

BICENTENNIAL
REVISED

LARRY LEMMONS

“The really important feature of The Fool is that its number should be 0.”

The Master Therion

O Rose Thou Art Sick

Ray tried to pinpoint the first time he realized he had more than one mind. He had infinite access to the immaterial, but sometimes it was tough gettin' out of bed. Navigatin' it. That's the problem. What's real? What looks real?

He woke up one day and spent the entire mornin' thinkin' in one mind, and then woke up gradually as he went about the day, understandin' he was both in a dream and in the world.

After awhile it blended together with the past, with the spirits, and then he wondered if it all was really one mind and he didn't know where his mind stopped and the human mind began, which is part of God's mind.

What is God's mind?

It's fuckin' everything.

It's nothin' but a Word.

Things should be explained. Everything laid out in a logical way by someone else.

Is the bomb real?

It's nothin'.

It doesn't matter if it's real. It matters what you do.

Too many possibilities.

Are you capable of navigatin' uncertainty?

Fuckin' ambiguity.

O rose thou art sick.

Commit.

I have more than one mind.

Life requires commitment. Life requires commitment. Life requires commitment.

This life.

We have instinct. We act.

There are always consequences.

Act!

Ray did act. He committed. At that moment a world was destroyed, just stopped existin'. No more nothin'. No more somethin'. But no one noticed. Not even Ray saw it comin'.

The Story Is Everything.

There is an outside. There is an inside.

Some emphasize the outside, some the inside.

Some believe there is no inside and some believe the outside is illusion.

Wherever you arbitrarily separate the outside and inside is how you define reality.

The Star of David. It could represent outside and inside proceeding into the other infinitely. Male and Female. God and Man. As above, so below. It appears to be two triangles imposed on each other, creating one star. It represents a reality difficult to fully explain with words. The meaning is not in the lines or the triangle. It is in the star.

It's not reality. It represents reality. It's a map. Alfred Korzybski asked us not to confuse the map with the territory, so I try to accommodate him. A lot of people believe language creates reality. Others believe words are created to describe what already exists. Inventing a word can create an illusion of reality. Take the word "reality" for example.

A story creates reality.

That's why it's important to know something about the storyteller.

The Profane Preacher

Friends, you are NOT sinners! You are perfect people in an imperfect world! You live your lives lookin' for joy... and yet I see, my friends, that few of us are happy.

My name is Cody Badminton. I have certain expectations about how things are supposed to be. But I look around me and I see us gettin' locked up inside our technology!

My friends, the information inside this thing is artificial. All of it created by human minds. There's nothin' of the natural world at all, except the human observation and contemplation of it. Where's God?

You want to know why this old asshole is talkin' about shit that don't exist! God? Give me a fuckin' break! I am not profound, young man. I am profane!

And if you think you got everything figured out... 'cause, really, you're afraid of what you'll find around the corner... if your idea of reality is a boxcar on a train with several boxcars on a track headin' someplace everybody's been, just take off down that street right now, amigo, 'cause I'm gonna rip up those tracks and toss those boxcars across this so-called University and slice up your brain like a generic slab of head cheese, bought in a corporate retail chain, and marketed to John and Jane Smith. And I won't be usin' a razor. I'll be usin' a dull knife so your ragged edges are exposed and sensitive and full of hurt. Yeah, see, you take your mind out of that smart phone and life ain't always pretty.

I know some of you use drugs. They got all that pharmaceutical shit and no end of doctor pushers wantin' to make you normal, whatever the fuck that means. Someone has decided what's normal and they're gonna give you pills to make your chemicals fall in line with everybody else's chemicals. And that's supposed to be reality.

But the most dangerous drug these days is the goddamn technology! Inside this little world you get endless messages temptin' you to buy somethin' in exchange for an escape from reality, so you can head over to your social media sites and pretend you got a real life. And you're led to believe this virtual world is superior to the one you're standin' in right now 'cause it caters to you. And you might be in a group of people, maybe on a bus, but you're lost in your latest gadget, your mind is far away in a better place and you feel better 'cause you love doin' it. So how different are you than the junkie just two seats down who got a fix before he boarded?

The technology is leadin' humans, like a Pied Piper, down a track where all their information has been provided for them by other humans, by scientists, who used to be called priests, and corporations, that used to be called churches. Humans are followin' the piper's tune to a place where they'll be made to feel happy, normal, and productive with pharmaceuticals. They're takin' them to paradise! Back to the Golden Age! Back to Eden! All their needs will be met! But freedom, folks, freedom means thinkin' for yourself, don't it?

You are what you know. And you don't know what you don't know.

I'm gonna take you by your hands and lead you down another road. Over to that strip mall to be exact. See that sign that says CODA? That's where we're headed. If you've got just a little bit of curiosity you'll come with me. Come on, that's right. Watch the traffic. I'm gonna tell you a story, a true story full of lies.

July 4th, 1976

Ray woke up to the smell of piss under a sprawlin' oak. It took a moment to remember he was in the city park in Gonzales. Gonzales, Texas, the site of the Battle of Gonzales, where the first shots were fired in 1836 in the Texas Revolution. A rock dug into his shoulder, a root poked into his lower back. Andy was snorin' next to him. Dew settled on the grass across the park and a light mist hung in the air. The sky displayed streaks of grey through the canopy of green leaves, a curtain of diffused light across the landscape, easy on the eyes and mind.

It was early and quiet, except for the neighborhood of birds conversin' above him. Small drops of rain teased his skin, a tickle on the ear, a peck on the cheek. He got up and stretched, noticin' the darker shades of grey gatherin' to the east.

“Get up, motherfucker,” he said, and nudged Andy.

“What the fuck?” He grunted.

“Happy Fourth of July.”

Ray associated the smell of cedar with south Texas. He took a deep breath, clearin' his nose of the urine stench. Andy stiffly pulled himself up, stretched and staggered to a cedar where he pissed a good three minutes. Ray took that as a cue and, like a dog, pissed where Andy pissed. That's what we call tradition, folks. Ray followed Andy up a short path back to Highway 183. The next town was Luling.

Ray never wore a watch but, miraculously, he always had friends who did. “What time is it, man?”

Andy grumbled. “Six thirty.”

Ray glanced back. “I think we found the most popular tree in Gonzales.”

Andy nodded. “Must've been a goddamn dog party.”

“Didn’t notice it last night.”

Andy’s impatience showed in his face. “Didn’t notice nothin’ last night.”

The previous night they’d caught a ride to town from the concert. They was drop-dead, dog-tired and Ray had told Andy he had to be back to work the next day or he’d be fired. It was a lie, but when the opportunity presented itself to catch a ride to Gonzales, Ray grabbed it, figurin’ to get an early jump on the day. Of course, Ray never expected he’d be hitchhikin’ in the first place. But the Austin thing happened. Now there was long miles to go in the course of a day all the way back to Mango.

There they was, post-dawn on a dreary Sunday mornin’ in a small town on the Fourth of July. No cars. It appeared they was the only monkeys movin’.

But not for long. Only a mile up the road luck showed up in the form of a rusted, brown Chevy pickup with white trim. Two hippies with identical shoulder-length brown hair, thick beards, white t-shirts. Looked like brothers. They pulled up and idled beside them.

Shotgun spoke first. “Y’all need a ride?”

Andy answered in his easy drawl. “We been down to the Willie Nelson Fourth of July concert! Except we’re goin’ home already!”

“Us too,” said Wheel Man. “Where y’all headed?”

“Austin!” Ray was thinkin’ they was pretty damned lucky to catch a ride so early in the mornin’. Maybe somethin’ or somebody was lookin’ out for them.

“Hop on,” said Shotgun, “That’s where we’re headed!”

Ray and Andy collapsed into the truck bed and the bearded boys hooted as they spun out in the gravel and squealed onto the road.

July 4th, 1776

Thomas Jefferson is led down a long hallway by a courtier who looks vaguely French. Matter of fact, the hall appears what he imagines Versailles to be. Although he's never been there he's certain he'll experience it someday. He never expected this spacious interior from the Philadelphia exterior.

Twenty-two portraits hang in the hall. Tom counts them. Men and women from the past. He recognizes Pythagorus, Plato, Aristotle, possibly Hypatia. The hallway continues long past rational. The courtier's shoes click with his footsteps. Click, click, click, click. Tom's wearin' boots. He tries not to match the pace of the courtier, preferin' to avoid conformity.

Symbols appear before him, many of them he recognizes as Pythagorean, others are clearly a Freemason's attempt to grab his attention. He wonders how they appear solid, even though they're obviously suspended in his imagination.

The clickin' courtier leads Tom into a room where three men and a woman, also apparently fashionably French, are formally awaitin' his company. One of the men extends his arms and majestically recites.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

"I must say, I'm impressed by your architecture," Tom observes, "Rather deceptive from the outside. Not quite certain how you've done it."

One of the four is not so affable. "You should be hanged."

"Are you an executioner, sir?"

“My dear, Thomas,” the first man again. He puts his hand on Tom’s shoulder. “We are proud of all of you, well, most of us are. It shan’t be easy, my friend, but we sense fortitude in you. Is there something special you desire?”

Tom shrugs. “Freedom.”

Yes, a new order,” the third man interjects.

The second man simmers. “The Masters would not allow this! He’s a peasant!”

The third man is distressed. “They’ve allowed it or he would not be here!”

One intercedes. “Deux, Trois, s’il vous plait. We have already settled this.

“Yes,” the woman agrees. “The Colonies are the future. It will happen there.”

Two is exasperated. “The English have proven their superiority!”

Three is angry now. “The Masters have shown the way! America means freedom!

America means faith! And only faith will open the door! ”

Tom bows. “My dear sirs and madam, I admit our manners are not sophisticated, but the fires of liberty burn deeply in our breasts. We are Englishmen separated by a great ocean, but that fact makes our revolution all the more likely. I am most certain the temporary strife will be followed by reconciliation. We are, after all, bound by our common language.”

The woman is interested. “You see this?”

“I feel this. However, do tell me more of these Masters.”

The woman glances at the men but they express indifference. She focuses on Tom’s face. “Mr. Jefferson, there are many things of which you are unaware, things beyond the comprehension of your culture. I do hope I am not insulting you.”

“Pray, continue, madam.”

“That is not to say you would not understand, but you may not fully appreciate how events are influenced by certain...individuals.”

“Indeed! These Masters direct our fortunes?”

Three is anxious. “They do more than that, my dear sir. They are Masters in every sense of the word.”

That comment results in stern looks from the other three. Three bites his lip visibly. Tom observes the change of mood and proceeds delicately.

“Well, then, it is clear to me, as it is to the Masters, I presume. We should not succeed without their blessing.”

“I rather agree with you,” concludes One.

“I rather thought you would,” Two adds bitterly.

Tom suddenly finds himself in the woods of Virginia, sittin’ underneath a large beech. He’s a boy. He’s readin’ a book. The cover is worn and faded. He glances to his left. The Indian is there again, cradlin’ a musket in his arms. The Indian pretends not to notice him. It’s a game they play whenever Tom comes to the woods alone. Tom believes the Indian is Powhatan, accordin’ to his father’s description, but Tom doesn’t really know. He knows the story of Pocahontas, but this man always stands in the same place, watchin’ around them. Truth be told, Tom ain’t exactly sure the Indian is real. You’ll see what I mean.

Tom reads aloud, hopin’ the sound of his voice will soothe the anxiety that always rises in him with the appearance of the Indian. “That which is below is like that which is above.”

Young Isaac Newton appears. “You must define above and below, Thomas.”

For as long as Tom can remember he’s been able to manifest the authors of the books he reads. He doesn’t know if they’re real, probably not, but they seem to be as physical as he is.

He had long conversations with Plato. But then he found a number of alchemical works in his father's library. This translation of the Emerald Tablet was Newton's. He hadn't realized the man who had formulated the law of universal gravity had been an alchemist.

"The philosopher's stone. Above and below. That's the key."

"Above is above, is it not, Sir Isaac? It is the heavens."

"Where is this above?"

"It is beyond the stars, I suspect. Certainly beyond the moon."

"Does it even exist at all?"

"Why should enlightened men search for what appears to be myth?"

"Am I a myth because only you see me? Is our Indian friend a myth because he stands there silently only when you enter these woods? There is a place where this is all true. Did not Plato suggest it? The father of all perfection in the whole world is here."

"Is that the above, Sir Isaac?"

"You must also contemplate the one. What is the one? What is the many?"

"God, Our Father, is the one."

"This was written long before there were Christians, Thomas. Why not ask our friend what he thinks? He must be here for a reason."

The thought of interactin' with the Indian scares Tom, but he figures Newton has a point.

"You, sir. May I ask you a question?"

The Indian is silent.

"Sir? Do you know the one? Can you define the one?"

The Indian examines the forest, apparently checkin' the area to see if they're alone. He then cautiously approaches Tom. It's summer so the man wears only a deer skin at his waist.

He's tall and brown. Tattoos cascade over his broad shoulders down his muscular arms. His hair is shaved on one side of his head. He has an even, relaxed stride as he approaches Tom, stoppin' a few feet away, musket in his arms.

He growls. "Why you talk to trees?"

Tom suspects the Powhatan could be real. "I talk to myself sometimes."

The man studies the boy as if he thinks Tom's touched in the head.

Tom counters. "Why do you stand there when I come into the woods?"

"Bear. Wolf. No weapon."

His vulnerability suddenly dawns on Tom and he's embarrassed. Tom's father would insist a slave accompany him on his walks, but Tom would ditch him.

"You are quite correct, sir. I am a fool. I thank you for your understanding." Tom rises and tries to leave quickly but the man grabs his shoulder. He must see fear in the boy's eyes 'cause he slowly loosens his grip and backs away a step. He raises his arms and indicates all around them. He indicates Tom and he indicates himself.

"One."

Tom's suddenly back in the room with the four fashionable strangers.

"One?" he asks them.

"Ultimately yes, Mr. Jefferson. But that is much more complicated than you realize. You must first understand all that can be unified. It is something like Heaven on Earth. But we must begin with something less than that. The first step must be taken. It has fallen to you and your patriots. And of course further steps will be taken by those who follow."

It seems to Tom the first man suddenly affects an air of curious indifference, considerin' the human cost of takin' the first step.

The second man picks up the attitude. "I should think you want to prepare yourself for the catastrophe that will most assuredly follow."

"You are exaggerating, Deux." Three interjects.

"Of course all consequences have been foreseen by the Masters," says the woman, who Tom suspects is Quatre. "It will be just."

Tom smiles. "There is one more thing. I should like to meet one of the Masters. Can that be arranged?"

The four seem somewhat uncomfortable with the question. Three approaches Tom.

"Mr. Jefferson, the others do not believe I should reveal the truth to you. It is not that we are deceptive. You see, the truth has been known to be paralyzing. And of course, with the importance of events...well, we would not wish your morale to be injured, so injured that revolution would be put at risk."

"We are all taking a risk, sir."

"Yes, yes, and 'tis said, of course, know the truth and it shall set you free. But in this particular instance, knowing the truth may not be at all helpful to the cause and will not guarantee liberty."

"Nevertheless, sir, I believe I am strong enough to know it."

Two smirks, "Wonderful ignorance."

One smiles. "Well, perhaps it is not our place to reveal the truth, Trois. Considering your role in this Mr. Jefferson, it could very well be possible to meet a Master and he may reveal that which you would know. Is that suitable?"

"I thank you, sir."

Four shakes her head. "I doubt very much you will feel gratitude, Mr. Jefferson."

July 4th, 2016

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

A former Catholic priest once told me we spend our entire lives giving away our authority.

Remember, God didn't want you biting that apple. God wanted you to live in Paradise, a Golden Age, ignorant of morality and immortality, but having all your needs met. It was the snake that invited you to think for yourself. The serpent led you to self-awareness.

Lucifer, the bringer of light, wanted us to rebel. Prometheus brought fire to mankind against Zeus' will. He was punished for it by being chained to a rock, having his liver eaten daily by an eagle, only to have it grow again at night. Is the idea of a meaningful consciousness merely a dewy remnant of a storm-tossed night, a vanity a rock embraces to soften its hard time in this prison? Authorities tell us we are only a speck of dust with a breath of life. So let us immerse ourselves in this bright dark world and find solace in material comfort.

Is it so easy to snuff a soul? We've been fighting for light as long as we've been aware we have light. We watch the movement of the heavens, the stars that have guided us and we are drawn to those lights, those patterns. We follow Venus, the morning star, the bringer of light, as she crosses in relation to earth in the form of a pentacle, the very same stars that adorn the American flag. And we tell stories.

On this occasion I'd like to point out what extraordinary people the founders of our nation must have been. Ponder the profound courage it took to stand up to the most powerful nation in the world. They possessed the fortitude to endure the tribulations of revolution. Their vision, born of the Enlightenment, forged a nation embodying the democratic ideals that had shined so brightly in Athens. And they were wise to ensure one religion would not shackle the nation. By declaring religious freedom, they preserved freedom of thought and imagination.

Regardless what you think of the respective views of faiths harvested out of cultivated American soil, you must admit such a wide interpretation of spirituality would only have been possible in a land that cries out to God on a regular basis and in different ways. And, of course, we have the freedom to deny spiritual impulses exist, despite thousands of years of evidence to the contrary.

In ancient days initiates of the Mysteries of Eleusis would be shown an ear of corn at the end of a magical, mystical trip into the spiritual world. Immortal life sprouts from enlightenment. These days if we want to understand something, all we have to do is check our smart phone and move on, confident our direction is forged by some universal law of truth.

We've got it all figured out.

My friends, I have been to Heaven and it is not what you think. Should we not be free in Heaven? And yet we are not. Certainty is not freedom. Ambiguity is freedom.

CODA is a church. It's not a religion, but it is a story. The story is everything. Your story. It's right there in front of you, just beyond your nose, in your perceptions, your thoughts, the accumulation of your life, that thing we call memory.

Even more so, it's there in our judgment. Because as we slice our way with our machetes through the jungle of life, we choose with every stroke which leaf, which branch to hack off, clearing our way of understanding.

The problem is everything we clear from our path is the truth.

Ray Rhodes

Church of Divine Ambiguity (CODA)

July 4, 2016

Sunglasses

God, I was so tired that night in London.

When was that? Six months ago. Christmas. Chestnuts. That city smell. Soot. The lights at Trafalgar Square and the shopping on Bond Street. It is so fucking wonderful to have money! But I was too tired to fully enjoy the thrill. San Francisco only the day before.

Unlike today. Today I feel almost giddy. Tandi you are the luckiest girl in the world because it's a beautiful warm day in Seattle, which is rare enough for this waterlogged city. I even broke out the red and white gingham sun dress and I feel cool and free and sexy... and comfortable in these flats. Still, some of these moody Seattleites appear almost resentful. They probably think I'm too loud. They would in London. Who gives a fuck? I love the shaded view through my Ted Lapidus sunglasses. It works with the blond wig. Wondered if I could pull off blond with my complexion, but the glasses help.

I love Lapidus. Somewhat passé but he designed John Lennon's suit on the Abbey Road cover and that's my favorite album of all time. "Bang, bang Maxwell's silver hammer came down upon his head..." That's the song that went through my head that moment that night in London. Probably because it was London. Couldn't have been the axe.

She's running late. We did say four. And I know I said the coffee shop on the Ave., the one with this marvelous inside patio and the lush plants. So relaxing. So empty. But next week. Next week to Texas. To Mango! But not Austin.

Teddy botched it ten years ago. That sniper guy. What's his name? Whitley? Whitman. Charles Whitman. Yeah, Teddy let that guy get by him. Never been the same. Can't go to Austin. But I love Austin! Fuck Teddy. I'm going to Austin while I'm down there.

Fucking Teddy.

This job. Well, better than taking orders from fat fucks at the Pancake House. They loved that sugar fix. But I was different, and alone. So alone. Buck up, Overholt. I need a drink. Should probably see a shrink. That'll be the fucking day. Teddy saved me from that ordinary life. Knowing what I know now, though. Doing what I do. God, was it fucking worth it? At least I have freedom. I have money. But I know too much to be at peace. And goddamn it, why don't I care about anything? Am I even fucking alive? Buck up, Overholt.

Where is that bitch? Ah, there she is. Cute, petite, no style, baggy shorts, t-shirt and tennis shoes with pink socks, but I can see what the boys like, and a soft, gentle smile that lifts her face, and no makeup.

"Miss Boyce?"

"Ms. Boise, yes. Hi! You must be Debbie. Sit down."

"Are those Ted Lapidus?"

"Why yes, they are. Try them on."

"I love Lapidus!"

"Me too!"

"So, the message said you had some questions about my father? I didn't know him that well. And I'm surprised the University cares."

"Well, you know. Husky pride. The Human Resources Department wants to make sure everyone gets a fair shake. So anyway, when your father worked at the school here he actually started putting money into an extra retirement account and I guess he forgot about it. \$50,000."

"Oh, wow! That's wonderful. So...how..."

"Oh, I've taken the liberty of writing you a check, here."

"Oh my goodness! I can't believe this."

“Don’t give it to your boyfriend.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ali. Don’t give it to Ali. He’ll just buy more guns. Now listen to me. This check is good. Take it and go. Start over. We know about Ali and his shitty little buddies.”

“You don’t know Ali, bitch. He’s raining death on the fucking fascists.”

“Debbie ...we know he wants to blow up the Space Needle. It won’t happen.”

“I’m fuckin’ rippin’ this motherfuckin’ check up! How do you like that?”

“Well, you love my sunglasses, how do you like my .38?”

“You don’t work for the University, do you?”

“No, darling, I do not. We’re not going to let you go back to Ali and his Black September wannabes. I’ll write you another check, Debbie. Just go away.”

“What the fuck? Why don’t you just arrest Ali if you know everything?”

“We don’t arrest people. We stop them.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m the one stopping you.”

“It’s Ali’s gig!”

“But you will detonate the bomb, Debbie. We already know this.”

“Huh, what?”

“Tomorrow Ali will place the bomb in the Needle elevator, but he already promised you he will let you detonate it. He loves you, Debbie. He’s committed to you. Do us a favor and leave. Go away.”

“Fuck you. I don’t have to do anything. If you’re not law, you don’t have the authority to keep me here. I’m leaving. What are you going to do, shoot me?”

