate a shoelace; choking, purring.

The universe expands and I have tunnel vision.

Girls are all I see, their shapes and sizes. The fluid movements and gesticulating hips.

I think of a muscular horse that rides side by side with a breeze that is towing a January day.

Everything is red like poppies being mashed into heroin for the needy.

Tired of nothing, there's an aching want that is left unscathed by the eagle of the lush green valley.

A roaring in the street ushers in a new way of working within distrustful minds and unkempt hearts.

I pleaded to the man with the New Bangladesh Wild Cats beanie and he shook his head several times at my stupidity.

. His jokes went over my head and splattered like rotten tomatoes around me.

And Pensive George is pissed at the man with the seven-ten split teeth. "Happy Tax Day" he jeered.

The button pushing is too loud and it's time to leave. Bounce.

The native tongue speaks a strange vernacular to a strained and purple ear.

Doing life hard and being stiffed on a graveyard shift - stiff like a cadaver full of formaldehyde and there's a worm in its eye.

Blessed and passionate. Growing up too fast and slow to react to yesterday.

Why do clairvoyant dreams become less vivid to the monarch as he nears the mutinous men?

For he is a church and I am the bell that rings this Sunday at noon."

"What the hell was that?" Margaret said after a long silence.

Felicia wanted to throw her tablet out the window and never write anything again but then her mother laughed and said that she was just teasing her.

"Now that's poetry, honey. I want you to promise me that no matter happens to our family, you will keep writing."

"Well, I'm already a criminal now. We both are. Breaking the law for poetry is small-time stuff. I promise mom."

"Nobody can ever know about this, honey. Don't write about it especially and try not to keep your poetry on your tablet in case we are audited. If anyone ever finds out about this, forget #WEhab, we are going straight to The Outside Land. Don't forget that. Women or not".

The Ward household knew peace for a moment.

Stan snored heavily with his head on his desk and the pen that was in his pocket had exploded and was dripping all over. Before he passed out, he had gathered the remaining #spenx the family had and put it through the money counter. When Margaret came in to wake him for dinner, their money counter device was spinning endlessly with a twenty-bit #spenx stuck in it.

The house smelt like green beans, fried electronics and bourbon but not the emptied bowels of a small animal. Felicia had cleaned the downstairs bathroom four times over with bleach, and accidentally made a form of mustard gas by mixing ammonia with the bleach and almost killed herself.

Detective Scoville awoke as the sun was setting. He had rolled down the mountainside a significant distance from the now empty banana box. His head was cut across his forehead and his cheeks were lacerated a bit. The planter's warts at the sole of his right foot always made him limp. This time he was limping because of the pain in his right knee from the fall. He closed his eyes and he saw the grotesque image of the twisted murdered dog. He couldn't get it out of his mind and knew he was forever changed. He had encountered death for the second time, and it scared the hell out of him just the same as it did before.

"Where did the body go"? He wondered.

He was still within the Inner Lands and it wasn't possible that a bear or coyote had gotten to it; Wild animals had never been seen anywhere in the Inner Land.

The detective decided it was best to leave the box there as if nothing had happened. He couldn't explain to the guys back at the precinct what had happened for many obvious reasons. If it was discovered that he lost the body in a homicide case because he fainted, he would surely receive a life changing demerit to his account for gross negligence. He couldn't risk it.

There was only one thing to do.

He stopped at a coffee shop on the way into town and filled his canteen with espresso and parked near the Wards house.

Lucy had been feeling under the weather for a few days. She had been diagnosed with cancer earlier that week and was scheduled for an early inoculation, as she was only 20. Lucy was the opposite of her younger sister and mother. She was never depressed about anything. She had an enlightened way of living and seemed to be happy, though not content with existence.

Lucy felt strongly that there's was something wrong with the world and that there was something more than what science could explain. Every night she dreamt, and those dreams were a different place outside of the universe and her mind, she was sure of it. If there was something other than life on Mars and the world she would visit in her dreams, it had to be found only in death. Even if nothingness awaited her, she smiled dreamily at the thought of it and devotedly believed in what a magical change of scene that would be.

Lucy came home shortly after Felicia and Margaret returned from the river. They stuck to their fishing story and explained that Joey had been adopted after they posted an ad on #Craigslist. Lucy mumbled something in return and feverishly shook.

She smiled and was happy.

"We went fishing today!" Felicia and Margaret both said simultaneously. Nobody had asked them though they volunteered the information to Lucy. Lucy hadn't heard them.

"I can feel it you guys! It's awful! Its magnificent. What a rush death must be! You guys must be feeling amazing right now after... I mean. after you went fishing. Never mind." Lucy trailed off.

Lucy moved wearily as she made her way upstairs to her room. She coughed up blood and stopped at the top of the stairs.

“You guys, look! There’s blood in my cough! Can you believe it?” she was absolutely thrilled.

“Any luck finding Mr. Right yet honey?” Margaret asked her daughter.

“Ugh! How does Microfiber expect me to get pregnant while I have cancer? I can’t do it mom, I don’t want to have a baby. Who’s gonna take care of it when I die?”

“Don’t be silly! Nobody has died in five years and according to the papers, they project that none else will ever die again. You may feel like your gonna die babe, especially if you’re pregnant, but after nine months, you get your inoculation and be fine.”

“I will die mom! Just watch. One of these days way before nine months, I’m gonna die and its gonna be amazing!”

Lucy coughed some more.

“See? more blood!”

Outside, in his police cruiser, Detective Scoville felt his stomach tying itself into a tight knot. His head still hurt from his fall but for a moment he forgot about the pain and focused on his nausea. He was disgusted that Lucy could cough up blood so casually and upon imagining her standing there with blood from her lungs on her hand, he opened the door and vomited. He put his headphones back on and this time he added the audio signal coming from Lucy’s personal tablet to his index and monitored the activity of the household for the remainder of the night. He had pulled himself together as best he could despite the day he had. He tried to stomach the espresso in his canteen, but it was too acidic for his weak guts.

Around midnight, Scoville’s index showed that Lucy had used her tablet to search for information on the anatomy of canines. There was a light on in the garage, he could see underneath the garage door enough to know that someone was walking around in there. Finally, he picked up an audio signal from Lucy’s tablet.

“What are you doing out here?” the voice was identified by the index as Felicia’s.

“Don’t worry about Joey. I know what happened and I’m okay with the decision you and mom made.”

“He went to a good home “

“Yes he did. He went to the eternal home. The home that I hope to come back to someday.”

“What’s in the trash bag? It smells like piss. Oh my god Lucy! Why would you...”

“When I came home from work, I noticed that Joey was missing. I tracked him on my GPS to the river. I found the banana box behind the rocks and Joey’s broken body inside.”

“Anyone could have done that to him if he had been adopted. How do you know it was mom and I that did it?

“The banana box had “Felicia <3” written in sharpie on the side. I remembered you had used a banana box to pack your makeup in when we moved into the new house. The box also had your foundation smeared all over the inside.”

Detective Scoville felt a pang of embarrassment for being a detective and not noticing that Felicia had written her name on the box.

“Was it you or was it mom who did it?”

“It was me.”

“Tell me everything. What was it like seeing him take his last breath?” Lucy’s eyes swelled with tears of joy. She haphazardly shook Joey out of the trash bag and produced a kitchen knife that she began to crudely butcher him with, all the while chatty and smiling affectionately at her anxiety plagued younger sister.

“it was... I don’t know. Not as bad as I thought it would be.”

“ You’re my hero! Can we kill Brady next? He’s Practically a thousand years old in dog years anyway.”

“Lucy! No, you love Brady. He’s your dog.”

“I want him to die because I love him. He deserves it.”

“What are you doing with Joey? Stop that!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be quick. I’m just gonna take a peak inside and see what it looks like behind his skin. I wonder what’s in there. I promise that I’ll bury him in the backyard as soon as Stan and mom crash.”

“Here. Let me do it.”

Felicia’s voice was the voice of an angel, a murderous angel.

The detective hadn’t slept with his wife since their honeymoon over a year and a half ago and was sexually deprived. He felt the pressure of an erection building in his pants and felt ashamed of himself for his lustful feeling for another woman. He felt like a creep listening to the two sisters have a private conversation while he was rocking a raging hard-on. He was also ashamed that he hadn’t called for backup to arrest the family for the murder of their dog. He should be handcuffing the sisters right now and getting a promotion for solving the first murder case in the precinct’s history, albeit of just a dog. He decided to go home to his wife. Scoville removed his excessive amount of gold jewelry and he and his wife had passionate sex. Scoville pictured Felicia being bent over his squad car and handcuffed and what he would do if he could.

Chapter Forty-One

There had been thirty-three official known deaths on Mars to date. There was a marble wall to commemorate the deceased that was built in the capital ROC in New Bangladesh. Unbeknownst to the public there had been two more known deaths on Mars, but they had been quickly covered up and all accounts of what happened had been classified and redacted from documents.

The two deaths were a “buddy suicide”.

Hilrag Scoville and his best friend Gaudy Vase Scotia both had obsessive personalities. They were highly intelligent, with a lust for all things artful. Living in a black and white world of desk jobs a censorship, the two young men felt a lack of stimulation for their hungry minds and found little meaning in their lives altogether. Unlike their peers, they both tried to find an answer for why they felt so different wherever they could.

Gaudy was the most different from the other guys at school. Different in a way that his classmates couldn't quite grasp or pinpoint but nonetheless it bothered them tremendously, especially the other male students. Gaudy couldn't define what made him so unlike his fellow Martian peers either. He spoke with a lisp and his hand flailed about when he spoke, his wrists were limp, and his hips swayed as he walked whereas his male peers swung their arms and shoulders when they walked. These are differences that Hilrag had pointed out to Gaudy. Hilrag was absolutely devoted to Gaudy and had observed him long enough and intently enough to be able to point out what made Gaudy unique. Hilrag was classic valedictorian material and three-time MVP on the school's soccer team. He would have been MVP again his senior year, but his teachers received a letter from The Corporation stating that Hilrag was becoming too popular for their liking and to do their best to “normalize” the student. Failure to comply would result in the school being taxed at a higher rate.

Soccer was the only sport played on Mars and it was played in mostly in schools and local parks. They had amended the rules of the sport as well. After five goals were scored, the game would continue until both teams had an even amount of goals. Games would last months at a time and must be paused and then later continued day to day.

After the last world war back on Earth, the CEOs who survived it – and had managed to salvage humanity, were leery of homosexuality and its nefarious implications. In fact, a couple of the CEOs were themselves openly homosexual back on earth and the other board members were aware of this fact. Surprisingly, those two execs were the most adamant about banning homosexuality on Mars. They did it in a clever way. Instead of teaching propaganda about being gay and the problems involved with it, they simply erased all history of it so that people simply didn't know what it was.

Taking away something's definition is taking away its existence. As a result, people who were feeling gay but didn't know what it was exactly, would immediately consult their physician. The doctors were to prescribe a tablet that was essentially a large dose of saltpeter so that the sex drive of the patient would then disappear entirely. So far this approach to the gay problem on Mars worked.

Gaudy seemed to always be in trouble at school. His teachers couldn't stand him. His personality alone - whether he was speaking or not, was enough to disrupt a lecture. The students around him that didn't hate his guts, wanted to talk to him more than they wanted to

learn; especially the female students. He always had an answer for everything, and it was always something witty, something cleverer than what his teachers could have come up with.

As if Gaudy wasn't wild enough, everything changed for him one day. His existence was validated in a couple of paragraphs that almost jumped off the paper at him. Poetry had just been released in adult newspapers, but you had to be twenty-three years old to purchase them. Gaudy was still in high school. Gaudy had heard about poetry and its' controversial effect on people and was eager to see some before it was too late. There were rumors that poems would be banned soon, as they stirred too much commotion in the masses.

A group of Gaudys' classmates were huddled together behind the swing sets just beyond the tanbark and wallball wall. They were all passing something around and laughing tremendously.

"What is it. Ooooh Ooooooh. Show me! Show me! Show me! C'mon guys!"

"Go away Scotia. You'll narc us out."

The boys all stopped what they were doing and started pointing at Gaudy and repeating the chant "narc, narc, narc!"

"I'm not a narc. Shut up! I just want to see too. You guys."

Hilrag came out to the playground, late from study hall, and was immediately in a defensive mood. He hated when the other kids teased Gaudy and he had had enough of it. Hilrag stormed up to the biggest kid in the group, licked his finger, then stuck it in the kids' ear. Gaudy laughed flamboyantly and the bell rang. Hilrag forcefully grabbed the adult newspaper out of the bullies hand that they had all been huddled around and then handed it to Gaudy.

"Come on Gaudy, the bell rang." Hilrag took a few steps towards class and then stopped when he noticed that Gaudy had frozen.

"What is it?"

Gaudy read the passage five or six times before he was able to answer Hilrag. He cleared his throat and read out loud to Hilrag.

Give me a blank slate for a revolution to be written in stone on, a place for wild golden memories to tame themselves. Where the future can be seen pounding hot metal into a sword. The waxy past is something blunted and forgotten instantaneously. I elect for you to no longer speak and to move in colors and through dimensions, sensually, like an effervescent jellyfish washed ashore in New Alaska. Strawberry lies and Spaghettios for promises, do we take anything to heart? There are rules to this and if you break them, you're a poet. Impulses sway matter in a way that is ancient and unspoken. The fairgrounds are ready for the new year's ball and massive technicolor balloons carve godly face in the placid blue sky. A table is made into firewood and the people are in mourning. The horizon sparkles auspiciously; it's yellow and silver like the edge of a saber through cosmic butter. In a tree, an endangered family of belly dancers smoke cannabis and opium. An orange and green cloud ascends to the greater heavens gaily. You Believed in the alchemy behind your own personal progress and it led you there. Let prostitutes moan courageously on a Wednesday. A sweet smell of vinegar is carried by the cool New Himalayan breeze. No more Christmas classics on the tv or super Mario for the kids. We're not eating polenta ever again either, probably. Last time the birds were out of the cage and they disturbed the honored guest. Trying to be family but only being awkward. Glow like a moon bug and strafe from the bullets far. Welcome to Mars. Welcome to Mars."

“I don’t get it.”

Hilrag was kind of annoyed by the words Gaudy just read. They didn’t make any sense to him and nothing in his life had ever not made sense before.

“Don’t you see? The freedom in the words! It’s magical. There are no rules or reason, it’s just expression in its raw form. Everything in my life has had to fit neatly inside a box. They want me to fit in the box too, but this is written proof that the outside of the box is where I want to live. I don’t doubt myself anymore.”

Gaudy suddenly lept into Hilrag’s arms and wrapped his legs around Hilrag’s hips. Hilrag held tight onto Gaudy for a moment and began to blush.

“Carry my back to class.”

Hilrag was sweating like crazy. He dropped Gaudy on his backside and immediately began apologizing profusely. Hilrag ran away into the bathroom. He was late for class but he couldn’t walk in with an erection.

Gaudy and Hilrag started a secret poetry circle that was just the two of them and whatever of Mercy’s poems they could come across, which were only half a dozen or so.

Hilrag’s older brother Indir was starting to become worried about Hilrag. He spent too much time with that weird kid from school and he wondered what they were doing in the attic of the house everyday after school.

“Wendy Flannery really seems to like you Hilrag. How come you haven’t asked her to prom yet?” Indir asked his kid brother over breakfast one morning.

“She’s alright. I don’t know though. I don’t like her really.” Hilrag played with his oatmeal vacantly.

“Well it doesn’t matter if you like her or not, you’ve already had your wife picked out for you for many years now. This is your last chance to get a little something before you can no longer play the field, little brother.”

“Indir! I don’t like that your mind goes to such places! For shame, son!” Indir’s mother reached across the dining room table and slapped his hand.

“I want to take Gaudy to the prom.”

Everyone at the table dropped their spoons simultaneously. Their father choked on a date he was chewing on and spit it up on to his plate.

“Son, of course you can go with your friend but first you both need to find dates in order to attend.” Hilrag’s father said.

“Why can’t Gaudy be my date? What’s wrong with that?”

Because homosexuality wasn’t outlawed, there was no negative connotation in the young man’s mind regarding homosexuality. He didn’t know what it was, but he didn’t inherently feel it was something to either be ashamed or proud of. It was just a thing.

"It's the poetry papa! The stuff is making his brain turn to mush! He has spent all of his time lately in the attic with that weird kid and adult newspapers!"

"Narc!" Hilrag yelled.

"Poetry? When will the CEOs realize that this foolishness must end before there is another war because of it? I cannot believe this smut can circulate in this day and age!" His father slammed his mighty brown fists on the table and the fruit bowl jumped an inch.

"I don't even care about the poetry! I just want to be with Gaudy and he loves the stuff. It's way over my head. I know one thing and that is that I am happy when we are together. I melt when he reads to me. Since he's discovered art, it's like he's vibrating on a whole new frequency and I just want to absorb it all. I want to live like that for the rest of my life."

"See papa? It is the poetry!" Indir stormed down the hallway and pulled the stairs from the attic down. He climbed up the stairs and then returned quickly to the kitchen with a handful of newspapers. He tossed the papers into the fireplace, grabbed his backpack and lunch and was off to college.

"You dick, Indir! I hate you!" Hilrag ran into his room with tears in his eyes and shut the door.

It was the night of the prom. Hilrag and Gaudy were sitting in the attic together playing paper football. Hilrag was bored with the game. Gaudy had snuck in through Hilrag's window as he wasn't allowed in the Scoville household any longer. Gaudy had a big smile on his face.

"What?" Hilrag said.

"Guess what I used to make that paper football? Unfold it."

Hilrag unfolded the paper football and revealed that it was an adult newspaper. The newest Mercy poem was in it.

"I told my family that I wanted to go to the prom with you."

Gaudy felt his heart skip a beat and he began to blush. He didn't know what to say but he felt like holding Hilrag as tight as he could and never letting go of him. Tears began to swell in his eyes. He grabbed the piece of paper and started to read.

Well would you look at me. I Turned my pockets inside out. Just fantasy and the truth beyond the doubts. I have some knowledge; I don't want to share with the kids. Am I unwanted? Don't I get to fall in love? Hanging noose. I told the truth to your swollen eyes and I was shaken and I'm scared that I've had my time. So easily bruised, better take your vitamins. I was gone too soon. You were soldiering on and on through the black and brown and blue; the atmosphere of mud. Let's take a look at you and what you've accomplished with your blood. You're lying down but you don't sleep. You said "look inside. Get in there deep." Well these are just words and I've betrayed my kin. A very confused life. Flash before my open eyes. I've had my time. We lay down together, with bags on our heads. You hold my hand tight and soon we are dead.

"There's no place for us in this society, Hil. Don't you see what Mercy is telling us in this poem? I mean it's so obvious!"

"I have no clue Gaudy."

"It's about us. We've had our time here. It's time for us to be together forever."

“My parents are going to send me away if we hang out anymore. They can’t know that you are here right now. If I don’t go to the prom with Wendy, they said they will cut me off completely. I am too young to go to #WEhab, Gaudy!”

“I didn’t mean be together on Mars forever together. We can leave right now to a better place where we don’t have to worry about being different.” Gaudy pulled two plastic grocery bags out of his pocket.

Hilrag was nervous and started to shiver violently. His teeth rattled together audibly. He took a deep breath and decided at that moment to surrender his will and entire being to Gaudy.

“Whatever you want to do, I’m in.”

Gaudy put a trash bag over Hilrag’s face and tied it tightly around his neck with duct tape. He did the same thing to himself. The two lay down in one another’s arms and share their first kiss through the plastic bags. They suffocated within minutes.

Indir came home from his girlfriend and future wife’s house that evening to an empty house. He shouted for his brother and parents, but no one answered. His parents had gone to see the new Microfiber documentary showing at the local theatre; Indir remembered.

The prom must have been out for a few hours by then and he knew his brother well enough to know that he would have declined any social event that he might have been invited to after the dance. He decided to check the attic to see if he was up there with his loser friend again. He ascended the stairs to the attic and quickly fell back down them, completely unconscious.

Chapter Forty-Two

Family was everything on Mars. Families lived together their entire lives and shared the same tax ID number. As far as The Corporation was concerned, one family was like one person. An individual was required by law to belong to a family unit. If a member of a family unit is for any reason ever unable to contribute and or is removed from society/deceased, the Corporation subsidizes the family that suffered the loss the amount that the inequitable family member could have made potentially over the course of one lifetime. As a result of Hilrag committing suicide, the Scoville family received a large amount of credits from Microfiber and found themselves to be wealthy. Detective Scoville spent his portion of his share of the settlement entirely on expensive gold jewelry encrusted with diamonds.

Detective Scoville got an early start. It was the morning after he had tailed the Wards to the New Truckee river. He had only slept a few hours. He sat at the vanity for a few minutes and stared at the cuts on his face. He put on several pounds of gold chains and rings and was out the door.

Like his deceased younger brother, Indir had an obsessive personality. He was driven by two things as a lawman. One: to never let anyone ever commit suicide again, and two: he was going to find out who Mercy was, and he was going to make them pay for what they did to his brother.

It was a little after 5am and according to Felicia's file, she could be found at her work as she had the graveyard shift. Scoville arrived outside Bill and Sally's tavern and waited for Felicia to get off work. She was scheduled until 7am.

At around 630 am, a man arrived at the tavern by way of taxi. The man literally fell on his face when he exited the vehicle. Scoville recognized this man. It was Stan White, Felicia's stepfather. His face looked like a ripe tomato and his eyes were the same color as his cheeks. Stan was a big oaf of a man. He weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds, and was six foot four inches. He used to have ginger red hair but all of the hair on his body had long since turned grey. He had a chip in his front tooth that gave him a juvenile look somehow. He walked stiff like a rock-em sock-em robot fights. And he was constantly frowning to the point where the veins in his neck had burst because of it one time.

It took five minutes or so, but Stan made it to his feet and made his way to the entrance of the tavern. He swayed in place in front of the glass door. Felicia looked outside and felt her heart sink. She buzzed him in nonetheless.

"Whisky coke." Stan slurred, far too close to Felicia for her liking. Stan had always been creepy to the sisters.

Detective Scoville decided to go in undercover. He arrived at the door and waited for Felicia to buzz him into the casino. He could see that Stan and Felicia were arguing. She continued talking across the gaming floor to Stan, saying something inaudible as she opened the door for Scoville.

"It's open! Hello!"

Scoville just stood there staring at Felicia completely frozen. He couldn't move his legs or form words with his mouth.

"Felicia, hello! Hi." The detective said after a painful silence

“Do I know you?” Felicia got a bad vibe from him right away.

“No, no, no, no, I...I saw your nametag.” Scoville laughed awkwardly and smiled, showing way too many of his bright white teeth.

“Right. Are you playing or drinking or both?”

Scoville giggled like an idiot and walked in reverse towards the gaming floor. He kept eye contact with Felicia all the way until he sat down at the farthest machine in the room. She couldn't see him where he sat from the bar but every once in a while he would pop his head out into view and stare at her again.

She was glad that her shift was about to end.

Somewhere in the casino a man began to scream like a crazy person. Felicia lamented that security was only there until 6am each night. She ran out onto the floor and her suspicions were true. Stan was on the floor with his legs tucked under his arms, on his side. He was screaming from the deepest part of his being and bellowing out nonsense uncontrollably.

Felicia hadn't noticed it when Stan came in but in his hand was an empty coffee can. It was the coffee can that the family had collected the remaining credits they had in. The funds were to make it through the next two months. Felicia began to panic and she bolted toward the bar. On top of the register were the keys to the slot machines. It was 6:50am and Mr. Michael Landon could walk in at any moment.

Before Felicia tried at dealing with her stepfather, she went to the machine Stan had been playing at and inserted the butterfly key so that she could review the most recent activity. There was a buy in of ten-thousand four hundred and ninety five bits at six forty seven am. That was the exact amount her family had collected to survive for the little time they had left. The machine now had zero credits on it.

The local scumbags that haunted the tavern began to crowd around the scene. Felicia got on her knees next to Stan and whispered desperately.

“Get up you fat idiot! You're gonna get me fired. Do you want that, huh? You just wasted our last few #spenx and now you're gonna get me canned. Why did my mom marry you? Never mind. Get up. Get up, you...”

“Felicia. The police had better already be on their way to get this loiterer of the property! I'm tired of you putting up with bums! We need to clean this place up and it starts with losers like this guy!”

The words had barely left Mr. Michael Landon's mouth when suddenly Stan was composed enough to land a right fist to Felicia's boss's face. Stan took off on foot, up Rock Boulevard north for half a mile or so before he was detained by the sheriffs.

“Felicia, right? Hi I'm officer Leah. We haven't officially met. I was the arresting officer. Your stepfather wanted me to pass a message on for you. We have him in backseat now, it wouldn't be against any rules for you to talk to him before we had to the station.”

For a moment, Felicia was thankful that the incident had occurred in a small way. Officer Leah had come in about twice a week to use the restroom at the tavern since Felicia started working

there. Each time Leah would come in, she would say hi politely to Felicia and then be in the bathroom for five minutes or so, then she would thank her and leave. It was more to Felicia than just "hi" and "bye" with Leah. Felicia waited all shift for Leah to walk through the door. Something about a woman in a uniform attracted Felicia. Her heart would pound in her chest every time she saw her and each word she spoke to her felt like taking a great leap or reaching the highest mountain top.

"Stepfather? That beast is your stepfather? Excuse me officer, I'm the one the man attacked, why aren't you taking my statement"?

Mr. Michael Landon was holding a beer pitcher full of ice water over his nose. It was definitely broken.

"Because Felicia is cuter than you are, sir." Answered the Officer.

"Well I sure hope being cute pays the Bills for her because she's fired!" Mr. Michael Landon spilled the ice water on Felicia's shirt. Her large nipples became clearly visible through her t shirt.

Officer Leah giggled and blushed. She asked Felicia jokingly if she wanted to press charges on her now ex-boss for assaulting her with ice water. Felicia smiled but she was within the clutches of her chronic anxiety once again and the thought of being farmed for stem cells terrified her. Even if she were to be considered rehabilitated at some point, her family was too dysfunctional to vouch for her to be released.

Without a solid family, a Martian is bound to at some point be banished to the Outside Lands or farmed.

"I've seen you riding that awful scooter around. I mean, its pretty impressive that you can fix it like I've seen you do a few times. Sorry I haven't stopped to help. I'm always on my way to the station with someone cuffed in backseat. You'd be surprised how much petty crime has increased since those Mercy copy cats started popping up in illegal newsletters. I would give you a ride home right now but I don't think I have room for your scooter, with your stepfather back there. He's a big guy. I'm so happy he passed out."

"Maybe you could give me a ride some other time? I've never been inside a cop car before. Is it fast? I'm sorry that was a stupid question. I'm dumb."

"Yes and Yes...and no, that wasn't a dumb thing to say. Here's my personal tablet url. PM me. I'm off this Wednesday all day. First time in forever."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Detective Scoville was lingering near the wireframe news stand by the front entrance. He had tactfully inched his way closer and closer to Felica and officer Leah and had overheard most of the exchange between them. Scoville was overcome with anger, listening to the two talk to one another. Officer Leah recognized the detective from the station but decided not to say anything to him in case he was undercover or something.

Felicia left on her standup scooter after fifteen minutes of pulling the pull start repeatedly. The starter fluid spray she had no longer worked its magic as the carburetor was full of gunk, some

of it was from back on Earth even. Scoville had a harder time following a scooter at twenty five miles an hour than he had following the family car previously.

It was a cold Martian morning. Felicia hadn't dressed warm enough for the ride the night before.

She didn't notice the detective at all though he trailed only a few cars length behind at the same speed as her for the entire sixteen miles back to the Ward house. He pulled into the same spot he had camped out at the night before and he watched Felicia open the garage and bring her scooter inside. Felicia presumably went to sleep because there was no audio from her tablet the rest of day. Lucy was in the backyard gardening, Scoville could see her silhouette through the wooden fence. She was surely in the backyard for one reason only, the detective figured. She was making sure there was no trace of the grave she dug for Joey.

Chapter Forty-Three

It was nighttime on Mars.

Scoville had been in a half lucid daze while he chain smoked on his electronic cigarette endlessly. His left arm had fallen asleep and felt like it was on fire as the blood returned to it.

An audio signal finally came from the house. Scoville was paranoid about getting caught spending time on a case he should have closed already, especially if the grislier details emerge for his peers to scrutinize.

The detective had isolated Margaret, Felicia and Lucy's tablet feed and password protected them so that he could be the only one to hear what they were doing. Only detectives have this power in Martian society. All police officers had unlimited access to any citizen's personal devices without cause or a warrant.

"All the #spenx are gone Brady...that's it honey." It sounded like Margaret had been crying.

Brady barked and the audio in Scoville's headphones clipped with feedback.

"I've got 20 pills left. I won't even be a free woman long enough to take them all. That is unless I take them all right now. The girls will understand. I'm a broken poet with nothing to offer society. In twenty four hours, I will be officially negative in the account and they will come for me to collect, Brady. This is the only way now."

Scoville immediately grabbed his overdose kit and began to exit his vehicle but just then his captain called his car tablet.

"Sir, I'm sorry to be short with you but I've got something I have to do right now otherwise I'm going to regret it for the rest of my life. I'm hanging up on you. Please don't fire me."

"Detective, you press that button and you fired yourself. Am I clear?"

"Sir."

"Why is it that you assigned yourself the Ward case yesterday and you have yet to file a report on what you've discovered? Now I look and they tell me that the whole family is password protected by you. Seems pretty suspicious to me. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No sir, no suspicious activity to report. There were a few alarming searches on the mother's tablet but besides that, I think they are harmless."

"Harmless? They have less than twenty four hours of #spenx left between them. No one in those kind of dire straights isn't a criminal. In twenty four hours, the Ward family goes negative and that means the case becomes corporate and therefore out of our jurisdiction. This is a high profile case and could be the greatest arrest of my career, I don't want it to go to the suits."

"Sir, they're just a normal family that is going through a rough time. There's nothing high profile about them. I've done the research."

"Ah, so you saw the part of Margaret's file that has been redacted. Well, I have inside information about what was omitted from her file. Margaret Ward is the poet Mercy. Ever heard of Mercy before, detective... Detective?"

“Yes...yes sir.. I’m still here. Sir, this case has my undivided attention and you have my word that I will bring you something that we can get them on before it goes Corporate.”

“So, what was so important that you were going to lose your job over?”

“I think I have a lead, sir. I will explain later.”

“Get to it!”

Scoville remained in his car and tuned in on Margaret once more. He put his overdose kit back under the passenger seat and took a long sip from his canteen.

“Do you think ten was enough, Brady-boy”?

Brady whined at an unpleasant pitch.

“You’re right, I’ll take the other ten too. That should do it, honey.”

Detective Scoville’s life goals had contradicted one another in an unfortunate twist of fate. He vowed to end suicide but he also vowed to make Mercy pay for her poetry. A deep hatred flared in his gut and he thought of his brother with a bag on his head and the poem they found on his body. How could such a monster give birth to an angel like Felicia?

He couldn’t let that woman live, she was a threat to the future, a threat to herself and a threat to Felicia, the woman he was slowly falling in love with. He didn’t care that she had done to her pet. He hated animals and the fact that she was an outlaw, made him want her more. she was the daughter of the woman who had killed his brother and somehow that made him need to have her.

Margaret lay in bed waiting for the paramedics to break through her bedroom door like they had last time she attempted suicide. The paramedics never came.

Chapter Forty-Four

"Hello?"

"Hey. Um... I don't know how to say this... or, um I want to say, well "Hi" for one and that I'm sorry I didn't wait until Wednesday to call."

"Wait, who is this?"

"It's Felicia from the tavern earlier this morning. You arrested my stepdad."

"Oh, hey Felicia, I remember, the one with the hard nipples."

Felicia felt herself become wet between her legs. A world of anxiety followed that feeling.

Detective Scoville listened to the two have a rather familiar conversation for an hour before he could hear no more. It was clear to him that Felicia had been subjected to her mother's poetry. The conversation reminded him of Hilrag talking to Gaudy. There was something about the tone of their banter that he couldn't define but he knew it was wrong. At the same time he longed to speak to Felicia the same way, for hours as well.

Angrily the detective tuned back into the conversation.

"Do you like poetry, Leah?"

"Yeah, I don't get it, but I respect it."

"Can I read you something I wrote?"

"Felicia, you could get me in trouble. Let's meet somewhere secret on Wednesday. Just you and me and your....well I don't want to say it."

"Well, its just that I'm afraid I don't have until Wednesday. Can I see you tonight? I'm sorry to be like this."

"Are you in some trouble?"

"Big trouble"

"Send me your address and I will leave here as soon as my laundry is finished."

"Okay."

Scoville was relieved that she wasn't going to recite anything. After his brother's death, he had developed a hate for abstract things, especially poetry.

He was certain that if this officer Leah and Felicia get together, they were bound to commit suicide.

Detective Scoville was in a very tight spot. If the corporation arrested the sisters, they would surely discover what they had done to Joey after reviewing their devices. What's more is as soon as Margaret's body is discovered it will be known that Scoville was monitoring her at the moment of her suicide and he would face charges for allowing it to happen as well as face charges for not arresting them after Joey was killed. He thought about erasing the entire

family's master files, but that would be too suspicious. Now, Officer Leah was heading to the house, he had to do something fast.

"Lucy, can you get the door?"

"Yeah, I'm going. Are you expecting anyone?"

"Yeah, she's super early. I'm still doing my hair."

Lucy peaked out the spy-hole on the front door and was confused to see a short man of Indian descent wearing a trench coat. The man had a bunch of cuts on his cheeks and a big gash across his forehead. He looked strangely familiar to her. His gold watch glittered as he knocked.

"Um, Felicia. It's some shady looking guy. Is that who you are expecting?"

Felicia wrapped her hair in a towel and came to the front door. She peaked out the spy-hole. It was that little creep from her work earlier that day. Felicia went to the kitchen and found the same knife that Lucy had been dissecting Joey with the previous night. She hid it in her the back pocket of her black corduroy romper and then She picked up the phone to call Officer Leah but just before she dialed her url, the man started to shout something through the door.

"This is detective Scoville of the New Reno Special Crimes Unit. I know about Joey. Open up, or we will have to enter the house forcefully."

Felicia swung the door open and confessed.

"Lucy didn't do it, officer it was all me." Felicia started crying nervously.

"No, she didn't, but she did move the body and therefore is guilty of conspiracy. Both of you, come with me quietly and I won't handcuff you."

The sisters went with the detective willingly and sat in the backseat of his police cruiser. There was a cage between Scoville and the sisters that the detective spoke through while he drove. He had his rearview mirror turned so that his entire view was of Felicia. He hardly looked at the road.

"You're the guy from earlier at my work. You've been following me?"

"I've been working on your case, yes."

A Half an hour passed of them driving and Felicia finally asked the detective where they were going. She didn't recognize any of the scenery around her. Just then a phone call came in from Scoville's captain.

"Scoville. Anything on that Ward family yet. I need something yesterday. Did that lead pan out for you?"

"I'm afraid not sir. I still haven't found anything out about the family that is prosecutable. I'm digging deep though, sir. I won't let you down."

"just a friendly reminder that it's your ass, Scoville."

There were a few minutes of uneasy silence in the car when finally, Felicia asked again where they were being taken to.

“To democracy. “ Indir replied after a long silence.

The sisters had never heard of the concept of a democracy before or the word itself.

Where’s that?” Lucy asked.

“It’s not a place, Lucy. It’s a way of life that is different than the way you and I have been living.”

The car arrived at a small booth before a great iron wall that went in either direction as far as the eye can see. Scoville presented his credentials to the scanner in the booth and a small tunnel appeared in the wall. The car entered the tunnel and drove in darkness for a few minutes.

“There is a place in the Outside Lands that is civilized, they are a community that functions as a democracy. Every person in that community has a say over what happens to their tribe. It is your only chance at survival I’m afraid. I only have a small window of time to deliver you and your sister to this place before they discover what’s going on.”

“But we have family. Well we have a mother. What about my mom?” Felicia asked.

Scoville was quiet for a moment. He was caught off guard by the question.

“I’m...I’m sorry. I don’t know what will become of her.”

“Why are you helping my sister and I but not my mother? Why are you helping us at all? What about Lucy’s cancer? Was that in your file, stalker boy?”

Lucy slapped Felicia on her arm and said:

“Oh! Oh! Oh! I know where I recognize this guy from. Yesterday when I went to get Joey’s body from the banana box. This guy was passed out with his face in a bush. I was afraid he would wake up when I was moving the body, but he was out cold. Why were you sleeping in a bush?”

“I wasn’t asleep, I was... I had fainted. Every time I see something die; I faint. It’s embarrassing as a detective and I don’t want to talk about it.”

Because death had been virtually cured and because society never mentioned it in pop culture or in schools, people had no way to psychologically grasp what it was and therefore it was a common reaction for a Martian to faint, even at the sight of a bloody nose or a scraped knee. Their minds could not process things involving ones mortality and would simply shut down as a defense mechanism. Lucy and Felicia were different. Lucy had spent her whole life dreaming of her own death, and Felicia had dreamt so many times of killing people in awful ways, that the two of them had in a way, built up a psychological immunity to morbid things, or at least they didn’t faint at the sight of gore.

“What did you mean by ‘every time’ you see something die? Joey wasn’t the first death you’ve encountered. You can’t be old enough to have been from Earth originally? You’re like our age.”

“I’m thirty-one. I just look young. Good genetics.”

Lucy was always so curious, she wondered about the man who was allegedly saving them. She wasn't afraid of whether his intentions were good or bad, whatever happened next had a higher chance of her ending up dead than she would have had if she were to be sent off to rehab, so she was happy to go for a ride.

'When I was in college. My little brother and his friend. They both committed suicide.'

"Suicide, oh I've heard of that before. That's where a person kills themselves right? How did they do it? Were you there when it happened? How come nobody knows about it? They taught us about all thirty-three deaths in Martian history in school and those weren't included." Lucy was sitting at the edge of her seat. She had a big smile on her face, and she was bouncing.

They had finally made it out of the tunnel and now were surrounded by an endless forest. Martian landscape on the Inside Lands is completely flat and all farmlands. Meat was outlawed and all Martians on the Inside were vegetarians. The outside lands however, were mountainous and shrouded with trees that had complex and violent rivers running through them. Felicia looked out the window and saw a black bear with her cubs running away from the road.

Scoville ignored Lucy's calloused questioning of his brother's suicide and continued to drive deeper into the forest.

"You never answered my question, Detective. Why are you helping my sister and I?" Felicia remembered the knife in her pocket just then and checked to see if she still had it. It was there.

"There's no easy way for me to say this, but. Here it goes.... Felicia. I love you."

Lucy began to cough.

"Okay...Um, I don't know you. Isn't that a ring on your finger? Aren't you married?"

"It was an arranged marriage. I don't love her like I love you. You're my everything, Felicia. I want to talk to you like people who love each other talk to each other."

"And how's that? How do people talk who are in love?"

Scoville hated to admit it but he needed an example of flirtatious conversation.

"Like how you and Officer Leah talk to each other. Talk to me like you talk to her."

Felicia was disturbed by Scoville and just then she remembered that Officer Leah was coming by her house. She was devastated that she was missing her chance with her to drive around with a strange little man in the woods.

Lucy's coughing fit became worse and worse until a big black clot of blood jettisoned from her throat, onto the windshield in front of the detective. Scoville projectile vomited in response, all over the windshield and the car went off the road into an oak tree.

Chapter Forty-Five

Officer Leah knew she had the right address when she saw the welcome mat by the front door that said "The Wards" she remembered Felicias last name from the paperwork she was required to submit regarding the incident with Felicias stepfather. She had the right house, but

no one was home it seemed. All the lights were on and there was barking coming from the inside somewhere but no matter how many times she knocked no one answered.

Leah might have just left with her feelings hurt if it were any normal situation, but Felicia mentioned that she was in some sort of trouble. Leah tried the front door. It was unlocked. She entered and was bombarded by three friendly border collies. The barking she had heard from outside was coming from a room upstairs. She ascended the stairs with the three dogs dutifully at her side. She opened the door to the master bedroom. There on the bed lay a perfectly still looking woman with bright orange hair and a fair Irish complexion. Brady joined his friends in line behind Leah.

“Excuse me ma’am. Are you alright over there?”

Officer Leah walked across the room and put a hand on Margaret’s cold arm.

“Oh my gosh! You are so cold!”

Leah piled blankets on top of Margaret’s deceased body. She had seen a space heater on the way in and ran downstairs to the living room where she had seen it. She found the thermostat as we and cranked it to ninety degrees.

“Okay, Mrs. Ward. I’m gonna call for backup. We’re gonna get the paramedics here and figure what’s going on with you, okay? If you can hear my voice, I need you to blink your eyes two times for me. Do you know where Felicia is Mrs. Ward? Your daughter, Felicia. Where is she? Hang in there.”

Officer Leah grabbed her Walky and attempted to call for back up but the frequency was busy. Her captain’s voice came in over the radio.

“Attention all units. We have a....well there isn’t a code for this one. There’s been a homicide in our jurisdiction and what’s worse is that one of our own. Detective Scoville, has been kidnapped by the suspects. They escaped to somewhere in the Outside Lands, that’s all we know. I need units A through L to go to the address I’m sending to your index’s now. The victim is one Margaret Ward. Her daughters assisted her suicide earlier this evening and are at large. This is not a drill. I need all the men from Units L through S to return to the precinct to be briefed on your mission and be prepared to enter The Outside Lands. I repeat. I need all the men from L-S. Men only. No female officers please.”

Not only was Leah a female but she also a part of unit Y and was instructed to maintain her regular patrol while the rest of her precinct dealt with the crisis, or at least that is what the chatter on her radio was telling her to do though she didn’t hear the instructions because after she realized the Mrs. Ward was in fact deceased in front of her, she fainted on top of the body.

The dogs licked officer Leah’s palms and whined.

B squad was the first to arrive at the Ward house. They found Officer Leah, passed out in the master bedroom. A few from B squad fainted upon entering the room. An older officer who remembered the carnage of the Gay War, was able to stomach the alarming scene.

Upon being revived, Officer Leah was asked a volley of questions. She told her comrades that she had only just arrived a moment before they did and pretended that she knew nothing about the Ward family other than what she had heard on the radio. Leah raced back to the precinct and joined the briefing on the mission. After the officers had a game plan together, the

dispersed and headed to their vehicles. Captain Gleaser told Officer Leah to stay behind. He wanted a word with her.

“Officer Leah. What were you doing at the briefing? you should be with your squad patrolling the ROC.”

“Sir, my instincts tell me that there’s something else going on that we are unaware of. The situation doesn’t make sense to me. Does anyone know what Scoville has been up to the past few days? I saw him early this morning at Bill and Cindy’s tavern. He had scratches all over his face.”

“Isn’t that the tavern that one of the suspects works at? What were you doing there?”

“Arresting a violent drunk man who assaulted the manager. Felicia was there too, she was just getting off work. She didn’t seem to notice Scoville at all. Sir, please give me permission to join the other squads heading Outside.”

“No way officer. It’s too dangerous for a female on The Outside. The land is teeming with savage men who haven’t seen a woman in many years.

“Maybe I can be helpful if I investigate the case and the evidence we have so far., May I have Permission to access Detective Scoville’s master file? I definitely need Felicia and her sisters master files. I tried to open audio on her on the way over but her url was password protected.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. The sisters held the detective at knife point and made him wipe both their master files as well as his to erase the evidence the detective had on them regarding the murder of their mother.”

“Where is all this information coming from, sir?” officer Leak asked.

“Apparently they crashed somewhere in the outside Lands. When the sisters held him at knife point , they made him delete the files, then they took off into the woods on foot. Detective Scoville was able to radio in what happened luckily. I told him to stay near the main road and wait to be rescued but he insisted on going In after the suspects and is pursuing them on foot as we speak. Got to hand it to him, I always thought he was a loser. He has my respect now. That is for sure.”

“Yeah, he sounds like a real hero.”

A male officer entered the room with a letter in his hand.

“Officer Leah. This is regarding an arrest you made recently.”

The man handed the letter to her and then disappeared down the hall.

“What is it?” the captain said.

“I’ve got to go to the holding cells and take care of something unrelated Sir. Let me know if I can help in anyway on this case.”

“Get to it!”

Detective Scoville had been able to conjure up real tears when he called his captain to inform him of the fateful crash. He cried like an infant as he relayed his story to dispatch. Those that heard his desperate tale back at the station were themselves moved to tears as they listened in

shock. The detective had woken up from the crash alone and decided to delete his master file as well as the sister's files after coming up with a feasible alibi. He has no idea in which direction the sisters had escaped.

It had been an hour since the call, and he was still crying, and the tears were very real. He ran through the forest like a maniac, sobbing and flailing his arms about in every direction.

He was screaming Felicia's name as he ran.

"I love you! You bitch. Let me show you. Let me show you."

Felicia and Lucy had found an abandoned shed with a roll up door. Maybe it wasn't the best place to hide as it was the only man-made structure for miles.

"He's getting closer, what if he opens the door?" Felicia hadn't taken any of her anxiety pills with her and she was starting to come undone.

"Then we die! And that's it!" Lucy said in a loud voice.

"Lucy! Shhhhhhh. He's gonna hear us."

The yelling stopped a few feet from the shed. The girls could hear footsteps slowly approaching them. As the footsteps neared, they could hear heavy breathing. The door flew upwards and the dark figure of the detective appeared before them.

Felicia grabbed the knife from her back pocket and put it to her sisters' throat.

"If you come any closer, I'll kill her just like I killed Joey!"

Scoville Inched forward slowly with the same creepy smile on his face that had freaked Felicia out back at the casino. Only this time Scoville limped with both legs and it looked like he was walking across hot coals. Mucus ran from his eyes and nose and his hair was matted with blood.

Lucy was smiling like a kid at picture day as her sister held the knife to her jugular.

Chapter Forty-Six

Something inside Felicia came to life suddenly and she slid the knife across her sisters' throat, back and forth three or four times.

The blood made enough distance across the shed that a majority of the initial splatter went all over the detectives' face. He fainted promptly.

Felicia realized what she had done and tried to desperately to revive Lucy but she was dead within seconds of receiving the mortal wound. She had a smile across her face as wide as the one across her throat.

Felicia couldn't believe how much blood collected in the shed around her sister's corpse. She must have held her sister for a half hour before she realized that the detective was starting to wake up. She grabbed the knife that slayed Lucy and held it to the detective's temple and

waited. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for. Perhaps she was waiting for him to wake so he would feel it...

Maybe she was waiting for her sister wake up and to tell her to stop.

Something large moved in her peripheral view, and she turned in that direction. It was a black bear. It opened its mouth and roared while standing on its hind legs. Felicia found another door that lead out the back of the structure she was in. She kicked it three times until it finally swung open. and put the knife back in her pocket and ran into the darkness of the night. Scoville moaned wearily on the floor.

It had begun to rain, and Felicia was colder than she had ever been in her life. She ran for miles and miles, deeper into the woods. At last she came to another man-made structure. It was of a design she had never seen on The Inside before. It was made of stone slabs cemented together and a gigantic hand carved front door with a big brass knocker in the center of it. She entered the building cautiously after the rain extinguished her last cig.

The floors were rotted wood. There was a wooden staircase that spiraled upwards three stories. It opened as you passed the stairs into large open area with stone walls and wooden floors. There were no windows in there and there were empty picture frames on the walls.

She was exhausted beyond comprehension. She let her self collapse onto the floor and decided that she should sleep exactly where she was.

Footsteps sounded from the top of the stairs and could be heard descending down towards Felicia. A man appeared at the bottom of the staircase. He was old and had black stubs for teeth. His face was gaunt, and his mouth looked like a butthole. He was in his late sixties or early seventies.,

She stood up, pulling the knife put of her pocket as she rose and began to back away towards the front door, but she bumped into a large and muscular man who was just wearing ripped up Jean's and cowboy boots. He had dark African skin, a bald head and a bristly beard. The man grabbed Felica's arms and she was unable to break free. The knife fell to the ground.

"Oh my! Look at how young she is? You haven't been inoculated have you, doll? Relax, relax. That's just Black Tony. He's not going to hurt you, dear. Were you trying to sleep here on the floor? Girl, you look exhausted. Tony, sweetie, take her upstairs to my bedroom and let her rest for now."

Felicia stopped struggling and allowed the man to carry her up the rickety stairs. There was an army cot in the dark windowless room. She was tossed onto the bed on her back and Black Tony left the room, locking the door behind him.

She wasn't sure how long she had been asleep for, but she awoke to the sound of a man screaming and thrashing about on the floor downstairs. The sound of the struggle lasted for ten minutes or so and then suddenly stopped. After a few more minutes, the door to the room she was captive to opened quickly and the ugly old man from earlier entered the room. He had small wooden stool in his hands. He placed the stool on floor next to Felicia's bed and sat down. A shadow appeared in the doorway. It was Black Tony. He was to shirtless but this time he was wearing a dozen gold chains and had a gold ring on each finger.

The old man introduced himself as Five-Finger Johnny. He explained to Felicia that she was in an old outpost that the Insiders had built during the days when they used to monitor the savage people of the outside Lands. In the last five years all excursions to the Outside had

been discontinued, save for the search party that was on their way to attempt to rescue Detective Scoville.

Felicia counted the fingers on the man's hand while he spoke. There were only two fingers on each of his hands. His pinky and index finger remained on his right hand. His left had a thumb and pointer finger.

"What's your name, dear? Sorry to blab on and on...it's just there aren't any females around and, well I miss talking to them. I had a lot of female friends back on the inside."

"Felicia. Felicia Ward."

There was silence for a minute. It was interrupted when what sounded like the same man from before screaming wildly again. Black Tony ran downstairs and after a few minutes the screaming died down to a muffled moan.

"You only have four fingers. Why do they call you Five Finger Johnny?"

Johnny started to laugh and told Felicia that he loved that she asked that question. He stood up and dropped his pants in front of her. Where his penis was supposed to be, there was a finger.

Felicia began to scream. Black Tony raced up the stairs and rushed into the room. He held Felicia down on the bed. Johnny pulled his pants up to Felicia's surprise.

"Hey, hey! Felicia! Stop it. We're not going to hurt you! We're gay! I'm sorry if I scared you, but hey, you asked, girl."

Felicia didn't understand what he meant. She had never heard the word "gay" before.

"Gay? I don't know what you mean."

"It means my hubby over here and I don't want to have sex with you. We have sex with each other."

Felicia couldn't picture how two men would make love to one another. Leah popped into her mind and she tried to imagine what it would be like for them to have sex. She never considered that a possibility.

"So, you're his husband?" Felicia said to Black Tony as he released his firm grip on her shoulders.

"Yes, I am one of his husbands." Black Tony had a high-pitched voice and a heavy lisp.

"There's also White Tony and the George's. Three of my husbands are named George. It's super annoying..."

Five-finger Johnny returned to the stool and began to stroke Felicia's hair gently.

"Oh my god, your hair! I'm so jealous Tony look at her hair!!"

"I know! Ugh. I hate her!" Tony rubbed his bald head with a frown on his face.

"I can't believe of all the questions you could have asked me, you asked about my nickname first. Don't you want to know why you're here?"