“Don’t leave.”

“Kiss my ass.”

I knew it, goddamn it. She’s running. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Pull the trigger, Tandi. Pull the trigger! Fuck, I don’t want to kill again. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Aristotle. Aristotle. Done. Oh, that stopped her. What a beautiful red mist. Who’s screaming? Oh, the bitch cashier.

“I’m not going to hurt you! Get the fuck out of here! What’s the matter, Debbie? Is it hard to breathe? Let it go, baby. Let it go. Say hi to Jesus for me.”

A tear? Stress. Maybe I’m not dead after all.

“The money would have saved you, baby. Love destroyed you.”

Huffin’

The wind whipped Ray’s hair into his eyes and mouth. His socks and sneakers was damp. Above ‘em, his bellbottom jeans and blue flannel shirt was loose and baggy. He had a pewter Ankh danglin’ from his neck given to him by a witch. The sky was gettin’ darker. They’d get awful wet if it rained, but Ray was secretly elated ‘cause at least they’d have a ride all the way to Austin. They was fuckin’ lucky!

Ray considered Andy. His curly, black hair was flappin’ in the wind. What normally embraced his head like a balloon was misshapen and bent on one side. His sideburns stretched down his jaw line. Ray envied Andy’s ability to grow facial hair. He sported Tony Lamas, Wranglers, a yellow long-sleeved shirt and a leather vest. He also carried the backpack, which hid his Canon EF and a huntin’ knife. Andy was a real photographer. He knew how to do darkroom. Of course, you never know when you’ll need a huntin’ knife.

Andy was rubbin’ his left wrist, a habit he had. He said there was nothin’ wrong with it, only there would be a dull pain sometimes. Prob’ly arthritis, like his mama has.

With each mile the humidity got thick as thunder rolled in the east and a few drops smacked ‘em hard on their faces. The landscape didn’t change much. Scrub grass and barbed wire punctuated by cactus and mesquite, a few head of Angus and Hereford.

Andy was gloomy.

Ray felt guilty. “Sorry we left.”

Andy smirked. Ray felt Andy was just toleratin’ him.

Ray pressed on. “Man, you were fucked up!”

Now that got under Andy’s skin. “No reason to ditch the party.”

“How the fuck you know there was a party?” Ray shot back.

“I was fuckin’ partyin’, man!”

“You were passed out in a fuckin’ field, man!”

“We went to see Willie Nelson and we didn’t see Willie Nelson.”

Ray didn’t want to tell Andy he’d seen Willie jam with Doug Sahm while Andy snored.

Didn’t want to tell him he’d actually met Willie...maybe.

Silence for five miles.

Ray broke it, scratchin’ his ankles. “Think I got fleas or mosquitos.”

Andy shook his head but smiled. “Chiggers, ‘cause you walk in the grass. Gonna find their way to your damp spots. Had one on my dick once. Ain’t pleasant.”

The smile set Ray off. “If I don’t get back by tomorrow afternoon they’ll fire me.”

Andy’s eyes narrowed. “I think it’s kinda weird, Ray, this is the first I hear about this.”

Ray rolled his eyes. “Didn’t know your car would break down!”

Lies, of course. But Ray figured about the last thing Andy wanted to hear at that moment was the truth. He might throw Ray off the truck. In fact, Andy was lookin’ like that anyway.

“You were fuckin’ sure your car would break down, Ray! That’s why we took mine!”

The pickup edged over the yellow line and Wheel Man overcompensated. Ray crashed into Andy and they fell hard into the bed.

“Goddamn!” Ray yelled.

They worked their way back up to peek through the back window into the cab and observed the bearded boys engagin’ in a huffin’ interlude. Shotgun had a brown paper bag, sprayin’ a can of cookin’ grease into it. He shoved his face into the bag, and sucked it in hard.

Andy’s eyes turned to half-dollars. “Shit! They’re sniffin’ Pam!”

The pickup staggered across the median again as Shotgun sprayed into the bag and handed it to Wheel Man. Pam gave Wheel Man a lead foot and the truck was cruisin' at 95 in a 55 on the left side of the road as it jumped into the shallow bar ditch, choppin' cactus.

Andy screeched. "Think we're gonna die, Ray? You feelin' it?"

The truck grabbed gravel and slid to a stop at the intersection of 183 and 90. Ray and Andy got knocked to the bed of the pickup again. Ray fell on a tool box. Shotgun climbed out the window and sat on the door.

"Hey, man, we fucked up," he drawled. "Ain't goin' to Austin. Goin' to Houston. Wanna go to Houston?"

Ray managed an emphatic "No!" as he struggled to climb off the tool box. "Our car's in Austin. We'll get off here."

Andy was grateful. "Thanks!" He shook Shotgun's hand as they climbed off the truck.

"Y'all take care," hollered the bearded boys as they burned rubber and slung gravel at Ray and Andy and wove their way toward the big city.

Happy fuckin' Fourth of July!" Andy hollered back, chokin' in their exhaust.

As the truck receded into the distance it grew quiet again and Ray and Andy was alone on the road, as the blacktop stretched in four directions. They started walkin'. Lightnin' flashed to the east. Thunder growled like a pissed-off dog.

Caissa

“To the promise of this virgin land.”

“Buck up, Overholt.”

“Quite nice, Dr. Feldman. What is the name of this rye whiskey?”

“Old Overholt.”

“Ah! Liquid courage. Quite nice.”

“Would you like another?”

“Why yes! But why, sir, have you not finished?”

“I prefer to sip it, Path, constantly.”

“I shall sip this one as well. Now, sir, I do not understand the movement of the horse.”

“It has four legs and it carries you someplace, Lieutenant.”

“I do apologize for my blasted ambiguity. The horse piece.”

“The knight.”

“Yes. The knight, which reminds me, Doctor, horse showed up at the gate this morning.

Thought it was a bangtail.”

“Hmmm.”

“Private Badminton thought he’d give it a go but he got dusted.”

“Wouldn’t trust Badminton’s prowess on a nag.”

“Indian broke.”

“Hmmm. Savages in the area?”

“Not to my knowledge. The Colonel wants us to be vigilant.”

“Understood.”

“So, the knight... and this is the castle...”

“Rook.”

“But it looks nothing like a bird, sir.”

“It is from the Persian, Rukh.”

“That is the Persian word for castle?”

“Chariot.”

“But should not the horse be a rook, then?”

“The horse carries a knight.”

“Which we do not see, sir.”

“I suppose it is implied.”

“Is it implied, then, that a chariot has a castle?”

“I think you are looking for consistency where it is inappropriate.”

“When is consistency inappropriate? Yes, well, I think it would be easy to cheat in this game, Doctor, without consistency.”

“In fact, Path, the rules are quite clear if one pays attention.”

“But that is precisely what is bothering me, Doctor. The knight may move two spaces in any direction and then, without any logic at all, decide to move across, indeed, over any other pieces without taking them. It is the only piece that may move thusly. It seems arbitrary.”

“And yet, sir, it has survived thusly for a very long time.”

“Tradition.”

“If you wish.”

“I observe, sir, you have Mr. Darwin’s book ‘On The Origin Of Species’.”

“Hmmm.”

“Certainly not traditional!”

“Rather evolutionary, I should say.”

“We are descended from apes.”

“From a common ancestor.”

“Monkees.”

“Path, it is quite clear, is it not, that we and the animals have a great deal in common? Eyes, ears, nose, legs, etcetera?”

“Yes, well, what other way is there to be? Certainly our minds are not similar, Doctor.”

“I see. Well, yes, that is why I subscribe to Mr. Wallace’s theory that a spiritual force intervened on our behalf to give Man intelligence that animals do not possess.”

“Indeed, sir. That sounds much more rational than tracing our souls to a monkey.”

“You have left your Queen vulnerable, Path. I am taking her.”

“I do hope you intend to return her, sir.”

“You may have her back, Path, if one of your pawns should arrive at this end of the board. However, I shall attempt to thwart that effort.”

“I shall attempt to thwart your thwart, sir!”

“Hmmm.”

“Doctor, clearly one cannot reconcile evolution with religion. God made Man in His image. God is not an ape.”

“Are you so certain, Lieutenant?”

“Good Lord!”

“A feeble attempt at blasphemous humor, Path. Please forgive my presumption. Do you believe one should confess before being baptized?”

“Why yes, sir.”

“Then you are a Baptist.”

“How did you know, Doctor?”

“Well, you’re not Catholic. None of the stuff about you, the genuflecting, the rosary. You’re quite simple and modest in your ways, more so than many of the first generation protestants. One might call it unpretentious. A lack of the ritual, you know. Also none of Cane Ridge about you, the enthusiasm. Many Baptists and Methodists out here in the wilderness. No need for a Methodist to confess before Baptism.”

“I applaud your intellect, Doctor. May I know, sir, your faith?”

“I come from a long line of Jews.”

“I did not know you are a Jew.”

“That bother you?”

“I do not know why it should, Doctor.”

“No hatred of Jews in your family?”

“Well, you know, the Pharisees. But if you prick us do we not bleed?”

“You see me as Shylock?”

“Are you a money lender?”

“No, Path.”

“Then why should I see you as one?”

“Hmmm.”

“I believe in equality, Doctor.”

“Quite democratic of you, Lieutenant. Do the savages warrant the same consideration?
Or what of our freed slaves?”

“I fear you are testing me, sir, but in the matter of the former slaves, if nothing else our victory has indicated God’s judgment. The Confederacy was immoral.”

“And yet our Founding Fathers owned slaves and talked of freedom.”

“Regrettable, yes. They believed the black race inferior. And, as it happens, I am a descendent of Thomas Jefferson.”

“Indeed.”

“From an illegitimate line. Please do not repeat that.”

“Very interesting. If it’s any consolation, Path, legitimacy is arbitrary.”

“Yes, quite so, well, not to most, sir. On the other hand I suspect our final subjugation of the red race is a destruction of uncorrupted morals.”

“Hmm. Rousseau. I wonder if you would say that before he scalps you.”

“No, sir. I admit to being terrified of such a possibility.”

“You should be.”

“But I am a soldier, sir.”

“Indeed. In any event, I do not practice Judaism, Path.”

“Have you become a Christian?”

“Wandering among the gentiles I wonder about my own corruption, but no, I have not succumbed to such a fate.”

“I must confess to no small amount of confusion, Doctor.”

“The first words in Genesis are ‘In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth. God came before all. However, in John, your New Testament, he says, ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God’. That implies something different. That implies the beginning

was language. Intelligence, our self-awareness, if you will, is God. Quite a different concept and one I certainly appreciate.”

“But certainly God was there first.”

“Yet apparently meaningless until awareness perceived Him.”

“Of course, both the Old and New Testaments make the faith complete.”

“The Old Testament is tradition, Path. And to their credit my people have stubbornly hung on to that tradition for thousands of years, despite calamity, despite the pull of the secular world. Their faith is phenomenal. But that is precisely why I have left it.”

“Astonishing.”

“I was born into this new world to be who I am, to be free not to be part of a tradition.”

“But if the tradition represents truth...”

“But you are not a Jew.”

“I believe the full truth is Our Lord Jesus Christ, who by the way was a Jew.”

“I respect that story, Path, but I have traveled the Orient, learning of many faiths. The story of your Messiah is too similar to their stories to be real, the virgin birth, sacrifice, it’s all doctrine. You see, here, Path, I have taken your bishop.”

“Then what of Jesus the man?”

“Jesus the man was apparently a Jew fighting authority.”

“Then you believe in nothing, Doctor?”

“On the contrary, I believe in everything.”

“That’s hardly a position, sir!”

“Is it important one has a position?”

“You must define yourself as a man.”

“So that I may kill or die defending it?”

“If necessary.”

“I may not have a position but I have strict principles. I am no martyr. Tell me, knowing who you are right now, if given the opportunity by the Roman authorities to recant your faith or be thrown to the lions, what would you do?”

“I suspect I am not strong enough to die for my faith.”

“And I wonder how many of those poor souls considered the story of Daniel and hoped for just such a miracle before the beasts ripped them apart.”

“And yet, sir, living without hope, as many of them did under such a cruel regime...”

“Yes, hope of eternal life in a world beyond this one.”

“Life without hope is no life at all.”

“Indeed. Shall we agree we should make the world a better place for our children?”

“I suppose that is a favorable compromise.”

“Right. Then it is of strategic importance to clear the land of savages.”

“Observe sir! I am taking your bishop with my knight!”

“Very good, Path, but now I am taking your knight with my queen. That leaves me only a few moves before I corner your king with my rook and queen.”

“The valiant never taste of death but once, Dr. Feldman.”

“Fortunately for you, Path, there is life after chess.”

Jackalopes

They call me the profane preacher. Maybe you remember me from my old job. I wore authentic garb from the 1830s when Texas seized its independence from Mexico. Davy Crockett and the Alamo? I worked at that tourist trap known for the big calf fries. God bless America.

I recounted for the tourists a bit of history and a lot of Texas bullshit – jackalopes, that sort of thing. I would tell folks about the history of this little town and how unusual it is for folks to be proud of an origin based on prostitution. But that's what brings in the tourists.

So come on in and make yourself at home and I'll tell you a story. That's right, come on in. Have a seat. Y'all grab a chair. Comfortable? Help yourself to the coffee and cookies.

America observed its Bicentennial in 1976. To Americans, it's always about freedom. It's about individuality. Texans put a premium on individuality. They don't call it the Lone Star State for nothin'. That pentacle represents enlightened Man. These days a lot of Texans want to be individuals and then want other Texans to be just like them.

All of us here want freedom. All of us want to believe we have the right to believe anything we want to believe, even if it's wrong.

On July 4th, 1976, a young man from right here in Mango, Ray Rhodes...I know some of you have heard of him...well, back then Ray had a very unusual experience that changed his life. Now, maybe you've heard of Ray's ideas and that's why you're here. Or maybe you saw the CODA sign outside the door and didn't know it stood for Church of Divine Ambiguity and you said, what the fuck is that? So, like a goddamned tourist you just waltzed right in, grabbed a cookie and didn't get out before I started talkin'. If that's true feel free to leave now. You want to leave? Thank you, sir. Is that your phone? That's your phone? Alright, let me remind everyone to turn off your goddamned phones. Thank you, ma'am.

Now, in order to get to the truth, you're gonna have to accept a few lies. The sooner you understand somethin' can be a truth and a lie at the same time, the sooner and easier you're gonna get down this road. I know. Aristotle said the same attribute can't belong and not belong to the same thing, and since then, all the so-called educated people agree on that. Aristotle also said some folks are slaves and some are masters and that's a natural condition.

In the beginnin' was the Word. So it ain't easy explainin' what's beyond language. We expect true OR false, not true AND false. We ain't comfortable with ambiguity.

When Homer says Athena stopped Achilles from killin' Agamemnon, he's sayin' Athena, a Goddess, is in the room, stoppin' Achilles from killin' Agamemnon. He didn't say she was in the room symbolically. He didn't say Achilles had a change of heart. We say that now because we can't see Athena. Why not? Was Homer lyin'? Was he just a primitive son-of-a-bitch? No, says the historian. He was a poet. He just made shit up because he had poetic license! Aesthetics! We say today they was false gods. But back then they was true gods. And time and intelligence don't change the fact they are now what they was back then. They are true when we experience them and false when we do not.

So here's the deal. Ray Rhodes claims nothin' less than to have discovered the secret of America on the very day of the country's 200th birthday. Now, I'm gonna take you back to that day, but first we need to understand the landscape.

Mango is the quaintest little spot between Wichita Falls and Lubbock, as the Chamber of Commerce likes to say. Mango had a less than illustrious origin. Often, histories of settlements recount the experiences of upstandin' folks who sacrificed their lives buildin' a community. Mango, on the other hand, was founded on its back, with an eye toward freedom and prosperity. A hundred years before Ray came along, folks fought like hell just to survive on the frontier.

The Official Origin Of Mango

About eleven years after the Civil War, in 1876 to be exact, a former Confederate soldier, a drifter lookin' for a place to settle, had a vision of his God and his destiny on the very spot where Mango College, where y'all go to school, would later be built. The man's name was Jacob Winston. Winston gathered up dozens of followers, all men, who believed the world would come to an end at any moment. These Winstonians, or "Watchers" as they was also called, would spend days gazin' at the horizon across the empty plains, waitin' for Jesus.

The authority at that time was a small cavalry outfit keepin' the Comanches at bay. They thought the Winstonians was settin' themselves up to be slaughtered by loiterin', as they was, on the prairie. Colonel Cyrus MacDonald, who commanded Fort Palo Duro, about three miles north of the Watchers, repeatedly asked Winston and his followers to vacate their camp but his pleas was met with stubbornness and a lot of prayin'.

MacDonald believed absolutely in the First Amendment of the Constitution that guaranteed freedom of religion. However, he figured a growin' cult of men camped on the grassy plains lookin' for the end of the world was a bit unhinged and potentially dangerous. He preferred to deal with the Comancheros over this bunch of radicalized Winston worshippers.

Bein' a good Presbyterian himself, however, he was reluctant to send in the Army to remove the men, considerin' the number of weapons they'd accumulated, thanks to the Second Amendment. Someone was bound to get hurt. On the other hand, as every day passed the chance was greater they'd be spotted by renegade Comanches.

The last thing he wanted was an all out blood bath with those few renegades who would not adapt to reservation life. He reasoned the very thing that made the Winstonians powerful, the fact there was so many of them, should be the cornerstone of his strategy.

After countless failures to negotiate with the fatalistic Jacob Winston, MacDonald sent his men in all directions to every brothel and saloon in the area and gathered up every whore they could find. They built a whore house, a fine lookin' establishment, west of the fort and let nature take its course. As it turned out, about a week later, Winston was down to only eleven followers, which crippled his claim by one that he amounted to the Second Comin'.

The new business venture, however, was growin' larger every day. Houses was built. A saloon sprung up. Made up of prostitutes and seekers of the meanin' of life, the inevitable incorporated area had everything needed to foster a vital community. One particularly precocious workin' girl made the effort to seek out Jacob Winston to try to convince him to join the group. Alas, Winston declined and was left with dwindlin' numbers until all he had to accompany him as he dejectedly departed the prairie was a hound dog he called Faith.

That workin' girl was Madame Mango and she eventually became the First Lady of the town that bore her name. Decades later, your college was dedicated to that uneducated lady, who with the help of her fellow Americans, left the past behind them and recreated themselves in the middle of nowhere. God bless the Llano Estacado, where the flat land extends to the horizon and beyond to Heaven.

Today, most of the old money of Mango descended from a community with a vision to make the world a better place, and to do business.

Orphan

“For my part, my son, I do not believe you are guilty of your father’s sins.”

“Everyone stares at me, Father.”

“You must endure it. Your father was in the Schutzstaffel, the SS. That was a very evil organization. I am certain your father believed he was right. But he lost the war. Had he won the war, he would have been right. But God decided he was wrong.”

“Where is God, Father?”

“God is in Heaven.”

“And where is that?”

“The firmament.”

“Oh.”

“But you are not your father. You are not destined to do evil. You have an opportunity to redeem your father’s sins.”

“How?”

“Well, we have a problem, mon fils. Your parents are with God and did not leave any money. It is very expensive for us to take care of you. But fortunately for all of us, we have been saved by a very generous offer from the government. You will be able to stay with us and you will also be one of our special children.”

“Special?”

“What it means is we have chosen only a very few right now to be the special children. The special children receive special treatment. More ice cream. You’ll stay in a much better part of the orphanage. The best part is that you don’t even have to get out of bed if you don’t want. We just think some children deserve special treatment because, just between the two of us,

some of us are better than the others. Am I right, mon fils? Yes, you are your father's son, yes you are. And...if you ever want to talk to me about the terrible violence of their deaths. Well, that is what I do. But I must ask you if you want this special treatment, because if you don't I will give it to one of the other boys."

"May I have anything I want, Father?"

"Within reason, yes."

"May I have my dog?"

"Ah, that may be something of a problem because the dog won't be able to sleep in your bed. And who will take care of him?"

"I will!"

"But what if you become distracted? I will tell you this. If you agree to be one of our special children, I will find a way to keep the dog somewhere in the orphanage and you will be able to visit him. How's that? You like that, yes? Now, there is just one very, very small thing. I almost didn't mention it. Special children must receive shots and take pills."

"Shots?"

"We want you to be the healthiest children in the world. We want you to be strong one day. The Canadian government is taking a special interest in a little refugee like you because they believe you may have something great inside you that can make up for your father's sins. They will test these drugs to see which is the best. I'm so very, very proud of you son."

"May I see my dog?"

Seed

Life is a goddamned funny thing, sometimes. You think about the most monumental moments in history and you tend to think there was monumental anticipations leadin' up to the big moment. Hardly works out that way. Big things start from tiny things. Inside a seed is the destiny of a tree, rootin' and branchin' its life through time. Sometimes what seems to be an ordinary moment can turn into a significant point in history. Of course, folks don't realize it at the time. And ain't it all about time? Ain't it our ability to look backward down that road we come, that helps us realize we come down that road? Then we assume that road was always there. And of course it was... lookin' back, at that seed.

The question is... is the road actually in front of us? Is the future already there? Does it exist? Is there somethin' else right in front of our noses, beyond our comprehension? Whoa!

The idea to go on this journey came to Ray and Andy while they was smokin' some killer weed their buddy Ben Goldstein had shared with them the previous winter back in Mango.

Ben was carryin' on about his recent adventure in New York City as Bob Marley and the Wailers thumped from the speakers. Ben had the hots for the redheaded goddess who'd masterminded a magical transformation at Mango College. She'd been a shy hippie stoner, wearin' baggy and faded jeans, but overnight, and I'm talkin' in one night, she'd become a sizzlin' bitch queen in stilettos. She poured herself into a skintight, almost luminescent green dress that made her ass look like the primal destination of all things hard and unholy. And don't think those boys didn't change their attitudes about that little girl. They usually only had that one thing on their collective minds back then and for the most part it was based on appearance. You might say everything they thought was true was based on the appearance of things.

So, in some deep sense they understood how her attitude changed so completely with the outfit, if not why. She'd have nothin' to do with the boys anymore, except Ben. Ben thought it was 'cause he had a way with women but Ray and Andy was convinced it was 'cause he had the best dope.

Ben had brought ganja and Reggae back from the Big Apple. Those words was new to Ray and Andy but they trusted them to be righteous. He'd gone to visit the redheaded goddess who'd become bored with Mango and set off to find herself.

Well, this is how it all went down that particular night.

Ray was suckin' hard on the joint Ben rolled, held it, and released it too fast. You know how it happens. "Fuck! This shit is awesome!" he wailed over the Wailers.

He passed it to Andy who also sucked deep and tried to hold it. But he blew the smoke out hard like a steam engine when the little grunts from his sinuses grew ineffective. He was hackin'. "Goddamn! This shit is bitchin'!"

Ben just kept noddin' to the syncopation, "I'm jammin', I'm jammin'", and in a slow drawl he said, "Yeah, that shit expands." He kept noddin' as he continued relivin' his trip. He says, "So, I'm thinkin', fuck, if she says I should come to New York I'm gonna be fuckin' her all day and all night."

"Far out!" Ray was impressed.

Ben was wearin' a big green, yellow and red knit cap he said the Rastafarians had given him. He said he wanted to grow his hair into dreadlocks, but the boys didn't know what that meant. Fact is, they wouldn't have been able to find Jamaica on a map. And Andy wasn't understandin' the connection to New York, but it really didn't matter.

"This shit is so fine," Ben explained, "No seeds."

Ray was confused. “So?”

“Sensimilla. That’s why it’s stronger, man.”

“How you grow it if there’s no seeds?”

“The seeds are implied, man!”

Whoa!

Ray was tryin’ to come to terms with the idea that the presence of somethin’ is implied, even if the only evidence of it is the invisible idea of it.

Ben goes on to explain when he gets to her place in New York, she ain’t there. “I go to her apartment and find a note. She says she’s got business but I should crash there as long as I want. What the fuck?”

“Goddamn,” Andy indignantly proclaimed.

“She’s a heartless bitch, man!” Ray was tryin’ to be supportive, if not a bit excessive.

Andy turned as logical as he could be considerin’ he felt like his head was floatin’ on a Caribbean cruise liner. “But why would she invite you if she wasn’t gonna be there?”

“To tell you the God’s honest truth,” said Ben, “I’m goddamned mortified to say, but I think she just wanted somebody to watch her apartment while she was gone. And leave her some weed.”

Ray was surprised, but not much. “You never saw her?”

“Only when she came back right before I left,” Ben explained. “I ask her why did she want me to go there if she wasn’t gonna see me and she says she thought I’d like to see the city. I said, yeah, but what the fuck?”

“What the fuck?” repeated Andy.

Suddenly Ben got agitated. “I went to Central Park! There was a concert. That’s where I met the Rastafarians and they turned me on to Marley, man, and this fine ganja and I’m gonna go to Jamaica, mahn! Jamaica irie!”

Ray and Andy didn’t know what the fuck he was talkin’ about but the weed was magnificent. But Ray wasn’t feelin’ the syncopation. “The smoke’s great, mahn, but this Marley stuff, I don’t know. Every song sounds the same to me.”

Ben was still noddin’. “Feel it, mahn!”

Andy agreed. “Feel it, mahn!”

“And I’ll tell you something else about the redheaded goddess!” Ray was emphatic. “I asked her for a date after the transformation but she blew me off, mahn!”

Ben and Andy stared blankly. Ray thought it was just the pot. “I mean, who’d go out with her before? She’d just hang out with you and get high, right? Then, it was like reality changed overnight and she turned her back on the past and, wow, reality did change.”

The fact is, Ray was just talkin’ to himself. “As I see it,” Ben grew contemplative, “I was sent there for a reason. I thought it was to have sex. In fact, the goddess led me there to discover this ganja.”

The boys couldn’t argue with him, or didn’t want to.

A shave and a haircut pounded on the door and they instinctively moved to hide the dope and paraphernalia, not that it mattered. Ben’s pungent Patchouli incense wasn’t maskin’ the pot. Also, that knock was Angie’s. Angie glided into the room like a freighter dockin’ into port. She was a big girl, not in terms of weight, but in height and breasts, which the boys nicknamed Fuji and Kilimanjaro behind her back. She was wearin’ an unbuttoned cardigan over a tight t-shirt

without a bra. She was taller than they was and when she stooped to take the joint from Ray's fingers he couldn't help thinkin' of his mother.

"This is too small," she said, lickin' her finger and runnin' it along the edge of the joint, burnin' irregular-like. "Where's the clip?"

Ben obliged, handin' her a clip with a rabbit's foot danglin' from the end.

"Lucky me," she said.

She was Ben's landlady and lived downstairs but she was his current bedmate so she pretty much hung out with Ben and, needless to say, Ben got free rent. Of course, she loved weed, and Ben knew how to supply it.

To Angie, the word "rent" had a broad definition. She didn't need to rent out the apartment. She'd inherited money and didn't even need to earn a livin'. A "renter" meant easy dope and sex. She never advertised the apartment in the classifieds. The "renter" was her latest boyfriend. Of course, that meant if a "renter" broke up with Angie, or she broke up with him, that fool also lost his roof.

But I ain't implyin' she went through renters, neither. She tended to be a very loyal and dotin' girlfriend, a relationship type. She loved nothin' more than sittin' around on Sunday with her man, smokin' weed and watchin' old movies. Unfortunately, her men tended to get restless after awhile and started lookin' for a new apartment, or to take a trip to New York. On the other hand, she wasn't strictly monogamous. There was always the understandin' if she wanted a taste of somethin' else, or if her man did, she'd tolerate it long as he came back and made it up to her, as in this case, with ganja.

"I was just on the phone with my mother. God! She wants me to go to grad school."

"What the fuck," Ben grunted. "You don't have to do anything."

“I know, my love, but she says I’ll waste my life if I don’t do something with it.”

Andy figured he’d make conversation. “What would you study? Business?”

“Why the fuck would I study business?”

“Cause you got money.”

“If I have money why the fuck do I need to study business?”

“I don’t know. To know what to do with it.”

“If I go to grad school, not saying I would, but if I did, I’d do something fun like art.”

Ben was impressed. “I didn’t know you’re an artist.”

“I’m not. But that’s why I’d go, to learn how.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works, Angie.”

“What the fuck do you know, Ray?”

“I didn’t even know you had a degree.”

“I have a BA in psychology.”

“What, Freud and shit?”

“Yeah, Andy. Freud and shit. I’ve already got you two freeloaders figured out even if Ben doesn’t know he’s being used.”

“Honey Pie, they’re my friends!”

“You know goddamn well the only reason they’re your friends is because you get them high. If you didn’t have dope they wouldn’t be hanging around.”

Andy was indignant. “That’s not fair, Angie! We knew Ben a long time before you.”

“Right. But now, because he lives here I’ve got to put up with you and your childish shit, like naming my goddamn tits! Oh yeah! You didn’t think I knew about that, did you?”

Ray and Andy was embarrassed and Ben pretended not to notice.

Andy threw up his arms. “What the fuck, Ben?”

“So here’s the deal. If you’re going to hang out in my house you will respect me.”

Andy wasn’t thinkin’. “The house your dad left you.”

“Get the fuck out of here, Andy! Both of you! Get the fuck out!”

Ben stood and swayed in the smoke. “Whoa, whoa, everybody calm down! Please, darling. You boys need to apologize to Angie. This is her house. You are guests. I mean it, apologize to her.”

Ray was first. “I’m sorry for naming your breasts, Angie. That’s wrong. Please don’t kick us out.”

Andy was more reluctant. “I’m sorry, Angie. This is your house.”

“Now see? They’re sorry, baby. Don’t kick them out. They won’t be talking shit about you anymore. I fucking promise. Come on, baby.”

Angie took a long drag off the roach and passed it to Ray. “Alright. I was just really, really pissed off that you were making fun of me.”

Ray wanted to clarify. “Hey, we weren’t making fun...” But Ben shot him a deadly glance, which slit his throat. Ray shut up and sucked on the roach.

She smirked. “Did Mr. Goldstein tell you about his New York trip? The redheaded goddess spurned him. What’s her name?” She smiled wider than the Grand Canyon.

“Does it matter?” asked Andy.

“I think it does,” Angie replied, “if only out of principle.”

“Morrigan,” answered Ben.

“Morrigan,” Angie repeated with sarcasm drippin’ like hot grease off her chin.

“Morrigan, the redheaded siren whose song lured Ben into the rocks to his doom.”

“And got this killer weed,” Ray proclaimed, tryin’ to interrupt her gloatin’.

“Yes, well, there is that.” She turned thoughtful and thankful. “My wonderful Ben sought to find greener pastures and returned with a sticky treasure beyond the ordinary dirtweed.”

Andy perked up. “But what I want to know is what the hell was she doin’ while you were there?” Andy passed the roach to Ben.

Ben glared at Andy for a moment and then daintily took a deep drag on the roach, obliterated it, and held his breath for about thirty seconds as a slow smile emerged from his beard. He slowly exhaled. Ray admired his lung capacity.

“She’s a sex surrogate,” Ben announced. “She went to a convention for sex surrogates.”

The boys was dumbfounded. Andy spoke up. “What the fuck is a sex surrogate?”

Ben’s maniacal smile was frozen. “She gets paid to have sex with men who have sexual problems so that they get over their problems.”

A number of points exploded in Ray’s mind like little firecrackers. First of all, she has sex with practically anyone except him. Second of all, Ben goes to New York to have sex with her but can’t because she’s having sex with other men.

One more Black Cat to light. “She gets paid for that?” Ray asked.

Ben nodded.

Pow!

“Goddamn, she’s a whore and we don’t get any of that!” It was as clear to Ray as a Roman Candle explodin’ across the darkness of sexual frustration. They was losers. That’s when images of the 4th of July and travelin’ materialized in Ray’s mind through the ganja fog.

Angie collapsed laughin’. “Even a whore won’t put out for y’all!”

“No,” said Ben emphatically. “This ain’t prostitution. This is legit. People who have sexual problems go to her, and you know, if necessary... get therapy.”

Bein’ a smartass came natural to Ray. “Well, even in the short time you were there you had to have had time to get therapy.”

Ben smiled at Angie. It was clear he didn’t have problems in that area, missin’ Ray’s point entirely. Angie cuddled next to Ben and placed his head on Fuji. Ray made a mental note that the boys couldn’t trust Ben, especially now that Ben was gettin’ laid regularly.

Ben giggled. “Hell, I don’t have to pay for it.”

Angie nuzzled him. “You don’t have to pay for anything, do you cupcake?”

Ray and Andy shot a glance at each other.

Angie grew wistful. “I think I’d like to get out of Mango for awhile.” She ran her fingers through Ben’s hair. “You know Willie Nelson’s playing in Gonzales on the 4th of July this year?”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” Andy suddenly perked up out of the THC stupor. “Why don’t we all go to the concert together? We’ll be graduated! We’ll be free!” Of course, the moment he said it, he regretted it, considerin’ the incident just moments before. Goddamn weed.

“Wow!” Ray suddenly understood the gravity of the universe and all things in it! “I was just thinking about taking a trip and fireworks right before you said that!”

Angie seemed quite pleased with herself, considerin’ she could see herself occupyin’ most of Ben’s personal life that summer. “Then it’s settled. We all go together.”

Was it the drugs or the company or destiny that set them on that path to the concert? That question would preoccupy Ray for a long time. He thought about all the small things and the personalities that had come together to make the idea real. He didn’t like Angie callin’ him a freeloader. She had money. He didn’t. Psychologists fuck with your head.

The Death of All Things

The main thing about the plains is you can see for miles. Sometimes you can even see a bend on the horizon 'cause there ain't nothin' blockin' your view. Most times the vastness of that ocean of grass is terrifyin' to the white man who don't know shit about survivin' on the Llano Estacado. 'Course that's all changin' now.

The Comanche observes the activity around the Fort from a distance. It was bad enough when they was only dealin' with Texans. These days these white men set up forts and towns rise up around them. They force the People on the reservation. Even Quanah Parker is travelin' the white man's road.

Tahka inches closer. The wind whips the grass, concealin' his movement. He observes the bluecoats drillin' outside the gates. He isn't gonna waste away on the reservation. He's gonna hunt buffalo. He's gonna be free and find a way to drive these white sons of snakes off the plains. But there's only four of them. Four of the People against hundreds. Four was plenty to steal those horses from the Kiowa at the reservation.

Every mornin' one soldier stands in the same place, alone, just starin' out onto the plains, drinkin' somethin' from a cup, probably coffee. Good if you can get it. Don't work like the others. Must be a chief.

Tahka longs for the way it was when he was a young warrior, when The People camped on the Prairie Dog fork of the river. The huntin', the raidin', the fuckin'. Now it's just four warriors, no wives. That old world is gone and in its place more forts, more whites, more cattle and where is the buffalo? But the soldiers have no wives to take. There's only one thing to do. Tahka and Pijauhtzu and Tetecae and Ojapite must kill as many white men as there is grass.

Tahka will be a wildfire! The white man will cower in fear from his medicine! The People will show the white man he does not have the courage to take this land. The white man will run in fear. He will cry like a woman. He will see what it is like to lose everything.

Tahka looks behind him to see if the coyote is there. All his life the coyote spirit, who he calls Kunseeta, has followed him but has kept his distance, watchin'. The coyote's there, but the horse is gone. He hates the horse. The horse belongs to Ojapite. He abandoned Tahka.

He hears the grass rustle to his right. He glances over, expectin' to see a jackrabbit but sees instead a soldier staggerin' toward him. Lookin' closer it's clear the white man is drunk. He's comin' from behind Tahka, headin' for the fort. But Tahka's hidden and the man ain't lookin' for him.

The man is almost upon him when he stops, sways in the wind, and unbuttons his trousers. Tahka is incensed to see the man pull out his large penis and start pissin' in the grass right in front of him. He realizes his opportunity. In the time it takes an eagle to snatch a prairie dog, Tahka leaps from the ground and shoves his knife deep under the drunk man's ribs. The man only expresses mild shock as he falls backward, his dick in his hand, spraying piss and blood all over Tahka, who falls on top of him back into the tall grass. He keeps his hand on the white man's mouth as he listens for an alarm from the fort, but he hears only the wind.

He watches life leave the stinkin' white man's bloodshot eyes, removes the knife from his ribs and slices the man's scalp ear to ear. Saturated with the white man's blood, Tahka puts the scalp in a pouch and slithers off into the grass, satisfied he will fill the white men's hearts with terror.

Third Eye

Sounds spooky, don't it? Third eye. That's how Ray described his personal experience, so I've only got his word to go on, but it does explain pretty much how his ability worked.

Ray says when he was eight years old he sort of woke up. He was suddenly aware of things the other kids didn't see or know. Ray says it was almost imperceptible most times, but when it happened, he knew it.

Ray's dad was in the Air Force. When Ray was young they lived on an Army Post in Germany. Ray knew his old man might go to war one day and the possibility scared Ray. So he would always ask him if there was a war somewhere and his father would always say no. But one day he was in the car with his dad, whose name was Melvin. Ray asked him the same question and this time Melvin paused and said, yes, there's a war. Ray asked where it was and Melvin said it's a long way away in a place called Vietnam.

Vietnam, thought Ray. That's when he first felt what he would later call the third eye. Ray had an impression of death upon hearin' the word. He somehow knew the war would destroy his family. Not long after that Ray says some magical things started happenin' to him. He had a little friend, Paula, and the two of them was always settin' out on adventures through the thick woods that surrounded the Post at Darmstadt. Paula and Ray became experts at findin' four-leaf clovers. The two of them could sit down in a clover patch and pick four-leaf clovers at will. Ray said he never understood why the other kids couldn't find them. It occurred to Ray years later that Paula was probably a lot like him. He tended to keep his friendship with Paula secret. He didn't want the other boys to know his best friend was a girl.

Ray also met Hans in those days. Hans was blonde and blue-eyed, and always wore dark green lederhosen over a white shirt and socks up to his knees. Ray's parents said Hans was

Ray's imaginary friend, although they worried 'cause Ray was a bit old for that. And Ray assumed it was true 'cause no one else could see Hans but, to Ray, Hans was as real and solid as anything else. Also, Hans only showed up when Hans wanted. Ray was incapable of conjurin' him. Ray just figured that's how things was supposed to work. Paula could see Hans too.

Hans spoke English with an accent. One day Ray got a C on his report card in math. He sat beneath his favorite tree poutin'. Hans appeared next to him.

"You are bad with numbers, Ray?"

"I hate numbers. I hate math."

"Was ist los?"

"I just can't get the rules in my head. They don't make sense."

"Numbers are everything."

"Are you good at math, Hans?"

Hans nodded and shrugged. "Mmmm."

"Then why don't you visit me when I have a math test?"

"That would be cheating."

"No one else sees you. They don't think you're real."

"But you see me."

"But if you're not real, that's not cheating."

"I do not cheat, Ray."

It was obvious Hans had principles before those things was even a concept in Ray's mind, unless, of course, Hans was imaginary and he represented those things to Ray, or maybe those ideas took on a human form visible only to Ray. Is all that shit possible? What about those statues representin' freedom, wisdom or victory?

Furthermore, Hans had some peculiar ideas about his personal superiority. In those days, Ray would come across some of that old Nazi philosophy overhearin' the grownups talk. He got the impression they thought it was bad, even though they sometimes agreed with it. Hans said he'd been taught about his heritage from his father who said the bad things of the world was mostly caused by Jews.

Ray's folks was Baptists, but they didn't seem to have anything against the Jews, who played a pretty important part of the Old Testament, after all. Of course, Jesus was Jewish too. So was Paula. She taught him a Passover song. "Kadesh, Urchatz, Karpas, Yachatz..."

Paula and Ray had found a hole in the fence surroundin' the base and would sometimes sneak out and explore the woods. The day Paula saw Hans she and Ray was roamin' through the woods lookin' for an old pile of stones that must have been a large buildin' at one time. They saw a large pile of bricks and Paula pointed to a boy who was standin' on the top. It was Hans.

"You see him?" Ray was shocked.

Paula was indignant. "Of course I see him. He's right there.

"Hans, Paula can see you!"

"Ja, I am not hiding, Ray."

"You know him?" Paula asked.

"We're the only ones who can see him."

"That's not true, Ray."

"Yes it is."

"No it isn't."

"I've been with him before, Paula. Nobody sees him but me. And you."

"Are you real Hans?"

“Touch my arm.”

“He’s real, Ray.”

Ray felt vindicated someone else could see Hans. “What is this place, Hans?” he asked.

“Das Haus meine Oma.”

Paula was better at German than Ray. “His grandmother’s house. What happened?”

Hans made an explosion sound. “Dead.”

Paula was struck with empathy.

Ray noticed. “Dad says Darmstadt was bombed a lot.” Ray took note of the fact Hans didn’t talk about his family much. Ray figured if he was imaginary, he wouldn’t need a past.

“Do you want to play cowboys and indians?” Hans asked.

“Paula complained. “Everybody tries to kill each other.”

“Ja. Sometimes it is okay to kill.”

“No it’s not.”

“It is okay to kill animals!”

“People aren’t animals, Hans.”

“Some animals look like people.”

“No they don’t!”

“My father told me!”

Ray was impatient. “Let’s play hide and seek.”

“Okay,” Hans said. “Ray and I will hide.

Paula covered her eyes. “Eins, zwei, drei, vier...”

Paula found Ray pretty quick. They could sense where the other was. She never found Hans that day. He must have gone home.

When you look back on the road you traveled and realize how certain events had to come together to make your life what it is, it's almost magical folks. It's like echoes bounce off events and travel through time so you hear them years later.

Ray said he could also feel energy from people, like it would bounce off him and he'd get an impression. One day he and a buddy had roamed far out of the neighborhood and was walkin' home. A man in a car pulled up beside them and asked them if he could give them a lift. Ray disliked the man and said no. But his buddy was in a hurry and got too close to the car, despite Ray's warnin'. The man grabbed the boys arm, pulled him into the car and drove off.

Ray said he'd always remember the look on that kid's face, sort of like those animal shows on tv when the lioness pulls down the antelope. Instant and fatal and profound terror. Anyway, sure enough, the boy went missin'. The man was a pedophile, a Canadian, who was workin' on the Post with Ray's dad. Ray's buddy was never found.

Ray described the third eye as somethin' like sensin' an invisible box around a situation. Most folks see just the thing, but Ray could sense geometric shapes that formed the future or the whole picture. His parents just said he had a wild imagination.

He found joy in the library, alone among the books. That's when he first read about the pineal gland. The gland is located in the brain. Some old books he read said the gland connects the physical and spiritual worlds. It was supposed to be important in the development of psychic power. Wow, Ray thought! Could his ability be like that? The gland was called the third eye so that's why he started callin' his ability the same thing. The gland is shaped like a pine cone and the books said primitive humans used it a lot and that's why they was in constant contact with the supernatural. Over the years, though, humans didn't use it as much and it lost power. Things got more material, you see. Humans don't see gods no more.

While he's readin' about the pineal gland, he also finds books about the philosopher's stone. That was somethin' the ancient alchemists said could turn lead into gold. The books said there was also the possibility of turnin' an average person into gold, meanin' a spiritual person. Ray wondered what it meant to be spiritual, that is, bein' part of the spirit world. So the pineal gland is somethin' like a door between worlds, and the philosopher's stone could make a human into somethin' that could walk through that door.

"If that is true, why do people not know about it?"

"Guten Tag, Hans. It's in these books."

"These are very old books. You ask someone about this. They will not know about it."

"Maybe they just forgot."

"Did the war make them forget?"

"I don't know, Hans."

"This philosopher's stone...Der Stein der Weisen..."

Ray repeated, "Der Stein der Weisen." Hans helped Ray with his Deutsche this way."

"Is it real?" Hans asked.

"As real as we are, I guess."

"Can you imagine all the gold that can be made?"

"I can imagine a city of gold."

"Maybe you should imagine mathematics as gold."

Real Ale

The City Tavern was packed with giddy delegates of the Second Continental Congress. It was Thursday night as Tom Jefferson and John Hancock enjoyed a couple pints of ale followin' a patriotic day throwin' off the chains of the King.