"It's not sex?"

"Well, not really but kind of. I mean if, of course, you agree to help. Oh, boy. Where do I start? Okay so, mostly everyone who has been cast out of society was either cast out for being gay or became gay after they were forced to live with men only for so long. I've always been flaming but Black Tony used to have a wife and a family. It took a little work, but I got him to join the winning team." Johnny slapped Tony's firm butt with the back of his hand

Felicia giggled. She had never been around gay men before.

"Oh my god. She can smile! Girl, you've got a beautiful smile. You could whiten those teeth but well, I've got no room to talk." Johnny flashed a smile that was riddled with rotten and broken teeth.

"The idea was to get rid of the gays and other riff raff society produces and put them all in a place where they could never reproduce. The end game is to breed homosexuality out of the gene pool. It doesn't seem to be working though because every day, we get a couple more gay boys joining us savages on the outside. In fact, we just found a new one while you were sleeping. He's short but he's really cute."

"Barf!" Black Tony scoffed.

"What? You just don't like Indian guys. Racist bitch!" another spanking followed.

"I like all this gold that I stole from him. I mean, gold isn't really my thing but hey, it was free. Here..."

Black Tony put a chain on his husbands' shoulders.

"See. Don't you feel kind of badass?"

"I totally feel like a badass. Yeah."

Felicia recognize the gold jewelry immediately. She began to smile.

"Anyway, not being able to reproduce means that our people have no chance at starting our own civilization in the future. Many of us were inoculated before we were cast out, so we will live for a long time, but eventually, if we are not inoculated again, eventually we too will perish. We need a queen bee, so to speak."

Felicia had to think for a minute about what they meant by "Queen bee." She was a smart girl and after a moment understood their meaning.

"You want me to have your babies...." Felicia said.

"Not my babies! God no! I'm ugly and dumb. I was inoculated, plus Mars doesn't need any more of what I got to offer. I want you to carry my husband's children. They're all sexy bastards and have gigantic...brains. They're all under thirty. I know. I'm a cradle robber."

"You're making it sound like I have a choice over what my fate is. Why am I being held captive if I have choices?"

“You’re free to go at any time. We just sequestered you until we had a chance to talk. Just know that the other half of the savage men who live on the outside are heterosexual. Like back on earth, the straights and the gays separated from one another and were at war. I can’t imagine what would happen to someone as gorgeous as you if you came into the possession of these men. You are free to try and survive on your own but if they don’t get you, the wild animals will. I am offering the protection of an entire community, a community that will adore you. All we ask is that you bare the children of the future, albeit of Christ almighty allows it”.

Black Tony and Five-Finger Johnny crossed themselves.

“What is Christ”? Felicia wondered.

Black Tony opened the door slowly and motioned for Felicia to exit. Felicia stood up and made her way down the stairs. She walked like she had just been on a boat and stumbled and lost her footing halfway down and would have fallen had Black Tony not rushed to her rescue.

“Felicia! Oh, thank god. Tell them to let me go. I didn’t want this to happen this way. I was taking you to democracy! I wanted a future with you. I know you could love me. I know it in my heart Felicia! Felicia!”

Detective Scoville was naked and hogtied on the floor.

“You can have the gold! Take it and let me and Felicia go before it’s too late. The NRPD has sent an armed task force to the outside to recover me. Consider yourself dead if you don’t let us go now!”

“Do you know him, Felicia?” Five-Finger Johnny was surprised and worried that his queen may have a lover. That would not be ideal.

“Yes. I mean no! He’s a creeper. He followed me around for a few days, listened to my private conversations, dropped in at my work like a weirdo and then kidnapped my sister and me. He took us to the Outside and told us that we were going to live in a. “

“A democracy. “johnny interrupted

“That’s rich! I can’t speak for the straights and how they operate but us gay boys live in a feudalist society. We are all the loyal subjects of her majesty and of course Christ, our lord as well. ” Said Black Tony.

Tony and Johnny both got on their knees and bowed to Felicia and prayed to the Arch angel Michael.

Felicia liked the feeling of their reverence for her and chills ran up and down her spinal chord.

“Hey Johnny. Show the Detective why they call you five-finger Johnny.” Felicia said.

“Yes, your majesty! So, I’ve got two on this hand and let’s see.... Here’s three and four... now...”

Johnny dropped his trousers once again and showed his erect finger-penis to detective Scoville.

“Five!”

“Does it work?” Felicia asked as she sat on the stool that Black Tony had retrieved for her.

“Christ willing, sweetie”.

Just then White Tony and the Georges entered the abandoned building. They had some real fish and fishing poles with them. The husbands greeted one another with kisses and hugs. Detective Scoville began to scream again. “Stop kissing each other! You are all men; how can you kiss him. You savages! I cannot believe it! Please God help me!”

White Tony, who was the tallest and widest of the men walked across the room and rolled Scoville over so that his chest and stomach were facing the ceiling.

Felicia was fascinated to see same sex intercourse for the first time.

Officer Leah handed the letter to Stan White through the bars of his cell.

“Good news and bad news, I’m afraid. Bad news is, well... I don’t know how to say this but, your wife Margaret Ward, sir she’s dead.”

“Dead? You’re joking. How does that even happen.” Stan thought of the botched procedure performed that ended in a death and decided to stop talking.

I’m not supposed to tell you this but, she committed suicide. They say that your stepdaughters assisted her.”

“Well, what’s the good news, then? When are they sending me to the outside? Let’s get it over with already, my life is over.”

Leah was taken aback by how little Stan seemed to care about what had happened to his family.

“The letter in your hand is from Microfiber. They are subsidizing your family the amount that your deceased wife could have potentially made in one a average lifetime, even though she was unemployed for the last eleven months. These funds cover the crime you committed at the casino as well as your unpaid taxes. You have plenty left over after that to get on your feet again. Since Felicia and Lucy have disappeared to the outside as fugitives, not only do you receive one hundred percent of the funds, you may receive a settlement for the sisters as well.”

“Well then! You read the letter. Release me already! I am in mourning! I need to be alone.”

The Walky talky on Leah’s shoulder interrupted the moment with urgent message from dispatch.

“We’ve lost radio contact with the search party.” The captain said over the radio.

Detective Leah’s heart sank.

“I’m afraid that we have direct orders from the board itself to discontinue any further efforts to bring back our men. All units resume your normal duties and carry on. That is all.”

Officer Leah couldn’t believe that they were just giving up. She wouldn’t accept it. Felicia was innocent and she was going to prove it. Even if she had to do it alone. She hopped in her police cruiser and headed to the Outside Lands.

Stan came home to an empty house. He was tired and sore all over, but he was free, and fate had spared him from a bleak future, for now. The dogs were besides themselves to see a familiar human. They followed Stan from room to room as he cleaned up the mess the police had made. He opened the back door to let the dogs go to the bathroom and then headed to the master bedroom.

He searched through all of Margaret's personal belongings to see if there was anything of value to him. He knew that she had a sizable collection of precious stones and metals in a wooden box somewhere.

There was an entire filing cabinet in the closet that Stan had never paid any attention to before. It had been shielded from view by the long jackets of Margaret's that hung in front of it. Stan beat the lock off with a hammer quite effortlessly. He opened the middle drawer and found a handwritten note. It had poetry written on it. He opened the top drawer and found more poetry. The entire cabinet was full of hundreds of poems. They all had the name Mercy at the bottom of them, or at least most of them did. A few of them were signed M. Ward. Downstairs, the dogs all started whining and whimpering at the same time. Stan closed the cabinet and went to calm the dogs down. There was a trail of dirt that started at the back door and went to the kitchen. Stan followed it to where it ended. In front of the oven, a small skinned dog lay still. The face still had its skin and fur. It was unmistakably Stan's dog.

"Jo, Jo! No!"

Stan subsequently fainted.

Upon awakening, Stan joined the dogs in mourning their lost companion and cried like a baby. Stan returned the body to the hole in the backyard and rolled the BBQ and grill over the spot so the dogs couldn't dig him up again. He was down about Joey for a while, but an idea popped into his head from nowhere that would justify Joey's death and potentially earn him a decent living.

Chapter Forty-Seven

"What's the matter your highness? You've been quiet all day." Five Finger Johnny passed the plate of sautéed fish to his husband on his left. They were still in the abandoned research facility.

Felicia played with her food idly and shrugged. She had a vicious appetite the day before when she had first met her new subjects. She ate the meal they prepared for her in a few seconds and asked for more. Now, she felt sick.

"Yesterday...I just can't get it out of my mind."

“Oh, that thing with the Detective? Did we go too far, back there? I’m sorry you had to see that, I thought you wanted...”

“No, not that. I murdered my sister yesterday.”

Everyone at the table fell silent.

“It’s not like she didn’t want to die though! She always wanted death and I... She had cancer too! She was going to die anyway, and the thing with Joey, we were gonna be taxed more, I had to...”

“Nobody here is judging you, your majesty except for Christ, our Lord. We’ve all done our fair share of awful things. I mean, that’s pretty, woah, yeah. That’s heavy. But no judgment.” Said one of the George’s

“The scariest part of it all is that I liked it. I want to kill something again.”

“Lover boy is still in the other room.” Another George said.

After dinner was served, they all went into the room where Scoville was being held. He weakly begged for death to Felicia. Felicia considered his plea and the fact that she really wanted to see something bleed. Death was too good for him though, she thought.

“Let’s take him with us and keep him as a slave. Death would be mercy. I have none.”

“Mercy? I killed Mercy. She overdosed on sleeping pills just before I knocked on your door. I sat and listened while she died and it was sweet justice! Now do you want to kill me?”

Johnny’s was confused. Did he mean the poet, Mercy? Everyone on the Outside knew of her work.

“You gave my mother what she wanted. Thank you. I hope you can still walk; they say it’s a long journey through the woods to the compound.” Felicia felt absolutely nothing for her deceased mother.

Scoville found the energy to sob loudly again but only for a few minutes. Soon he was huffing and puffing behind the group being led in chains through the dense woods. He was naked and it was raining again.

After a while Johnny shouted over his shoulder to Felicia who was following close behind him. “Your mother was Mercy?”

“Yes, she was.”

“I’m a huge fan of her work...we all are!”

“Well, unfortunately, none of my mother’s works survived the closed minds of Martian society, but the good new is that my mother passed on her gift for writing abstract thoughts to me.”

The group of men could not adore their queen more. They were eager to return to their cave city and to etch her words into the walls of their homes and places of gathering and to pass on the writings for generation after generation.

“Oh, tell us a poem your highness!” The youngest George pleaded.

Felicia was already going over her favorite ones in her mind in case an example was requested.

Walking on the moon of another planet through what looks like a dried-up river, though you know that can't be what it is. The thought of mustard in a small glass jar is repetitious in your mind. You glance to the left and a steel girder lay rusted on the moon grass. To your right is the concept of flight and its inventors. It's a medieval midnight of the future. The crowding index of persons and things creeping upward to the pillars of creation can be seen with one's third eye. Arisen and lame. It is the courtesy of a plagiarized galaxy that presents us with a terraforming green sphere that chants its malcontents to the peanut gallery. There's no charity or humility under the crust. People plan things sure, but the again, Microfiber is not a person. A frost-bitten passion and a balmy hope - both the size of a child who still loves its mother, are skipping down the fairway of someone else's meaning for all of this. They are drinking lemonade from a leather pouch and the sun rises to the banging of a burnished bronze gong. The trees, heavy with big black vultures, finally collapse under the added weight of the problems of the people from the nearby city. Regret turns into a sprawling golden fire that creeps like a manta ray across my scalp and I am engulfed with embarrassing thoughts that don't mean anything to anyone else, yet have entombed my evening and buried me alive with just a pencil."

Detective Scoville was screaming the duration of the poem. It was almost as awful as being defiled by the six men he followed.

At last the group came upon the entrance to a cave. The Queen had come home.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Officer Leah pulled over to the side of the road, next to Scoville's car. There was no sign of her colleague or the sisters. She followed a partial trail that looked as though it had formed naturally and was a dried of creek or riverbed. She was on this path for a couple miles or so when she noticed a small structure up ahead. She made her way to the structure and hadn't noticed that she was sprinting towards it. She was out of breath when she arrived. The roll up door was three quarters of the way open. Leah partially ducted as she entered the garage. On the floor lay Lucy Ward with her neck cut open. There was blood everywhere.

This time when Leah awoke she was being carried by bearded and strong looking men.

Four men held her, one man for each leg and one for each arm. She struggled briefly but eventually tired out and let her body sag between the men.

After several hours of marching, it seems they had reached their destination. She was tossed before a gigantic metallic pyramid that had a massive entry way that was perfectly rectangular. The biggest man Leah had ever seen in her life appeared from the shadows of the pyramid.

The men that carried Leah also carried Lucy's body. It had been entirely wrapped in a crude looking fabric.

The Kingly looking man knelt over the body and opened the fabric wide enough to see the face of the body. A mighty scream came from deep within the man and echoed for what seemed like forever over the silence that followed.

"You killed my daughter!" The accuser said.

Of all the things I brought into this world, she was my favorite. I had such high hopes for her.

"Your daughter? How can that be? I didn't kill her, I swear. She and her sister were fugitives and I..."

"Felicia? Where is she?" The man asked.

"Well, I don't know. I was trying to find them as well as my colleague. She's somewhere in the savage lands."

Just then a group of men swarmed the entrance of the pyramid with guns drawn.

"Freeze! NRPD! On your bellies, all of you. Now!" The leader of the squad shouted through his mask.

The kingly looking man put his arms in the air and stepped further into the light with a smile on his face.

"Commissioner Gottfried? Sir, is that you?" The soldier said as he lowered his weapon slowly.

"Yes, it is. Stand down soldier."

The soldier took his mask off and another soldier asked him what he was doing.

"That's Lucifer Gottfried. He was our police commissioner...He's a war hero too. He's killed more fags than...How many fags was it, sir?"

"Ancient history, son." Gottfried said.

"I was cast out of society for being too famous and too loved by my men. The Corporation was afraid that the men would be loyal to me and not them if ever a revolution happened. I had some very different ideas for the future than Microfiber has and I was too dangerous."

"Well they were right to be afraid of that sir, I don't give a damn about Microfiber. I wanted to revolt after they banished you and so did a lot of the fellas."

A group of armed men all agreed and also lowered their weapons."

"Join me men, we have a brand-new society here in the wild and you are at the forefront of it. Long last, I have a queen to share my throne. How old are you dear?"

"My name isn't dear, it's Officer Leah. I'm twenty-eight."

"Then you will bear my children as penance for murdering Lucy. Let no other man touch Leah or face my wrath! Your first task as soldiers of the new world will be to bury my child. Get to it men!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Leah, join me willingly or not, we are going to my quarters."

Leah had never been with another sexually, she was a total virgin. Her cherry hadn't even popped yet. Her eyes welled up with tears as Lucifer lifted her from the forest floor and tossed her over his shoulder. The men began digging in the area in front of the pyramid that they had buried the men who had been killed battling the fags And when they were finished, they gently placed Lucy's body in the ground and then covered it with dirt.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Stan White navigated through the ever denser forest like a blind man navigates the streets of a bustling metropolis. He was too much of a coward to break away from the rest of the group. That moved at the same slow pace. He was with five other men who were around his same age, at least by appearance. Stan wasn't sure if the others had been inoculated at an older age like he had been so many years ago or not.

"That looks like an entrance to a cave or a tunnel, in that direction. Follow me!"

A man at the front of the group yelled back. Stan could barely hear him. The group shifted directions, slightly east where a great bare mountain lay above the dense forest. The mountain was bright orange sand and devoid of life.

They cautiously entered the city of Neo West Hollywood, forming a circle with their backs toward one another as the strafed across the smooth stone ground of the cave.

They walked for a mile or so when they abruptly came to a halt as they had just walked into a wall.

"This wall is too smooth to be part of a natural formation." A man said amongst the group.

Stan began to probe the surface with his hands and arms, not expecting to find anything. His right hand came across an oval indentation in the stone wall. Stan put his hand in the oval and

pushed on something that felt porous, like a very old piece of wood. After a loud rumbling sound went off like thunder in front of them, the wall had disappeared.

The voice a man with a distinctively Indian accent yelled from the darkness in front of them.

"I'm free! Thank you god! Thank you dear god!"

Some sort of fleshy mass hit Stan in the face from the darkness and he fell to his back on the ground.

"Out of my way, damn you!" The voice cried. Hysterical laughter and sobbing could be heard disappearing in the direction from which the group had entered the cave.

"Free! Hahahaha." The voice echoed.

The men took a few steps in the direction that had previously been blocked by the now vanished stone wall. From what they could tell in the darkness, the hallway continued for a few feet more and then stopped at another stone wall. Again, they probed about, feeling around for another switch. A few minutes passed and they had made no progress in their effort to bypass what they were sure was enough door of some kind.

There was a loud rumbling behind them that was just like the one they had heard before. Stan ran in the direction of the rumbling and he ran into the stone wall from before. It had been lowering from the ceiling. The weight of the door rested comfortably on Stans' exploded head.

The rest of the group were on their hands and knees now and feebly groped at their surroundings. One by one they all found their way only a few feet down the hall where the door had shut behind them. The air became stuffy and the men began to panic and started to scream. Their cries grew louder when they each eventually felt stand headless dead body for the first time.

The soft lights of many torches interrupted their cries. The wall that had not pulverized Stan lifted to the ceiling and as the eyes of the men slowly adjust to the scene before them. There stood half a dozen shirtless men, six young women, dressed in a greenish fabric that covered their pronounced figures, and an older looking woman with blondish grey hair and fiery eyes.

"Where's Scoville? Why was he not chained up? I don't even see his chain in here anywhere. Who the hell are you all?" a shirtless man of African decent was amongst the group that stood before them. He was bald and had a grayish black beard. He wore many gold chains.

No one in the group spoke. They were just as confused as her majesty servants were. Felicia broke the silence with one of the many questions that someone was bound to ask eventually.

"Who's that?"

Felicia pointed at the remnants of her stepfather.

The men from the group Stan had been with, all began to talk at once.

"Behold! Your queen! Her Majesty Queen Felicia. Get on your knees when you speak to her and only one of you may speak at one time, praise the lord, Christ!"

The men listened as if Black Tony had been shouting at someone else. None of them went to their knees.

The young looking men who were with Felicias group each chose one of the five men before them and one by one, kicked their legs in until they were face down and completely prostrate.

A muffled voice came from one of the men whose face was under a firmly planted foot.

"I don't know who he was! I don't know who anyone is. We all arrived at the outside together and only met on the bus ride over a few hours ago. All I know about that guy is that he said he was convicted for selling black market poetry. Says he made a fortune. Got away with it for three decades almost."

"Poetry is still illegal on the outside?" Felicia asked.

"Yes ma'am!"

"Your Highness!" Felicia shouted.

"Yes, your highness! I'm sorry."

"And what about my servant? The one who was in here that you let free? How did you all get into this room?" Felicia addressed the man now with her foot on his face.

"It's not a room. It's part of a hallway. The wall behind us is a door like the one you just opened." One of the groveling men said from the floor.

Black Tony stepped forward and investigated the wall. Besides the massive amount of blood at its base, the wall was otherwise unremarkable.

"Oh well, I'm actually relieved he's gone. I never would have been merciful enough to have finally ended his pathetic life and I had grown bored of him decades ago, a few years after we castrated him." Said Felicia.

"I can't believe that you guys kept him in this room for 28 years and you never knew there was another door the whole time, mother!" said the youngest looking girl in Felicias group.

"Why do we have to say things that the situation has already made obvious to everyone, my child. Tell me more news of the Inside before we kill you all, Christ willing!"

"No! Please don't kill us."

"Then tell me more about poetry. There's a black market for it now?"

"Yes! Yes! The Corporation couldn't contain all of the illegal poetry that were flooding the streets of each ROC. Poetry was especially revolutionary where I'm from back in New Dublin. A few of us fellas who had had it with the oppressive regime of the CEOs retaliated and burned down the facility where they had all of their surrogate mothers at. It was a poet named Mercy who inspired me."

"Never heard of her." Felicia said, followed by "kill them all."
After Felicias daughters cut the throats of the men effortlessly, one of the middle aged ones name Maggie ran ahead of the others to ask her mom a question.

"When the man mentioned that poet, Mercy, right? You said that you had never heard of her. How did you know Mercy is a her?"

All of Felicia's daughters were very much of their mother's temperament and demeanor, however none of the girls, save for Maggy, seemed to have anywhere near their mother's intellect. Felicia lamented how dull the other girls were and at the same time also disliked how smart Maggy was. Felicia realized shortly after beating her first child, that she simply was not the mothering type. In fact, she despised children and openly.

Felicia hit Maggy across the cheek and simply told her to shut up.

Back in the downtown part of Neo West Hollywood a great feast was held in the main courtyard where Felicia's subjects and offspring all joined together to roast the faux bodies the men they had just murdered. It had been a while since any of the townsfolk had eaten human flesh. It greatly lifted their spirits to have meat again and they all toasted to their Queen and prayed to The Christ.

Chapter Fifty

Over the last twenty eight years, Stan White was able to make a living that supported the life of a bachelor who had a four bedroom house to himself.

Car companies had discovered that formaldehyde makes a far better energy source than gasoline back before Earth had been abandoned. Every average Joe was able to purchase formaldehyde legally and most Martians had a tank of it in the garage, lying around.

Stan grabbed the formaldehyde and Joey's corpse and placed them both on his work bench and got to it. It took several hours and it was a very crude job, however Stan was able to successfully embalm Joey and preserved his skinned body exactly the way he had found it.

He built a glass case in the master bedroom and put the dog in it. There was a bronze plaque beside the case that said "Joey" he bought a cast iron safe that he stored Margaret's poetry in and began making some phone calls. Since Stan used to hold a position of high prestige, he had contact with some very rich and eccentric people within the community and now was his chance to cash in on those connections.

Stan started a very private and very expensive "death tour" that he marketed toward the super wealthy, especially those who were known supporters of poetry back when it was legal. He would take the person or persons in some cases through the house that Margaret the famous poet had killed herself in. The tour ended at the very bed that she did it in and at the foot of the bed, the dog that her daughters killed and skinned, adding all the more shock to the experience. After the person recovered from fainting, they were then sold an exclusive Mercy original, handwritten poem.

Stan had no idea the implications of what he was doing were or that he would end up sparking a social revolution within the inner lands. Slowly over the years Mercy's poetry spread and was reproduced by secretive rogue printing presses. More people began to write and soon others began to draw and even try to build basic percussion instruments.

He was able to get away with the death tours for as long as he did because of the fact that he only dealt with extremely wealthy and important individuals who had their own reputations to

protect. Regardless everyone who purchased a tour was made to sign a nondisclosure agreement for good measure.

Like many successful criminals, Stan was eventually caught because of unpaid taxes.

The authorities investigated his master file, found out what he had been doing and ended up in the forest.

Felicia hadn't thought about Stan in many years and was not thinking a put him just then, as she chewed on a piece of his calf muscle that had been slow roasted on a spit, and stared into the fire. She wondered where Scoville went and then her thoughts drifted to Leah. She always thought of her at night. She had become more of a representation of something she lost that she still longed for. The person that Leah actually was, Felicia never knew and never would....At least, that's what she thought.

Chapter Fifty-One

Detective Scoville sprinted across the mountainous martian landscape. He hadn't worn a single item of clothing in twenty eight years. He was as comfortable being naked as a dog was. Like a dog, he was kept on a leash and made to sleep on the floor of the cave and because of the way he was forced to live. His body was as hard as a rock and he had the physical endurance of a professional athlete.

The sun was setting and disappeared behind and the dense tree-line of the forest.

Scoville was hardened but it was going to be a very cold night, and he needed to find or to make some kind of shelter soon. He reached the top of a very steep part of the forest eventually and decided to climb the tallest tree he could find. Maybe he could get a glimpse of what direction home was if he reached a higher elevation, he thought.

He climbed a large mahogany tree with ease. Before he made it to the top, an incredibly bright light coming from a few miles west of him blinded him for a moment. He shielded his eyes for a few minutes until the sun had set enough for the light to move elsewhere. He had a sun burn from exposure to whatever the light was. He looked west and could clearly see the source of it. There was a large black metallic looking pyramid that was shrouded by thick forest. He spotted a river that ran directly to the pyramid. Scoville climbed back down to the forest floor and made his way through the trees and bushes until he found the river that he saw. He followed the river slowly as there were a lot of little rocks near the river and they hurt Scoville's calloused feet.

The pyramid was only just a few hundred feet in front of him. He climbed up from the riverbank to the wooded area that was near the base of the structure. He was starving and he could smell something like roasted meat in the air. He picked up his pace to a steady jog. To his surprise, the ground gave way under his feet and before he knew it, he had plummeted fifteen feet or so, to the bottom of a ditch.

It appeared that he had walked into some kind of trap, most likely designed for a bear. The ditch had been covered by several long branches and dead leaves. Scoville was unable to climb out of the ditch. The walls were steep and there was no single indentation where he could get a grip or put a foot, that would allow him to scale the dirt wall.

He decided to try to build a shelter out of the tree branches that had fallen in the ditch along with him. He made something suitable to sleep under and for the first time in decades, fell fast asleep as a free person.

Two days passed and Scoville was dehydrated and almost delirious. He began screaming like a maniac. He screamed for several hours and finally fell silent. He began to weep. An hour or so after the detective's screaming fit, he awoke to the sound of voices coming in his direction.

Looking down on him now, were six beautiful young women. They had orange tops and bottoms on that were clearly handmade. They had golden blonde hair and the biggest blue eyes a girl can have. They were in excellent shape and had great hips for bearing children. A few of the girls had bows and arrows and a few had spears. It began to rain.

Scoville shouted up to the women.