Congress had ratified the Declaration of Independence that day. Hancock was President of the Congress. Jefferson had written the document in question. Now it was a matter of anticipatin' its effect on Philadelphia, on the Colonies, and of course on the English. But at the moment Tom was considerin' John's outfit. Hancock was rich, inheritin' his money from an uncle. He was, in fact, an orphan. Jefferson thought that's why he liked to show off what he considered his superior taste. Tom thought it pretentious.

"I must say, John, love the waistcoat."

"Thank you, Thomas. Amsterdam."

"Dutch! Who would have thought? And your breeches. Quite fashionable."

"French. I'm hoping my breeches convey stiffening resolve."

"Most indeed, John! Most indeed!" Tom always appreciated a good penis reference.

John shifted the conversation. "Heard news of Washington?"

"In New York. Also, rumors of British movement off Long Island. I suspect they want to end the celebration before it begins, John."

"Nevertheless, I believe we did well today."

"History shall be the judge of that, my friend. Did you inform Franklin of our opportunity?"

"Yes, he should be here any moment. Now, explain to me again how you came across these rather fashionable gentlemen."

“It’s rather hard to explain in a rational manner, John, but as we are both brothers, as it were, I beg your indulgence in this matter.”

“Indeed. You must visit St. Andrews when you are next in Boston.”

“I love my tea too much to throw it in the harbor, John.”

“Quite so. I admit it was a waste of good Twinings.”

“After the vote I was feeling giddy. Quite frankly, I’m not certain what possessed me to rise suddenly and leave the hall but I was certainly compelled to do so. I strolled east on Chestnut towards the river, quite lost in thought, not really aware I was going anywhere, actually, but apparently I was. When I came to Front Street I turned north, seemingly in two minds, John. That is I was fully aware of the river on my right and the various facades on my left, but I was also in something of a dream, walking in a world of geometry, if you will.”

“Geometry? What, pray tell, are you saying?”

“Yes, it is difficult to explain. I cannot do so. It is as if an idea of geometric shapes was made manifest and I was part of a line, No, I was a line, moving towards a point.”

“What point?”

“Aye, that is the point, John. I did not knock. I did not announce myself. I opened the door of a small establishment on the street to find a man waiting for me. He appeared to be a courtier of French fashion.”

“Blue coat and waistcoat, black pantaloons, white cravat?”

“Why, yes...how...oh, never mind. He led me down a long hall. You must understand, John, the building outside looked small. On the inside it resembled a cathedral.”

“I rather suspect you napped following the vote and dreamed the entire episode.”

“I cannot say, John, however, the gentlemen and lady I encountered were quite real to me, at least in every way I would perceive them to be real, la cour du roi Louis.”

“Why French, Tom? Why not English? Dutch?”

“I do not know. It was as real as you and I at this moment. As real as this ale.”

“And they promised you an opportunity to meet one of these aforementioned Masters?”

“Indeed.”

“And what is a Master?”

“I have the impression they are manipulating events. Our events.”

“French agents manipulating our events?”

“No, no. They’re not French. They appeared French. They spoke English, with French Accents...at least to me.”

“Tom, my good friend, I suspect this is all imagined and you are expecting Ben and me to accompany you into that fantasy. You are mad.”

“Well there it is. If after everything we’ve done together, stirred the hornet’s nest, you think me mad. Exile me to Virginia and I shall die a happy man.”

“I did not intend to ruffle your feathers, Tom, I am merely questioning your wits.”

“You, sir, are an odious toad.”

“Here, here, from the author of the Declaration of Independence!”

“Cheers.”

“Cheers. Now, there is something I want to relay to you that could possibly be connected to tonight. It is the reason I have agreed to accompany you on your adventure, Tom. Two days ago I was trading with a man out of Ulster, Mr. R.A. Wilson. He told me a remarkable story concerning Bavaria. It seems a Mr. Weishaupt has established the Order of Perfectibilis.”

“Optimistic.”

“Only recently changed to Illuminatenorden.”

“Well, we are all enlightened men, are we not?”

“They’ve taken the Owl of Minerva as their symbol.”

“Wisdom. Hardly subtle, John. Have they been recognized?”

“For the moment profane. The Austrians have found them to be somewhat radical.”

“How so?”

“Oh, you know. The inherent rights of man, the toppling of tyranny...that sort of thing.”

“Holy Roman prejudice, I suspect. Aren’t they Lutherans?”

“And it seems Mr. Weishaupt is specifically contemptuous of the Jesuits.”

“Not that they are deserving of contempt.”

“Quite so.”

“I am curious of the Austrian reluctance. Perhaps something related to a degree ritual?”

“One hears stories.”

“Yes. Otherwise, these Illuminati sound like amiable chaps.”

“Amiable atheists?”

“Yes, well there’s a fine point there, is there not? Whence cometh authority?”

“We are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights. If rights are given by Man, any Man may claim sovereignty. Hardly of the Light.”

“Yes. But I can see the point discarded in desperate times. An architect may have use for such material.”

“Rather cavalier with the ideal, don’t you think, Tom?”

“Perhaps in spirit. No one has accused me of being a Royalist. I am a practical man.”

“Speaking of a practical man, Mr. Franklin has arrived.”

Ben Franklin had stormed into the tavern, briefly stopped at the bar to order a drink to be delivered at the table, and elbowed his way apologetically through the crowd toward Tom and John. He was clutchin’ the newspaper and seemed mighty pissed off. He threw the paper onto the table and sat with an exaggerated disgust.

“Mr. Hancock, I believe the instructions were clear. You were to deliver the Declaration of Independence to the Pennsylvania Evening Post two days ago when we agreed to the final draft. So today, when we ratified it, it should appear in today’s newspaper.”

“Indeed I did so, Mr. Franklin. However, Mr. Towne did not want to commit to the document until we had officially ratified it. Therefore it shall be in the Post on the sixth.”

“The sixth! That’s bloody Saturday! Mr. Towne’s careful printing reeks to me of political opportunism. I do not doubt he would easily display Tory affectations should he be so compelled. A true patriot and a competent printer would have jumped on the news of our Declaration of Independence!”

“Mr. Franklin, there was mention in the Post of the Declaration Tuesday.”

“But the document, Mr. Hancock! The very document you were first to sign in your elaborate script Tuesday! That document should have been published today when we ratified it! It is the evidence of our resolve to fight for our freedom. It is Mr. Jefferson’s call to action!”

“With your help, Mr. Franklin, and Mr. Adams.”

“Really, Mr. Jefferson, it was you. It was always you. However, our ability to impress upon our citizens the import of this Declaration has been squandered by Mr. Towne.”

“And of course, you would know, Ben. Printing is among your many accomplishments. Thank you for joining us. And John, you might pass along the Declaration to General Washington in New York.”

“I shall do so Saturday.”

“Saturday, Mr. Hancock! Saturday! Every day matters! Where is Mr. Adams?”

“Mr. Franklin, I do ask you to calm yourself. I assure you there is no conspiracy to suppress news of our Declaration. General Washington will receive word in a timely manner. Furthermore Mr. Adams sends his regrets. He and his cousin are returning to Boston on pressing business.”

“There is word, Mr. Hancock, Long Island is in danger of English encroachment. Furthermore, as we speak there are unconfirmed rumors Howe landed on Staten Island yesterday! If the city should fall it would be that much more difficult to communicate with Boston. That ludicrous situation in Quebec New Year’s Eve should serve as warning we cannot be caught unaware of risks. We lost Montgomery. Arnold was wounded. Four hundred men taken prisoner. What were we thinking?”

“That the French would support us! You must remember the debate.”

“I remember we lost. New York is much more important to our cause than Canada.”

“I shall notify Washington as soon as possible, Mr. Franklin.”

“You mean Saturday.”

“Yes.”

“Need I remind you, Mr. Hancock, of the potential political implications of the King’s terror? Many loyalists live in New York. All Howe would need is to execute several rebels a day

before the city rises up against anyone supporting independence. And that fearful seed could sprout in Boston.”

“Not Boston.”

“It could sprout here in Philadelphia and Mr. Towne would support it in his Post!”

“I must say, Mr. Franklin, you haven’t much faith in the discipline of our neighbors.”

“Aye, Mr. Hancock. Public opinion will be one of the most vital forces in our new nation. We must not give too much power to mob sentiment. They can turn on a whim.”

“Well, sir, should Congress have need to evacuate this most patriotic of cities, we have a contingency in place in Baltimore. A tavern.”

“A tavern! Well, God is on our side. Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

A Question Of Aesthetics

Through the shiftin' grey mist Ray saw what appeared to be the outline of a town. The rumblin' in the sky echoed the rumblin in their guts. They was careful about spendin' the money they had and hadn't eaten much the day before when they hitchhiked to the concert. It was early and they didn't know what they'd find in Luling.

Ray observed Andy trudge up the road in his dusty Tony Lamas. A car approached from behind them. Andy turned, shufflin' backward, and stuck his thumb out. Ray did the same. The car sped up as it passed, makin' a statement, an old man smokin' a cigarette and clutchin' the steerin' wheel high and hard. He looked pissed. Ray wondered what they must look like to prospective rides, two longhaired, dirty hitchhikers, or maybe hijackers. Ray considered their decision to go on to the concert after Andy's car broke down was more emotional than sensible. But Ray's third eye was at ease, and of course, at that time they didn't care. The whiff of adventure was in the air. Andy paused to light a cigarette. He offered one to Ray. Ray took it.

"We probably look like killers," Andy observed.

Ray began singin'. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...?"

A low rumble tumbled across the sky.

"Fuck, Ray, your singin' is angerin' the thunder god."

If you recall, I explained the boys of Mango in those days tended to judge things physically. Beauty was only skin deep to them and there was no tellin' them otherwise. Mango College was stocked annually with potential catches, but neither Ray nor Andy was particularly successful at fishin'. Andy tended to have high moral standards. In Ray's case, he tended to be younger than most, graduatin' High School at 16 and whizzin' through College classes even in the summer. Ray knew how to be a student, even gettin' better in math, especially geometry.

The fraternities and sororities generally sported a preppy, conservative look. They contrasted with the shabby, woolly “heads” who hung out in the Radio and Television Department. Only two frat boys was in radio and tv. Ray’s buddies referred to them collectively, as Rob and Bob, as they was never seen apart from each other. They looked like bookends, wearin’ their sweaters tied over their shoulders around their Oxford shirts. Their haircuts was identical, the same blow-dried, medium length, blonde locks that sat lazily just over the tops of their ears. The heads referred to the Greeks as Krappa Doodoos. The Greeks called the heads loser assholes.

It was the redheaded goddess, Morrigan, and only that divine idea, who had ever completely stepped out of one world into the other. The source of her transformation was her sisters in the sorority, who adopted her as their pet, although she dumped them as quickly as she dumped the boys when she escaped to New York to get paid for sex even though she wasn’t a prostitute. That was Mango genius.

Ray worked part-time at the college television station so he had keys. This is important.

One of his classes, Television Production, involved the creation of music exercises. Now, all y’all have seen music videos. In ‘76, before anyone even thought of software, they’d put pictures on two stands, make moves on them with two cameras, and use what’s called a switcher while music played. All this was recorded in real time on fat pieces of video tape on a large round spool that rotated on a big editing machine.

Ray’s exercise for the class was a collection of rodeo pictures edited to the song, *Remember the Good Times* by the god of Texas music, Willie Nelson.

Now, I’m gonna have to take a little time here for the benefit of those who don’t know how big an impact Willie Nelson had on the state of Texas. It’s tough to communicate these

days what a hero, an icon, a burnin' force Willie Nelson was to young Texans in 1976. Today Willie's well respected musically, but back then he was the source of the identity Texas would brag about for generations. He was *The Red Headed Stranger!* And Willie represented weed. Austin was cowboy hippie. Any young Texas head with any self-respect had to make a trip to Austin at some point and join the party.

So anyway, Ray and his buddies are at Mango College. Charlie Fellini was their professor. Fellini graded Ray's music exercise and said it was okay, but it didn't give him a boner. That astonished Fred McKinley who didn't realize that was the point of the exercise. Fred, Joe Napolitano, Andy and Ray used to hang out in the cafeteria. Andy said he did his project to *Okie From Muskogee*. They all agreed that wouldn't give Fellini a boner either. Fellini just meant the exercise wasn't excitin', wasn't sexy, like they say today. It was ordinary, average. But back then the boys tended to be a bit literal about things. The material was all they knew. Appearance was all that mattered.

Joe proclaimed the obvious. "Fellini needs a boner!"

Fred threw up his hands and said, "Well, short of doing a porno I don't see how he's going to get it."

There was a peculiar silence. Until that moment it hadn't occurred to them the potential of puttin' photographs to music.

"Fuck," said Andy. They looked at Ray. Ray worked at the station. He had keys. Ray immediately understood, but did point out they could never show anything like that to Fellini. However, he saw in their faces Fellini's boner was no longer their concern.

They agreed to meet at the station before Ray's shift ended about midnight. They also agreed to bring magazines and music. That night Napolitano arrived with a fat doobie and they smoked that outside the back door before they looked over the possibilities.

To the boys beauty may have only been skin deep, but it's in moments like this when folks discover they don't always see eye to eye on art, beauty, or anything else of real value. Plato said beauty was the object of every love's yearning, and that might have been true for Ray and Andy, but it was bullshit to Fred. It was evident by the various magazines they'd brought. One man's art is another man's porn, right? Andy and Ray opted for the more idealized Playboy. Napolitano had brought a Penthouse, which was a bit more graphic, but McKinley brought the hard core shit. He had Hustlers, nudist magazines and specialty publications featurin' hairy women and anal sex.

Of the four of them, Fred McKinley had a reputation for havin' no standards whatsoever. Fact is, he said havin' standards at all was counterproductive. Consequently, he got laid more often than the rest of the boys. On the other hand, he'd had practically every case of the clap you could imagine. All Fred ever cared about was fuckin'. He had no romantic notions at all.

Andy was shocked at Fred's magazines. This led to aesthetic clashes. Andy was conservative. He said he didn't have a problem showin' some skin, but he wasn't comfortable with the actual fornicatin', especially in the back door.

Fred wasn't gettin' it. Wasn't they makin a porno?

Joe pointed out some of the photos was black and white and some in color and emphasized to his artistic colleagues the importance of establishin' a tone and bein' consistent.

"And who will watch this?" he announced with authority. "Who is our audience?"

Andy took a stand. He said he'd leave if they used Fred's magazines.

Fred called Andy a pussy.

Andy got into Fred's face and offered politely to ram his fist down his throat. Ray stepped between them and offered a compromise. In a calm voice he said, "Fred, the truth is we're just not in your league. You know more about fucking than all of us. But this piece could be more than that, aesthetically, I mean."

Fred shrugged widely, not comprehending.

Ray looked at Andy who was still clenchin' his fists. "Reckon we could use some of Fred's beavers."

Joe rejoiced. "Got any beavers in color, Fred?"

Fred's disappointment settled on his shoulders like that fat lady who sang, who was also in one of his magazines. He understood his defeat as a battle for freedom of speech against a democratic majority that didn't know shit about sex.

They rummaged through the various photos and put them in order while listenin' to the records they'd brought on the turntable. After some consideration, with a nod to the history of Mango, they chose King Crimson's "Ladies of the Road", more about groupies than prostitutes, but what the hell?

They stepped outside, back of the studio, to smoke another joint before they began and that's when Rob and Bob showed up from Watcher Park. Napolitano offered them a toke.

Now folks, the idea of aesthetics can have a purely artistic connotation but ain't all our judgments artistic? If you think the world should look a certain way, I reckon that's an aesthetic choice. So, if you judge others by what they're wearin', you might come to a conclusion based on whether you think conformity is good or bad. Now, the boys, they had no sense of fashion at all. Hell, most of their clothes hadn't been washed in a few days. Rob and Bob, on the other

hand, dressed like their middle-class friends. Their aesthetic was used to send a message to the boys that they didn't belong. Of course, the boys was proud of their ragged, shaggy individuality. And along with appearance was an expectation of philosophical conformity. You can look the part, but that don't make you any more than an actor unless you believe the part. So thought becomes an aesthetic choice too.

"Y'all are up here late," Rob said.

"Really late," Bob observed.

"So are y'all," Andy answered.

"We were partyin' at the gazebo with a couple of stoner chicks looking to score," Rob explained.

"Not loitering inside the school after everything's closed," Bob clarified.

Ray tried to change the subject. "Thought you hung out with sorority chicks."

"The Betas start their coat drive tomorrow," Rob said.

"They don't do gazebo the night before," Bob elaborated.

"Those chicks still looking to score?" Joe asked.

"I only had a joint on me," Rob replied.

"But they appreciated it," Bob smirked.

"Did you fall in love?" Fred smirked back.

Rob spit. "Tryin' to be funny oil slick?"

Bob spit too. "Yeah, like you ever take a fucking bath?"

Joe made peace. "Why don't you boys have a doobie on me and let us get back to work."

Andy got aggressive. "It's a secret project for Fellini's class. So fuck off."

Rob and Bob accepted the joint and moved on. "Fuck you very much."

The large gazebo, of course, is still in the middle of Watcher Park, south of the college. The legend is if you meet somebody there you'll fall in love, that sort of thing. It's populated after the sun goes down by all kinds of folks doin' all kinds of things, openly. There's never been an issue of stoppin' it. And it's considered bad form to mention the more graphic displays of affection. To those of us in the know, the gazebo has a secret, but we don't talk about it.

The boys got back to work then and was makin' good time till a campus cop wandered into the studio. Generally, the cops wasn't interested in anything happenin' on campus. They wasn't armed or curious so it was unusual the guy showed up singin' *You Are My Sunshine*. There was no way to hide what they was doin', so they gathered in the studio except for Napolitano who slipped out the back door. He was holdin'.

The cop had a drawl longer than a yardstick. "Looks like y'all are doin' somethin' y'all shouldn't be doin'."

Ray explained his employment status and the class project and how they was doin' somethin' special.

"With naked girls," the cop observed.

Fred attempted a reasonable approach. "Obviously, because we're using these photos, we can't do it during normal hours."

But it was Andy this time who offered a solution. "Hey, why don't you watch us? You can sit over here and look at the magazines if you want."

The officer considered the offer. He nodded like he drawled. He sat down, picked up one of Fred's hairy magazines and continued singin'. You make me happy when skies are grey. The cop stayed until the end.

When they finished Andy, Fred and Ray packed up, locked up, and waved goodbye to the guard who kept the magazine and disappeared into the dark campus singin'. "You'll never know dear, how much I love you..."

The boys hoped the cop had been compromised so they felt somewhat relieved and lingered in front of the station as the moon crept across a starlit sky. Andy lit a Camel. Fred lit a Marlboro. Ray bummed a Camel. Not far away, the sound of Joe's '65 Impala with a hole in the muffler could be heard recedin' into the night, *Layla* blarin' on the 8 track. Ray concluded Joe had sold dope to the stoner chicks in Watcher Park.

"Could still rat us out," Andy decided.

Ray inhaled the cigarette deeply. "Doubt it, but Scarlet says tomorrow is another day."

Fred checked his watch. "What do we do with the video?"

Andy dismissed him. "I put the three-quarter master on my private shelf. It's safe."

The night's activities prompted Ray to contemplate beauty and which women most resembled his ideal. Ray's ideal was Stevie Nicks. The boys had seen Fleetwood Mac in the Mango Special Events Center about three months prior. Ray stood on the floor beneath the stage and gazed in rapt wonder at Nicks, with her long, black dress, sportin' a top hat and a tambourine. Nancy Wilson was absolutely hot but Stevie Nicks was a full-fledged goddess. Andy liked Farah Fawcett. "Layla, you got me on my knees..." Fred had no ideal.

Anyway, Ray knew what turned him on and Fred's magazines made no attempt to gloss reality. Ray realized he liked gloss. After all, if you think about the goddesses of love, Venus, Aphrodite, Isis, they are glossy ideals. They are stars.

"Thou fair-hair'd angel of the evening."

"Blake," said Andy. They'd been in English 201 together.

“Venus,” said Fred, always the rational one.

Ray nodded. “The evening and the morning star.”

Fred spit. “Blake seemed a bit loopy to me.”

Andy dismissed Fred. “*O Jerusalem* isn’t loopy.”

Ray loved William Blake. He wrote about magic and the invisible. He hated Shakespeare for a completely irrational reason. He found him to be too quotable. Ray soaked in the sky. He imagined countless generations of humans just like himself starin’ up at the light show and seein’ magic in the night. Ray wondered what it must have been like to really believe, like they did in the ancient days, that stars guided your destiny.

Ray pointed at Isis. “Check out Sirius. Very bright tonight. The stars are guiding us.”

Fred was disgusted. “You’re not talking about that astrology shit, are you?”

Ray laughed. “Maybe I was talking about navigation!”

“I know what you’re talkin’ about, Ray,” Andy said, “but it ain’t the stars guidin’ us.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Fred demanded.

“He’s talking about God, Fred. Oh, but maybe God’s an alien like, you know, the *Chariots of the Gods*.” Ray had talked about the book before with Fred but Fred took the position that aliens would have to travel faster than the speed of light to come to earth and that was impossible and it was a stupid idea anyway.

Fred waved them off. He didn’t have time for that nonsense. Like I said, he only cared about fuckin’. He retreated into the night with his dirty magazines.

So, after a night of producin’ pornography Ray found himself considerin’ spirituality, or the love of beauty. Or just sex. Or maybe sex is a road to God. From the physical to the

spiritual, the mundane to the divine. Ray peered into the universe before him. “Sometimes I feel like something’s guiding me. Sometimes I’m just lost.”

Andy considered his friend. “Well, I figure you’ll know what you need to know when you need to know it.”

Ray pointed his cigarette at Andy. “Why didn’t you want to use Fred’s magazines?”

Andy shook his head. “He don’t have standards, Ray. I’m a live and let live kinda guy, but some things just bring down the moral center.”

Ray dropped his cigarette on the ground and rubbed it out with his shoe. “Pornography?”

Andy nodded.

Ray shrugged. “Just pictures, man.”

Andy offered another cigarette to Ray who took it. “I think it gives people the wrong idea, Ray. You know, they look at those pictures and they think that’s the way it is. Well, that ain’t the way it is.”

“Could be,” countered Ray.