"Please, help me get out of here! I'm so cold. Help!"

"It's not a bear, I told you. They're too smart for this kind of trap." One of the girls said.

“Well, we caught something to eat, nonetheless.” Said another girl as she readied an arrow that she aimed at Scoville’s chest region.

The woman let the arrow go just as the arrow that had been fired at her pierced her heart. The arrow that was meant for Scoville went straight up into the air and the woman fell dead at Scoville feet. All six of the women received a fatal arrow each and one by one fell into the pit, burying Scoville with their carcasses.

Scoville lay perfectly still under the bodies while he listened to the chatter above him. It was Felicias voice. He knew it very well.

“No. We are too far from the city to carry their bodies back. Use your brain!”

“Yes, mother.”

“Were not hunting right now anyway, this is strictly a scouting mission. This is the closest any citizen of Neo West Hollywood has ever been to the black pyramid. If the rumors are true, this is where the straights have been hiding out for a few years now maybe longer.” Felicia said.

Felicias daughter Maggie asked an appropriate question.

“These girls are wearing orange so they must be a part of the straight clan, but they are young and beautiful. There’s no reason they should be in the outside Lands. Unless...”

Felicia was stumped. She hated to admit it, but maybe her daughter had deduced more Information than she had about the situation.

“Unless, what?”

“Unless they have a queen bee too. Maybe they’ve been reproducing too.”

It wasn’t easy for the detective to catch everything that was being said overhead because of the rain and the amount of human flesh he had covering his head. He figured they must have been looking for him. Felicia couldn’t care less about what the fate of the detective may be. The majority of the criminals that had arrive on the outside over the years had either joined the people of Neo West Hollywood, or were eaten by them. The wild men and now women, apparently of the Orange clan, were more selective about who they let in to their society.

Because of the amount of people Felicias kingdom housed and fed, there had become a great need for them to expand territory and absorb smaller tribes for their own advantage.

Felicia was hungry for power and wanted to control all if the wild lands as well as the people who lived in it. She had seen the black pyramid for the first time many years ago and she wanted to occupy it back then, but she discovered a shooting gallery near it that had spent shells scattered around. The people who wore orange had automatic weapons and were too dangerous to attack.

Felicia finally felt that she had the manpower to take the wild men on. Slaying the six woman in the forest was a strategic effort to get the war to come to her, so that her men could fight on their terms and utilize the infrastructure if the city to beat their rivals.

The sound of Felicia’s voice faded and the thunder cracked in the dark Martian sky.

Scoville wriggled his body out of the pile of still warm bodies. Shivering, he collected the spears and arrows that the women had been armed with. The heavy rain loosened the mud of

the walls of the ditch he was trapped in. He dug a spear into the dirt wall. He grabbed a couple of arrows and dug those into the wall at a higher part of it. He repeated this process with the remaining arrows he had collected and managed to use the weapons to climb out of the hole.

He hadn't walked in a few days and his legs were cramping up from dehydration. He pushed forward as fast he could through the forest towards the pyramid. He passed an area that looked like a commonly used BBQ pit. The smell of roasting food from the other day still haunted his nostrils and the sight of the pit made his stomach purr like a friendly cat.

Long last, Scoville had made it to the shelter of the massive metal pyramid. He couldn't believe how tall the walls were of the entrance to the thing. Like Neo West Hollywood; the angles of the architecture were all perfect and must have been laser cut, though there was an ancient feel to the place.

There was no one in sight, though the detective had a strong feeling that he was being watched. There were lit torches in metal fixtures along the walls as he walked along the massive corridor. After a few minutes of walking, he found himself in complete darkness and only had the faint light of the torches that he had left behind a few hundred feet back in the direction he came from.

It was a long night and it felt for the detective as though the sun would never rise again. He certainly didn't think to see the sunrise from within the pyramid, but to his surprise, the entire inside of the place was illuminated in an instant. As soon as the sun touched the pyramid, the walls became translucent, and Scoville could see through the metal that surrounded him as if it were not even there. On top of being able to see through the structure, it seemed that the special material that it was made out of, also evenly distributed the light of the sun to naturally illuminate the inside of the pyramid.

Felicia and her daughters took one last glance in the direction of the pyramid from on top a high plane that lead back to her kingdom. It looked to her how it had looked to Scoville from on top of the tree he had climbed. A powerful reflection of suns light was like a laser that pointed in whatever direction the pyramid would reflect it to. More than anything, she wanted to claim it as her own. The group headed back to the city with the news of their skirmish with the people who wore orange.

A great black and white throne that looked like it was out of marble was the first thing the detective noticed when his eyes finally adjusted to the light within the strange structure. He looked at the man who sat on top of the throne and slowly his jaw dropped. Why did he recognize this man? The beard didn't look familiar to him, he must have known the man when he was clean shaven. He had Asian looking eyes but looked otherwise Caucasian. He was sitting down but he had to have been over six-foot tall, judging by his frame and long muscular legs and was absolutely gorgeous to all who beheld him. He had high cheekbones but a square jaw that was very masculine. His hair was silver, and his eyes were hazel and green. He wore a bearskin cape and an orange loincloth only. His chest was laden with curly grey hair and his stomach was firm and lean.

The words finally formed in the detectives mouth that he had been trying to articulate.

"Commissioner Gottfried?"

"Cadet...Sandoval?" Lucifer replied. The king raised his hands as if he was motioning for someone to stop. The sound of many guns being lowered around Scoville followed the gesture.

"Scoville sir."

"Detective Scoville, actually." Officer Leah stated as she entered the throne room.

"Officer Leah?" Scoville had known of her but had never spoken to her before.

"Queen Leah." she corrected.

"Get the man a blanket and some dry clothes! On the double." Gottfried clapped his hands twice and a few men disappeared into another room and returned quickly with the items their king had requested.

"Dear god son, what happened to your cock and balls? What did those fags do to you?"

"Fags, sir? I...I..." Scoville dropped to his knees and wept.

"A woman who kidnapped me thirty years ago, she...Her and her sister...Felicia Ward and..."

"Felicia Ward, my daughter?" Lucifer was standing now and descending from the stairs that lead to his throne.

"Your daughter? No, it can't be. It wasn't in her file that you were related. I thought it was just a coincidence that she had the same last name as our former commissioner...Felicia and Lucy Ward, right? They are your..."

"Yes, well Lucy is dead and Felicia, I don't know what happened to her. They are my children as are you. All who are living are my spawn."

Scoville hesitated at this comment and the implication of what Lucifer had said, didn't register in his mind just then.

"Felicia is still alive sir; she killed her sister Lucy! I saw it with my own eyes. Cut her throat in cold blood, sir." Scoville had finally stopped shivering but his lips were still purple. He looked at his fingertips. They looked like dried prunes.

"I told you it wasn't me!" Leah shouted while jumping in the air.

Satan got onto one knee and held his queen's delicate hand.

"My love, I doubted you when I first met you, but you know that I believed your word after we fell in love and I gave my heart and soul to you."

"And I you." Leah's eyes grew wide and she smiled warmly at her man.

"But you gave me so much more. I have six beautiful daughters now that are angels in this savage world. When they return from their hunt this afternoon, you will meet them Detective and you will agree that they are absolutely perfect creatures." Lucifer extended his slender hand to Scoville and helped him to his feet.

"Were your daughters wearing orange clothes as well? Blonde hair, all of them, right? Two of them had spears and the other four had long bows with arrows made of a white pearly wood."

"You didn't come across them in the woods, did you? They certainly would have thought you were a drop off from the inside and would have hunted you for dinner." Leah had begun to feel sicker. All morning she felt ill and her guts told her something terrible had either happened or was soon to pass.

Scoville was certain that the women who had been slain, the night before were Leah's children. He was uncertain of how to break the news to her. Lucifer had been known to be a hothead at times. He decided to change the subject back to what had happened to his member.

"Felicia did this to me, sir. About eight years ago, Felicia had decided that she was done with me because I wasn't of any use to the gay-boys anymore, because....I...I can't!"

Scoville began sobbing.

"Fags!" half a dozen men who surrounded Scoville said at once, correcting the detective. Another random voice could be heard trailing off "We call them faggots..." it said.

"They had decided that I should be killed, but by way of slow castration. They tied a rope around my cock and balls as tight as they could and let the rope do the work for them. It took over a month, but eventually my entire manhood fell off in one rotten piece on the floor in front of me as I was being returned to my room after feeding time. They expected me to die from infection. I had a fever for a few days and I was certain that I was at the end. I wanted to die dearly but no such luck came my way. I survived my disfigurement and some of the gay... erm...Fags, found me too be desirable again after I lost my penis." Scoville thought about the six women in orange again.

The straights that surrounded Scoville were furious already and wanted to take revenge for their former colleague. A good portion of the kings men, were made up of the search part that had been sent after Scoville and in pursuit of Felicia, all those years ago. They remembered Scoville from the inside, even before they had been sent to rescue him. He had never been a very popular person in their world, but he was also not disliked. Now, they all admired him as they did Lucifer. Some of them had tears in their eyes for his plight. For the men with dry eyes, it wouldn't last long. They were soon about to join their brothers in crying, as soon as Scoville broke the news about Leah's daughters, and the future of their kingdom.

"She killed them, sir! All of them. Leah's daughters are in a ditch just south of here a mile or so. It was Felicia and her daughters. I'm sorry your highness!" Scoville crawled to Queen Leah's feet and sobbed with his face pressed against the cold floor.

Leah and especially Lucifer were both very sharp, in fact, Lucifer Gottfried was the smartest man on Mars, and that is including the people who lived on the inside. Leah hated Lucifer at first and had always hated when men wanted anything from her. Over the years she began to fall for the man and even lusted for him. He was the type of genius who never flaunted his intellect. He was not pedantic or egotistical and one learned of his deep intellect not by what he said or did, but by what he didn't say or chose not to do. His inactions those moments of silence, instead of speaking one's mind when it was not of importance, those were the attributes that showed his wisdom. Leah loved that about her man, she also found his boundless strength and wild cow-licked hair to be sexy.

Lucifer was a man of action as well. He didn't say another word, he didn't have to. He and his armed men as well as the queen, were outside, in the forest within minutes of the detective telling them the bad news. Scoville followed behind, limping with his right foot that was still covered in plasters' warts.

The men and the queen all began screaming as they fell to their knees around the ditch. It had rained enough to cover the bodies of the two girls on the bottom of the pile entirely with muddy water. Their oldest and the only one who was with child, stared blankly up at Satan.

“Felicia did this?”

Scoville nodded to the king silently. He was also crying.

The men had to carry Leah back to her bed within the pyramid. She was hysterical. The king and his men, and the entire population of their society gathered in the throne room and began to plot the greatest battle Mars had ever seen. Scoville was fed some roasted squirrel and slept for thirty hours straight. He awoke to the king handing him an automatic assault rifle and a pistol.

“You will lead us to the ones who wear green, and we will take our revenge. I have seen the entrance to the cave they live in, but I have no knowledge of what is beyond that.” Lucifer said.

“It’s a massive city that must have been built by aliens, sir! It is laden with booby-traps and is not an ideal place to fight, even with my knowledge of its infrastructure. I will lead us there sir, and I will show you the weaknesses within Felicia’s kingdom. You have my allegiance and I will fight for you until my last breath!” Scoville saluted his ranking officer and stood up straighter than he had in years.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Felicia and her daughters returned to the cave city and prepared for battle.

The city had a built-in defense system that was powered by steam. In the center of the city was a massive burnished bronze water tank. Connected to the tank were miles and miles of piping that were sort of like tree roots and spread out in every direction, just under the surface of the ground above the cave. These pipes collected rainwater and sapped moisture from the Martian surface above throughout the years. The water is funneled back into the tank and below it, there is a large fire pit. Once the tank has collected enough water, the towns people can use it as a source of fresh water to drink, as there were spigots build in to the sides of it that were apparently meant to be used for that purpose, or if an enemy was attacking them, they could build a fire underneath the water supply that would turn the water into a lethal steam. There were more bronze pipes that were built along the ceilings of the entrances to the cave that would release steam into the tunnels. Each tunnel had its' own lever to release the steam. There were six tunnels that lead to the center of the city where the water tank was.

Five-Finger Johnny had been killed by the steam trap when it was accidentally discovered. Someone had lit a fire underneath the cauldron and another person pulled the lever that released the steam into the tunnels. Five-finger Johnny was returning from his midday walk and was half way down the tunnel when the steam was released. His husbands mourned their loss and turned to their queen for guidance but not comfort. It was well known in the kingdom that Felicia had a heart of ice and steel and was incapable of human compassion.

"The straights are multiplying!" Felicia cried from the balcony to her penthouse. The towns people had gathered around and were completely silent and listened intently.

"Just a few hours ago, on a scouting mission to the black pyramid, my daughters and I disposed of half a dozen young women who wore the color orange!"

Many of the townsfolk gasped. Hundreds of questions from hundreds of men followed.

"Silence!" Black Tony shouted.

"Light the fire for the steam traps and every man that is able, arm yourselves, the battle is coming to us."

Detective Scoville knew about the steam traps and had drawn a crude map in the sand of the city and all of its entrances for Lucifer and the other soldiers. Scoville felt strange wearing clothes again, as crude as they were. He had gotten used to not having a penis however, he was unable to hold in his urine, so wearing pants was inconvenient for him. Satan had some of his clothes makers fashion him a diaper.

The group felt sufficiently prepared for battle and had peace of mind, knowing that they were the superior army, as they had guns and hand grenades. They also had the keen leadership of their lord who was a strategic genius and would surely lead the men to victory. There was also Scoville to consider, his knowledge of the inner workings of Neo West Hollywood and his vendetta against the gays and their queen was possibly their greatest advantage.

Scoville knew that Felicia would be expecting them to retaliate but he also knew that she was unaware that Scoville had ended up in the hands of her enemy. She would not be expecting an attack of the surgical precision that the straights had planned for her and her army.

Satan decided to gamble with the future of his people. He decided that this battle would make or break those who wore orange. He brought with him every man and woman under his command; the entire population of the pyramid marched behind their king and queen with Scoville leading the way through the woods.

Felicia's people had many clever traps set in around the perimeter of the entrance to their kingdom. They had dug their own ditches and had upturned wooden spikes lining the floors of them. There were logs that would swing from ropes from the trees they were placed in and crush whoever was below. There were also traditional traps set for animals and many nets and cages overhead waiting to trap or ensnare an unsuspecting target.

Detective Scoville knew where the traps could be found as he was one of the slave laborers Felicia had used to build the traps and to dig the ditches. He had a hard time not reverting to walking on all fours as he led the way. He leaned forward so far that it almost looked like he was about to bear crawl. His knowledge of the traps was not absolute however, two men fell into a ditch and were impaled fatally. Queen Leah herself was ensnared by a rope that tightened around her ankle and hung her upside down. Her skirt fell over her face and her hairy vagina was at eye level for all her people to behold. Lucifer was furious and rebuked Scoville for the loss of two men and for having shamed his beloved wife. At that moment Satan began to distrust Scoville at a subconscious level, but fatefully never acted on those instinctual feelings towards his ill endowed subordinate.

The two men that had befallen to the traps were armed with precious automatic rifles and several hand grenades. One brave soldier climbed into the pit and retrieved the munitions before the group proceeded with ever more caution. Scoville asked for the grenades and received them upon Lucifers hesitant approval.

The detective explained that there was a tunnel that did not have a steam trap built into the ceiling. It was a narrow passage that could only be reached by swimming through a even more narrow waterway.

There was a small waterfall just above the river they were looking for and the detective pointed it out as they arrived, which was a relief to most as they had all been looking for the landmark for a few hours.

The sun was setting and though it had been a hot day on mars, the night was already colder than usual, and it was humid as well. Water fell from above the heads of those who wore orange and a steady aura of what looked like steam rose from the mouths of the winded caravan of people.

Lucifer was the first one in the icy river water. He dove with an Olympic posture and swam like a fish into the blue hole that lie beneath the water. His queen forgot the woes of losing most of her children momentarily and there was a thrill in following her fearless husband into battle; a fear that was intensified by the cold water surrounding her athletically shaped body.

Scoville had already discarded his diaper as well as the rest of his clothes and was swimming along side almost a hundred others, who like sperm to an egg, jockeyed for position to make it through the tiny hole that lead to the secret entrance to the city.

Two flares were lit by some random soldiers the army of those who wore orange, and the scope of their surroundings were measured by the vigilant eyes of the people who were proudly named "the straights."

There didn't appear to be any pipes on the ceiling above them and one could easily see for themselves as it was only a passageway of about 9 feet high.

The passage was supposed to lead to Felicia's private quarters by way of a secret door that had a hidden switch that activated it. Of course, the people in the city would prepare for an attack via this passageway, but if they could overpower whatever portion of the army that was covering that position and overtake the penthouse, they would have a strategic advantage over the rest of the forces that Felicia would retaliate with as there would only be two angles they could be attacked at, and one you had to swim to get to. From the balcony, the army could wipe out the city's entire population several times over with the amount of ammunition they carried.

Scoville instructed the men to put out the flares as they approached the door. He groped for a moment on the right side of what hardly appeared to be a door until his hand came into contact with the familiar porous wood that the switch was made of. He pushed it in and there was nothing stealthy about the sound that the door made as it sank into the stone floor below. As expected there were a dozen men wearing green handmade clothes on the other side, that were armed with bows and spears.

"Fags!" The king's men cried and emptied their first clips into the huddled mass of enemy flesh.

There was no need for anyone else to shoot. The squad of men that manned the entrance were all dead without a single casualty to the straights. Scoville explained to Lucifer that it would be disadvantageous for him to fight on the front lines because it was auspicious that Felicia was still unaware that Scoville had defected to their side and was aiding them in battle. He instead stayed back near the waterway that the army had come from; along with a few other armed men that covered the rear.

Those who wore orange had taken over the penthouse and had snipers in place that were taking out Felicia's soldiers with ease at a very steady rate. A few arrows connected with an arm or a leg here and there and those who were wounded were carried to the center of the group and tended to as the siege continued.

Not many, but a few soldiers who wore green attempted to enter the water passage and flank those who wore orange but were killed before they reached the surface in every case.

It had been a day since anyone had eaten or had anything in their stomachs besides river water. Felicia didn't have to decide whether or not she had been defeated, the outcome of the massacre was clear and the fate of her kingdom was clear to all. Bravely, she entered the abandoned town square that was just below the balcony to her former place of residence. She was unarmed and you could see that she was a strong woman who had unusually broad shoulders and thighs the size of tree trunks, that were entirely lean muscle and nothing but.

"Felicia!" Satan cried from the balcony. He had lowered his weapon and removed the hood from his bearded head.

Felicia had felt nothing when she had heard of her mother's suicide. She murdered the family dog and her around the balcony where their triumphant queen held her rivals at gunpoint.

Felicia tried to appear to be as calloused as she usually was when it came to deciding the fates of those she had conquered. Inside, Felicia was unresolved and needed time to think about the appropriate action to take, both regarding her estranged father as well as the woman who represented a desire that she knew that she had to explore, once and for all.

She decided to consult the priest to see what Christ wanted to do with Lucifer and Leah.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Felicia had gathered enough intelligence about her enemy to know that not only was Leah a mother many times over, but she had given life to children that were actually, Felicia's sisters and brothers. Felicia was less perplexed by the fact that her father had taken the main love interest of her life from her than she was confused that Leah would have ever settled for that.

The woman that had aimed a loaded rifle at her only a few hours before was not the same woman before Felicia now, begging for a noble and quick death, though it pained Felicia to admit it, Leah was devoted to those who wore orange and whatever flirtations between Felicia and Leah that had come to pass so many years ago, had no merit in the depraved and savage existence that they were both now involved in.

Leah was like a rabbit in a cage dodging a humane version of euthanasia. Felicia was at first saddened by the fact that the woman who had originally made her feel so passionate was now cowering at her ankles.

This was definitely a call for the priest to make.

She knew that Leah would never forgive her for murdering her children but Felicia was Chronically ill when it came to being sane.

Leah felt the same frustration that Felicia had harnessed and conducted into dictatorial power over the weaker people she had encountered in the outside lands. The two of them dealt with their suppressed feelings differently.

Leah was genuinely able to have a meaningful relationship with Lucifer because she cared so dearly for the children they had together. Leah, hated the children that she bore for the sake of her kingdom's future and knew and had imagined for decades, what would make her happy. The only thing that would please her.

Leah fought feebly for a minute if that and only because of her devotion to the people who had made her a prisoner for so long. Her eyes met Lucifer's sharp gaze as he grinned against the wall he hung from with his golden skin sparkling by the torchlight within sconces.

Felicia signaled Black Tony to pull on Lucifer's chains and at once he was elevated to just above the floor of his cell.

Though Lucifer was imprisoned, Felicia still felt like he had power over the situation and he watched with a smile that was unnerving and disturbed even Felicia.

Detective Scoville was surprised that Felicia had not mentioned a word about his previous escape or the way he betrayed Lucifer and his army. He decided to let it go as he had finally surpassed his status as a slave and had the regular rights that all citizens of Neo West Hollywood could boast, which were very limited but still the regular folks of Felicia's kingdom had a myriad of more freedoms than a slave had.

Scoville wondered if Felicia had allowed him to escape intentionally; knowing all the while of his undying reverence and loyalty to Felicia, no matter how horribly she had treated him over the years.

Felicia and the ones who wore green descended into the darkest pits of Neo West Hollywood, with both Leah and Lucifer in the front. They were both in manacles with chain leashes around their iron neck collars. Leah was shaking but Lucifer seemed to be enjoying the situation an unnerving amount more that Felicia thought he should have.

Finally, they entered a large chasm that had a wooden church in the center with a shining bronze cross as its steeple.

At the podium the priest was waiting as it was Sunday and he was preparing for his sermon.

No one had ever seen the mans face as he always wore a long brown hooded cloak like a medieval flagellant.

“We have usurped and obliterated the ones who wear orange, father. There is now only two left; the one they call Lucifer and his concubine, bearer of his flesh and blood whom all have perished at our hands, amen!”

The enigma called “The Priest” abruptly halted the sermon about Christ that he had begun preaching upon hearing the name “Lucifer”; which to everyone else in the church, this name had no meaning to it as they all unknowingly were his creations and Satan never taught anything close to theology to the bastardized version of mankind. There was only one individual who still lived that was made in the holy fathers image. His name is....

Chapter Fifty-Four

“Jungle Jim! Ha, it’s been so long my friend.”

Jim lowered his hood and bravely met the eyes of the devil, once again.

“So that foolish son of mine, Arkansas really did save you from the hole all those lifetimes ago. I’m so glad that I had your lizard spawn destroy him when I did.”

Lucifer spit fire onto the stone floor of the church.

In fact, SCP-682 as he was called, was such a nuisance that I quiet literally had to nuke earth... again, just to be rid of it.

“If that’s supposed to be a revelation that upsets me, it isn’t. I repent to The Holy Father daily for my transgression of sleeping with that Succubus, Lilith.”

“Don’t you know by now, that the Holy Father as you call him, is not in this universe. I am God of this realm and he has no influence.”

“You are not God of anything Satan, if you saw all that is, was and will be as the Father does, you wouldn’t have to have planned your little skirmish to have these depraved hell spawn lead you to me. If you were God, you would not have even needed to stop me for spreading the Fathers name and the good news. Every time one of your bastardized knockoffs of humanity uttered the word “Christ”, you lose more and more power. Obviously none of them understood or attempted to follow the rules and teachings of the holy trinity, after all they are your creations, but just the inception of the idea of the true Father was enough to hurt you enough to come find me on this fateful day. You think you caught me in your web, but it is the Father and Christ who’s web you are now immobilized within.”

The people on Neo West Hollywood all looked around at each other, not sure what side to take or even what was going on at all.

Leah was the first to speak. She had finally resolved in her mind what to do.

“Release my father and his bride! This priest has been manipulating us all along with his forked tongue and lies of some demon named “The Christ”. Bring him to me so that we may punish the final dissenter once and for all. All hail king Lucifer; The Holy Father”!

Dozens of angry men rushed onto the stage and bound Jim the manacles that had been removed from Lucifer.

“What shall we do with this devil, our lord”? Asked Leah, prostrate at his feat.

“Well, If he thinks he is so Christ like, than it is only fitting that he be crucified!”

I am nothing like Jesus Christ. I am simply trying to amend my transgressions that almost parallel yours, demon.” Jim was resolute in his words and though he feared his fate, he accepted it.

A massive wooden cross was constructed in no time and Jim was nailed to it brutally after being flogged forty-nine times.

All that beheld his suffering were impressed to see that he did not scream or beg for his life. He took the torture better than a meth-addled member of a biker gang gets a new sleeve of ink.

Suddenly there was a deafening sound in the air that sounded like the sound barrier being destroyed by two stealth bombers passing inches from each other going in opposite directions.

Jim opened his eyes but could hardly see what the commotion was because of the congealed blood in his eyes.

“Michael! No... You can’t be here! This is my world. I won! I beat him, once and for all.” Jim could hardly see the blinding sight of the angel of God before him, but he could have sworn it was Christ himself. He wondered if Jesus and the Archangel Michael were one and the same, as Christ is one with the Father.

Maybe, we are all one? – He considered.

The Archangel Michael did not entertain a word that Lucifer said and with one fell swoop of his flaming sword, Lucifer and his knockoff humans, were destroyed to the point where their very atoms were no more.

Chapter Fifty-Five

The angel Michael's voice boomed but with the enchanting and comforting timbre of a golden harp.

"Jim. It is time. You have finally learned and are ready now. Come off the cross." Michael said ethereally.

"I can't. I'm almost dead. I feel my life force fading now. Help me, please Michael Jesus, God; I do not have the strength."

"I am afraid that I cannot aid you. We angels are not allowed to directly intervene physically in this world, since the Watchers first corrupted mankind. I am sorry, but you will find the strength. Pray."

Jim earnestly prayed and then began pulling his right hand away from the wood of the cross, towards the flat end of the nail that bound him to it. It took him twenty minutes for each hand he ripped away from the cross and after he freed his left hand, he fell face down while his feet were still nailed to the cross and it broke his shins and feet.

It took another hour of wriggling and bleeding and screaming for him to break his feet free.

"Follow me Jim. There is a faster way out of this place."

"Please help Micheal. I can't see. I am blind!"

"Use your faith in the Heavenly Father to guide you. I will go at whatever pace you can muster, but we must go now."

Jim crawled for a day and a half until finally, he felt the sunshine on his skin once more.

"Stand up." Micheal commanded.

"I can't my legs are..."

"You're wounds are healed now. Arise!"

Jim felt the pain disappear and found the blood to be all gone. He was naked as Adam and Eve.

"What do I do now, Micheal?"

"Do you see it?"

"See what?" Jim choked.

"What's always been before your eyes."

Suddenly a shape that must have been translucent manifested into reality.

It was an escalator.

Jim took a few steps forward and ascended the escalator.

He looked to either side of him and fanning out in both directions as far as he could see were every human he had ever know and billions more, all the colors of the rainbow; all from the old world and none from the current one at all.

As he made it to the top of the structure, he could see them all coming together as one, and riding the escalator to heaven.

Chapter Fifty-Six

A SCP Foundation Senior Researcher, Doctor Jim. S Takumat had mixed feelings about his new assignment. Sure, in the past he had cracked the code on how to neutralize several Keter-class anomalies that previously were thought to have been indestructible. Maybe he had a knack for this kind of thing, but he knew that his previous successes were irrelevant to the new task at hand. He was assigned to find an effective method of destroying and ending the life of SCP-682 – The Hard to Destroy Reptile. Despite this. Jim knew that O-1 assigned him to the creature as an ironic punishment. She was sadistic like that.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with SCP-682. It is a quadrupedal reptile with beyond genius intellect that hates all living things and is able to adapt to any physical trauma and almost instantly evolves to respond to whatever may be attacking it. It is contained at Site-19 in a tank full of hydrochloric acid that destroys its matter at the same rate that it repairs its injuries, thus keeping it in a sort of stasis.

Even still, the reptile breaches containment often and has slain a massive amount of SCP Foundation researchers and mobile task force or MTF's operatives alike.

The months crawled by like an undulating serpent. The only success Dr. Takumat had since having taken on this impossible task, was that he was assigned to work with Dr. Perla Law. Dr. Takumat had admired her from afar, his heart dancing like a First-Nation medicine man around a bon fire during a sacred ceremony with every passing of one another in the jarring white hallways of Site-19.

She looked exactly like her.

Like just about everyone else on planet earth, Dr. Takumat was happy to see the impossible year of Two-Thousand Twenty pass into history. He still wore a mask, like everyone else; though he didn't need to. He was hopeful that the vaccine would put an end to all the social-distancing and extra precautions that impeded on humanities previous, now seemingly carefree way of life.

It was Dr. Law who made the first move to get to know Dr. Takumat outside of work.

Dr. Takumat new year's resolution had somewhat come into fruition. He resolved to ask Dr. Law out for coffee and soon enough, there they were, drinking hot caffeinated beverages at the café within Site-19.

Before he knew it, the two of them had become an item.

They had to keep their romance low-key as it was frowned upon for Foundation employees, working on the same SCP to have romantic relationships.

Even still, the secrecy of their relationship made it all the more romantic.

For the first time in his life, Dr. Takumat was happy.

Over coffee one day, Dr Law suggested a promising idea on how to neutralize SCP-682. She explained that they should attempt to introduce the reptile to SCP-999, The Tickle Monster.

Dr. Takumat, like mostly everyone else at Site-19, dearly loved SCP-999 and the thought of putting it in harm's way made him hesitate to give Dr. Law an opinion on the idea.

Here's a quick summary of the entity SCP-999 or "The Tickle Monster" as it is affectionately called by SCP Foundation Employees.

SCP-999 is a gelatinous orange blob with vaguely human like facial features that as far as anyone can tell, is the embodiment of love and compassion with absolutely no negative thoughts or feelings. It is virtually made of unconditional love and is a playful and caring mass of happiness.

999's favorite pass time is tickling its friends and it has many friends as everyone who encounters the entity finds themselves loving 999 and full of love themselves. This feeling isn't permanent but many staff members, especially operatives with PTSD are allowed to and implored to interact with 999 to keep their morale up.

It didn't take long for her to convince Dr. Crenshaw to submit the request to the O-5 council. The idea after presumably much deliberation was approved and the team assigned to SCP-682 prepared for execution of the plan.

Dr. Takumat pulled the lever that controlled the volume of acid within 682's tank. He pulled it all the way down, thus emptying the container of all the acid within.

Upon SCP-682 seeing the orange gelatinous blob approaching it, the monster mumbled its' familiar catch phrase.

"Disgusting..."

With that he stomped on SCP-999, The Tickle Monster, and its form spread out on the floor like marmalade across hot toast.

Dr. Law and Dr. Takumat felt their hearts sink, that is until they heard something that made them second guess their ears.

SCP-682 began to laugh.

It started as a chuckle but soon it was laughing hysterically.

SCP-999 reformed into its normal shape and took the chance to leap onto SCP-682 and tickled it all over.

It was quite a site, however; Dr. Takumat didn't see how making SCP-682 laugh and feel the unknown sensation of joy would neutralize it.

After quite some time of SCP-999 interacting with SCP-682, 999 was extracted from the reptile's containment cell.

The lizard lay on the floor smiling for a while. This gave the team of researchers a glimmer of hope that SCP-682 may no longer feel it's usually homicidal urges and hatred for all living things.

Suddenly the lizard shook it's body like a dog does after a nice swim in order to remove the unwanted water and dry itself. Instead of water in this case, it was a concentration of all the joy and laughter the lizard had absorbed during it's time with 999.

All Foundation employees within a ten-meter radius fell on their faces and laughed hysterically. SCP-682, who had returned to its usual hateful state of mind, took the moment as an opportunity to breach containment, resulting in the loss of many Foundation Employees as well as entire Mobile Task Forces, respectively.

Dr. Takumat was one of the lucky ones who survived the incident. He didn't consider himself lucky though. It's not like he was ever in any real danger anyway.

He had been covered in the dead bodies of Foundation Employees that 682 had flung around the room.

One of those bodies belonged to Dr. Perla Law.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Dr. Crenshaw was discharged from the medical bay a few days after the incident. He didn't have any physical wounds but the loss of his girlfriend, sent him into a deep catatonic state.

Soon enough, there he was again, back in his life-draining office. There were no framed pictures of a spouse or children, and now there never would be. There were no decorations on the walls or anything indicative of the solemn doctor's hobbies or interests.

There was just his black particle board desk, a framed diploma behind his head, and his computer. An unblinking camera hung from the far corner of the room, fixed on the commiserating researcher. There was also a full-body mirror there as the doctor was meticulous about his appearance and could tie half a dozen exotic knots with normal neck ties but was most of all fond of bowties. Finally, the only other thing in the sterile room was an emergency Scranton Reality anchor within a "black box" safe in the corner, just like all the other offices of Foundation researchers

Briefly put. A Scranton Reality Anchor is basically a device designed by Dr. Scranton of the SCP foundation before he became lost forever to SCP-3001, The Red Reality. It was designed to negate the influence of reality-bending SCP entities and worked quiet well in general for the SCP Foundation

Jim took out a Polaroid photo from his desk. It was a picture of himself and Dr. Law at Disney World.

"Forever." The caption written in Sharpie read in Perla's eloquent hand.

There was also one more substantial thing to mention within Dr. Takumat dreary office and that is the visceral burning hatred he felt for SCP-682. Not only had it taken Dr. Law from his loving arms, but its previous containment breaches had all resulted in Dr. Takumat losing many dear friends and he knew it was all his doing.

Though Dr. Takumat had never prayed before, he clasped both hands together in a ball with his elbows on his desk, then he laid his head down on it as tears puddle together around his face. He closed his eyes and said out loud.

"I would sell my soul to kill that thing, once and for all."

Suddenly he had the strangest craving of his life. He wanted, no, needed to eat some apple sauce... specifically Mott's brand applesauce:

With the urgency of a dehydrated wanderer of an arid desert, he raced towards the cafeteria. Dr. Takumat wasn't certain that the refrigerators contained apple sauce at all. He thought he might have seen someone eating some at some point.

The doctor was in luck. Inside the first refrigerator he opened was a single serving of "MOTS" brand apple sauce.

"MOTS?" the doctor said out loud inquisitively.

He had thought that the brand was spelled "Mott's" with only the first letter capitalized, an apostrophe after a second "t" in the name which was oddly absent from the logo on the container. He briefly wondered if this was a symptom of "The Mandela" effect. Alleged instances of this phenomenon seemed to become more and more prominent as the years went

on, so much so that the Foundation was pouring substantial resources into finding out the causation of the Mandela effect.

He shrugged it off and realized the last time he had eaten apple sauce was when he was a small child so he must have remembered the label incorrectly.

Another random compulsion entered his mind. He felt the need to be alone when eating the applesauce. The doctor attributed that feeling to still mourning for his love as well as one of his random bouts of agoraphobia.

Dr. Takumat burst into his office, opening the apple sauce container on his way in. He set a spoon and the container on the desk then sat on his chair so quickly that he wheeled away from his desk and towards the far wall of his office.

While wheeling back to his desk he smelt an unmistakable odor that he knew instantly. It was the smell of silk-worms.

Dr. Takumat cultivated silk-worms for a middle school project and ended up keeping the colony of worms for a long time, but his mother really disliked them and the pungent aroma they emit, so she got rid of them one day while Jim was at school.

The doctor slowly looked into the container to see that his nose hadn't failed him. There within, certainly were a dozen or so silkworms. He also noted that it appeared that the container never had any applesauce within it.

Dr. Takumat felt that what he was seeing was indeed strange but, was it anomalous?

"Hello." Said a very familiar voice within the Doctors mind.

"For sure anomalous." The doctor thought.

He snapped out of his sorrow in that moment and produce a pen and paper. He began to document his encounter with the unknown SCP within the applesauce container. He knew that voice though, it was unmistakably his deceased mother's voice.

"Mom. Is that you?" Dr. Takumat said while looking all around the room, tears gathering in his eyes.

"Down here. "

The doctor once again looked down at the container where the worms were.

"Is that...you're talking in my head? Why do you sound like my mom?"

"Yes, that is us. The long-short of it is that when people hear us in their heads, we choose a voice that is most familiar and endearing to the one making a wish."

He jotted down some scribbly sentences.

"You mean, I get to make a wish? What are you, like a genie?"

"Yes. That's exactly what we are, and yes you get to make a wish, or rather consummate the one you already made."

"I don't know what you mean."

“Well, you had said that you would sell your soul to kill...what is it again. Erm... 682.”

“SCP-682, yes, I did. But that wasn’t a real wish or anything.”

“You were serious enough to have been able to summon us to your office.”

The worms continued:

“Don’t worry.won’t steal your soul and you still receive your wish. No strings attached.”
Dr. Takumat frantically wrote some more. The professional in him knew that he needed to raise the alarm that an unknown entity had somehow breached security and was now in his office. He wasn’t feeling too professional in that moment.

“I wish for Perla back.” The doctor said

“Sorry pal. The only thing I can do about that situation is nothing.

There was a palpable moment of silence.

“Alright then...” The doctor trailed off. He couldn’t bring himself to switch places with his beloved. Either way, they would no longer be together.

He placed his hand-written notes in the safe and shut it. Then he said:

“I would sell my soul to kill SCP-682 with my own bare hands.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Dr. Takumat awoke to find that he had apparently slept on the floor of his office. He had that distinct feeling of being exposed to class A or class B amnestics, which had happened to him an unknowable number of times throughout his career with the SCP Foundation.

Maybe it was just the stress he was enduring as a result to the trauma the last containment breach had caused him.

Jim tried to stand but was stuck on all fours for some reason. He looked at his hand in complete shock and horror. It was green and scaly and adorned with gigantic black claws on the tips of his reptilian digits.

He stampeded toward the mirror in his office.

Staring back at him was SCP-682, only much, much larger.

He had no memory of making a wish the night before.

A Mobile Task Force blasted into the office; guns drawn.

Jim explained to the task force that he was in fact Dr. Takumat, although something anomalous had occurred that resulted in his new physical form.

He wasn't believed at first and they open-fired, but Jim just sat there while they did; not taking any amount of damage at all.

Meanwhile, the real SCP-682 was still in stasis within its acid bath, safely contained. The O-5 council commanded the MTF to disengage and a few moments later MTF Alpha-1, The Red Right-Hand, entered the room. Behind the MTF were several members of the O-5 council themselves and much to Jims relief, O-1 was absent.

There was much deliberation between the doctor and the council, Dr. Takumat couldn't remember just how he came to be in his current form to the disappointment of all, however he joyfully agreed to the proposition of him attempting to neutralize SCP-682 in his new form.

It was the least he could do.

"Good!" said O-11.

"This is a much better plan than the Tickle Monster one you submitted recently. It worried me to put something as valuable as SCP-999 in the ring with SCP-682. "

"You mean, the experiment with SCP-999 hasn't happened yet?"

O-9 jumped in the conversation. "It was scheduled for this afternoon. We tabled it in order to experiment with using you to take down the beast."

She is still alive, then. Jim thought.

Sure enough, upon entering 682's containment cell, there she was. Beautiful as he had remembered her. She saw Jim in his new form and ran away terrified, as did the rest of the team of researchers in the vicinity.

“Babe! Wait!” Jim cried.

The commotion woke up SCP-682 immediately.

The acid bath drained and then it was just the two of them.

“Disgusting.” SCP-682 said, directed at his own doppelganger.

“Is that how you talk to your own father?”

682 pounced onto Jim.

The two did battle for hours.

SCP-682 like usual was able to be destroyed and then repair itself to new specifications in order to adapt to its adversaries. Jim however, never showed any sign of damage whatsoever and what's more is that he shared the limitless adaptability of SCP-682.

Eventually Dr. Takumat slayed the beast once and for all and devoured it's remains.

Jim looked at a camera and said “It's done.”

The foundation staff as well as the O-5 council who had been watching the video feed of the battle cheered and some even wept. If one wasn't aware of what was going on that caused such a celebration, they might have figured they had just landed the first astronaut on Mars.

Jim was kept in SCP-682's cell under lock and key for several weeks as a precaution because the majority of the Foundation employees figured that the defeat of SCP-682 was temporary like all the times proceeding this last, supposedly successful attempt.

At long last, Dr. Takumat was classified as a Safe object and was treated with the same relaxed approach as other SCP's that were classified as Safe.

Because of how powerful SCP 682-2, formally called Dr. Takumat, apparently was, he was not sequestered to a single area at Site-19 because the O-5 council feared that being on the wrong-side of this entity was not advisable.

All Employees with a level four clearance or higher knew that the nomenclature of “Safe” Was merely formally given to 682-2, so he wouldn't know how immensely terrified the O-5 council and other Employees were, and that they were of the mentality that the entity was actually of the Apolyon class, just not officially on paper.

The first thing Jim did was go to Dr. Law's office to see her.

Doctor Crenshaw in his previous human form was Perla's type across the board.

He seemed to have more love and compassion in his soul than most and she felt bad that he seemed so lonely and burdened with a light that no one cared to let shine or to bask in his radiance.

Had the body of a fireman, not the body of a scholarly bookworm. He always dressed immaculately to the nines and had a surplus of class that she had never found in a man before and she swore that his skin sparked and glittered. He was rather intelligent as well, yet humble

with a big caring heart. Most of all, he was funny. She loved when he made her laugh which was quite frequent.

This thing that stood, or rather crawled before her, boasted none of those attributes. "Get a MTF over here now! It's going to kill me!" she shrieked to the red emergency phone in the hallway that was adjacent to her office.

"Babe, it's me. Jim." The words slithered out abrasively causing her to turn tail and run for dear life.

The MTF arrived within minutes. They did absolutely nothing to Jim for they feared the beast implicitly.

The only one on the task force who wasn't shaking in their boots was sergeant. Leo Neroni, who was Jim's close friend and neighbor.

"Hey um...Look Jim. You should probably move on from Dr. Law. I know how much you love her, but...She's not into you, at least the way you are now."

Leo gave Jim a gentle pat on his massive shoulder and ordered his men to disperse. Dr. Takumat retired to his furnished cell and was seething with a deep black hatred that he couldn't shake. Everything he saw and thought about, made him blindly angry and he wasn't even sad that Dr. Law had rejected him, rather he was livid that she had.

As Jim visualized his now ex-lover, he no longer felt the same undying love that thinking about her typically did to him. Now the thought of her simply agitated him.

He didn't leave his cell for several days.

The whole time he was obsessing about Dr. Law. He kept trying to replace the strange feelings of malice towards her, and feel love for her once more, though every thought he had about her only further galvanized him towards the young doctor.

Maybe he was just having a hard time facing the fact that she was no longer his soulmate or companion.

He may have been a monster but he was still an entity of science, so he decided to take a series of tests on himself. A thought experiment.

He rudely told a passing by researcher who was chaperoning a D class to come into his cell and use the computer that Jim was unable to use anymore due to his new form. He demanded that the researcher compile pictures of a few dozen random nouns, people, places, and things and events in history. Once the researcher had completed this assignment, Jim rudely said "There's the door."

Both the researcher and D class exited and went about their business.

He could smell their palpable fear.

"Idiots.' Jim said to himself.

He went through the pictures that the researcher had compiled and was testing his reactions to various things.

The first picture was an apple.

He involuntarily scoffed.

Next picture.

A movie theater.

“Awful waste of time and money, Movies suck these days.” He thought

Children on a teeter totter.

“Children...Why bother? Just a few more parasites to suck the life from this impossibly worthless planet.”

Dr. Takumat wasn't surprised about the results of his test, rather concerned that he was not only different physically, but now his mind and personality were undergoing a metamorphosis. He was certain that it was futile to continue his experiment but decided to look at one more of the random pictures.

He loathed that once again, he was still immortal.

It was of a lush and beautiful garden. Under a tree sat two naked humans and between them was a snake. The beautiful woman in the picture is handing a half-eaten apple to the equally beautiful man.

Jim felt the only other feeling that he was briefly able to experience which was a deep and sorrowful remorse that gripped his cold blue heart.

He knew so much now, virtually everything. And all that he knew, he absolutely despised, though he worked so hard to rid his heart of hate and judgment in the past.

He also knew where Doctor Law would sit during her lunch break as well as the exact time she would go to lunch.

When he found Dr. Law, she had just sat down and had taken a single bite out of a shiny red apple.

“Disgusting!” Jim snarled.

The entire cafeteria went completely silent. He was so repulsed by Dr Law, that after eating most of her, he vomited it all back up.

The silence was quickly disrupted by the sound of many feet running away as well as screams of bloody murder.

The O-5 council instructed all MTF's charged with responding to this incident, not to attack 682-2 and they sent out an ex-cop that specialized in hostage situations and negotiating with the criminally insane.

The negotiation was brief and quickly halted by a casual swipe from the right hand of 682-2 that killed not only the repulsive negotiator, but the entire squadron that he arrived with.

The O-5 council reluctantly ordered their soldiers to draw the beast to the exit of site-19 resulting in releasing the beast upon the world it found to be oh so vulgar and useless.

They made this decision because the on-site nuclear device being used at Site-19 would cause more harm than good, even if it could damage Jim; which they very much doubted it would. Not only that but Site-19 contained some of the Foundation's most dangerous Euclid and Keter class entities; many of which would most certainly survive a nuke.

Even evacuating a town or entire urban city is messy and difficult to achieve. Evacuating all of North and South America took nearly a year. The Foundation found themselves unable to conceal the organization any longer due to the havoc that 682-2 wreaked.

It was a "Broken Masquerade Scenario coupled with an XK class End of the World Scenario." Despite the resources and man power the Foundation poured into saving or at least postponing the demise of the masses, it wasn't long before Foundation members were being hunted down and eliminated at the hand of the proletariat which now reigned in a messy anarchy as all world governments had fallen due to the impervious and scornful 682-2.

The only one who they couldn't kill of the council was Lilith, 0-1.

682-2 decided to rest a while before crossing the pond to Europe to finish his extermination of humanity and all living creatures.

It closed its eyes and lay on a beach in what used to be Miami.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Immediately upon Jim opening his eyes it was very much confused as to where he was.

Where did the burning beach go that he was basking in and why is it in his old office again?

What's more is the fact that he resided once again in his formerly occupied human body.

His nose informed him that he was near some silkworms again.

It all came rushing back into his mind.

During his time as 682-2 he hadn't remembered his initial interaction with the worms but now he remembered making the wish to destroy 682 and vividly could recall the year or so that he spent as a more deadly and powerful version of the reptile, completely without any recollection of how he came to be that he became the dreadful monster that he originally spawned.

Like the previous interaction with MOTS, as the worms called themselves, he grabbed a pen and paper and began writing down notes frantically as the entity communicated with him telepathically.

"Welp. That wish you made totally sucked, right?" Now the telepathic voice was unmistakably hers.

"You purposefully botched my wish. I would rather have given my soul to you than to have experienced that reality."

"Sorry, I only take Venmo, Cash App, Some species of gourds, saffron, and pesos. No souls unfortunately. Lucky for you, I will grant you a real wish this time and not a prank one since I messed with you so bad."

"Genie... I just want a normal peaceful obscure life where I am once again mortal. I am so tired and I just want peace."

The genie suddenly stopped messing around and quite seriously said within Jim's mind: "There is no peace without God."

Jim responded with: "But there is no God in this world. This world is made by and usurped by Satan."

MOTS chuckled. "There is nothing that can be that is without God, however you cannot know him without one of these."

A bible appeared in Jim's hand and then he and the jar of applesauce vanished.

"Tell you what. Since you finally are beginning to understand things, I will grant you your wish as well as returning Dr. Law to life; well, rather, a friend in a high place will grant it".

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Doctor Law was heart-broken that Dr. Dr. Takumat had completely vanished into thin air. At the same time, however, she was more thankful to be alive than she remembered ever being before in her life for some unknown reason. This gratitude also came with a tinge of guilt. Maybe this was a natural way to feel after losing someone you love dearly.

Maybe it wasn't.

Dr. Law had to table her idea of introducing SCP-999 to SCP-682 as a solution to the ongoing problem

682 presented to the Foundation and all of mankind alike. She would never get the O-5's to sign off on such a wild idea without a senior researcher petitioning them on behalf of her. This didn't bother her as much as she had thought it would, though. Part of her was relieved that this dramatic proposal would never come into fruition.

Dr. Law was about to end her contemplative lunch within Site-19's cafeteria when her colleague, Dr. Ruth Farmastone sat across from her with her lunch.

The older researcher's stormy, silver-blue eyes pierced into Dr. Law's soul but in a concerned and caring manner.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. I know how much you cared for him."

Dr. Law didn't bother to ask her mentor how she had deduced that the two of them were an item. If Dr. Farmastone knew something not readily advertised as factual, Perla had learned not to wonder how she came to such conclusions as Ruth was the most intuitive person she had ever known, almost to an anomalous degree even.

"You've heard the rumors, I assume?"

"I didn't do anything! I don't know why anyone..."

"Perla.... I know that. I didn't come here to berate or interrogate you. I'm here for emotional support as I know you are really going through it."

"Thanks. Something tells me that you are here about something else as well. Your food is getting cold, ma'am."

"When are you going to just call me Ruth? You're respectful and polite almost to a fault."

There was silence and Dr. Law offered a wry smile and pretended to eat the cold peas left on her plate.

"You're right, however. I am here for another purpose. You yourself are becoming very intuitive these days. Almost to an anomalous degree even." Ruth allowed a slight gentle smile to spread across or stunning and timelessly beautiful face.

"That's it. She's definitely an SCP of some kind." Perla considered internally, half-joking and half-serious

"I am taking over the investigation into Dr. Takumat's disappearance. I wanted to inform you of this, not as a threat but as a source of relief. I took on this task because I have no doubt that you are innocent and it is better that someone of this mentality looks into the matter rather than someone who may think otherwise."

Dr. Law felt relief wash over her and relaxed her tight and quivering muscles, realizing that she was tightly wound, like someone preparing to be punched in the gut ever since she heard the devastating news.

Dr. Farmastone then rose from the table, having not even taken a single bite of her lunch.

Dr. Law managed to chirp a tiny “thank you” but exactly as she said this, Dr. Farmastone was already saying “You’re quite welcome, dear.”

Dr. Farmastone’s slender gloved hand reached for her level 5 clearance keycard. With her other hand she turned the handle to the door to Jim’s abandoned office.

There was a general placid and sterile look to just about every researcher’s personal office within the foundation but Dr. Crenshaw’s was particularly bleak in appearance. There was nothing within that would demonstrate that a human with a soul had operated there. All except a single polaroid hidden under a stack of files within his desk.

Dr. Farmastone felt a pang of sadness for the couple in her heart. They looked so happy in this picture. In sharpie the word “Forever” was written on the bottom.

The doctor noticed that the external hard drive to the surveillance camera within the office was absent. This only left the telekill alloy safe in the corner to be examined.

Telekill metal is an anomalous element that prevents thaumaturgical properties effects or at least, lessens them significantly.

Dr. Farmastone easily bypassed the combination and retina scan safety precautions of the safe with her level five keycard and quickly found several items of interest.

First, she retrieved the external hard drive that had been formerly attached to the camera within the office and second, she found a file with the words “SCP-XXXX” written in what she deduced to be Dr. Takumat’s spidery shorthand.