Andy waved him off. “Tell that to your girlfriend who’s never heard of such a thing.”

Ray considered Orion and Orion’s Belt, and followed the invisible path to Sirius.

“Darling won’t you ease my worried mind...How did the red headed goddess change overnight? What was she thinking the night before? Commitment?”

There was an edge to Andy’s voice. “You’re the one who sees the future. Seems to me if you really could do that you’d be able to do whatever you wanted, includin’ changin’ whatever you wanted.”

“Oh, right,” Ray thought. Anger over his third eye. It always appeared at unexpected moments. Ray changed the subject. “Well, on the 4th of July we’re going to the concert, man. We’re going to see Willie Nelson. We’re going somewhere. I’m committed.”

Andy shook his head. “You will be committed you keep up that third eye bullshit.”

Joe Napolitano, whose mind was more open than most, called it the Eye of Shiva. Joe had once given Ray blotter and they ended up at the Dennys and Ray saw ideas hoverin’ like balloons over people, like ideas was choosin’ people to be their vehicles like we choose cars.

Ray told me at that moment with Andy he felt an idea was hoverin’ above him, wonderin’ if Ray was the proper vehicle. The idea chose him, Ray said, the idea to go on that trip, and as far as Ray was concerned, it was a done deal. It was gonna happen. A triangle extended from his eyes to a point beyond his nose.

Ray saw the road.

Ray saw the road stretch into the horizon and disappear as they hiked along the highway. Ray figured if you just put one foot in front of the other you’d end up someplace at some point in time. Ray thought it was funny how being on the road meant you wasn’t anyplace. You was between places, even though you was clearly in a place, beggin’ for rides. Ray observed Andy was lost in thought too.

“Hey, man, ever hear about the secret of Mango?”

“The disappearances?”

“Where the hell did they go, man?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“They had to go someplace.”

“You sure about that?”

Bad Bullfight

“Bloody Hell, Tandi. I hate fucking Texas.”

Teddy’s being unusually moody today. His habit of wearing nothing but black every single day might have something to do with it.

“But we’re not going to Austin, Teddy, my love. We’re going to a god-forsaken provincial landmark.”

“Good Lord! Mango? I’ve never had the desire to go back.”

“Well, you might want to start desiring.”

“What the hell is he doing? The bull is a fucking pin-cushion! He’s dripping blood from every fucking wound and that wanker is prancing about like a fucking ballerina! Boo!”

“It’s called masculinity, Teddy.”

“It scares the hell out of me.”

“A big strong man like you?”

“Mango scares me. The future.”

“The future’s always scary.”

“It’s what’s implied love.”

“I get it. But you did return from the other side. You’re special. Think about all those who tried and never returned.”

“But I was never the same, was I? I know too much. Funny thing is, I stood at the door, considering everything, knowing I would probably die, and I leaped. I tried to kill myself, love. I was prepared for death. I was never prepared for the truth.”

“You do realize we had this same conversation when I came back from it.”

“Fuck. You never get over it. What does the Council think they’re seeing?”

“Unusual wave activity.”

“Not likely a terrorist threat in Mango unless the Masters have sussed the plan, Tandi.”

“Fuck them.”

“Well, do you think they know?”

“If they do it’s over.”

“Might not be so bad.”

“Maybe you’re getting old. Maybe you just want to pretend it’s not real and go back to sleep. Remember history, the shift from Brit to Yank. Privilege, Teddy. Noblesse oblige.”

“Rubbish.”

“Freedom.”

“They use us, my love, for whatever schemes they fancy.”

“I’d rather be awake.”

“My point is if The Masters know about Mango, they know about us and about the Council turning and then what would be the point?”

“Maybe it’s coincidence.”

“And maybe there’s one of us in Mango we don’t know about.”

“Aren’t you sensing it? I’ve been feeling a progressive significance related to terror.”

“Yes, well, you’re much more sensitive than I am, darling. Is there a name?”

“Ray Rhodes.”

“Mr. Rhodes. And since we don’t know...”

“We have to feel him out.”

“That could take weeks!”

“All the indications are pointing to July 4th. Independence Day, Teddy.”

“Indications...indications. I prefer something stronger.”

“Like Scotch?”

“You’re one to talk. What’s that rubbish you found?”

“Old Overholt.”

“Why do you drink that rye rot, Tandi? Barley’s best.”

“Something personal, I guess.”

“New world taste. Concerning Mr. Rhodes, if he’s one of us I’ll need Mr. Putty.”

Poor Teddy. He’s really had enough. Too bad there’s no relief. That day The Council put us together should have been the clue. He only wanted to drink. His reluctance on every mission is understandable, considering the sometimes lethal result, but he’s been at this longer. Teddy’s a consummate professional. He gets the job done, every time, except that time in Austin. And I’m fucking tired of being the one pulling the trigger.

“Yes, well, I suppose it will be nostalgic seeing Mango again.”

“That’s the attitude.”

“But I will miss the Costa Brava.”

“You won’t miss this pathetic bullfight.”

“Rather tiresome, isn’t it. The incompetent Matador. And here comes the man with the knife. Bloody brilliant. You’re a wanker! Si! Boo!”

“You can always come home, Teddy.”

“Not really. I get farther from it every time I leave.”

“At least you have a home.”

“That was your choice, my love.”

“Why is everything so complicated now?”

“It’s all very simple, darling.”

“You see? That’s what you do.”

“I don’t do anything.”

“You always contradict me!”

“No I don’t.”

“You’re doing it now!”

“No I’m not.”

“My God you’re a wanker.”

“You don’t even know what a wanker is.”

“Yes I do.”

“You just hear me say it and you say it because you want to make a point.”

“No I don’t.”

“Have time for a siesta before you leave?”

“Why not?”

The Arcane Knowledge of Thebes

So how many of you think this is just fanciful bullshit I'm makin' up to lure you into a dangerous cult? None of you? Well how 'bout that? What if I told you that's exactly what I'm doin'? How many of you want to leave? Raise your hand. One, two, three, four...four? That's fine. Y'all just take a cookie for the road and I appreciate you spendin' time with me today. Y'all know the way out, don't you? Take care of yourself. Bye bye, now. Please shut the door on the way out. Thank you!

Okay, let's get down to business. Y'all obviously don't believe what's in front of your noses and that's a good sign. That means you got a little curiosity and a lot of skepticism. That official origin of Mango is what we tell the tourists. It's commerce. How do you hide the truth? Put it right out there in the open, amigos.

The truth of Mango is so bizarre most folks just don't believe it. The foundin' pioneers found it hard to believe too, so they devised a way to hide it and prosper from it. You're probably thinkin', realistically, a town couldn't be established by a bunch of religious zealots and prostitutes. They'd have nothin' but churches and brothels and the two just wouldn't work together, and you'd be right.

On the other hand, there is evidence of such a thing and it was mentioned by the Greek historian Herodotus. Apparently, in Babylon, every woman by law had to surrender herself to Venus, that's Mylitta to the Assyrians, and have sex with a stranger. Women would sit there in the sacred precincts until a man chose them and then they'd go off and have sex. She couldn't refuse anyone. And she couldn't leave until a silver coin was tossed in her lap and the stranger said, Mylitta Prosper Thee. Sacred Sex? Religious prostitution? What the fuck?

Well, this point wasn't lost on the founders of Mango. They was a learned bunch in terms of the classics. But don't jump to conclusions. That ain't the secret of Mango.

Obviously, in order to build a community, they needed an economy and just as with many communities around them, they began with cattle, got the railroad to come through, established banks and later struck oil. That's historical fact, but not the truth.

Many of the founders had abandoned families to follow Jacob Winston, but later, brought those families to the settlement and they brought their traditional beliefs with them. Gradually a moralistic middle class was formin', just like in any town, and those folks wasn't too happy about the prostitutes and proceeded to shut them down and send them packin', those still in the trade, that is. So here was the town of Mango with a typical business front of respectability.

The first Masonic Lodge was established by the Societas Vigilum On The Plains. However, the Grand Lodge of the Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons for the State of Texas didn't accept the Lodge. The Mango group was considered fringe at best and the fact they admitted women didn't endear them to the traditional types. And the rumors that some of the Mango Lodge practices for the higher degrees involved ritual sex and magic pretty much kept the Mango group way outside the Freemason mainstream. Seems there was a bit of Babylon in them after all.

Anyhoo, back then the town leaders was all members and they all seemed to know a secret handshake, even though it was evident to anyone watchin' what the handshake was. So they called themselves Masons even though Masons in other towns wouldn't claim them.

Here's what happened. There was a handful of Watchers who experienced somethin' unusual out there on the prairie. That's where Watcher Park is today by the college. And a few of them claimed to know the ancient initiation rites of the priesthood in Egypt. So they formed

their lodge and set about tryin' to understand the strange experience they had on the prairie, which was no easy thing, 'cause it's hard to explain, much less get a handle on it.

Now, this is another crazy part. The lodge also tried to get the town's name changed to Thebes. Callin' the town Mango, considerin' its origin, was tantamount to callin' it Babylon. Well, the moral folks was in favor of Thebes, and called for a public vote to name the town. The name "Mango" won 'cause the fake Masons voted for it. Now wait a minute! Didn't you say they came up with the idea of Thebes in the first place? Yes, and then they voted it down!

Turns out the fake Masons of Mango referred to the town as Thebes in their secret rituals. Inside their lodge they had a mock Karnak Temple, much smaller, of course, in which they would ask the gods Amun, Mut and Khonsu to choose the Potentate of Games. That exalted person would be in charge of creatin' rules for the Order. Once a new Potentate of Games was named, new rules would be imposed. This happened every two years. It's said Domino Night could become quite hellish. The old Potentate walked into Heaven to live with Amun and was never seen again. What do I mean by that? That was a secret for the higher degrees.

They reasoned if the common folks focused on the Origin of Mango, they wouldn't be askin' about the disappearances of noteworthy townsfolk and others. The fake Masons offered up the lesser truth, which is a shiny distraction, in order to hide the greater truth, which was dangerous. To top it off, they engineered this vote to give the whole thing a legitimacy that would put to rest further questions regardin' what was really goin' on, in case the word "Thebes" got out. Of course, that didn't stop the whisperin' and unsuccessful investigations.

Those fake Masons created truth and reality by tellin' a story and everybody accepted it and now it's goddamned history. That's the beauty of public relations! And you don't see fake

Masons around town anymore 'cause they all went to Heaven. I'm descended from a Watcher who saw a little more than he expected out there on the prairie. The knowledge lives on.

Now, of course, the Chamber of Commerce has run wild with the Origin of Mango, hopin' tourists will be attracted to the unusual honesty of this town, and the fake recreations of brothels that sell I Love Mango t-shirts and coffee mugs.

And now you know somethin' most folks don't.

Grade A Porn

You want to know why Moses got so pissed off after comin' down the mountain with the Ten Commandments to find the Israelites had made a golden calf? Those folks needed to build somethin' solid to remind them why they was out there in the desert. They needed an image to worship. But folks, if you make physical somethin' that's not physical and call it a god, well, you've got to face charges of idolatry, which is what they did. It wasn't pretty. The Bible says 3,000 Israelites was butchered. That's quite a price to pay for worshippin' your creation, ain't it? And don't even think about depictin' Allah or Mohammed! You're liable to get stalked by jihadists who'll get all Moses on your ass.

But fortunately for Ray and the boys, their penalty was not so severe for creatin' an idol to be worshipped in filthy fashion.

The next day Ray was called into Edward Keyes' office. Keyes was in charge of the Department. Ed was a big black man with a deep resonating voice, an old radio jock. He'd worked with Alan Freed in Cleveland before Freed went to New York. He'd even met Wolfman Jack. Ed was a fuckin' broadcaster and he always wore a three-piece suit and a bad toupee. Ed sat behind his desk. Fellini sat on the edge of it, a nervous man with a big family but never enough health insurance. On the desk was a three-quarter inch cassette. Ray understood immediately. They'd been ratted out. The cop wasn't content with the magazines.

The gist of it is Ray's in trouble. Fellini believed it called for a teachable moment. So the boys would be graded on the project to teach them a lesson. But it wasn't the cop who ratted them out. Keyes and Fellini knew about Joe. It was Rob and Bob.

Joe whispered his rage. "Those motherfuckers. I gave them a joint!"

The boys was in the cafeteria when Ray broke the news.

Andy suddenly sprouted a ragin' tomato red, puffy-face. His eyes bulged and his lips reared back, exposin' cigarette-yellowed teeth. We're goddamn smut peddlers! We're goin' to Hell! Just think what would happen if we had done the fuckfest!"

Fred countered. "We'd probably make some goddamn money!"

Joe threw up his hands, "Well, you know who won't get a boner. Keyes."

Everybody knew Keyes was gay. No big deal. Fact is, in those days Mango had a pretty big gay population for a town its size, but considerin' it was those days, most folks kept a relatively low profile, although any open-minded barhopper was obligated to make a stop at The Cave to pay respect.

Of course there was a moral group who didn't like it. Like I said, some folks are just so proud of how they view the world, there ain't no room for somethin' different. So they deny it. What's funny is they make no secret of the fact the town was founded by whores. That's local color! Why, that's just capitalism in its most basic form, ain't it? But don't tell me there's men lyin' with men or women with women! I got my picture all painted and I ain't got room for that! No siree!

Matter of fact, Keyes was creative. He come up with a gay origin of Mango which he related to the boys one night over beers. Back then, in Texas, the drinkin' age was 18. Just want to make that clear. Fred just happened to have his cassette recorder with him. Ain't that convenient? Keyes made a big production of it. He stood on a chair at The Dog and Pony Show, a bar near the college. Like I said, he was a big guy and more than a little tipsy, and slurrin' his words, and he was swayin' dangerously on the chair, but his partner, Tom, sportin' a lime green polyester leisure suit, supported him as Ed Keyes, his toupee awry, launched into his oratory.

Keyes held his right forefinger in the air, as if that was the expected pose. “In those days, those days of yore, when the founding of our great city was birthed out of the regal, I mean illegal congregation of sexual appetites, one man’s vision defined, but did not refine, the relationship between God and man.

At some point, a time yet to be returning...determined, Jacob Winston suddenly...I presume it was sudden, but I have no evidence...he realized he had dozens of spiritual men but no women. He thought it odd, dare I say queer, that only men would arrive when the flyers he’d circulated in previous towns he’d visited said clearly, “Come to Paradise, Men and Loving Partners in Life.”

For you see, unfortunately for Winston, he was diluted...deluded by the inherent misogyny, look it up ye who are thirsty for knowledge... of Christianity and Juda...sism... and could not bring himself to use the word, “women.”

Women! It reminded him of his mother, you see, and she was a controlling bitch. For it is a little known fact that Winston had, in fact, been responsible for his father’s death, in fact. He did not know, in fact, the older Yankee he had stabbed with a bayonet on the battlefield was his actual father. Winston’s real name was Lancaster, but he had been stolen when he was a baby, by an insane drunk named Victoria Winston who desperately wanted a baby, and who brought young Jacob home to her husband, One-Eared Bill, a bar owner, and they raised him as their own in the squalor of their self-destructive lives...which Jacob was quick to escape when he joined the Confederacy...those slave-owning sons of bitches.

Jacob Winston was consumed with guilt by the deep gratification he received plunging his bayonet over and over ...and over again into the writhing, bleeding man who was his father, Sebastian. His father’s last words to Jacob were, “God bless you, son.” Of course, it was pure

coincidence that Sebastian should utter those words, for he did not know the man who pierced his mortal flesh was the child he had conceived and who had been cruelly stolen from him.

Jacob was shattered by the life he had taken, a life that forgave his cruelty. So he made it his holy mission to discover the identity of his battlefield victim and to apologize to his family.

Immediately after the war he found Jocasta, Sebastian's wife. She was, of course older than Jacob, but he was strangely attracted to her, there in her deep grief, her vulnerability drew him in. Do I need to elaborate on the tragic circumstances? For yes, as you suspected, in a story older than Sophocles himself, Jacob fucked Jocasta, and carried on with her in secrecy before their nuptials were planned.

By the time of their wedding Jacob had grown irritated by the way Jocasta treated him. She would order him around and fly into a rage when he would not do what she demanded. She said so long as he lived in her house he must follow her rules. He would have left her were it not for his attraction to her that grew from his obsessive memory of stabbing Sebastian and the erotic compulsion that followed to penetrate Jocasta!

Would you hand me my drink, Tom? Thank you, kind slur.

On their wedding day when the Minister asked, is there anyone present who does not believe the bride and groom should be married, it was Jacob's other mother, Victoria, who rose quite sober, unlike your humble narrator, and said the ceremony was an abom...abomination!

And explained why.

Jacob quickly fled the city in disgrace and no small measure of disgust, turning his back on the past, heading west.

Everyone at the ceremony was relieved the truth was exposed before the bride and groom had a chance to consummate the marriage. These were Victorian times, even in America, when the illusion of respectability was observed over the rather unsavory reality.

This was Jacob Winston's state of mind when he came to the prairie to pray to God for salvation. This is what was in his heart when he looked out upon his followers to see only men.

He actually suspected something was amiss when the sun went down and he noticed shadows in the moonlight. He even said as much every day in his sermons. He would close with the prayer, "Jesus, please banish the shadows from our Holy Prairie."

But one night as moonlight determined the course of shadow and light, Peter Pan's shadow called upon Mr. Winston. I won't bore you with the graphic details, but suffice it to say Jacob Winston got fucked like a whore in a gold rush.

And he liked it.

He forever saw things in a new light.

When Cyrus MacDonald showed up with the ladies, some men set up shop elsewhere. We now know that part of town as The Caves, in reference, of course, to Plato's allegory of the cave. Those men knew life is shadows. And that's why we love the Greeks.

Unfortunately, Winston could not make it off the prairie, much less out of the closet, and so he vilified the desires he had revealed in only days before. He was forever haunted by his unexplainable circumstances and he attempted to find solace in the Holy Bible, and the classics, but tragically, he grew embittered and judgmental. He suppressed his true desire, to love all men. That was a lesson in eros and agape, boys."

The boys learned a lot about Keyes that night. He was an artist.

At noon, Fred, Andy, Joe and Ray was joined by Keyes and Fellini in the conference room with a three-quarter inch machine. They watched the music exercise silently as King Crimson filled the tiny room. Keyes and Fellini watched the video without expression.

When it was over Keyes broke the suffocatin' silence. "I don't know about you, Charles, but it didn't give me a boner."

The boys giggled nervously. It appeared Fellini was searchin' for the precise level of outrage, even though it was all planned. Then he basically ripped them a new one. Aesthetically, however, he was quick to note they'd created a mess with no intrinsic value. He flunked them.

Fred was confused. "Why is porn morally wrong? It makes people rich. That's the American way, right?"

Fellini wanted to tell Fred to pull his head out of his ass, but instead, he considered Fred was his student. "You'll come across a lot of inconsistencies in your lives. You'll have ideals and you'll hear excuses about why the ideals are too unrealistic to follow. The realistic choice will always be about making a living. That's how we survive. However, if we disregard the ideals, we have no standards at all."

"Maybe we shouldn't have standards," said Fred.

"Sometimes we just have to put up a front for everyone else," Keyes explained, "Appearance means a lot to people."

"Hypocrisy," insisted Fred.

"The way it is," countered Fellini.

"I think standards are important, Mr. Fellini," said Andy who was desperately suckin' up.

“And what standards did you apply to this project, Mr. Hart,” asked Fellini, “because I couldn’t see any.”

“Well, it could’ve been a lot dirtier, but it wasn’t.”

Fellini could only manage disgust. “Really, Andy? That’s all you’ve got?”

Andy rubbed his left wrist furiously. “Wish I had more, Mr. Fellini.”

Folks, nature ain’t kind to ignorance. She can rip you apart with the teeth of a tiger and be blissfully content in her lack of judgment, and full belly. That’s what Ray was considerin’ after they left the school that day.

Joe was philosophical. “Well, lesson learned, right guys? If you’re going to attempt something beyond the boundaries of good taste it better be fuckin’ good.”

Fred was historical. “You know what they did to Edward II? They stuck a hot poker up his ass. Fried his insides.”

Andy was skeptical. “Really think we could do that to Rob and Bob?”

It occurred to Ray the Krappa Doodoos would always have somethin’ over him. Money. They may be goin’ to the same school, but they wasn’t the same. Ray understood he would always resent their privilege. He also realized they’d probably never notice, much less understand the injustice. They was content with their full bellies.

He shook it off. “I’ve got Spanish in fifteen minutes but I just want to get high.”

Andy patted his shirt pocket. “I got a j, man. Want to take a ride?”

Fred nodded. “I could use a beer. Let’s just go to my place.”

Joe celebrated. “Party in the afternoon!”

“Fuckin’ A,” said Ray.

Fred and Andy lit cigarettes. Ray bummed one of Andy's Camels and they took off across the campus to Fred's apartment. It was a sunny, cool, early spring day and the thought of spendin' it on beer and weed was exhilaratin'. As for Rob and Bob, it seemed to Ray if you're always lookin' at the material world for confirmation of your place in life then you'll always be concerned about holdin' on to material things. If you're always lookin' outward, what kind of inner life would you have? He realized Rob and Bob must be empty inside.

Well, he couldn't know that, of course.

As he strolled with Andy and Fred to Fred's place, through the beautiful Winston Park neighborhood with its old oaks and red brick streets he suddenly felt balanced on that razor's edge between the external and internal worlds. Ray was beginnin' to see the world beyond the material, beyond appearance. The moments wasn't permanent, but when they came they was powerful. He grasped the infinity of his internal universe, freedom of pure thought.

Outside he saw the potential for beauty, but also the endless pain of desire, the sufferin' felt by all people. He'd read a little about Buddhism and could relate to that part, but he wasn't convinced the material world was illusion. Depends on your perspective. You could only say that truthfully from outside lookin' in. How could you do that? Now, if you was inside lookin' out, which is what everybody was, what was the inside seein'? What was imagination? Where did it come from? What's inspiration?

He was brought back to Mango, literally, trippin' on a brick and fallin' in the middle of the road because he wasn't payin' attention to the material world. The boys howled and ordered him to get his ass back up pronto and to stop daydreamin'.