Dr. Farmastone thought it was strange that such a well-organized and thorough researcher would ever hand-write a file, especially one about a potentially new SCP item.

Dr. Takumat must have been in a real hurry.

Dr. Farmastone returned to her office and connected the external hard drive to her laptop. The hard drive saved the surveillance footage of each day as a new folder. She double-clicked the final folder within the hard drive and was perplexed for the first time in a very long time.

“You purposefully botched my wish. I would rather have given my soul to you than to have experienced that reality.” said the Doctor on the computer screen.

He was apparently speaking to an opened single-serve container of what appeared to be applesauce.

Dr. Farmastone zoomed in as far as she could and noticed two very odd things about this container.

First, it appeared to be a “Mott’s” brand container although in this case it was incorrectly spelled “MOTS” for some reason. Second, instead of applesauce within the container, she could almost swear that the contents seemed to be moving, writhing even. “Were those worms within?” she asked herself.

Dr. Farmastone realized that he was indeed speaking to the suspect container on his desk. She was unable to hear what the entity was saying to Jim and figured that the item must have telepathic communication capabilities

.
She saw him furiously scribbling out notes onto pieces of paper within the very file that now sat on her desk.

It dawned on Farmastone that she was reminded of something by the seemingly innocuous but perplexing misspelling of the brand name on the container.

“Jiffy-brand peanut-butter...BernSTEIN Bears...” She muttered.

Had she finally figured out the riddle of the Mandela Effect? Was it whatever entity that Crenshaw was interacting with in the video?

Jim’s notes state that the way to summon SCP-XXXX is to genuinely offer to sell your soul for a worldly gain. You will know if your offer of your soul triggers SCP-XXXX to materialize if suddenly the person who made the offering has a powerful craving for applesauce, specifically Mott’s brand applesauce.

SCP-XXXX will materialize in a container of applesauce somewhere closest to the wisher, SCP-XXXX-A. The container will always be misspelled as “MOTS”.

Chapter Sixty

“What’s up Duder-onomy?” Said Steve-Vicious, leader of MTF-FP-ZETA.

“Not much Bromo-eructus.” Rude Pete responded to his commanding officer.

“Bro...’Bromo-erectus? That’s hella gay sounding. Maybe instead of Rude Pete I should start calling you Ru Paul!” Steve Vicious teased his second-in-command and close pal.

“I don’t get it...Ru what?” Staff Sergeant Rude Pete responded.

“Oh my god. You know... He’s that famous drag queen from that show about drag queens.”

“Sorry I’m not hip with all the famous drag queens in the world but that’s more your department, anyway.”

“Bro. Real talk. I only know that because my girl makes me watch every episode. So gay.” Steve Vicious said.

“Yeah, yeah. You mean, your boyfriend, right?”

“At least I don’t have a gay-ass nickname. Rude Pete sounds like a village person.” Steve joked.

“It’s an homage to my Jamaican culture. Something I won’t even waste my breath explaining to your thick-headed-ass. At least my nickname is original. “Steve Vicious” ...total Sex Pistols rip off dude.

“What? No, it isn’t. I don’t even know who the Sex Pistols are.” Steve rebutted.

“They were this shitty punk band that was only famous because they were one of the first in their genre.”

“Bro. They weren’t shitty. C’mon!” Steve interrupted.

“Ha! I knew you were pretending not to know them. I saw a “God Save the Queen sticker on your car the other day. Why not “Steve Rotten” instead? Sid Vicious couldn’t even play the bass. You know that they unplugged him for shows, right?”

“Is this exchange ever going to end or should I keep waiting?” Dr. Farmastone interjected.

“Yes ma’am! Sorry we...”

The doctor had already turned around and was walking towards the experiment chamber. Dr. Law and her mentor walked with purpose side by side. They both could feel the men from MTF-FP-Zeta staring holes through their backsides.

“Ugh! I swear the “FP” in MTF-FP-Zeta stands for “Face-Palm.”

The boys walked far enough behind the doctors so they could whisper more of their toxic-masculine commentary.

“For an old bitch, Dr. Farmastone is so f’in hot, bro...more like Doctor “Farm-ma-bone!” Sgt. Steve-Vicious quipped.

“I heard the other one just lost her bf. Your loss, sucker! I’m gonna swoop on that ass. Watch and learn.” Rude Pete snarked.

The doctors up ahead heard more or less all of their inappropriate comments.

“When is someone going to be brave enough to get the Ethics Committee involved with Beavis and Butthead? They are so creepy!” Dr. Law said.

“Honey. The only thing dumber than those simpletons is allowing them to effect and have control over your emotions. By all means, if they really bother you that much, you have every right to complain but please wait until after the experiment today.”

The group entered the chamber and Dr. Law’s heart skipped a beat.

In the center of the main chamber, there was a D-Class strapped to a gurney and above him a metal device that looked like a hydraulic piston hung from the ceiling.

“Oh my god! Is SCP-106 on the loose? Dr. Law cried. She looked behind at the operatives chaperoning them and then said “We’re so dead!”

“Calm down. SCP-106 is still hibernating last I heard.”

Dr. Law assumed that the “femur breaker” that the D-Class was strapped beneath was intended to be used to catch the depraved and sadistic “Old Man” or SCP-106. She couldn’t think of another use for the barbaric device.

“Nice! The strippers I ordered are finally here! Where’s the pizza and beer, though?” D-9929 declared.

D-9929 was a hulking white man in his mid-forties who was covered in gang tattoos and had been hand-picked from death row inmates. He was a serial rapist and murderer.

Without missing a beat Dr. Law said. “I think he means you two.” directed at the guards behind her.

“I’m not gay ma’am. I love me some...”

Dr Farmastone interrupted Vicious.

“We don’t care about your orientation or what you love, operative. Only speak when spoken to from here going forward.”

With that, the group retired to the other room in the chamber that was separated by a wall that was mostly a two-way mirror. There was a computer console with a single lever in the center with a view of the D-Class.

Dr. Law was instructed to take a jar of Mott’s applesauce that was nearby and to bring it into the other side of the chamber and to place it on a small round table next to D-9929 and then open the lid.

Dr. Law returned to the safety of the observation chamber and spoke into the intercom microphone that extended from the console in front of her.

“D-9929. You are instructed to say the following phrase. “I would sell my soul to be back in my cell right now.”

“I would sell my soul to see you naked right now, doc.” a split second after the words left the D-Class’s mouth, Dr. Farmastone pulled the lever on the console and the piston above the man extended at sixty-five miles an hour and shattered his femur.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get that, D-9929. What was that wish again?”

D-9299 spit at the mirror.

There were a few seconds of silence and once again the lever was pulled. D-9929 wished internally just before the piston struck him again.

"I wish I could trade places with the cock-sucker operating this machine. I would sell my soul." D-9299 shut his eyes and winced, but to his surprise, the piston stopped an inch before it struck his thigh once more.

Suddenly D-9299 had a strange craving to eat the applesauce on the table next to him. He grabbed it as his arms were not bound. The man noticed the jar was curiously misspelled "MOTS."

A disembodied voice that sounded exactly like Donald Trump said: "As you wish!"

The D-class vanished from the gurney and found himself on his knees in the observation room. He tried to scream but operative Sgt. Vicious's erect penis was deep within his open mouth and went partially down his throat.

No matter how bad the D-Class willed himself to stop sucking the operative's member, not only could he not pull away but found himself giving the most enthusiastic and highly skilled blow-job a human can give.

There was a shrill scream from the experiment chamber on the other side of the two-way mirror. Dr. Law sprinted into the other room, also screaming.

Rude Pete dashed to his commanding officer and tried with every muscle in his body to remove the D-Class from the Sergeant's crotch but it seemed to be impossible to pry this man away.

Finally, Rude Pete was able to pull D-9299 off of his friend, falling onto his back.

To Rude Pete's horror, D-9299 was expertly removing the operative's fatigues. He opened his mouth wide and nearly swallowed Pete's flaccid and shriveled penis but instead found himself sucking on the barrel of a cold Desert Eagle 50 caliber sidearm.

Without a moment's hesitation, Pete pulled the trigger and the top half of the assailant's head flew unceremoniously across the room.

"How's that for a cum-shot?" Rude Pete cracked

"Boss?"

Operative Steve Vicious pulled his pants up off the floor and jostled his still erect penis back into his briefs but just before the waistband covered the top of his member, he orgasmed violently and couldn't help but moan.

The sperm launched directly upwards, cresting just before reaching the light-fixture above. The massive amount of semen then landed square on the back of the deceased D-Class Employee. If there had been a target painted on the orange jumpsuit D-9299 wore, the sperm would have been a perfect bullseye.

"Bro..." both men said awkwardly.

"Will you idiots get in here already? She's comatose. Call the medics!"

Chapter Sixty-One

As soon as D-9299 was granted his wish, Dr. Farmastone had been teleported to the gurney the moment the piston struck a second time. Since she was so much shorter than the D-Class who had wished her into this position, the device shattered her hips, cracking them straight down the center.

Despite the traumatic injury Dr. Farmastone endured when the femur-breaker split her hips in two, she was eerily calm and one could not tell by her demeanor that she was gravely injured at all.

The doctor told her that she would never walk again. Dr. Farmastone simply smiled and said with confidence to all including the doctor who was treating her: "I'll be better in one year from today."

Dr. Law was the first to visit Ruth. Farmastone interrupted Dr. Law as she stammered out words of support and sympathy.

"The applesauce...Is it still in the experiment chamber?"

"Yes ma'am. Looks like the lead and telekill lined walls of the test chamber managed to catch the entity."

"Summon the nurse to put me in a chair and then I want you to push me back to the chamber."

"But Dr. Farmastone...You need to rest."

"Just do as I say, please."

Soon Dr. Farmastone was alone in the test chamber looking down into the applesauce container.

"Yo." Said a familiar male voice in the doctor's head.

It was uncannily her deceased wife's voice.

There was silence for a moment and then the worm's spoke again in the doctor's head.

"Good to see you again, Ruth. Sorry, I'm not actually your dead partner, but I thought you would like to hear her voice again."

"What do you mean, again?"

"You SCP quacks have tried to, as the name SCP states, Secure Contain and Protect me many times before and I've been labeled at least a dozen SCP names. SCP-7053, SCP-8866, SCP-7911 and so on. It never sticks because, even though you summoned me to a room made with thaumaturgy suppressing walls, you never have and never will contain me, at least, you won't contain me any longer than one year at a time. A year from when that unfortunate D-Class, as you call them, met an untimely and gory death and you had your hip split in two, I will return to the main timeline which is paused as soon as the hypothetical timeline initiated by the D-Class making a wish is finished."

Dr. Farmastone typed lightning-fast on her laptop, trying to document every little nuance of her interaction with the SCP.

"You can write everything down that you desire but the reason no file exists on me in your database to date is because everything written or known about me will invariably vanish from existence."

"Dr. Farmastone paused and thoughtfully asked "So then, if what you say is true and you will never be exposed, then please humor me and tell me what you are, where you come from. Anything and everything, please."

"I usually don't do this but you did suffer terribly when I switched you with the D-Class during that barbaric experiment. I wanted to teach the D-Class a lesson but I saw an opportunity for teaching you a lesson also. When I said that I have been to this very place and studied by the SCP Foundation many times. Do you know who it was who studied me every time?"

"Was it me?"

"Yes, but there was another the first few times who you worked with. Your wife."

"You killed her. I remember now. I remember every interaction we and I have had with you in the past. It all just came flooding back to me"

The worms chuckled and replied: "I did kill her, yes. You are quite intuitive. Is that actually intuition or is it something else though? I think people have dubbed it "The Mandela Effect." As you deduced already, I am the reason behind this illusion phenomenon. The reason a lot of people believed that Nelson Mandela died in jail in the 80's but he actually died in the 2010's is because both things happened.

The first occurred in a "pocket" timeline like the one we are in currently and after the year was over, time went back to the main timeline where Mandela survived his imprisonment.

Your so called "Intuition" is nothing more than having lived during two separate progressions of time many times."

Dr. Farmastone closed her laptop and sighed.

"You broke my hip to warn me to leave you be, right?"

"Correct."

"I will do as you say and see that you never are summoned to Site-19 or any other SCP Foundation sites ever again, but could you please just tell me what you are, once and for all?"

"Fine. I will tell you not only what I am, but what you are and everything else conceivable is as well. Maybe then, you will leave me to my business."

"I promise I will do so."

"Okay, here goes:

Perfection wondered "what if I could be imperfect?" and this world, this hypothetical exercise is the result.

You may even call it a play.

Since humanity is simply put, the sand derived from the fracturing of one single stone, you therefore are not whole individually but if you trace your lineage to the dawn of time, you would find that you once were not only whole but the same singular item as all of what you behold in life.

As imperfect beings, it seems that you now are beginning to grow weary of the hypothetical exercise and question that is existence.

Eventually you asked “what if I could be perfect ?” And therefor the singular stone that was shattered into sand has begun to return to its previously whole form.

The first particle to begin the process was a man who was called “The Christ.” Over two thousand years ago.

The real yin and Yang is recognizing the dichotomy of being perfect by not existing or becoming imperfect so as to exist. It's one or the other and never both.

“We are all one” is a partially true statement.

There are actually only three separate consciences in existence and they...we three together are one being.

Imagine that all of existence is simply a business. Say that business is a little theatre.

The builder of the theatre is God, the father. The actors are God, the son, who is the living God and the playwright and director is myself, the Holy Ghost.

All three of these entities function to produce the same singular desired outcome but not one of us is able to do it alone. The desired outcome for our theater is to put on a show that sells enough tickets to keep the doors open and for everyone involved to make a living.

The builder could not make his theater a viable business on his own and must hire the playwright and actors.

The actor could not sell their wares without the story from the playwright and the builder must allow this to happen in his building in the first place.

The playwright could not have his works performed without his or her actors and without a place to put on the show.

When a person is alive, they play a role on the stage. In death, they are in the audience.

The theater doesn't produce anything of value whatsoever and is redundant in nature but as long as there are those who patron the establishment, the theater will remain open but as soon as the crowd realizes, they are lining up for the same old story every time and see beyond the illusion, The illusion that every story is different, as well see it for just being just that, a story, then the theatre will naturally close.

What am I, then? What is the Holy Ghost?

I am a very simple thing to explain, in fact, I can do so with one singular word.

“Time”

What is time?

For such a constant and inescapable part of existence time is infinitely difficult to comprehend and to see what it actually is or rather, what I actually do.

To answer this question, let us go back to one of the most popular myths regarding the beginning of time.

This is an interpretation of the Abrahamic story of Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden.

God, the father created man in his image and placed them in perfection, Eden, with one stipulation. Man was not to taste the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

When Eve shared the apple with Adam mortal life and time began in that moment.

Why was mankind placed in Eve? As perfect as the garden supposedly was, it was still very clearly apart from heaven and both places are not the same destination.

If you tell a child not to do something, they generally want to do that thing more than before you forbade them to do this thing.

Wouldn't an all-knowing God realize this? He deliberately compromised man's perfection for man to fall. The original sin did not come from mankind but from God when he allowed the serpent into the garden and when he planted the forbidden tree in the first place.

God made man mortal and to suffer so that his creation's would do two things that a perfect being could never do.

The first thing, is to experience enough hardships and tribulations to actually appreciate being in heaven just as a sailor who was almost shipwrecked kisses dry land upon miraculously reaching the shore.

The second thing, is to create.

If Beethoven hadn't been born into a broken home and beaten senseless by a drunkard father and watched his many siblings die from coughing their bloody lungs up. If he had not gone deaf at the night of his career and had lost the ability to hear the one thing that made him happy. Would he still have written "The Ode to Joy?"

Mankind is the only animal that creates art that is derived from their conscience experience. Sure, there are birds that build beautiful nests or beehives that are expertly constructed and anthills like pyramids. The difference is though that all of these things that other life forms make always have a utility or purpose related to survival whereas a painting or song or play only exists to express human thought and directly has no real value as far as survival goes.

The other tree in the garden is called The Tree of Life. Can we deduce that since choosing the tree of knowledge and not the tree of life, we chose the opposite of life? Is it cryptically implied that knowledge is actually the equivalent of death?

Where does knowledge come from, or more correctly, how is knowledge acquired?

We learn from nothing other than the passing of time.

We study things of how they were before, how they are now, and their implications for the future.

Remember that drunken uncle that ruined every thanksgiving growing up? Eventually your family stopped inviting him to dinner because they have the knowledge of what your uncle has done in the past and they apply that information to change the outcome of the future.

If time was removed from this scenario, how would anyone be able to know what the uncle has done in the past when there has been no passing of time? How would they plan ahead for a future that never comes?

In fact. If you were to live without the dimension of time, the concept of time would be as impossible to comprehend as we feel a fourth dimension would be to your minds as they are presently.

Many if not every religion has an end of days scenario somewhere in the canon of their beliefs. This isn't referring to a biblical apocalypse but is actually what it says. The end of times is precisely that, the end of time.

When the dimension of time is gone, no one can sin because knowledge is impossible to acquire without experience as everyone will be blissfully stuck in a single moment, just like being a child or infant again.

Since wisdom cannot be gained without time, mankind is maturing by the use of time for the moment when time ceases and we are eternal again.

"If you were stuck in one moment forever, wouldn't you want to be your best self?"

Thus, people toil here on earth and time continues until we choose that the play we are all stuck in is no longer interesting and decide that we all just want to go home"

"When you catch the butterflies of dejavu or you trudge into the uncanny valley, only to find haunting liminal spaces... there within is me."

Chapter Sixty-Two

“Sorry for the long-winded harangue, but you asked what I am, so I obliged.”

Dr. Farmastoned smiled dejectedly then began sobbing.

She managed to choke her thoughts out in broken sentence fragments in between tears.

“I’m stuck in hell. I hate working for this evil organization and on top of it, I am trapped in a loop of summoning you, forgetting the whole thing and doing it again and again, aren’t I?”

“That’s pretty much the gist of it, yeah.” The worms decided to speak in another familiar voice this time and used Perla’s instead of the doctors deceased ex.”

“Can you grant me my own wish this time please? I’m not asking for much. I just want out and a different life. I want to work with animals and go on adventures and fall in love with...”

“I will grant you your wish and the caveat of the fact that this time, it won’t be over in a year. It’s not worth mentioning because you will never remember ever having interacted with me, but something very, very bad will happen. Good luck”.

“Wait...What is it”?

“Abracadabra”!

Chapter Sixty-three

Against Jim’s better judgment, he agreed to hire his new roommate, Duke onto the catering crew he managed.

Jim swore time and again that he would never hire a friend or roommate or work in middle management again either, yet there he was, doing both these things...

Jim was a humbled man whose whole demeanor was underscored with an air of kindness and though the world around him had at times been treacherous and burdened him with great pain, one could tell that Jim valued all life as precious and had a near infinite patience for the foolish people that he, like us all, frequently encounter.

At least Duke wouldn’t be among the foolish, Jim thought, or more correctly, had hoped.

Duke was a whole two heads shorter than Jim.

Jim never really thought about the difference in height but as the two got to know each other better, Jim realized that Duke was clearly intimidated by his height and ashamed of his own. Jealous even.

Duke had made a great first impression on Jim. He presented himself as incredibly considerate and helpful as well as politely mannered. Jim was aware however, that sometimes the most lacking individuals make the greatest first impressions – he was always ready for the old “bait and switch” when getting to know someone.

As time went on, and as Jim and Duke became more familiar with one another, Jim realized that he had made a mistake in bringing Duke on.

Every instruction that Jim would give to Duke, Duke would respond with a question that was designed to poke holes in Jim's command, presenting his thoughts and opinions on why said command would lead to problems in the future. For example:

"Duke, could you mop up this dirty water in the office?"

"Oh, you don't want me to squeegee it instead? I mean I could definitely use the mop but it's pretty dirty and when was the last time you changed the mop head? This seems more like a squeegee job, don't you think?"

Shortly after Jim had instructed Duke to dry the floor he walked towards the refrigerator for more limes to cut. He slipped on the muddy water that was still on the office floor.

"Duke! Why is the floor still wet?"

Kimaya, the other employee who was working with Jim and Duke, told Jim that Duke had left a little while ago and didn't say where he was going.

Jim considered that maybe Duke had some sort of emergency that he had to leave for and rationalized that his absence would be justified. He sent Duke a text, calmly asking where he had gone as he searched for the mop. The mop was nowhere to be found. He ended up using the squeegee which was old and hardly worked and wasn't used because the linoleum tile made the ground too uneven for a squeegee to be effective.

"Hey roomie. I'm at the laundry mat washing the mop head. 😊 I'm also washing your work shirt. It had a little stain on the front."

Jim then called Duke and told him to come return to the crew and not to wash anything. It was too late however. Duke had washed both the blue mophead and Jim's white button-up dress shirt together, staining his shirt a sky-blue color.

Duke returned triumphantly to the office with the ruined shirt and the mop-head that, though now clean, was tangled too severely by the wash cycle to be reattached to the mop-handle.

Instead of scolding Duke, Jim politely explained that Duke needed to stop questioning his commands and taking matters into his own hands. He told Duke that, though he may have good intentions, his behavior was quite disrespectful and borderline insubordinate.

"Imagine that we are working on a puzzle together. I give you a piece and instruct you on where to put it, and then you follow through with that task. Don't worry about the big picture of what the puzzle will end up being, whether it's a scenic view of a mountain, or Spongebob Square Pants. You just focus on placing the piece where I ask and I'll focus on the big picture, because if all of us focused on the big picture, we would lose sight of the little pieces that we need to place to reveal the greater scheme."

Duke wondered what the hell a "SpongeBob Square Pants" was and responded with "If I hadn't of done that, you would have washed it later at Tiffany's Laundry mat for almost double the price! I found better spot that's a few blocks further west that charges half the price!" A beaming Duke produced a receipt that was from a place called "MC's Laundry." it was slightly cheaper, yes but Shane's business had an account with Tiffanies and he and his staff were not allowed to pay out of pocket for dry cleaning as his boss didn't want to handle reimbursing his staff.

Duke told Jim he can “hit him back whenever” In regards to the nine dollars he had “fronted” to wash the mophead and ruin Jim’s shirt.

Jim blew it off but Duke asked him for the money every shift henceforth, more and more aggressively each time.

The next shift, Jim had Duke unload the van and to bring the product from the previous event back into the office and then put the products and equipment away for the next gig.

Jim explained to Duke that he wanted him to simply do two things: One, unload the truck and two, place the items back on the shelves they came from. In that order.

Jim was exhausted from working almost a month without a day off, so he relaxed on the couch in the office and caught up on some paperwork. Jim was so happy to feel tired and pain again.

An hour passed and Jim went to check on Duke to see if he had begun making the pre-batched cocktail mixes for the next event. The Cargo van was still full of equipment and liquor bottles. Duke was in the bathroom, rinsing empty juice bottles out by hand for some reason even though they had a dishwashing machine.

“Why is the van still full?” Jim patiently asked.

“Oh, well I figured that you wanted me to clean the dishes?”

“At what point in my instructions did I tell you to do the dishes? Please, would you get back to unloading?”

Another hour passed and Jim went to check on Duke. About half the cargo van had been unloaded. Duke was polishing wine bottles that he had removed from their cases and was placing the loose bottles on the shelf, with a proud and self-satisfied grin.

“Oh my gosh. Why is the van still full of crap man? You’re not supposed to remove the wine from the cases, I don’t have enough empty milkcrates for these bottles and they are in the box still for a reason.”

Duke wondered what the heck a “gosh” was.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” Duke said accusatorially

Jim took a deep breath went outside to finish up the task himself. The van was still full of junk and there was a broken case of beer on the asphalt of the parking lot. The glass of the broken bottles had been dragged about with the squeegee, making deep scratches in the lot that his landlord was sure to complain about.

The most disappointing part of this scene however, was the fact that Dukes 83 Mustang 5.0 was parked in the lot next to the work van. Jim had told Duke a number of times that his landlord would fine him if they took up any more parking spots than the one that was allotted to his company that was reserved for the cargo van.

“Duke! Why the heck is your car...”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m moving it!” Duke snapped back.

Duke climbed into his obnoxiously loud muscle car, fired it up, setting off the car alarms of the other cars in the lot, then paused to smoke some weed out of a bong and after 30 seconds of hotboxing his vehicle, sped off of the lot, peeling out and making permanent tire marks in the company lot that his landlady fined his boss for.

Jim beat himself up for making such a blundering move, hiring Duke.

Chapter Sixty-Four

The big day of the annual Rose Bowl party that Jim's company catered to, had finally come.

Both the client and Jim's boss neither wanted to pay for anything more than eight bartenders, though Jim protested; saying that the size and conditions of this event required a minimum of a dozen seasoned workers. It was forecasted to be 105 degrees in Pasadena that day and Jim had become very sensitive to hot climates and was prone to crippling sun burns as well as heat stroke.

On the day before the event, Jim, Duke and Kimaya took two trucks to the stadium with all of the catering supplies. Jim had hoped that Duke was lying about how many push-ups he had done that day before heading to work. If he was telling the truth, he would be no use setting up for the party.

It appeared that Duke had told the truth and ultimately, Duke was of no use to anyone.

Jim didn't know or care to ponder whether it was physical fatigue inhibiting Duke or was it just a general lacking of his mental faculties?. He didn't have time to consider anything other than how to navigate through the constant unnecessary extra work that Duke's presence seemed to always entail, on top of ardently trying his best to please the absolute monster party planner, who could never be happy with anything anyway.

It should have been a six hour day but Duke made it all the more challenging.