Rob and Bob seemed to have been born knowin' how to succeed. So why did they have to rat out Ray? Well, that's what the rich do. They throw out the trash.

Manifest Destiny

Lieutenant Sam Path was an eager young man, 'bout as foolish as he was remarkably open-minded in those days. He'd left his affluent family in Illinois to join the Army, much to their chagrin. After all, the Civil War was over. But he'd wanted to see the frontier. His uncle had managed to get him a commission so he just packed up one night and skedaddled.

He'd served as adjutant to Colonel Cyrus MacDonald at Fort Palo Duro goin' on a month, and learned to resent and love the sparse landscape that greeted his mornin' coffee meditation. Back home they called it a desert. Injun country. Not a tree in sight. Just grass. Grass for what's left of the buffalo. A sea of grass. And wind. Always the wind. This could be hell as far as Path was concerned. On the other hand, he never felt closer to his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The empty plains both mirrored and nurtured his solitude. Path only felt freedom when he was alone with God. God was within him and gave him strength and perspective. You can see a long way out there on the plains. You can see it comin' long 'fore it gets here, he often thought. Of course, Sergeant Booker didn't see it comin'.

And Path didn't see what was comin' that mornin' in late June, 1876. He was summoned to MacDonald's office. When he arrived he found the Colonel flustered, lookin' for somethin'.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Lost my goddamn pipe, Path. Wife gave it to me."

"I'll help you find it, sir."

"Just leave it for the moment, son. I want you to do somethin' for me. Now, I don't know how much of this you know, but I'll try to be brief. Last year we were able to contain Quannah Parker, the Comanche Chief up at Fort Sill, but a few renegades down here are itchin' to

raid and grab scalps, I imagine. Sergeant Booker found that out. Must have spooked that Comanche horse and got gutted for it.

Blanco Canyon's just to the west of us. It was one of Parker's favorite destinations. Fort Elliot up north is supposed to watch for renegades, but Booker's murder makes it clear they didn't do their job. Our job is to make goddamn sure those Comanches are rounded up and sent back to the reservation or exterminated. Understand?"

"Yes sir," Path could hear the wind pick up on the plains.

"Here's the broader view. Man named Goodnight owns Palo Duro Canyon now. He's raisin' cattle and we're gonna need beef to live off this land. Railroad's layin' rail and we've got to protect Goodnight's ass here south of the Canyon so business and prosperity can flow into this god-forsaken desert. We're tamin' this country, Lieutenant."

"Sounds like I missed the action, sir."

"You missed a lot of bloodshed, son."

"You want me to round up these renegades, sir?"

"Hell no! Captain Nash is on that. You know Bob, veteran Indian fighter. You wouldn't last two days on that grass, Path, especially against Comanches. No. We've got an unexpected surprise. You know we're celebrating Independence Day special this year. We want it to come off without a hitch."

"Yes, sir."

"Turns out we've got company. A religious man, I don't know, one of those goddamn revivalists out of the latest awakening, wavin' bibles in the air, claimin' to perform miracles, showed up East of here, set up camp, and he's sittin' out there on the prairie with a few dozen followers. All men."

“Why would they do that, Colonel?”

“That’s what I want you to find out. I want answers. Head out that way and see what they’re up to.”

“Yes, sir. Just so I’m clear. Are they breaking any laws out there?”

“I’m the goddamn law here, Path. They’re not doin’ any harm, from what I can see, but the Comanches might not see it that way.”

“How soon do you need the information, sir?”

“Goddamn it, I need it now! Stop asking questions! I want answers!”

“Yes, sir! Here’s your pipe, sir. It’s on the floor.”

“Why the hell is it on the floor?”

“I suspect you dropped it, Colonel.”

“Path, as you continue along in this world, if you survive long enough to make a difference, you need to figure out when to answer questions and when to keep your goddamned mouth shut. Dismissed.”

Pinto

Now, before Ray learned it was ignorant to think there was only two kinds of people in the world, Ray thought there was two kinds of people in the world. Ray thought of himself as an individual. He thought of Rob and Bob as conformists.

Furthermore, up to this point, the story's been a mite unfair to Rob and Bob, whose real names was Robert and Robert. Robert Nash's father was a doctor and descendant of one of Mango's founders, the heroic Indian fighter, Captain Robert Nash. Robert, or "Bob" Turner's father was a lawyer. His ancestor, Ezekiel Turner, is reputed to have been the first to have seen the vision on the plains.

Rob and Bob grew up on the tree-lined, brick streets of the original Mango neighborhood, Winston Park, a haven of Episcopalians generally. But let's not forget their ancestors gave up the divorce cult for awhile to be Watchers. Both fathers was competitive in their fields and they tried to encourage ambition in their sons. They could trace their bloodlines through Burke's Peerage straight to English nobility, which they brought up often at cocktail parties.

Rob's and Bob's lives was filled with high demands and little approval. The main lesson each father passed on to his son is that he must win. He must win at any cost. They'd say a guilty conscience is better than a hungry belly. Anyway, in America you can justify pretty much anything you do to anyone else providin' you say you're doin' it for your kids. Folks forget Nazis had kids too.

Their mothers wanted them to hang out with the right people because accumulatin' money was the bottom line. Wealth was the standard against which all else was measured. If you wasn't on the same page, they didn't have time for you. So, it wasn't so much about bein' wise with this class of people; it was more about conformity. These folks wanted friends to think

and act the same, at least on the surface. Underneath, it was kill or be killed. Preservin' their lifestyle, every detailed bit of it, was a very serious thing. Any threat to that lifestyle was to be removed with extreme prejudice. And underlyin' everything was an unspoken understandin', as natural as breathin', that the reason they had money while others didn't was because they had some sort of moral superiority. They was favored by God. Their wealth was proof of that fact. They'd been given the opportunity to have heaven on earth.

But truth be told, Rob and Bob grew up in a world without love. Everything tended to be a transaction, which was appropriate considerin' how the town came about. It was also understandable they should be so much alike since their upbringing' was so similar and the expectation to conform so powerful. But understandin' came later to Ray.

And, of course, Rob and Bob would never need to hitchhike. They had nice, new dependable, sexy cars. Ray stuck his thumb out as a young, clean cut couple drove by in a white Buick Wildcat. They waved to the boys but didn't stop.

Ray laughed, "Well, I guess we should have thought about lookin' like Rob and Bob before we had the bright idea of hitchhiking."

"You got to be born with that look," Andy replied. He'd removed his camera from the backpack and was takin' a few shots, includin' a couple of Ray. Ray shot him the finger and Andy took a photo. That's the one hangin' in the CODA main hall out there.

Ray shrugged, "Not fair, that's all. Just because their parents have money."

Andy shook his head. "And my old man's dead."

Andy's father had died of lung cancer. He smoked. That's how he dealt with paycheck to paycheck. The hospital bills piled up and Andy's mother was stressed tryin' to pay those off,

but she insisted Andy go to school. Ray respected Andy's pain, but thought Andy wasn't mad enough about it. Andy never liked to get mad, even when he did.

"All I'm sayin'," Ray clarified, "Considering it's the goddamn Fourth of July, is that we founded this country trying to reject the crap that was going on in England. Aristocracy and inherited money. Well, as I see it, we got the same goddamn class issues they have. Some people just got to feel superior to others and they end up makin' the rules."

Andy wasn't swayed by Ray's appeal to his patriotism. "Well, you're free not to follow the rules. See where it gets you."

Ray kicked a rock at Andy's boots. "So I guess you think it's okay to make employees wear uniforms."

"Hell yeah." Andy replied.

"Even crappy uniforms?"

"Don't have to work there, Ray." Andy kicked the rock back and they began an impromptu rock battle.

"What the fuck is money, then? The word of God?"

Andy was exasperated. "It's money! That's all!"

Ray was overly dramatic. "It's power wielded by people who probably inherited it!"

"You just don't like authority, Ray."

That's really what it came down to and Ray knew it. "Look, just because someone owns a business that doesn't give him the right to dictate your life. He's paying you money to do a job. He's paying for the job, not the person."

Andy considered. "That's a matter of opinion."

Ray put his finger in Andy's face. "Well, hey, man, what about pornography? You say you're uncomfortable with it. If someone's willing to pay for someone else to market her body, who are you to say it's wrong?"

Andy considered. "I think there's a point, Ray, when you've got to consider what's gonna destroy you. Lines need to be drawn to protect the kids."

Ray shook his head. "Everybody thinks protecting the kids says it all."

Andy chuckled and spit on the highway. "Damn, Ray, I don't understand why you just can't accept the way things are. I know you got eyes. I know you ain't dumb. So why the hell can't you just see a fuckin' road, like this one, and call it a fuckin' road?"

"Well, why don't you know more about the weird disappearances in Mango?"

"It's just a bullshit legend, Ray. I don't even know if it's true."

"I think you grew up with it and accepted it as normal. I come in from the outside and ask what the fuck is going on."

"When we grow up we're told stories. That don't mean we're given answers."

Ray didn't say nothin' for a long time. He walked ahead, his gaze fixed on the blacktop. "I don't think I see things the way you do. I mean really, man."

Andy threw up his hands, "Ray, I reckon folks think pretty much the same way all over."

Ray continued. "Most people want to get from here to there without complications. They expect things to happen in certain ways and everybody falls into the game and it becomes unconscious over time. It's only when somebody comes in from the outside, noticing the differences and asking questions, they realize what they're doing. And then chances are they don't like attention called to the habit."

Andy countered. “It used to be strong people killed other strong people and took their lands, got rich, and set up kingdoms, but it’s not like people want feudal lords as leaders out of habit. It just means sometimes might makes right, historically speakin’. Are you gonna change hundreds of years of history with an attitude hatin’ authority? Good luck on that.”

Ray was emphatic. “We think this is all there is and don’t expect anything that’s not material to be part of it. The spiritual world would not necessarily be anything like this world, because it’s not material.”

“What the fuck? How the hell did we jump to the spiritual world, Ray? We don’t even know what the spiritual world’s like, except God’s in it.”

“We just need to find the key to the door.”

“The key to heaven? Hope you find that key before you die, Ray.”

“If you want to see the spirit world, man, you have to believe you can do it.”

Andy nodded, “You’re talkin’ about faith, man.” Andy narrowed his eyes. “You don’t hear voices, do you?”

Ray shrugged.

Andy spit on the blacktop. “Yeah, if I were you I’d keep that shit to myself too, Ray.”

Ray was disappointed Andy didn’t go for the political debate but it helped pass the time. “Well, before you fall in love with the way things are, just remember, our country was founded by people who didn’t like the way things are.”

Andy wanted to end the conversation. “Looks like we’re in Luling.”

Luling was as quiet as Gonzales on the outskirts of town, but there was somethin’ of a bustle up the road. The rumble of V8 engines breakin’ the mornin’ silence echoed more

frequently around the small houses that appeared on both sides of the road. Little yards, chain link fences, a few American flags peppered here and there.

Ray knew how to get under Andy's skin and he was doin' it out of boredom, but he wanted to talk about somethin'. "Miss your old man?" Ray asked.

Andy stared at the road. "All the time," He tossed the pebble they'd been kickin' into a yard. A dog barked. "Glad he ain't sufferin' no more."

Ray envied Andy's relationship with his father. Ray's father came back from a war he didn't want to talk about. He didn't want to talk about the divorce or his girlfriend Trang.

He didn't talk.

The weight of bein' abandoned on the road suddenly pressed on Ray's shoulders. The realization the two of them was alone and a long way from home without immediate assistance caused his gut to twist. Whenever Ray felt physically uneasy, he'd try to calm himself by thinking abstractly. Ray always admitted this was an attempt to escape from reality. Drugs never did for him what a contemplation of ideas could do.

Ray imagined ideas floatin' just beyond his comprehension, perhaps just ahead of him in time, in the future. The ideas anticipated Ray's arrival from the past. As Ray arrived they would greet him, embrace him. Suddenly Ray would have an idea, but it wouldn't be his idea. He would be the vehicle for it. The idea would hitch a ride on Ray and be taken someplace else where it would hitch a ride from somebody else. Ideas was hitchhikers in the Fourth Dimension.

A few folks gathered in the mornin' gloom to examine produce from a man sellin' it out of his pickup. As Ray and Andy approached they smelled the ripe fruit. An older couple drank coffee and the aroma made Ray feel warm and comfortable. The vendor had a box of peaches, some strawberries and cantaloupes.

Ray and Andy decided to buy a melon for breakfast. The old man with the coffee observed them suspiciously. He appeared to have a white crew cut under his white straw Stetson. “Y’all come up the Gonzales road?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Ray. “We were at the Willie Nelson concert.”

“Leavin’ a bit early, ain’t you?” The man squinted.

Andy scowled. “Car broke down in Austin. Got to be to work by tomorrow.”

The old man nodded. “You got jobs! Work’s important. Yep. Got to have a job. They let you work with hair like that?”

“Yes, sir,” Ray answered.

The old man nodded. “You know, those folks in Gonzales didn’t want that concert there. No sir. Quite a mess. Didn’t want all them hippies. Raised a ruckus. Can’t say I blame them. Where y’all hail from?”

“Mango,” answered Ray.

The old man was surprised. “Mango! All the way up there? Y’all are walkin’?”

They nodded.

The old woman interrupted. “Ain’t that the town founded by harlots?”

“Yes ma’am,” Andy answered, “but also by God-fearin’ men.”

The woman moved closer to Andy’s face. “Wasn’t those God-fearin’ men sittin’ out in the grass waitin’ for Jesus?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Ray.

“And they got harlots?” asked the old woman.

Andy was embarrassed. “Reckon so, ma’am.”

“Well, what kind of example is that for the kids?” the woman complained.

Ray shrugged it off. "It's the only thing they've got to bring in the tourists, ma'am."

"Beggin' for rides on the Sabbath. Service starts in ten minutes, Deke."

The old man scowled at Ray. "Well, you know, boys, when I got back from the war, that would be WW2, I come down to South Texas to find peace. It was damned nice 'round here till a dirty bunch of longhaired, cracked-up bums, who lost Vietnam 'cause they was high on dope, decided to set up camp on my property. I don't need to tell you I took care of that problem. So I got some advice for you, longhairs. The law will arrest you if they find you hitchin' inside the city limits, holiday or not, so y'all better get out of town lickety split."

The boys understood. They took their melon and hoofed it quickly to the other side of Luling. They made sure to find the edge of town by the city limits sign and found a comfortable spot on some grass beside the highway just inside the limits. The sky looked like it would split open any moment, but they knew they was vulnerable to the elements and couldn't do a thing about it. Andy removed the huntin' knife from the backpack. He split the melon in half and gave half to Ray. Ray scraped the seeds from the middle and cut the melon in half again, and then another half. They ate their way to the rind, savorin' each bite.

Ray laughed. "Those old farts hate Vietnam vets."

"Mr. Jenkins, the government teacher? Says we lost Vietnam because all the soldiers were on drugs."

"My old man hated Jane Fonda. That chick was Barbarella, man."

Andy made a point with the knife. "She hung out with the enemy."

They noticed a stray dog, some sort of brown and black lab mix, had stopped across the highway and was watchin' them.

“Think he likes cantaloupes?” Andy hurled one of the melon rinds across the road. The dog went to it, sniffed it, but wasn’t interested, and then sat next to it, continuing to observe Ray and Andy intently, as if they was doin’ somethin’ other than eatin’ melons.

Ray stared back. “Reminds me of a dog I used to have.”

“Lab?”

“Hmm. Black and brown like that. Some white thrown in. Happy. That’s what we called him because he was happy as a pup his whole life, or at least as long as we knew.”

“What happened to your dog, man?”

“Dad’s girlfriend, Trang?”

“Yeah, from Vietnam.”

“Right. Well, he didn’t meet her after he and my mom split up. She was the reason.”

“Oh wow. Didn’t know that. Sorry.”

“I told you how fucked up Dad was when he got back from the war. He’d dive on the floor if he heard a loud noise.”

“Yeah, that’s fucked up, man.”

“We were living in a double-wide in Apache Junction, Arizona. Dad was trying to cope. Then we got Happy. He was always running and panting and loved to play, man. The guy who owned the mobile home lived next door. He got mad because I never cleaned up after the dog. And Happy would howl at everything.”

“I’ve seen dogs like that.”

“Well, one day we get a knock on the door and there’s this Vietnamese woman, Trang. She tells this story how she and Dad were together over there. They were supposedly married. And she was able to get out of the country on a boat so she could track him down.”

“Fuck, man! Was she pregnant?” Andy immediately regretted the question. “Sorry.”

“No. Dad’s surprised, of course, and Mom’s put out...”

“Reckon so.”

“Well, Mom told me later she wasn’t surprised he’d fucked around on her over there, but she wasn’t going to put up with the goddamn war followin’ him home like a stray dog.”

“Yeah. I like your mom.”

“And here’s where it gets shitty, man. Dad wouldn’t tell her to go. He felt loyalty to her...more than he did to us. Mom said it was her or us. He wouldn’t decide. So Mom left for Mango. My aunt lives there. It all just blew up.”

“What about the dog?”

“Left the dog with Dad. But Dad’s trying to patch things up with Mom and keeps drivin’ to Mango but he’s not giving up Trang, either, so Mom’s having none of it. When I can I go back with Dad to see the dog. Then he can’t afford the rent. So late one night Dad says we’ve got to get out quick and Trang and Dad and I get in the car. Happy was off chasing something and wouldn’t come when I called. We left. Dad said we could go back and get him, but we never did. Things got even more complicated after that. The dog was basically...abandoned. That old man probably shot him.”

“Wow. Maybe not, man. Maybe that’s your dog.”

But the stray had disappeared and in its place a Ford Pinto had pulled up on the highway. They sat on the ground with drippin’ cantaloupes, watchin’ the car, the huntin’ knife steely and sharp in the overcast sky. The Pinto was driven by a woman. She stared at them. After seconds passed in silence she leaned over the seat and rolled down the passenger window.

“Want a ride or what?”

So, a woman pulls up in a car alone and asks two longhaired hitchhikers holdin' a huntin' knife if they want a ride. Andy has half a mouth full of melon. He's as surprised as Ray. Ray's first thought is that they wasn't hitchhikin' at that moment and remained inside the city limits. His second thought was to crawl to the other side of the city limits sign because his third thought was why the hell is the Highway Patrol pullin' up behind her?

Fuck! Ray figured they was about to get arrested for hitchhikin' even though they wasn't hitchhikin' at that moment! The trooper yelled out his window. "If you're gonna pick 'em up, Caroline, you gotta pull off the highway!"

The woman edged her Pinto to the side of the road. The trooper drove off. Ray and Andy dropped their melons, threw the knife into the backpack and hurried toward the car.

"Where y'all headed?" She asked.

"Austin," they replied in unison.

"Y'all safe? That trooper saw you."

"Safer'n bunnies in a pettin' zoo," said Andy.

"Well, hop in, Flopsy and Mopsy."

Watcher In The Park

Good vantage point. Good parking. Got a view of the entire park. Hasn't changed much since I was here last. Have to admit it was a profound experience, but demoralizing. It does make you special. Oh yeah. Think about those who walked through and never came back. Always a big risk. But even if you make it, you can never really come back. Innocence lost. Buck up Overholt. Watcher Park. Looks like any other park with a gazebo. What was the legend about it? Something about true love or sex or something. Right. More like rape.

God, what did I do to deserve this? And this ugly car. A Honda Civic. Teddy's got a black corvette and they give me a Japanese toy car. Assholes. Well, those hippies are obviously smoking a joint. Doesn't seem as if anyone cares. This little college seems laid back. Ray Rhodes. Ray Rhodes. Come out, come out wherever you are.

That fucking bitch in Seattle. Debbie? Yeah. Debbie's course had been clear. She would have detonated that bomb without a doubt. Deep insecurity she thought Ali could heal. But too deep. Got her killed. The information on Rhodes... not as clear. Indications, a number of knocks, but who's at the door?

And that's why I have to do fucking reconnaissance and that's why I have to pretend to be a fucking college student and to dress like a fucking homeless bitch and pretend to be poor. I grew up poor. Walked away from that. Very white here. Daddy would try to justify it. Momma would say it's jive.

Be a good boy, Ray Rhodes. Don't make me kill you.

There's the fucking wave. What is it? What am I not seeing? Something about Ray Rhodes. There he is, slouching, giggling. Who's he with? Oddball. Ruggedly good looking.

Well, maybe not. They're just going to sit in the park? Fuck! I want to go back to college! Oh! I fucking guess I am back in college, goddamn it! Guess I should go introduce myself.

Fuck these books. I don't need them. I do need my sunglasses. Interesting wig. Somehow red and curly works. This is a nice park. Green grass. What the fuck? Ray's leaving? Maybe I should go back to the car or follow him. No, his buddy already sees me. I'll see what he has to say. I could use a cigarette.

"Hi, I'm Tandi."

"Fred."

"I don't suppose you'd let me bum a cigarette."

"Sure. Have a seat."

"Well, okay. I've got class but I'm new here and I really don't know what I'm doing."

"Really? Where you from?"

"N'awlins, Honey."

"Wow. Never been.

"Different from here!"

"Guess so. What's your major?"

"History."

He's sizing me up fast. A glance at the usual places. I figured these short cut offs would work. Need to give him a view of the panties. My legs are astonishing. Brown and smooth and thin. Got a good tan in Spain.

"So tell me about Mango. What do you do here for fun?"

"Nothing special."

"What about your friend? The one you were talking to before I showed up."

“Ray? Yeah.”

“You do anything special?”

“Oh, I get it. I don’t get high.”

“Oh, right. I love the sun on my face but my head is hot. I don’t need a wig do I?”

“Wow. Why you wear a wig?”

“A girl needs options.”

I’ll lie down on the grass and close my eyes. Make sure my legs and boobs are communicating. They are. He’s definitely preoccupied with my shorts. Or what’s underneath them. Why the hell am I trying so hard with this idiot? Don’t need to do this. He’s not too bad. Broad shoulders. Tight waist. Strange eyes. Bad acne once. Greasy hair. He’s very comfortable with me. Very cool. Looks like he’s got the goods. It’s a beautiful day and I don’t want to think about the job. I deserve a little distraction and I’d still be working after all.

“You know, I could show you around. A tour guide.”

“Oh, really? You know the history of this place?”

“Well enough.”

“So where do we start?”

“How about my place?”

The Council

It was a discussion about taste more than anything. Given a choice of all things at all times the selection of a Chihuahua as the official Council mascot caused Two and Four to erupt in apoplectic histrionics. Three was surprised by the outburst but One was dismayed. It was not so much the choice of the specific purebred longhaired pup they named Manners, but the fact of its Mexican origin.

Two and Four had been unapologetically snobbish from the moment they had been selected to serve on the Council, vowing that very little of new world custom would penetrate the gilded facades of their imaginative constructions. Of course, it was the very nature of the path to Heaven to reward those whose manners were most precise. Consequently, following a period of human intellectual curiosity, embodied by the Classical philosophers, many of whom served on the Council, the four positions were subsequently inhabited by those personalities most adept traversing the ebb and flow of the Masters' political fortunes.

This was the moment we were to discover later that led to the betrayal of our cause. One had brought Manners to the Council and Three fawned over her, declaring her the official mascot. Two and Four insisted nothing less than a Maltese could serve in such a capacity, its origin unequivocally European and its tradition unabashedly aristocratic. When One questioned the dissenters' motives and speculated their aesthetics seeped into decisions of Heavenly entry, the Evens did not disagree, and in fact called upon the Odds to admit their blatant hypocrisy. They pointed out the Masters had decreed precisely who should enter the gates of Heaven and who should be excluded and those without the most refined manners should be given ample opportunity to acquire them on earth before they should contaminate paradise.

It had been assumed the Council had been turned and would grant entry to those likely to create dissension among the Masters, but the stand taken by the Evens indicated that assumption was tenuous at best. It suggested decisions made regarding disruption on earth were suspect. Put simply, could the Council be trusted to stop terrorism on earth and to encourage it in Heaven?

Of course we did not know this at the time and we continued our missions confident in our leadership. Consequently, over the years, it gradually became apparent our leadership, the Council, was not necessarily concerned with our best interests. It became crystal clear over the years the blood spilled in the name of various transitory causes would become a sea of crimson anger that would inundate all shorelines.

All over a fucking Chihuahua.

Excerpt from "Observing The Council"

Ray Rhodes

Church of Divine Ambiguity

Therapy

“Why are you angry?”

“I’m angry about my circumstances. Yes. You would be angry too.”

“Do you think there is a way to repair this?”

“Yes, well. You see. Yes. He says I stole his watch. I did not steal his watch. I resent being called a thief, in front of everybody.”

“He called you a thief.”

“In front of everybody.”

“The other patients?”

“And the nurses. And the staff.”

“So you strangled him.”

“I wanted him to stop talking.”

“You almost killed him.”

“I wanted to teach him a lesson. Do not fuck with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Do not fuck with me. That is the lesson I taught him. Do not fuck with me.”

“You are here because you can’t control your anger.”

“Yes. I get angry. I have rage, Doctor.”

“Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No.”

“Want one?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Why are you so mad?”

“You already know this. The Canadian government performed drug tests on me when I was a child. The Catholic Church in Montreal sold me to monsters. My childhood was a disaster until my uncle found me. He rescued me.”

“We have found no evidence such tests occurred.”

“The Government hides the truth.”

“I see you were born in Germany. They made you a Canadian citizen when the orphanage took you in.”

“When they began testing on me. Yes.”

“But you’ve been living in Germany since then. So you’ve only been in Montreal a month and already you’re touring our mental health facilities?”

“I lost my temper at the church. I hit a priest. Why is that a crime?”

“Your father was a Nazi war criminal. He killed your mother and then himself.”

“I was at school.”

“Why did you come back to Montreal?”

“I came to find their graves.”

“Did you find them?”

“I found my mother’s. My father committed suicide so they would not bury him there. I don’t know where he is.”

“Look, if I were you, you’ve got another month here if you show progress. Keep your head low. You’re a young man. You’ll have many opportunities to turn your life around. Don’t hold onto the anger. You’ll be happier if you let it go. Can’t change the past.”

“I cannot forget the past.”

“Well, here’s the thing. If you keep assaulting priests you won’t end up here. They’ll put you someplace more secure. If you behave you can go home.”

“Do you believe in destiny, Doctor?”

“No, not really.”

“I don’t either. In that film with John Wayne, *Liberty Valance*, out here a man settles his own problems. I believe it is up to us to make our fate. We are not puppets of a bearded man pulling strings in Heaven. I haven’t time for fairy tales. Do you know Engels?”

“The butcher around the corner?”

“Frederick Engels. He said what is genuine is proved in the fire, what is false we shall not miss in our ranks. I am ready to jump into the fire. I believe I am on the right side of the ocean. But I want to go to America.”

“New York. Boston.”

“No. I want to go where there are cowboys. I want to go to Texas.”

“Try to stay out of trouble buckaroo.”

“By the way...”

“What is that?”

“The watch.”

“You did take the watch?”

“I thought he was running out of time.”

Patty Hearst For President

It was durin' those years I met Ray and Fred, that I also met Tandi. She would play a significant part in Ray's life.

Fred McKinley had a giant, black, longhaired, perpetually sheddin' cat named Coffee. He was old and docile and Fred rarely cleaned up the black tufts of fur that seemed to sprout from his ratty furniture.

Ray would hang out in Fred's miniature apartment behind the more grandiose "Lord's Manor" where his landlady lived in Winston Park, two blocks west of Mango College. Fred called his landlady Lady Snoop because of her constant attention to Fred's activities.

Ray and Fred met 'cause they was both disc jockeys on the radio at Mango College. They loved music. They had guitars. They dreamed of bein' rock stars. They tried to learn the blues, which was the foundation of all good music in those days. Improvisation was the ideal. Noise is what they did well.

Coffee would listen to their screechin', rise up in a fit of pique, twitchin' his tail, and retreat into the bedroom, fur flyin'. The cat probably hoped he'd heard the worst but Fred decided he wanted to build himself a synthesizer. He got a kit and began piecin' it together as he had money to do so. A solderin' iron and a table top scattered with electronic components became a permanent display at Fred's place, like obscure collectables.

Lady Snoop was determined to track down the bizarre sounds she was hearin' from Fred's apartment. Unfortunately, the sounds he was startin' to evoke from the skeletal contraption made Coffee edgy. Fred was a chain-smoker and it gradually occurred to Ray that the cat seemed to be gettin' allergic to the Marlboro Man while Fred seemed to be gettin' allergic to the piles of saliva-coated black fur balls that rolled around the dingy carpet like hairy bugs.

They both began sneezin'. I bring this up because it's a rational alternative explanation for "the curse" as Fred described it, but more about that later.

Ray and Fred drank lots of beer. Fred never imbibed in weed. He said he'd nearly lost his mind as a teenager sniffin' glue. He did have a kind of frazzled, burned-out hint of psychosis about him, the eyes, the greasy hair, but his buddies assumed most of that was because he was from Idaho.

Again, I bring this up because, despite Fred's rigid refusal to partake of the things that would cause him to question his reality, Ray claims they was never certain Fred had that firm of a grasp on reality in the first place. Of course, Fred was certain. He was proud of his rationality.

There was no "ordinary" woman in Fred's world, and he loved to brag to the boys in minute and sometimes unwanted detail about his physical adventures. The boys generally saw these women come and go. Ray had never been attracted to any of them until he saw Tandi through the window of Fred's apartment. She was strokin' Coffee. She was laughin' at somethin' Fred had said. Ray was about to knock on the door when Lady Snoop, a small woman, appeared behind him.

"Good evening, Mr. Rhodes."

Ray wondered why he felt as if he was hidin' somethin'. "Evening, Mrs. Arthur."

The Lord of the Manor, George Arthur, had died several years earlier. He'd been an oil man. Lady Snoop lived alone except for the help and the various tenants over the years that had lived in the old detached garage apartment in the back of the house, which was once the servant's quarters. She looked to be about seventy with an imperial air, which suggested to Ray she wasn't altogether comfortable with the money, implyin' she didn't come from it.

Snoop moved uncomfortably into Ray's space. "I've been hearing sounds. Strange sounds. They seem to emanate from this apartment. When I ask Mr. McKinley about the sounds he tells me he doesn't know what they are. Do you know what they are, Mr. Rhodes?"

Ray wasn't sure what he should divulge to the landlady. "No ma'am," he said.

Snoop seemed to be lookin' into Ray's nostrils. "I am aware, Mr. Rhodes, that Mr. McKinley is something of a Lothario. I do not judge. However, quite frankly, I fail to understand his attraction. How is someone of his obvious hygienic shortcomings so successful at attracting young ladies? Much more successful than you, I observe."

Ray's guitar was gettin' heavy. "I suppose I'm more of a romantic."

Fred opened the door and was surprised to see his landlady. "How do you do, Mrs. Arthur? Welcome to my humble hovel," he said, grinnin'. "This is Tandi Marceau."

Lady Snoop frowned, nodded, turned and walked back to Lord's Manor. Fred questioned Ray with a look. Ray shrugged, entered the apartment, and beheld Tandi.

As Ray tells it, her luminescent skin and her perfect broad smile and mischievous brown eyes melted him in his tracks and she knew it instantly. He was uncomfortable tryin' to hide his obvious instant attraction.

Her voice was melodic. "Freddie, you didn't tell me your friends are so handsome."

Fred grunted."

She giggled. "You brought your guitar to serenade me?" Ray could honestly think of no other reason for the guitar at that point.

"Please do," she said.

Fred and Ray played Emerson, Lake and Palmer's, *Lucky Man* because Fred had figured out a synthesizer part. She said they was musical geniuses. Then she whipped out a joint and she and Ray smoked it while Fred sucked on his Marlborough Red.

Tandi Marceau told Ray she came from New Orleans. She wore a large, round, curly, reddish wig that she removed like a hat. Her real hair was short, black and straight. She wore bellbottom jeans and a loose blouse. She thought Mango College was silly. She kept strokin' Coffee and he purred. He purred really loud.

Fred had told her about Rob and Bob rattin' out the porn video and she said she hoped their privileged dicks would fall off. Ray told her Fred wanted to stick a hot poker up their asses like Edward II and she said Fred might want to see a psychotherapist about his anal obsession. He winked at her. The wink made Ray's heart sink.

She affected a swoon, "But my God, they're such snobs! In Mango, Texas! What do they know about class?" Ray agreed. If she had thought the world was flat, Ray would have agreed.

"No, I mean flat, really flat," she said.

"Yeah, like you'll fall off the end if you go too far." It was good weed. Maybe too good. It was like she'd read his mind.

"And those clothes!" she continued. "They're better than we are because they wear button-downs and polyester pants?"

"Yeah," Ray agreed. "I don't get the whole polyester thing."

"Have they no shame?" She seemed genuinely ashamed.

Fred ventured further. "What's up with the haircuts?"

"That's what I'm talking about, Honey," she said. Ray wished she'd call him Honey.

"Not a speck of creativity nor an ounce of intelligence."

“They do worship authority,” Ray offered.

“It’s 1976!” She said it as if it needed no clarification, but she provided it. “We removed a criminal from the White House! We ended an unjust war! The arrogant assholes have been run out of Washington, except Ford, but he’ll follow for pardoning Nixon!”

“Ford’s going to be reelected,” said Fred, shakin’ his head.

“Where are you from, Honey, Idaho? Don’t be pessimistic.”

Ray wanted to be called Honey. If she’d call him Honey he would sacrifice a goat to her.

“Who’s going to beat Ford?” Ray asked.

“Lloyd Bentsen?” asked Fred oozin’ with sarcastic relish.

“Jerry Brown,” she said triumphantly.

Ray agreed. “Brown! Not Bentsen!”

Ray told me it was at that very moment when Tandi fixed her brown eyes on him that he felt somethin’ was truly different about her and he began to wonder what the hell she saw in Fred. Then he wondered what the hell Fred did to attract someone beautiful for a change.

As if on cue she said, “Sometimes you have to go through a lot of milk before the cream rises to the top. Of course, none of it will be legitimate until a woman is elected.”

Fred met Ray’s glance and rolled his eyes.

Ray pounced on the opportunity. “I’d vote for you right now!”

“I know you would,” she said.

“Patty Hearst for President!” said Fred.

Lookin’ back, Ray says he might have been havin’ a third eye moment but the pot was primo and Tandi’s beauty was distractin’ him beyond sensibility. “What’s your major,” he asked.

“History,” she answered.

“You don’t seem like a historian,” Ray observed.

“And what’s a historian like?”

“Stuffy.”

“Well, you see, Ray, It’s my mission to correct history. We’ve been told stories from a patriarchal point of view, emphasizing the victories of white men over the oppressed. The oppressed have stories too and frequently they contradict the oppressors.”

“What about those guys who say the Holocaust never happened?” asked Ray. “Don’t you think history is compromised if you start revising things?”

“Whose history? Accepted history tends to justify the power of the rich. Authority must be questioned. And so long as you can question authority without repercussion, democracy gentlemen, the First Amendment, holocaust deniers and others like them will never have that much power.”

“Yeah, that’s America. Leave the past in the old world. Be who you want to be, not who you’re expected to be.”

“Absolutely!”

“Have you noticed though how so many people have their own stories about Mango?”

“Don’t you know why?”

“No. Do you?”

“It’s to hide the great secret of Mango.”

Fred perked up. “What’s the secret?”

“Didn’t you grow up here, Ray?”

Ray was confused. “No. But neither did you.”

“It’s a custom here to tell different stories so the real story is hidden.”

“Really,” said Fred sarcastically, “and how would you know?”

“I’m a history major, honey. That’s what they teach us.”

Ray was amused. “So what’s the secret?”

“Sometimes people here disappear.”

Fred laughed. “I knew it was bullshit.”

“You can ask the local folks, Honey. Lots of people have lost someone.”

Ray’s third eye murmured. “Well, talking about confronting authority, you think terrorism is ever justified?”

“Interesting you should bring that up,” she considered.

“Why?” Ray just wanted to dive into her soul and drown there.

“I’m very interested in terrorism. Freddie teases me about Patty Hearst but I think that whole thing with the SLA was bullshit. Do you really think the girl was brainwashed? She was a poor rich kid looking for a cause. Ever heard of the Baader-Meinoff gang? The Red Army Faction? The Red Brigades?”

Ray was impressed.

Tandi continued. “You know, the PLO, Black September, they sent letter bombs to Israeli diplomats.”

“How does a letter blow up?” Ray asked.

“SEMTEX with a springloaded actuator.”

Ray was shocked. “Wow, serious shit.”

Tandi agreed. “It is serious shit.”

Fred sauntered into the kitchen and took three Lone Stars out of the refrigerator and shouted. “You can’t fly anywhere anymore without the damn plane getting hijacked!”

Tandi looked deeply into Ray’s eyes, seemin’ to suck in his soul as she sucked on the joint. She must have read Ray’s mind as he realized he would never betray Fred.

“Nothing’s permanent,” she offered.

Fred handed Ray and Tandi a beer and lit another Marlborough Red. He offered one to Tandi. She reminded him she only smoked menthols and he reminded her she never had any.

“Tell Mr. Rhodes the feminist origin of Mango,” Fred said.

Ray perked up. “You already have your own story? Far out!”

“Far out” she repeated. She began to roll another joint. She had an unusual dexterity, manipulin’ the paper like a magician rollin’ a coin through his fingers. She had it rolled, licked and lit in a matter of seconds. She took a deep drag and passed it to Ray. She held her breath and exhaled slowly. She sat up and began.

“Okay, so Jacob Winston has all these guys out in the middle of nowhere. They’re watching for the return of Jesus but all they’re seeing is the odd coyote and roadrunner. Loony Tunes! Official history would have you believe a man, this MacDonald character, came up with the idea of getting prostitutes to disperse The Watchers. But that’s just a lot of patriarchal bullshit. Mango was not a prostitute. She was a business woman. Her real name was Marie Mangareau. Yes, she was French by way of New Orleans. Sound familiar, gentlemen? She’d traveled to this area with her sickly lover, a Mr. Weishaupt, who promptly died of pneumonia. Rather than return, she decided to make a go of it in Texas. She used their money to build an establishment in Cambridge, Texas, which is now a ghost town.

Cambridge was originally settled by English cattlemen. They wanted to endow the town with respectability by naming it after the prestigious university. Marie opened a hotel, which included a saloon and gambling on the ground floor. She called it The Oxford to make the townsfolk understand that she was on to their game and approved of it.

Naturally men were attracted there, and naturally women who had no other means of support were attracted to the men. It was tough for a woman out there on the prairie, considering there were few options for them if they found themselves stranded or abandoned. Yes, some of those women became prostitutes and Marie turned a blind eye to the activities because, quite frankly, she was not a puritan, and also she understood their limited options. However, she was not the owner of a brothel. That lie serves Cyrus MacDonald and his descendants.

She was called Madame Mangareau but she was not a Madame in that way. To the few and judgmental church ladies in town who hated the idea of a saloon and gambling, not to mention the collateral prostitution, she was a sinful woman. Madame Mangareau would probably have agreed with them, had she believed in sin, or even God for that matter.

Now, for a small town Cambridge had big pretention. They believed it was only a matter of time before their superior morality would make them rich. And that's the thing with the rich. The rich think they're rich because they're somehow better than the poor, as if there's some cosmic plan in play. God says "you're better than this guy, so you're going to be rich." No. It's more likely there's a goddamn Rex Mundi somewhere who rewards assholes who are willing to sell their souls for a fucking dollar."

"Right on!" Ray exclaimed.

"However, Cambridge's efforts to attract the railroad failed and when the honor went to Henrietta, Cambridge began to die. That's when Marie heard of the men on the prairie. She

closed up her business and headed for the action. She approached the Army with the idea of a new settlement near Fort Palo Duro, created by lonely, religiously inclined men, and the various women throughout the area who needed salvation.

Marie Mangareau had a grand vision and it took incredible business acumen to take advantage so perfectly of the situation. She created an opportunity for most of the women stranded on the prairie to make better lives for themselves.

Obviously, the plan worked because we are here today and Marie was given the honor of Perpetual First Lady and they named the town after her, not because she was loved or respected, but because she knew everyone's dirty little secrets. Eventually drunken slurring and ignorance reduced the town's name to Mango. And despite her power, she was not given real responsibility in the town. After all, she was a woman. Voila!"

Ray clapped. "I love it!"

Fred shot Ray a glance that indicated it was time to make an exit but Ray wasn't leavin' that fast. Ray allowed himself a lingerin' gaze at Tandi Marceau. She returned the gaze. "Where'd you two meet?" he asked.

"Watcher Park," she said.

"Well! You know what they say about that!"

"Fuck that," said Fred, sure of his own magnetic way with women.

"Yeah, fuck that," said Ray, hopin' it wasn't true.

"Fuck that," said Tandi, not believin' it was true.

Tandi's effect on Ray was profound. She swept over him like a wave. But here she was with Fred. Yeah, right. Whatever they say about Watcher Park, Ray gave it a week.

The Epic Journey

Tom, Ben and John was standin' on the banks of the Delaware, waitin' for a boat that was to take them upriver. It was cooler in the evenin', but the humidity was thick and the mosquitos hungry. They sweated like the guilty but they didn't know what babes they was. The Master would change that. They was smokin' a pipe Jefferson had brought.

"Quite nice, Tom," said John. "The tobacco is very rich and what's that hint of an aftertaste? Something sweet."

"Hemp," Jefferson answered, "and a trace of fungus."

"Wonderful," Franklin said sarcastically. "We're smoking spores and rope."

"It's a special blend I've cultivated, Mr. Franklin. I think you'll like the effect."

"I certainly think I could sell this in Boston, Tom," John savored the smoke.

Tom looked to the heavens. "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?"

Ben grumbled. "I'm beginning to feel like Job, Tom, and your pipe is not helping."

John agreed. "It is truly hard to be entertained while these insects feast on my face."

Tom was elated. "Do you think we are alone in the universe, gentlemen?"

Ben snorted. "That is certainly what the Church wants us to believe."

"Yes, of course, Ben, but is God just beyond the moon? How large is this starry vision?"

"Actually, Tom, I have given it some thought," John swatted the air. "It would seem rather provincial of us to believe we are alone. Think of Cook's voyages and discoveries of new lands. I suspect those natives thought they were alone."

"Indeed, John. Perhaps we are merely waiting to be discovered by star voyagers."

“But think about that, gentlemen,” Ben grew serious. “If that is so, then they are superior. They are able to navigate the stars, while ignorant fools that we are, can only admire these lights and give them imaginative forms. We would be practicing primitive magic and they would be conquering our world.”

“A sobering thought, Mr. Franklin.”

“Quite frankly, gentlemen, I sobered up some time ago. Jefferson, when is this boatman due? I’m tempted to abandon you. As I say...early to bed...early to rise...”

“Yes, Ben, you’ve said it many times. Out there on the water...is that a light?”

“I believe you’re correct, Tom. What do you think, John?”

“Indeed, it is a light.”

“Well there you are. We have consensus. How very hard that is.”

Tom couldn’t help but smile at his own memories of wranglin’ with the Continental Congress. “It is as if the very idea of language itself inspires passions beyond borders.”

“The pen is mightier than the sword.”

Tom nods. “And yet, John, the sword is useful.”

“To terrorize the citizens, Mr. Jefferson?” Franklin had that gleam in his eye.

“You’re wanting to bait, me sir. At what point is terror justified?”

“Aye.”

“Certainly if one’s property is under threat.”

“And are we being threatened, Mr. Jefferson?”

“Of course. The English Army could destroy our homes at will.”

“But are the English so threatened? Should we not send a few reliable men to London to create violence and instability?”

“That rather seems a monumental task, Mr. Franklin.”

“Only a small group, a raiding party if you will, to wreak havoc. We could establish something akin to our Indian experience in the heart of London, creating chaos.”

Hancock interjected. “Gentlemen, I must warn you about contemplating such actions.”

Franklin smirked. “Mr. Hancock, you have a conscience?”

“I only caution there can be no good of an action that is not firmly intended to produce profit in the end.”

Jefferson agreed. “Quite so.”

Hancock continued. “Is there profit in terror?”

Jefferson nodded. “I believe there could be, Mr. Hancock.”

Hancock shrugs. “Then conscience has no place.”