At one point Duke was tasked to load beer crates into a confined and cramped wooden storage area. Half a minute into the task, Duke screamed like a new born and started swearing with the most manly sounding curse word combinations he could think of in order to mitigate the fact that his initial cry was nothing short of wimpy.

"Ah! Suck it nail!" Duke said to a newish looking nail that was just sticking out of the also newer looking wood. Duke spit on the nail and swore some more as Shane came near to see what had happened.

Duke had apparently grazed his arm.

The nail left a painless white line that was a bit red and puffy surrounding the mark.

Duke made it clear to Jim that he thought that loading anything else into this particular storage area was a risk they simply should not take. Jim needed the space, so he climbed in and began stacking boxes in the room at a rate of about four boxes to Duke's one. Duke couldn't let his friend risk himself on his account, so he did the noblest thing he could in the moment and joined Jim in the room.

Duke placed his body between Shane and the nail.

"I got you bro..." Duke said.

Jim told Duke that it was cool and to hop out and he'll finish up the task. Duke refused and Jim shrugged and continued loading product into the room. Jim forgot how close Duke, the human-shield had been to him and he accidentally bumped Duke and Duke fell back into the wall and this time the nail stabbed him in his lower back.

"Awwwww! I need a first aid kit!! Horses ass, that bitching hurt!"

"Sorry Duke, I don't have one with me. Kimaya, do you have anything?"

“Always”

Kimaya opened his backpack and produced the kit. He offered to bandage the wound for Duke but Duke said he was good on that.

Jim praised Kimaya for his reliable and hard working character and Duke was visibly upset that he never received such praise from Jim.

Duke asked if he could take a break to recover from the minor injury he had sustained. Jim figured he could do more without Duke around, so he offered Duke a free pass to leave the ballpark and go home.

Duke felt like it was necessary to tell the crew that he would be in the van trying to get through to his doctors office. He went on to explain that he was 92% certain that he had gotten his tetanus shot a year back, but not entirely certain of that.

“Better be safe than sorry. I’ll let you know if they clear me to finish up the shift or not. I’ll text you guys in a group chat if I can come back. Either way, I’ll text you if not too. I’m probably going to walk to that food truck we saw... yesterday? Or was that today? Anybod-“

“Do your thing man. We got to get working. See you later.” Jim trailed off.

There was a suspicious looking vehicle in the parking lot and Jim swore that he saw the same car parked outside of the office the other day. It was a navy blue 1993 Dodge Shadow with double limo-tinted windows.

“About like what time later? Just so I know. I have to have my creatine and high protein shake every four hours. But that’s okay, I’ll be fine, though someday I feel like hypoglycemic and I get super-super hangry while others I...”

Jim and Kimaya walked away at about “I have to have my creatine.”

Rose had known Duke all five years that she had been unhappily married to her boring husband. Duke was friend-zoned by Rose very early on in their friendship. She was only into confident men who simultaneously are not embarrassed to have a heart and exhibit softness. Duke was none of that.

Duke suggested that Jim hire Rose so that he could have a chance to be around her more and so that she could see how tough and assertive he could be in the workplace. He would be a force of leadership and cool competency.

She would fall for him yet.

The moment Jim met Rose via a Zoom interview, they clicked and by the end of the interview, Rose was hired. They were both left smiling and bedazzled by the other’s presence.

Jim shrugged it off and before any fantasies concerning Rose entered his mind, he stopped and reminded himself that he is now her boss and should respect the professional and plutonic arrangement that they now have. For Jim, trying to be a good person gave him a satisfaction that was; due to his troubled past, more rewarding than living out any adolescent fantasies that a woman like that could inspire.

Saturday was hell for Jim and his crew. The four sided-monster of a bar that the client has built for Jim and his bartenders was out on the thirty yard line, devoid of shade. He had already contracted a mild case of heatstroke within the first hour of the event.

The client deliberately sabotaged the event on account of the event organizers being an ex jilted lover of the owner of Jim's company.

Upon arriving at the ballpark, Jim found that a broken ice machine on an old wooden pallet had been dropped in front of the doors that led into the storage area they had brought their equipment to the previous day.

Jim finally convinced a worker at the stadium to help unblock the door. He wondered if he ever would have retrieved his gear if he hadn't picked up a decent amount of Spanish.

None of the obstacles Jim faced were as impossible as working with Duke though.

With an hour left until they were to start pouring drinks, Jim's coworker Malcom, who was also Kimaya's roommate received a most unfortunate phone call.

Kimaya had been hit on his motorcycle on the 101 Pasadena freeway. He was in critical condition.

The crew completed the set up for the bar and retired to the hot and stuffy boiler room that the stadium provided them.

Jim began writing the game plan of the night and discussed how they would get through the event. He did so almost like a quarterback or head coach would, writing on the whiteboard with squiggly arrows that attached to hurried X's and words that were hardly legible due to his shaky hands.

Jim couldn't hold his composure any longer and broke down in tears before his crew. He choked as he tried to explain that Kimaya had had a terrible accident.

"He's so young." He sobbed.

Jim then made cross with his right hand over his chest and prayed. This was a very strange gesticulation to the crew as no one had ever heard of Jesus or the cross.

Rose was full of sympathy and adoration for Jim in that moment. She was moved to tears and was not the only one either.

Jim pulled it together in a minute or so and asked for a moment of silence for their hurt coworker.

Jim finished his briefing with: "Let's keep our chins up and press on without dwelling over what's gone wrong."

Jim left the room.

Duke broke the silence by turning to his nearest coworker and attempting to gossip about Kimaya.

"So Kimaya, eh? Wowie. Just...yikes, right?" Duke said with an inappropriate smile.

The coworker simply stood up and left.

Duke approached Rose who was lying on the floor on her back, sweating. The set up phase of the shift which lasted 4 brutal hours of what ended up becoming a hellish 13 hour shift had really worn Rose and the others out. A lousy half hour break in a boiler room didn't do too much to rejuvenate anyone.

"So, Jim's a pretty cool guy, right?"

Anytime Duke felt like Rose had eyes for someone other than him, he would verbally prod an answer out of her.

Rose avoided the question because the true answer to Duke's question would not please him to hear.

"Yeah. That's what I thought. You're only in to bigger and more manly black guys usually, plus, between me and you, I can't believe he cried just now. Was I like the only one who felt like I was on a candid camera prank show? Super-super embarrassing, right? And what was the hand gestures he made? Weirdo!"

"Be nice! Most girls find sensitive men to be hot. I know I do at least."

Duke's heart sank. As soon as Rose sees Jim behind the bar, it was all over. If only Jim would let him tend bar instead of schlepping ice around like a fool.

Jim never listened when Duke stressed that he was the best bartender money could buy after his six month stint as a beer and wine server at a movie theater.

Duke found a plastic container with cut limes in the room. He went around a corner and squeezed lime juice in his eyes. He managed not to yelp from the stinging pain in his eyes.

Duke walked to the center of the room and fell down on his knees, tears streaming down his face.

"Kimaya! Why? Why god? Why him? It should have been me instead." You could say that he definitely missed the moment and the others were suspicious of his random sobbing.

"He is so young!" Duke quoted.

Jim and Rose bartended together at one of the four bar tops. The other three bars were staffed with one or two each of Jim's crew who mostly were pretty new to the company and bartending in general, but had shown that they can handle it throughout previous events. Rose was the only one with zero experience, so Jim worked alongside her as support.

Everyone of Jim's crew were admirably composed, despite the tragedy that occurred earlier plus the brutal dry heat as well as the thousand-plus dehydrated partygoers returning to the bar every few minutes or.

Everyone except for Duke, of course.

Duke's only task was to bring as much ice as he could manage from the ice truck under the stands to the bar-island on the 30 yard line and to make sure the ice was broken up before he filled the various ice tubs the crew was using.

For some reason, It didn't occur to Duke to bring the ice behind the bar to fill the stations, rather he pushed and fought through the dense crowd to the front of the bar and majorly interrupted service. He asked Shane for a fruit knife to open the ice bag. Duke was clearly stressed out and in a flight or fight mindset.

"Just rip it open with your hands."

Duke managed to open the thin layer of plastic and placed, rather than dumped, a virtually solid gigantic chunk of ice in the ice bin and ran away before Jim could tell him to break it up next time.

Eventually Jim was able to instruct Duke to break up the ice each time

Duke asked Jim if he had a hammer.

Jim explained that no hammer was needed and to simply toss the ice on the ground twice to break it up.

Duke returned forty minutes later wearing thick gardening gloves and holding a hammer. He angrily smashed up the ice on the customer side again, while swearing inappropriately at the ice.

Jim had had enough. He told Duke to switch jobs with him and tend bar.

"I thought you'd never ask. Oh my, it's so hot. Do you think they would care if I took my shirt off?" He was asking Jim but his eyes and a wry smile were directed piercingly at Rose who was too busy to notice.

A customer ordered a vodka soda from Rose. Rose was pretty sharp and the hour that Jim was able to instruct her during was well absorbed by her spongelike mind.

"I got it, Rose. I know you're still learning. Allow me." Duke bellowed, half to the crowd and half to Rose.

Duke addressed the customer.

"I want to first say, great choice ordering a vodka soda! You will be happy to know that we carry Tito's brand vodka which not only is very smooth, but made entirely out of organic potatoes and is 100% gluten free."

"Actually, the gluten-free vodka we carry is Smirnoff." Rose interrupted

"That's what I said! Smirnoff brand potato vodka. The gluten-free choice for those watching their figures."

Duke said this while turning his complete attention to the annoyed customer.

"Not that you need to watch your figure ma'am. You're in good shape for your age. Maybe you could lose a few pounds but in that case the only answer is a high protein diet and monster workout "seshes" daily."

"Vodka soda, please." The customer repeated.

"Coming right up! Now, do you prefer cola soda or something more akin to sprite? I think I have Diet Coke around here somewhere and I want to say that we have diet sprite. I'm like, 92% sure that I saw maybe two or three cans somewhere."

Rose interjected by sliding the annoyed customer a vodka and club soda with a lime garnish. "Thanks!"

Duke laughed and told Rose that she'll be back for the correct cocktail as soon as she figures out that it was made with club soda.

"Who would ever want plain old soda water in their drink? It's alright Rose. I think that that's super-super cute, actually. Adorable. Geez, I wish I could take my shirt off."

Needless to say, the whole event was botched and Jim felt pretty crushed that all his hard work had been to no avail and even though the event coordinator would have complained no matter how they performed, Jim was painfully aware of the many shortcomings that were on his end of the bargain ultimately.

Finally, they called last call and broke down the bar and began loading "gator" carts with the remaining liquor and equipment:

During the last golf cart load of their gear was ready to be driven to the cargo van for Jim and his crew to unload, the vengeful client had her crew round up all the garbage bags on the ballpark and dump them onto the gator that had the rest of their gear on it.

The client started commanding Jim's crew to help take down stations and decorations that had nothing to do with the bar.

"You! Empty this bucket in a drain somewhere."

"You got it!" Duke replied.

Jim inserted himself into the interaction that Duke was having with the client.

"Duke, just meet me at the van to load up. Don't listen to her. None of this was in the contract."

"Ten-Four, good buddy!"

"What did I say about the buckets? Get to it!" The client demanded.

"Absolutely." Duke responded.

"Duke! Come on man. See you at the van."

Jim followed the gator to the van and the rest of the crew, excluding Duke, loaded the van up. Jim returned to the field and found Duke doing everything the client told him to do enthusiastically.

"We're leaving. "

Duke wished the client well and followed Jim to the van.

Duke opened the passenger door to the van and produced a bar towel and a small bottle of sanitizer. He wiped the seat down thoroughly and began organizing his bags in a tidy manner within the van. Jim accelerated with the doors still open.

On the way home, Duke was feeling defeated. Sure, he had done a great job bartending, but what was the use if Rose still liked Shane more than Duke, he pondered.

Silently Duke said to himself: "I would sell my soul to be more like Jim."
Suddenly, Duke had the strongest and most random craving of his life.

He wanted...no. He needed apple sauce, specifically Mott's-brand apple sauce

Chapter Sixty-Five

Jim was usually a good and attentive driver, but he was worried about making it home because towards the end of the event, he was so sun burnt, hungry and dehydrated that for the first time in his life he felt like he would faint at any moment and was experiencing actual tunnel vision and not just metaphorically like he assumed that phrase meant.

It was almost 1am and Jim hadn't eaten a thing throughout the day. He managed to eat half an orange during the shift, but the heatstroke made him sick, and he painfully threw up the only contents of his stomach – half an orange and some foamy green bile. He threw up several times after, but it was more like a dry heave, because, though he was constantly chugging water, he would sweat it all out before it would hydrate his body.

Jim considered having Duke drive them back, but thought that may be more dangerous than driving in his condition.

"Can we stop at the grocery store? I need applesauce."

The question annoyed Jim. Nobody needs applesauce. What a stupid thing to say, he thought.

Jim finally had somewhat of an appetite and agreed to stop at Ralph's to snag a quick meal. It was his only option at that hour anyway.

The two entered the store and Duke went straight for the applesauce aisle while Jim shopped for food to last the next few days.

Jim never typically used a shopping cart. but he was using a cart this time as a walker. His dehydrated muscles burned, and his knees kept giving out on him.

As much as Jim wanted to just grab something easy and leave quickly, he had the foresight to know that he would be bedridden for the next couple days due to his weakened condition, and therefore stocked up on canned soup and Pedialyte.

Meanwhile, Duke was perplexed by a single container of applesauce that stood out from the rest to him.

The container was missing a "t" in "Mott's" and though it was a normal 24-ounce plastic container.

"MOTS" – all capital letters, it read.

When he lifted it off of the shelf, it easily weighed as much as a gallon of milk.

Duke figured that the container only felt heavier than usual because he was weakened from his shift but dismissed this theory after lifting some of the other containers on the shelf. They felt like the normal weight and the brand name included both "t's."

Duke decided that he would leave the strange, misspelled container and purchase one of the regular ones on the shelf but suddenly found that he was at the checkout, purchasing the unusual applesauce container.

Jim wasn't surprised that though he had done a substantial amount of shopping, somehow Duke took twice as long as he did to buy only one item.

Jim was well aware that finding a parking spot in East Hollywood for the fifteen-foot Uhaul he had rented for the event, would be a major challenge.

Jim pulled up to their building and told Duke that he doesn't need to go with him to find a most likely nonexistent parking spot.

"Keep driving. I'm coming with you. We're in this together roomie."

Jim's heart sank and the two of them roamed the neighborhood until he parked in a red zone; hoping that he would only get a parking ticket and was banking on the hope that no parking enforcement would be zealous enough to tow a 15-foot vehicle. Just in case though, he set an alarm for 5am so that he could hopefully find a proper spot after people started to leave for work.

Duke fumbled his keys and they fell unto the ground in front of the main door to their apartment building.

"Oops! You know what that means?" Duke said

"Ten pushups!" He answered himself.

Before picking the keys up, he did ten of the wimpiest push-ups Jim had ever seen. The weight of the many grocery bags Shane was carrying made his arms burn and his tunnel vision darker. There's no way that Jim would have been able to sense that he and Duke were being watched and that there was a navy blue Dodge Shadow with dark windows parked directly across the street.

Jim wearily pressed the button on the elevator for the 3rd floor with his foot and accidentally hit the buttons for the basement level as well as the 2nd floor meaning he would now have to wait for the elevator to go to the two unintended floors.

As the doors shut Duke said:

"Hold the elevator!"

Jim didn't move a muscle.

Just before the doors shut, Duke stuck an arm between them.

"Wait up. I have to check the mail!"

He placed his double-paper bag containing the applesauce in the elevator and ran over to the mailbox in the hall.

"Oh my god. Screw the mail man! I'm dying over here."

"I'm waiting on my disability check! Shoot! My mailbox key must be upstairs. Do you have your key on you?"

“You know what? Mines upstairs too.”

“Nice! Do you mind grabbing it and coming back down?”

“Sure Duke. I’ll get right on that.”

The doors shut and Jim considered screaming the duration of the ride. He was too tired to and was also mindful of his neighbors, otherwise might have lost it.

Jim quickly put away all his groceries and hobbled up the stairs with sushi and several bottles of electrolyte solutions.

The moment he sat down, his phone dinged.

“Did you find your key? Should I come up and get mine instead. LMK?” The text read.

Duke hadn’t received any mail.

This made him angry, and he stomped from the elevator to the apartment door, slamming it and then swearing loudly in the kitchen.

Duke decided to take the applesauce up to his room to eat. He almost never ate in his room for the fact that eating in the apartments common areas meant a higher chance of seeing a roommate and talking to them. Unsurprisingly, Jim never would eat in the common areas because of that.

At first glance. The container appeared to be completely empty.

“Horses ass!” Duke shouted.

“Well... I suppose that I’ve been called worse things before.”

Said a male voice in Dukes head.

The room started to smell in a way that Duke couldn’t quite put his finger on. He knew he smelt the odor before at some point in his life, but for the life of him he couldn’t place what it was. All he could say for sure, is that that smell was an attached to some old memory from childhood.

Duke stood over the open container of applesauce and suddenly he remembered what the smell was.

Silkworms...

“Aw! Gross!” Duke yelped as he impulsively leapt backwards.

He gained the nerve to peer inside after a moment of collecting himself.

He was half amazed and half disturbed by the spectacle within.

A few dozen silkworms stood erect at the base, reminding Duke of tiny meerkats.

Duke didn’t remember the silkworms he had cultivated for a science fair demonstration having eyes.

Beady black eyes like that of a rabbit with the same placement were on the heads of the worms. An eye on each separate side of the face.

“Definitely not a Horses ass but, sure, we’re pretty gross. We can live with that.”

A jaw dropped Duke felt his heart plummet when he realized and accepted that the voice he had been hearing was coming from the colony of worms...only he didn’t hear them with his ears, the voice was within his mind only.

Telepathic communication is just one of many anomalous powers the worms possessed. Duke would learn of the entity’s other abilities quite soon.

“Who...what are you?” Duke thought.

“Can’t you read? Our name is MOTS; MOTS the genie.” An unmistakable voice within Dukes mind replied.

It sounded like Howard Stern.

“What do you want with me?” Duke thought.

“Haven’t you ever seen a movie or read a book about genies? Your species got most of the details right except of course, we’re not a blueish green middle eastern, mermaid looking thing with a dark goatee and big gold earrings. I don’t know where that all came from. People always try to anthropomorphize things they don’t understand like angels and the devil and god. The Dali Llama is actually a Llama. Etc. All these things look way different than what you all are thinking.”

“So, God and all that is real?”

“Nothing gets past you Duke. Or I mean “The Duke” that’s what you call yourself right?”

“No. That’s my nickname.”

“Come on. No, it’s not. Nobody calls you that but yourself. Anyway. You get to make a wish, just like in the fables.”

Shane didn’t need time to think about what he would wish for.

“I want to be taller and stronger than Jim.”

“You got it! Just make sure the last thing you think of before you fall asleep is about your wish and we will do the rest.”

Duke asked a million questions internally until the voice interrupted him with: “Enough! We’re a busy pile of worms. We don’t have time for this.”

Duke said good night to Mots.

“Night. Good luck with your stupid-ass wish...We mean, um. Actually, that’s pretty much what we meant. Go to bed and relax. We promise it will be everything you hoped for and totally isn’t going to suck...”

“Sweet!” Thought Duke as he began to place the lid of the container back onto it.

“Dude!” Said Mots.

"I know, I know. Leave the lid off. I was just, you know...maybe you wanted some privacy kind of thing."

"Holy Christ you are dense!"

"What's a 'Christ'? Duke thought.

As instructed, Duke laid in bed forming a mantra for his wish.

"Bigger, Taller, Stronger than Jim. Bigger, Taller, Stronger than Jim. Bigger, Taller, Stronger than..."

Chapter Sixty-Six

Duke awoke in the late afternoon. His body ached and cramped. He had a dozen or so Charlie horses in his muscles that were tighter than they had ever felt before.

He tossed his comforter off his body and gasped at the sight of himself.

He was taller and stronger than before, but in all the wrong ways. His legs were as they were the night before, but his torso was another foot and three quarters longer. From his hips to his chest was thinner than his legs and there was barely any muscle left in his midsection.

From his pectoral muscles to his chin had five or maybe ten times the muscle mass than before. Even his neck had a massive amount of muscle now to the point where turning his head was practically impossible.

He tried to rise but his atrophied midsection simply could not lift the weight of his hulking upper body.
He flopped to the hardwood floor.

More Charlie horses twisted throughout his body.

He crawled across the floor to his desk where the applesauce container was. He pulled at the desk until the container fell in front of him. Applesauce exploded everywhere but especially in his face.

Though the room was filled with a pungent silkworm smell, MOTS were nowhere to be found and the container now read "Mott's – the correct spelling of the brand.

What's more is that Duke had absolutely no recollection of his interaction with MOTS the previous night.

His shrieking and the magnificent boom of his plummet to the ground had alerted Jim who was baking a pizza downstairs.

"Hey Duke. You okay? Can I come in?" Jim's muffled voice sounded worried through the door.

“No! Don’t come in I don’t.... Agh!”

It was as if the various Charlie Horses throughout his twisted body had networked into one contortion of blinding pain. He couldn’t stop screaming.

Jim flung the door open and gasped.

The doctors were baffled and intrigued by Dukes unfortunate condition. This was certainly not a covered topic in med school.

Weeks passed painfully for Duke, and he was tired and humiliated from becoming a spectacle in the medical world and was at his wits end with doctor after doctor visiting him and asking the same questions to no avail.

He tried to remember what had happened but the memory of his encounter with the anomalous worms was reduced to the remnants of an intense dream that quickly disappears upon waking.

All he remembered was that smell but again, couldn’t place what it could belonged to.

Duke thought he would never get out of the hospital. He also never thought that he would be bound to a wheelchair either.

It had been over a month bedridden at Kaiser.

Jim pushed Duke’s wheelchair into the lobby of their apartment building. He checked the mail for Duke and there were a few more letters to add to the stack that had collected during Duke’s time as an inpatient.

Duke went through the mail methodically, appreciating the mundane task more than ever before.

Three-quarters of the way through the stack, Duke noticed a thick envelope from the disability office.

The letter stated that Duke’s disability checks would stop coming and that he now owed the social security office thousands of dollars for faking a disability.

Several photos were xeroxed onto sheets of paper within the envelope. They were pictures of him doing pushups at his front door as well as pictures of him unloading the van at the Rose Bowl and finally, him loading the van at the office in Culver City.

The letter also stated that there is a 3 year prohibitory period before he would be able to apply for any other government assistance including food stamps, health care, etc.

Jim tried to help Duke by giving him hours at the office helping with preparations for events but Duke was unable to perform any of the tasks Jim gave to him.

As much as Duke had irritated Jim, Jim felt awful about his roommates Bizarre twist of fate and he had tears in his eyes when he broke the news to Duke that he was renting his room out on the first.

It seemed like in a blink of an eye, Duke was now living in a dormitory-style halfway house for the disabled.

He hadn’t noticed how much he had changed as a person during this horrific portion of his life, but he was no longer boastful and cocky at all. He had no energy or will to respond to the needs of his ego, and instead responded to the immediate needs of his body and mind.

Duke had also developed a broader understanding of himself and a keen awareness of his actions.

Where had things gone wrong? He thought.

His mind drifted to his childhood and for the first time in a decade or so, he allowed himself to think about his parents.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Duke's father was a policeman who was greatly respected in the community. His mother was a painter who never really made a substantial income.

Duke's father was a tall and barrel-chested man, while his mother was very short and frail looking.

Duke's father lamented and resented the fact that his only son had turned out to be skinny, short and lame. He blamed Duke's mother's weak genes and sometimes if his father had enough to drink, he would make her pay for it physically. Other time's he took it out on Duke.

Duke was almost relieved when his mother told him that his father had been shot and killed while patrolling the beat.

The life insurance policy paid out handsomely and if Dukes mother hadn't had become a junkie, they would have been set for life.

Duke's mother got into a bad car wreck that was a drunken suicide attempt shortly after the passing of His mother. She was hospitalized for a few weeks and became addicted to painkillers.

Duke's mother made a full recovery but despite this, she worked the system to receive disability benefits indefinitely.

The moment Duke turned 18 and his portion of his father's insurance payout was deposited into his bank account, Duke kissed his apathetic mother goodbye and headed to Hollywood seeking the approval that he never had from his parents, from the whole world now instead.

He blasted through his inheritance and had no concept of value or what earning money really felt like and how difficult it is and how fortunate he was to have had a decent amount of it.

As he lay in bed at the shelter, tears rolled down either cheekbone and his heart welled up in his throat. He thought of how his mother simply faded away from this world, like her life force was set to a dimmer switch, and it broke his heart. He didn't even know if she was alive or dead anymore.

For a while, Duke had given up.

He was going to die in that roach hotel.

He hadn't left his bed since he got there three days before. He refused to eat or even drink water. He didn't have to get up to go to the bathroom because of the various tubes attached to him that took care of those needs.

The only pleasure he had was picking out a new book or short story to read each day. He hadn't been much of a reader before but in his situation, it was the only release that kept him sane.

Duke had always thought that he was someone with no special talents though he had never attempted to create anything before.

He had a dream one evening and woke up and hand wrote a story that had come to him called

"The Little Seed."

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Betty June loved all her flowers with all her heart and that love did not stop at the seeds. She knew that each one of the seeds had a special gift stored inside and she was overjoyed to see the gifts they gave each time one would grow.

In Betty's flower shop, it was considered cruel to keep seeds within pouches to sell to the customers. Instead, they were contained within clear jars, so they may gaze in wonder about the flower shop at all the plants that used to be little seeds just like they were.

Jeb was especially eager to grow as soon as possible. As far back as he could remember, he had always desired to become a rose. He was not like most other seeds in the jar who had not figured out what they wanted to become yet. Jeb wondered how the other seeds could have any doubt about what they should become in adulthood. Roses were beautiful and cherished as gifts of affection from lover to lover. They also had thorns which could prick those who weren't delicate enough and do not appreciate their beauty. The goal for Jeb was to be chosen as a flower that will be gifted to someone to show affection. Jeb considered that life would be easy for him, seeing as he already had the answers to his future, or at least an idea of what he will become.

One day a man came to Debbie's shop and purchased a handful of seeds from Jeb's jar. Jeb was one of the lucky ones to get picked. He squealed with joy the entire ride to his new home where he would turn into a beautiful Rose.

Jeb was given his own pot with rich soil. The other seeds from Jeb's jar were in the garden too; each having their own pot to grow in.

Jeb joined the conversation his neighbors were having around him and soon found himself bragging about how quickly he would turn into the most wonderful shade of red they had ever seen.

One neighbor expressed that he could not understand why Jeb wanted to be a rose so bad.

Another seed told Jeb that he doubted that anyone of them would turn into a rose at all, nor did they want to. They went on to say that it would be embarrassing having to deal with all the attention that roses generate.

A few weeks passed and one morning Jeb noticed that nearly all the other pots in the garden had budded. Little green leaves could be seen on the tops of all the pots surrounding Jeb. This worried him deeply. Why had he not started to grow yet? He was exhausted from trying so hard to grow each day. He would stay up at night later than the others and stare at the moon, hoping it would help him grow.

A few months passed and now it was clear to Jeb that the other seeds were turning into blackberry bushes. Every one of them had begun to produce their first berries.

Jeb was not a berry bush. He knew that. How could he possibly become something that did not even have a flower? Sure, they had thorns like roses, and that was sort-of appealing to Jeb, but

it was simply not what he wanted to be all in all.

A year passed and Jeb had not grown into anything.

He hadn't given up on becoming a rose and knew he never would. This thought scared him. If all he wanted to become was something that he could not be, then would he turn out to be nothing at all? He would even settle for becoming a blackberry bush. They were not adored

such as roses and no lover would ever give one as a gift, but they sort of looked like Roses and at this point it was about survival for Jeb.

Jeb pictured all the other flowers besides Rose's that he used to see at the flower shop. He tried with all his will to grow into a morning glory for a few days and then after that decided that he was to flower into a daffodil; that phase lasted for a few weeks. He even tried to talk to the bushes about his new identities as various flowers and pretended to have as much enthusiasm about being a lilac as he had shared about becoming a rose. The bushes ignored the tiny sound coming from their former peer and around that time, most of the bushes had resolved to flat out ignore Jeb when he spoke.

The man who's garden they lived in came out one day and picked the season's wealth of berries from the bushes around Jeb and the bushes were all very pleased that their fruits were being so thoroughly enjoyed.

Finally, the man came out to the garden again one day and looked down into Jeb's pot. He grabbed Jeb and placed him in a tiny jar and put the jar in his car. Jeb was nervous at first but soon ecstatic to be in Betty June's flower shop once again.

The man complained to Betty that this seed had not grown into a bush. Debbie exchanged Jeb for another seed. Jeb could not return to the jar with the other seeds, he knew that. He was too old and didn't grow. He was certain that he was to be thrown into the trash.

He gazed at the Roses that he grew up admiring within the flower shop and he wept.

Betty loved her seeds too much to just throw Jeb in the trash. She tried a few different mixtures of soil and exposed Jeb to different amounts of lights each day. Jeb sat in his new pot and thought to himself that Debbie was sure to give up trying to make him grow, but sure enough, suddenly Jeb began to sprout little green leaves.

Within a month, Jeb was a full-grown Marigold.

Betty said to herself that he was the most beautiful Marigold she had ever grown.

A young man came into the shop shortly after Jeb had grown and asked for the most beautiful flower he could buy for his wife. Betty didn't need any time to decide which one to send the man home with. The man agreed with Betty that Jeb was certainly the most beautiful flower he had ever seen.

Chapter-Sixty-Nine

Duke contemplated on the correlation between hardship and creativity. Most of the world's greatest artists were and are tortured souls. This gave him a glimmer of hope that all his suffering would lead to more creativity and at least there was some direct reward for all the hell.

Duke mustered up enough motivation to force himself to do a single sit up. It was terribly painful. His back audibly cracked and there were knife-like pains in his shoulders and neck.

The next day, Duke did another sit up and found that he could actually do two of them this time.

This process went on until duke was doing a hundred a day.

Duke's midsection began to fill out and he was confident that it would now support his heavy upper body.

Like Neil Armstrong landing on the moon, Duke placed one foot on the floor and then the other and stood on his own two feet

Dukes sleeping roommate woke to a loud crackle, like the sound of a stiff piece of wood split by an axe, followed by a shriek of vocalized intense pain.

Duke's lower spinal cord was sticking out of his back and he was face first on the floor, now unconscious.

Chapter Seventy

Now that Duke was paralyzed from the waist down, he would need special care for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, he had no money or insurance so there was still a dreadful fear of what will happen to him next. He had no certainties of the future and was free-falling into circumstances that he could not predict.

Despite having no insurance, he was taken in at the ER once more.

Just like his mother, he was soon addicted to the morphine drip and was now a crippled junkie. This was an ultimate defeat. He hated drugs and alcohol and swore them all off because of what his mother went through and now there he was, in the same situation, though his was somehow exponentially worse.

He managed to eke out another creative piece, despite his condition. It was a poem.

No more lies
Just this last one
How many more times
Can you come undone?

No more lies
I'm right where I should be
Just tell them the truth
Don't you want to be free?

No more lies
But for old times' sake
I'll tell you one more
And say that I'm okay

Stealing a glance
Skating on through
Whenever you look back
You only see you

It's hard to measure
The things we all do
But it ain't a contest
I just hope that I pull through

No more lies
There's more than seven sins
I been in and out
Of each one of them

Broke but not broken
Crooked at the hip
I've never walked a straight line
Or even dreamt of it

In the very thick of it all
And piano wire thin
He who lies is he who tries
And amongst the best of them

So I set my things down
And take a spam risk call
I bend an ear again
And I tell them it all

Fifty-one-fiftied
Fifty-one times
I'm becoming my mother
People tell me left and right

It feels good to say the truth
That I should have said in my youth
I've Settled scores
Got a big red door
Behind a picket fence

So no more lies here henceforth
You can put it all to rest
The Merchandise
Ain't worth the price
Of a porous Blow up bed

No more lies
I know it's all been all but said
The difference is
about this time
something I forget

Broke a champagne bottle
On the side of a boat
GPS says I'm here
But I still feel so remote.

From the bottom of the deck
I called a spade a club
Then I went all in
And built the jackpot up

I was having your arm
But wound up with your fist
Relying on a charm
That's growing like a cyst

No more lies
Stopped spinning yarn
There's a catch to each misstep
And People are catching on

Duke asked himself what it is about a poem that makes it any good. He realized that the answer to this question can be distilled down to a single adjective. "Honest" - good poetry, is honest.

For the first time, Duke didn't need anyone to validate his worth. He was contented with being the only one who ever reads his writings, it was reward enough that he was even able to write at all, both in the sense of having something to say, as well as having the use of his arms to physically put the words onto paper.

The food at the hospital was God awful but he was thankful for the food anyway as he could not feed himself or provide himself with his own nourishments. For some reason though, he was craving some applesauce and asked for it every day.

Finally, a nurse cheerfully brought in a tray of food and on that tray there was a single-serve applesauce. It was his favorite brand, "Motts" though he noticed that it was spelled with only one "t" and all the letters were capitalized.

The nurse left the room and Duke skipped the meal and went straight for the long awaited applesauce.
The container was surprisingly heavy.

“That smell again?” Duke thought.

Then he remembered it was the smell of silkworms. He also remembered his last interaction with the genie, MOTS.

Chapter Seventy-One

“Hey kiddo. Let’s make this quick, as we said before, we’re a busy-ass pile of worms.”

Duke tried to respond verbally but talking hurt just like anything else he was still able to do.

“Look Duke. I’m sorry I went so hard on you but you were the biggest douche ever before and now, I’d crack a few beers with you, you know... if you weren’t hooked up to several machines in a hospital and dying. Oh yeah, by the way, you’re dying.”

Suddenly Duke was back in his room at the apartment he shared with Jim. He was exactly one year in the past. His body was back to normal and he was not addicted to opiates any longer.

“Hey Duke!” The worms said pleasantly within his head.

“Just call me Dillan. That’s my real name. Duke is dead.”. Duke responded internally.

“Oh, thank God! That was so embarrassing for everyone.”

“God”? Duke wondered.

“Time to hit or stay. You can either make another wish or you can choose not to.

“I wish for humility.”

There was a heavy pause.

“Love it. Really, I do, only one thing...why wish for something that you already have. Why not just choose to not make another wish and simply retain the hardships that have made you so much better?

“Because I wish for humility but to forget the trauma that afforded being humble to me.”

MOTS was taken aback and paused for a moment and then said:

“Wisdom is trying to not be foolish, rather than trying to be clever. Don’t forget the moral of the story.”

“Moral of the story...MOTS!” Dillan exclaimed.

“Look at you and that big brain! You are the first person ever to get that. You are actually listening now instead of waiting for your chance to speak.”

“My mind is made. Please grant me my wish.”

Jim and Dillan were training a new employee how to bartend.

The new hire received an order for a vodka soda and the trainee asked the customer if they wanted sprite or coke for their cocktail.

Dillan, who now called himself Duke once again said in front of the customers:

“Oh my! How do you not know what’s in a vodka soda?”

Jim jumped in and nicely explained how to make the drink and the employee thanked Jim and called him boss.

“She never called me boss before”. Duke thought.

“I would sell my soul to be more like Jim.”

He wanted...no, he needed apple sauce...specifically Mott's-brand apple sauce.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Jim had taken to sitting under trees in wooded areas and meditating.

Even though he was nearly in an absolute trance and his eyes were closed; The brightest light Jim had ever witnessed; brighter than the light that spewed from him when he was put into “the hole” by Shooshi and Takumat suddenly appeared, coupled with a deafening crash. It was so blinding that he saw it through his eyelids.

Just as the blast was cascading to Jim’s face, existence was paused.

Jim was disappointed, he smiled at the thought of being obliterated by a nuclear misle but his suffering was not quite over.

An angel of heaven came to Jim. He introduced himself as the Archangel Micheal.

“You’re almost done, Jim. You saw the old world destroyed and have lived millenniums since to see this one destroyed as well.”

“So let me die with it! Please Micheal, I am begging you.”

“Follow me, Jim.”

Jim knew better than to argue with an angel of God, so he took a brave step forward and suddenly he was on what felt to be an escalator, though he was unable to see it.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Perla had always wondered how her girlfriend; Ruth had gotten into such a niche market for her occupation.

Ruth ecstatically told Perla about the new location for filming, while struggling with the cork on the first bottle of champagne she had ever purchased in her thirty-one years of age. The news hit Perla like a champagne cork to the face, which also hit her just then.

“Oh my god. My eye! I can’t see! I can’t see!”

A pale Ruth dropped the bottle to shatter on the granite kitchen floor and her jaw dropped in unison with it.

“Babe, oh no, no, no!” Ruth cried.

Ruth rushed over and cradled her wounded lover while simultaneously digging her phone out of her pocket to call the ambulance.

“Gotcha, hooker!” Perla teased and revealed that both eyes were perfectly fine.

“You’re such a bitch, I really thought I’d hurt you! Fucking comedians these days think nothing is off limits. My fault for dating one, I suppose.”

With that Ruth tackled Perla onto the love seat and tickled her until Ruth legitimately considered that she might have to redial the ambulance because Perla may be having either a seizure, an aneurysm or both.

“Okay, OKAY! We’re even. I’m sorry, but that cork hitting me square between my eyes really hurt for a minute...or a second. I don’t even know if it actually hurt, but it scared me.”

“Valid. Did, you even hear me though? We’re going to the Hawaiian Islands until the end of February, babe! Aren’t you excited, or did I give you PTSD just now?” Tess said as she retrieved the broom and dustpan from the closet.

“You mean more PTSD than usual?” Perla snickered.

“Hey, that’s not funny. PTSD is actually some serious stuff and as a queer woman, you should know that it’s a real and tragic thing.”

“Okay, fair enough, but your perilous adventures on the floors of the oceans and seas across the globe have a level of trauma to them...at least for me. I know that you’re not really afraid of dying, or sharks or, fucking...whales the size of the statue of liberty, or the goddamn Kraken, which probably exi-“

“Okay, I get your point already! You’re afraid I might get hurt. That’s so sweet, babe” Ruth interrupted.

They kissed.

“So which Island are we staying on?’ Perla asked.

“Drum roll please!” Ruth grabbed a pair of chopsticks from the previous night’s takeout order and poorly imitated a drum roll on the marble island between them.

“Niihua!” Ruth exclaimed.

“Uhh. Let me google tha- how come I’ve never heard of...What was it, Nee-Wa...Who?”

“Of course. You google everything. I can’t state a fact, person, place, or thing, without you googling what it is if you don’t already know, and even when you do know, you sometimes still google it. Your curiosity is going to get you into trouble one of these days, missy.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time!”

“That’s not what I meant. But that does feel good. Okay, I retract my last statement, I love your curiosity don’t stop, don’t ever stop...don’t...don-...stop. Ooooh!”

Chapter Seventy-Three

“Look, babe. I’m glad we aren’t going to either of the earths poles again this time, but really? “The Forbidden Island?” Population 200? Is this like, the “Hills have eyes” of Hawaii?”

Ruth laughed at Perla’s joke, but was sincerely worried that Perla would absolutely hate the visit and the meager hut they were to be housed in. There wasn’t even cellphone reception or at best it was very weak, she was told.

The small puddle jumper landed abruptly on an airstrip that was partially overgrown with dense jungle plants.

Ruth pictured Jill getting bored after a week and island hopping her way out of their relationship. She tried to make the stay sound to be as pleasant to her girlfriend as possible, but Perla knew it was bullshit. Still, Perla stood by her words that no matter how remote or inhospitable the location for the next shoot would be, she would stand by her woman regardless of the unideal environments and lack of creature comforts.

Perla looked at the Jeep Wrangler that their native islander guide had arrived with, figuring that it would be the last modern piece of equipment she would see besides a few boats, her girlfriend’s scuba suits, and a shitty Rav4 for the next few months.

As their chaperone cascaded towards the dense Jungle, Perla and Ruth were both very surprised to see hundreds of official looking people and what’s more is that they passed half a dozen full-on space rockets, poised to the sky that looked identical to the ones NASA builds to send astronauts into outer-space. The word “Microfiber” ran the length of each rocket.

“Since when does Microfiber build space ships?” Perla asked.

“It is strange, especially on such a remote island. I always said that that company made everything but now I think that’s actually literally the case.” Said Ruth.

Chapter Seventy-Four

The hut looked primitive from the outside though inside, it was surprisingly homely. Both girls sighed in relief for different reasons entirely.

Jill tried not to think of how many followers she would lose on her Youtube channel while being unable to stream whatever wild antic or punchline floated through her head for such a long duration of time.
Two whole weeks.

When the couple had done a shoot in Antarctica for a month the previous year, Jill lost hundreds of thousands of followers, and she had only just the month before recuperated her following.

While the sun was setting on their second day on the Island, a rinky-dink boat arrived on the dock near the hut. On the boat there was a small crew that worked on the T.V show that Tess hosted. It was an Animal Planet show about exploring parts of the ocean floor that had never been seen by human eyes, or at least not recorded on film. The show had a treasure hunting aspect to it for ratings sake and of course, and documented encounters with marine wildlife enough to be relevant to its respective channel.

“Are you sure you’re not going to go Jack Nicholson in “The Shining” on me, alone out here for a while? I would.” Tess joked, half kidding but with a level of concern for her girlfriend’s mental wellbeing.

“I’ll be fine, babe. I brought, um...A book about...Nazis I think and, um, A California lotto scratcher and this...paperclip. Oh, who am I kidding, I don’t know what to do without a phone!”

Tess laughed nervously, kissed Jill on the cheek quickly and followed the shouts from the crew at the dock who were trying to hurry their host up before they missed their window to film that evening.

Tess returned after midnight the following several nights and even later than that the nights after.

Jill had taken to writing jokes and pondering sketches for outrageous tiktok and Youtube content until she was beginning to write worse and worse material. Her comedy was based on what she drew from interacting with society and could not draw inspiration from the sound of seagulls or the constant noise of the waves collapsing against the shore.

There were still several days of filming left before Tess was able to wrap on the episode and Jill was out of her mind with boredom.

One evening during the twilight hours, Jill was so desperate to entertain herself that she put on one of Tess’s scuba diving outfits and began to film herself with a GoPro she had fastened to her head. She walked up to the only mirror in the hut and began doing satirical impersonations of Tess hosting her television show. She perfectly emulated Tess’s southern drawl and amused herself with the uncanny impersonation of her girlfriend.

Next thing Jill knew she was walking quite comically down to the shoreline in labored steps as the flippers she wore on her feet were harder to walk in than Tess made it look. She looked at the ebony waters. They were calm and the waves were mild.

Jill decided that Tess would probably forgive her if she did a full-on spoof of her show and decided to walk into the water to explore.

She wasn't worried about sharks or the Kraken or whales as it had been explained to her previously that the bay was secured with a crescent moon sandbar that kept the larger marine life at bay.

The Ocean was still warm, and the wetsuit cocooned her from the water pleasantly. She clicked on her headlight, attached the O2 mask to her face, and submerged herself in the ocean.

She swam quite amateurishly to the floor of the ocean and began to explore as Tess may, while trying to add a comical flare to her dive for the camera, still mounted on her head. Periodically she would resurface to make a quip or a sarcastic comment about her discoveries. She felt very "on" though, it may have just been delirium caused by smartphone withdrawal.

Every time Jill would resurface, she would look back to the Island and make sure she wasn't too far from the warm light coming from the hut. She was a bit afraid of going too far from the shore on her quixotic journey, but she knew that to interact with a greater variety of aquatic life, she would have to go out a bit further.

Jill swam out as far as she could go without losing site of the light from the hut and hoped that on her final submergence before returning to the island, she would encounter something more than coral and crabs to film.

She was out of her comfort zone at this point, but she figured that worst case scenario she would go too far from shore and could rest on the shallow sandbar that was about one hundred yards from shore.

The ocean floor was much deeper at this distance from shore, but still her curiosity propelled her legs as she labored to reach it. Finally, she reached the bottom and even at this depth, only found smaller marine lifeforms. She explored with great curiosity for almost forty minutes submerged, when suddenly she saw something swimming in her peripheral vision.

It was a dolphin who may have been just as curious as she was.

It must have jumped the sandbar, into the bay, Jill concluded.

The dolphin swam right up to Jill and put it's face within inches of her mask. She laughed with Joy and touched the dolphins blow spout. The dolphin began to do playful barrel-rolls and Jill did the same. Repeatedly they spun around face to face and Jill laughed mutedly.

It was then that Jill felt the equipment attached to her back snag on something on the ocean floor. Bubbles began bursting out of one of the hoses from her O2 tank and the dolphin got spooked and swam away in an instant.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Jill remained as calm as she could compose herself to be, but a cold feeling hit the pit of her stomach and her adrenaline could not be quelled. She raced to the surface and emerged in a frenzy. She could barely see the light from the hut at this distance and the thickest rain drops she had ever seen pitter-pattered around her on a now disquieted ocean.

A huge wave submerged her again, and when she tried to breath under the restless waves using the compromised equipment, she inhaled a mouthful of salty ocean water instead and choked.

Jill fought her way to the surface once more and coughed up the water she had inhaled desperately and took a few quick breathes before she was beat down by a wave that was bigger still.

She was certain that she was done for, though she fought her way to the surface once again. She didn't understand why she seemed heavier for a moment, but then realized that the O2 tank strapped to her back was no longer full of oxygen and therefore, like a water-laden boat, was sinking. She made a snap decision to discard the tank quickly and braced for another brutal wave.

The rain had calmed down, however, and the waves were tolerable enough for her to keep her head above the water for a short while.

Jill tried to recollect her wits and she realized she was faced in the opposite direction of the shore, only she could no longer see the sandbar, just a bleak horizon.

She turned in the opposite direction and swam towards the dim light of the hut for nearly five minutes, doggy paddling and taking short, sharp breathes. The tears coming from her eyes were lost to the ocean and rain, which both became harsher once more.

This time when the next monstrous wave submerged her violently, she was tossed like a ragdoll to the floor of the ocean, though she was relieved to observe that she had made significant progress towards the shore, and that the ocean floor was noticeably shallower than where she swam with the dolphin.

Jill's survival instincts told her to fight her way to the surface again and the only thing she could think about was getting some precious air in her lungs. Even just one more breath, However, her right hand was pinned between a rock and a coral formation.

She was convinced that this meant death for her. She had lost hope. She lamented that she had merely doggy paddled for the five minutes she had above water, instead of swimming like a frog, or an Olympian. She also swore, that if she emerged once again, that she would take the deepest breaths her lungs could accommodate and savor every molecule of oxygen she may be blessed enough to ingest.

She imagined herself fighting to free her hand from beneath the rock that had pinned it, but she was tired and suffocating quickly and felt herself, for the first time in her life, completely give up all hope.

A current, or an undertow swept over her and twisted her like a fork spooling spaghetti, breaking her wrist, and cutting it deeply. It was the most pain she had ever felt apart from suffocating which she experienced simultaneously however, it did dislodge her from the trap and catapulted her to the surface.

Instead of panicking and breathing shallowly, she resolved to take slow deep breaths and to savor every breath like it was her last and to use the vitality it afforded her to fuel her body to swim as she had imagined herself swimming when she lamented over her lame attempt at doggy paddling.

Despite the excruciating pain that paddling like a frog caused her with a broken and maimed wrist, she swam at more than double the speed she had during her initial five-minute swim towards the coast.

The light on the island was getting brighter and what's more, she saw the light of a flashlight searching about the shore near the dock.

The relentless waves would only afford her five to ten seconds at a time to come up for air, which she did not waste each time she emerged.

She even paused before surfacing each time to attempt to surface in between waves and it worked quite well for her.

She wondered how much blood she had lost from her wrist as the light of the hut grew larger and larger when another wave unexpectedly dunked her once again.

She resurfaced with a superhuman effort but was facing towards the long last sandbar once more. This time, however, she saw several fins of sharks cutting across the ocean's surface. Her controlled breathing routine was compromised by her fear, and she began breathing like a person locked in an airtight room once more.

She sucked in a lung full of salt water and drowned.

Chapter Seventy-Six

Tess had been frantically searching for Jill not five minutes after she returned from the shoot that evening. It was pouring rain on a virtually uninhabited island and the Rav-4 they had been given for their stay was still parked near the hut.

Something was wrong.

She used her flashlight to search all over for Jill but to no avail.

After twenty minutes or so, she decided to hop in the car to go find help.

Upon turning the headlights on, a black lump was illuminated upon the shore.

She dashed out of the vehicle to Jill's lifeless body, sobbing and shrieking intemperately.

"Jill. Babe, no, no, no, no!"

She rolled Jill onto her back and performed CPR with no results. She began beating on her chest in between administering CPR to her love, screaming despite being out of breath.

Jill coughed and expelled an enormous amount of water and then coughed some more.

Tess rolled Jill onto her side and stroked Jill's hair with her trembling hands. Jill faintly breathed while her head was cradled into Tess's lap. Tess noticed the blood gushing from Jill's right hand and felt for a pulse, as her breathing was so faint that Tess could not determine if she was still alive.

"Babe, you can't leave. Don't go. Please baby girl. Say something. I'm here. HELP! Somebody help us!"

Jill rolled over on Tess's lap to lay in her back, so that her emerald eyes met Tess's. Tess wiped Jill's matted blonde hair from her face and kissed her forehead."

"Jill? Are you okay?"

Jill's eyes closed and her face looked like she was going toward the bright light at the end of the tunnel.

With a whisper, Jill responded:

"Gotcha, hooker."

Chapter Seventy-Seven

The two lay on the beach hand in hand; both feeling more drained than either of them could remember.

Something soft and wispy landed on Ruth's nose. It felt like snow that wasn't cold or made of water.

Ruth whipped her nose with the back of her hand and saw that there was what appeared to be ash on her hand.

Ruth looked at the sky and saw the blue sky as well as the sun were blocked out but an opaque grey and black layer.

Soon both her and Perla had ash all over their bodies and breathing was incredibly difficult.

“Look”! Perla exclaimed, pointing at the ocean.

The ocean water was at a rolling boil and fish were floating upside down in the water while thousands more splashed onto the shore and were partially cooked by the sea.

Without much deliberation the girls sprinted to the shack, dodging birds falling out of the bleak sky. They grabbed their covid masks and the keys to the Jeep and sped off towards the nearest rocket they had seen on their way in.

Upon arrival to the nearest launch pad, the couple witnessed dozens of men, women and children frantically making their way into the craft.

There were armed guards stationed around the perimeter of the launch pad.

Perla pleaded to the most important looking soldier desperately.

“Please Mr...Uh”. She scanned the soldier for a name tag and saw that his last name was embroidered into his fatigues.

“That’s Commander Uh to you”!

“I’m very sorry. Commander Gottfried. Please allow my partner and I to go where ever you all are headed. We’re so scared. What is going on? I think it’s Armageddon. I’m begging you”!

“Didn’t you see the sign posted around this clearing? Well, in case you didn’t it says that non-authorized personnel will be terminated upon trespassing. I will give you both ten seconds to turn around and walk away.”

The couple pleaded feverishly for the duration of the ten seconds and, true to his word, Gottfried discharged his firearm, smiled and hopped aboard the rocket.