Franklin was gleeful. “Ha! That is the very nature of conscience! What we do under duress. Do we maintain our principles? Do we become savages?”

“If the English burn our homes, they must expect and receive the worst from us. If the worst be attacking Tory sensitivities...”

“Those most sensitive here. But not in London?”

Jefferson contemplated. “In the name of liberty?”

Franklin smiled. “In all honesty, I do not believe, Mr. Jefferson, I could commit true horror for an ideal. That is savagery. It is too French.”

Hancock laughed. “Or desperation, dear sirs.”

A boat floated gently to the small dock, one man rowin’, a lantern illuminatin’ the night. The three men boarded the boat and they was rowed across the river, moonlight dancin’ on the soft waves. They watched the distant, dark shapes of Philadelphia fade into the night.

Athena's Hand

It appears to Tahka the gatherin' of white men on the grasslands is of a spiritual nature. One man is always talkin'. They do a lot of what white men call prayin' to their god but then they start howlin' and shakin'. The Indian thinks they're possessed by evil spirits.

Tahka glances to his right at Ojapite. The other two are back at the camp roastin' a mule deer they shot early that mornin'. But Tahka wants to show Ojapite the strange event takin' place on the grass before the sun went down. Things get shadowy after that. Tahka glances to his left to see if the Coyote spirit is there. It is.

Tahka leads the four men. He's the strongest but Ojapite is the oldest and most experienced raider. Tahka always wants to act quickly with little thought. Ojapite is a man of common sense.

"No horses, Tahka."

"When the moon is high in the sky and the white men sleep, we go to the edge of camp. We kill one man...two...we kill two. They wake and see what Tahka and Ojapite have done to them and then they fear us."

"You say white men have horses. Ten horses you say. I see no horses, Tahka. You took my horse, Tahka, not yours.

"My horse was sick."

"And my stupid horse went to the Fort to eat soldier food. Now your horse is mine. Tahka must have a horse."

"I see four horses."

"Two wagons. Four old nags. They are almost dead, Tahka. Slow."

"We strike the white man now and he will fear us and he will run."

“Tahka, you are strong. You are a brave warrior, but I count many men at camp and many soldiers at Fort. They do not always run. You kill soldiers and they look for us. You kill white men in camp, they find us. Tahka, we are free. We hunted well today. We should return to camp now or Pijauhtzu and Tetecae will eat all the deer. No horses.”

“Ojapite, you are wise and you have taken many horses. You have killed many buffalo. Now you must kill the white man. We must show them our medicine is strong.”

“What is Tahka’s medicine?”

Tahka takes his knife from its sheath. “Ui has always found the heart of the enemy.”

“You use that knife for everything.”

“It is a good knife.”

“Apache?”

“His life. This knife. Good trade.”

“Good trade.”

“It wants blood.”

“Ojapite wants meat, Tahka. We come back.”

The sun has fallen below the horizon and the golden orange and blue sky is givin’ way to dusk. Ojapite crawls away. Tahka scans the gatherin’ of men, lookin’ for a weakness. Many of them are not aware of their surroundin’s. They’re lost in their calls to the spirit. Tahka’s never seen such a strange group of white men before. Why would they gather here in the grass and act strangely? Why don’t they go to the fort where the soldiers are? Two wagons. One for food. One for...rifles. Yes. Many rifles. And...that’s odd. Are those lights twinklin’ around the camp? Fireflies? Here? Tahka’s never seen fireflies here. To the south, yes, but not here.

A small man leaves the camp. Tahka figures he's goin' to pee and it hits him this will provide an opportunity for him to kill another white man. It occurs to him this could be a sign that white men are best killed in this way. The small man heads east, into the darker horizon and Tahka stalks him, his knife firm in his hand. Ojapite is wise, but he does not act. Tahka will do what is necessary to put fear into the white men's hearts. Tahka sees the white man is talkin' to himself, carryin' the book they carry. They are in the dark now and Tahka does not need to crouch. He stalks the man as he stumbles into the tall grasses. The man suddenly falls to his knees and embraces the book, prayin' in the darkness.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters...”

Tahka steps quietly behind the man, He figures he will grab the man's hair, pull his head back and run his knife across the man's throat before he has a chance to call out.

“He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”

Tahka is behind the man but the man does not know it. He leans over him to strike.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

But Tahka can't move. It's as if someone is holdin' his arm back, preventin' him from strikin'. The man must have strong medicine! Tahka should have his scalp by now but somethin' holds his arms. Ui, do what you do! Wash in the blood of this white devil!

Tahka glances about him, tryin' to discover what's holdin' him back, but he sees nothin'. He realizes attack is hopeless. It is the spirits. The spirits do not want him to kill this man. This is an important man. He honors the spirits' wishes. Tahka looks at his knife, almost throws it away, but thinks better of it. He retreats into the dark grasses.

The man rises from his book and peers into the darkness. “Ben?”

Fortune

Two weeks later Fred and Tandi was still together. But Fred didn't have much time alone with Tandi because she insisted Ray join them whenever they did anything. Not only had Tandi called Ray "Honey" many times, but she had a nickname for him. Ray of Sunshine.

She would sing. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..."

Fred was not amused. "Do we have to hear that crap every time he shows up?"

Ray was magnanimous. "I'm bright as the sun, man."

Fred figured he was gettin' eclipsed.

Ray knew the reason Fred was moody was because Ray was spendin' too much time with them and he didn't care. Ray was anticipatin' the end of their relationship because he'd be there to pick up the pieces. Ray had never felt that way about a woman before. She'd removed the wig and was runnin' her fingers through her straight black hair. Wrapped up in the cute, tiny jean cut-offs and the white angel wing top with embroidered pink hearts over her breasts, it seemed it was all he could do not to rush over to her and eat her. She was loungin' lazily on the couch and her long brown legs led his eyes up past the exposed white pockets up under the cut-offs and he realized she wasn't wearin' panties and he realized she was noticin' his gaze and she smiled and adjusted her posture to hide the view.

Jesus Fuckin' Christ, he thought. How could someone have such a hold on him?

She smiled sweetly. "What do you want to do today, Ray of Sunshine?"

Ray felt like bein' honest, but not in front of Fred. There was a tinge of guilt and then it vanished. "I just want to be with you. Both of you."

Fred glanced at Ray and Ray could see a hint of frustration.

"I'll make you an offer you can't refuse," she said like Brando. "I'll tell your fortune."

“Jesus,” moaned Fred.

“Freddie’s mad because he didn’t like his fortune. I told him he’ll wear a dog collar.”

“Nobody believes that bullshit.”

Ray loved the fact they were arguin’. “You got a crystal ball or something?”

She winked at Ray. “No, I don’t need that. I know Voodoo.”

Ray loved that he winked at her. “Really? Like you stick needles in dolls and stuff?”

“No, but I can tell your fortune. Give me your hands.”

Ray offered his hands and she took them and found the pressure points. She pressed them and gazed into Ray’s eyes. “Hmm, yes. You will find the woman of your dreams, Ray, but she won’t be what you think she is. I feel here you have a great journey ahead of you.”

Ray was impressed. “I am going to the Willie Nelson Picnic July 4th in Gonzales.”

She nodded. “Well, then, that must be it.”

This time Ray winked at her. “Tell me more about the woman of my dreams.”

Tandi was coy. “Well, of course she’s beautiful, intelligent and absolutely charming.”

Ray could feel his pulse quicken. “That goes without saying.”

Then she squeezed his hand. “But I told you she’s not what you think she is. In fact, she’s a lot like you.”

He squeezed her hand back. “What does that mean?”

She started feeling around his palm. “Oh, now this...this, hmm. You have a gift, Ray.”

Fred chuckled. “Fuck.”

“No, Freddie, not fuck. Ray senses things other people don’t see.”

Ray glared at Fred. “No one believes me but it’s true.”

Tandi purred. “I believe you, Ray.”

Fred smirked. “She doesn’t really, Ray.”

Ray wanted her to keep holdin’ his hands so he thought he’d elaborate. “Okay, so when I was a kid in Germany. We lived in this town that had been bombed and shot up in the war. So I call this thing my third eye, right? “

Tandi was amused. “Third eye?”

Ray continued. “I’m not talking about my dick, Tandi. The things I sense. So, I’ve got this dread about playin’ in a particular field near where we lived. It’s a big empty lot but I don’t want to go back there. My third eye keeps warning me to stay away. I even had an imaginary friend tell me to stay away from it. Turns out, they found an unexploded bomb back there. They evacuated the whole goddamn area while they dug it up!”

Fred shook his head. “Kids are afraid of stupid things.”

Ray was impatient. “People are afraid of stupid things, like the unknown.”

Fred was more impatient. “Or maybe it was a fucking coincidence. Who was your imaginary friend? Nostradamus?”

Tandi put an end to it. “Stop it Freddie. Ray is special. You have to live with it. Now then...let’s see. I see you doing great things, Ray. Great things for America. You are a hero.”

“Well that’s good to know!” said Ray.

“But Mr. Sunshine, you may also be a villain, a horrible terrorist.”

“Well that’s a pretty wide range of possibilities, Tandi. I think even I could have predicted that.”

She fixed her gaze into Ray’s eyes. “And it’s very hard for you to invest yourself in anything or anyone because you believe you’ve lost so much.”

This surprised Ray. “Wow! Well I have moved around a lot.”

“Your father went to Vietnam, didn’t he?”

“Did you tell her?”

Fred shrugged. “I didn’t tell her anything.”

“It’s in your hand, Ray of Sunshine. Now, think about this. The harder we hang onto things, the unhappier we are.”

“It’s not easy letting go,” said Ray.

She smirked. “Is that a wart on your hand?”

Ray examined his hand. “I guess so.”

Fred sniggered. “That’s what you get for spanking the third eye.”

Tandi smiled. “Well, to cure that you’ll have to kiss a witch, Ray of Sunshine.”

Sunshine smiled right back at her. “Well, if she’s a pretty witch, why not?”

Sunday Morning In Bed With The New York Times

“He’s a romantic boy, Teddy. I don’t see him as the terrorist type.”

“Some of the best terrorists are romantic. What are we feeling then?”

“Why do we feel anything?”

“Ooo, why do we bloody feel anything? You wanted this job, didn’t you?”

“So you are feeling it now?”

“I’m seeing your Independence Day. A bus.”

“Yeah, well The Council had that two weeks ago.”

“Yeah, well I just now got it.”

“We were in the wave together. Sunshine and I.”

“You didn’t fuckin’ tell me that.”

“But Teddy...he could be both. Benedict Arnold.”

“That’s why you call him Ray of Sunshine?”

“He’s an optimist. I haven’t seen one of those in a while. I mean really, black panties?”

“Men don’t wear panties, love.”

“Well, it is a bit snug don’t you think? How’s a girl supposed to get in there?”

“So how do you find out?”

“Well, I thought I’d just reach in there.”

“How do you find out about him? About July 4th?”

“I’ll have to siesta with him.”

“That’s your answer to everything.”

“How many women have you slept with?”

“I’m a man, darling!”

“You’re so full of shit. Not as if it matters, Teddy, my darling. You’re the one I love.”

“Bollocks. You love that back door fucker.”

“I’m bored with it but something draws me to him. It’s fucking weird.”

“Are you going to break his heart, then, or his balls?”

“No danger of either.”

“Not the sensitive type?”

“A bit like me. The portal changed me, Teddy.”

“You would think knowing the truth would be better than knowing nothing.”

“How many times have you been through?”

“Three, counting the time I almost died. The last with you.”

“You took the time to discover things about yourself.”

“It doesn’t help.”

“I was overwhelmed. Apollo explained the big picture and it scared the shit out of me.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Why me?”

“Why anyone? You were born with it. I got it accidentally. What’s the difference?”

“It’s my job, Teddy, to enforce a destiny created by others. What about my destiny?”

“You’re back in Mango. Try again. Find out what you want to know. But I promise you, it won’t change anything.”

“Will you go with me again?”

“No.”

“I just want to know who I am.”

“You’ve been many people, Tandi. You already know that. Knowing specifics causes a richness of pain, the anguish of lost loves and the horrors of torture and death. It’s good you don’t remember. It’s a blessing.”

“I’m sorry, Teddy.”

“I don’t want to go back there. I want to forget.”

“How close are you with Mr. Putty?”

“It’s done, love.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you were enjoying yourself in your little Mango world!”

“You son of a bitch!”

“It’s ready whenever you are.”

“I just want to make sure what’s supposed to happen will happen. Are you certain?”

“How long have I been doing this?”

“Confidence doesn’t excuse failure.”

“Who the fuck are you to tell me that?”

“I just want to know what to expect when you flip the switch.”

”Boom.”

Bananaland

One night Tandi decided she wanted to go to the local amusement park. So the three of them piled into Ray's yellow Bug. It was stick and Ray was fond of weavin' in and out of traffic like a snake slitherin' across the road. Tandi sat in the back rollin' a joint. Fred sat shotgun and didn't say much, lettin' a Marlborough Red burn through his fingers.

Tandi scolded Ray. "Be careful, Honey, we want to make it to the fun in one piece."

Ray was showin' off. "I know how to drive, Honey."

She pressed him. "You don't want to get pulled over while I'm rolling a joint, do you?"

Ray realized she was right and wondered why he was so stupid. He shifted down and cruised comfortably on Papaya Boulevard.

Tandi lit the joint, took a drag and passed it to the front to Ray. She sang.

"We're going to Bananaland. We're going to Bananaland."

Bananaland had conjured up childhood memories for folks in Mango a long time, and for Tandi maybe she was relivin' her childhood. She loved the rides. It's not there now, but back then the entrance was arched over by a great big yellow banana. It claimed to be the biggest Banana in Texas. In the eighties it collapsed and killed a homeless guy who was sleepin' under it. The Park had a decent roller coaster, the Cyclone, a Ferris wheel, various centrifugal force rides like the Scrambler, the Himalaya and the Tilt-a-Whirl, a haunted house called World Of Death, and lots of carousels for the little kids. Employees dressed in banana outfits and handed out free cotton candy to the kids. That was my job.

As you know, The Prairie Steak House, home of the Monster Calf Fries, is next to Bananaland. Back then that's how I got the idea to try a change of costume and offer my services to the steak house as a frontier character that would entertain the tourists. They hired me

at minimum wage. I think it was two-thirty back then. But Bananland is where I first met Ray, Fred and Tandi. I'd heard Ray and Fred on the radio, but I met them that night.

I remember givin' cotton candy to a little brat who wouldn't stop cryin'. His mother said the sight of a big banana pushin' cotton candy was scarin' him so I gave up. I saw Ray and Fred hangin' out by the World Of Death. It was loud on the midway with carnival sounds but I could see Fred was mad at Ray and Ray was tryin' to calm him. I offered them cotton candy.

Fred said, "Go fuck yourself you fucking banana fuck."

Ray defended me. "Man, he's wearing a goddamn banana costume. He sees you're pissed off and wants to make you happy because we're in fucking Bananaland."

Fred wouldn't back off. "Shove this banana up your ass, Ray."

"I'd have to charge you for that," I said.

Ray smiled. "He's a funny banana."

We introduced ourselves.

"Fred thinks I'm moving in on his girlfriend," Ray explained.

Tandi had gone to the ladies room but hadn't returned. Fred spotted her ridin' the big carousel. She was on a horse and a man in black was standin' next to her on the ride talkin' to her. She seemed like she was havin' a good time. We hurried to the carousel, which ain't easy in a banana suit, I can tell you, and waited for the ride to finish.

Tinker Polka was blarin' from the cheap speakers and kids smiled. Tandi was laughin' and carryin' on like she found the love of her life. The man looked spooky, black jeans and boots, a long black trenchcoat, smokin' a cigarette and sayin' somethin' in her ear. It was a weird scene, I tell you. When the ride stopped, she jumped off the horse, started gigglin' and

was leavin' with the weird guy. Fred called her. She noticed us and waved. The man gave her a piece of paper which she read quickly, crumpled and threw on the ground. She ran to us.

"Who's the banana?" she asked.

"Who's the guy?" asked Fred.

"Somebody I met," she answered. "Who's the cotton candy for, Mr. Banana?"

I gave her some candy. She pulled the pink cotton apart and ate some. "I love how it disappears in your mouth!"

Fred flared again. "Did he give you his number?"

"Yes, Honey, but I threw it away. Besides, it's none of your business, Freddie," she said flirtatiously. "Let's do the World Of Death!"

"You're pretty high," Fred observed.

"You think a little old spook house can scare me?" She kissed Fred lightly on the lips. "Why don't we go in alone? Just the two of us?"

The proposition perked Fred up. They paid for the ride, squeezed into the little car and disappeared through the double doors as a shriek erupted deep inside the World of Death.

I watched Ray watchin' them disappear into the spook house. "Want some cotton candy?" I offered.

Ray shook his head. "Don't want sticky hands."

"Speakin' of," I said, "Your buddy have anything to fear about his girlfriend?"

Ray smiled. More shrieks and moans belched from the World of Death.

Ray stared at the exit of the spook house. "She's pacifyin' him right now because she knows all he wants is a fuck. That's all it's going to take to make him happy. That's all he's about, man. He's feeling her up in there right now."

A scream.

“But I don’t get it. She knows who Fred is and what he wants but she’s sticking with him. And she’s smart, man. I mean, really smart. What does she see in him?”

“Maybe he’s got a big banana,” I offered.

Ray looked disgusted. I was in a banana suit, so I didn’t think Ray would mind my curiosity. “Where’d they meet?”

“Watcher Park.”

“Well, you know about that!”

“You don’t believe that shit, do you?”

“I don’t not believe it.”

“I feel like I met her in Watcher Park.”

I think a lot about how that day was so fateful for me. Fateful for Ray too, I guess. On the other hand, it didn’t affect the vast majority of the world. It’s like that drawin’. Is it a witch or a young woman? It’s both. Just depends on how you look at it, and that’s gonna affect your destiny. And the same is true of God. Divine ambiguity. It’s all true. And it’s all a lie. Depends on how you look at it.

Jesus said just because you was born into a situation doesn’t mean it defines you. He said, “If any man come to Me and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” You can turn your back on the past if you commit to a new life, but that means navigatin’ ambiguity.

A maniacal laugh heralded the smashin’ of the double exit door as the car with Fred and Tandi exploded into the carnival lights. Fred’s tongue was divin’ deep into Tandi’s throat and his right hand stroked her small breasts, which were exposed to Bananaland. It struck Ray that he

thought her breasts were larger than that. She'd been wearin' a beaded tank top, but that was around her neck. She'd lost her bra. When she realized they had emerged from the World of Death she hollered "Woo Hoo" after pushin' Fred off her, and lowered her tank top.

Ray was sarcastic. "Want to pick up your bra next trip?"

"Well just go ahead and blurt it out for everyone to hear, Sunshine!" Tandi slithered up next to Ray and pressed her breasts against him. "I've burned way too many bras to worry about that one my little Ray."

Fred had a shit-eatin' grin on his face. "They still burn bras? Far out."

Fred had a hard- on the size of Montana. I realized, the way Tandi was with Ray, and with the guy on the carousel, that there was more to her than what any of us saw. Ray confirmed this to me later, of course, but back then we was all just a bit mystified.

So, as Ray tells it, he drove Fred and Tandi back to Fred's place, but when he got there, he had a third eye moment. He had the strangest feelin' he needed to go back to Bananaland. So he did. Ray approached a couple of bananas before he found me.

"Look, don't take this the wrong, way, man, but you all look the same to me."

I said, "If you spend more time with us you'll understand bananas are people too." I continued jokin'. "You're not here to get that bra, are you?"

Now, there's somethin' about a banana suit that makes people open up more than they usually would. Ray told me about the psychic powers he got occasionally. I didn't know what the hell he was talkin' about and didn't really care. I figured he was high, but I went along for the sake of argument.

"Something wants me to be here, Banana Man."

We were near the carousel. He studied it but seemed dissatisfied. We wandered down the midway and stopped in front of the World Of Death. A long line had formed to take the ride.

Ray shook his head. "I do need to get that bra."

I wasn't very kind. "That's the most pathetic thing I've ever heard."

"It's not what you think," he said. "I'm getting a bad feeling now."

I said that's the feelin' you get when you lose your pride and dignity."

Ray got serious. He asked me to convince the guy to stop the ride so he could go in to get somethin' he'd lost. The guy's name was Junior.

Junior was flirtin' at 300 pounds and always wore overalls. His beard was messy with wisps of cotton candy. He was about twenty-five and the only time he'd left home was to go to Vietnam. When he returned he never left home again. His mother made him the same lunch every day, a bologna sandwich and a chocolate chip cookie. Sometimes Junior would just stare into space and mutter words only he could hear.

Anyway, I told Junior the story but he was havin' none of it. First of all, Junior said, the ride was makin' money and there was no way the boss would let him stop it while there was a line waitin' to get in. Second of all, insurance reasons wouldn't let Ray go in without bein' in the ride car. Ray insisted. Junior resisted. Ray said it was his girlfriend's engagement ring. Junior said, it was dark and he'd never find it. Ray saw he was losin' the battle. So Ray tells Junior he's ashamed but he's got an unnatural desire to hold the bra left behind by his friend's girlfriend. He says he can't help himself. Somethin's drivin' him to find it, to take it home with him and to keep it in a secret place where only he can look at it, worship it and smell it.

I was pretty disgusted but as it turns out, Junior was sympathetic. To my surprise a tear formed in the corner of Junior's eye, which he quickly brushed away. He nodded respectfully

and went to the crowd and announced he'd have to shut down the ride about ten minutes because they was detectin' somethin' wrong. The crowd booed, someone called him an asshole, and a few left. Once the last car exited the spook house Junior turned off the power.

Ray thanked Junior and, as Ray tells it, he was drawn to a small piece of crumpled paper on the ground. He felt moved to pick it up. There was one word written on it. "Boom." Not comprehending, he moved toward the double-door entrance, but before he could enter the house a blast splintered the roof of the World of Death. Ray was knocked to the ground. Debris fell around us and everyone in the vicinity had ducked or hit the ground. I saw terror and shock on Junior's face, who for a big man, managed to squeeze himself under a golf cart he used to get around the park. I imagined Junior was havin' a flashback and was back in Khe Sanh. He kept chantin' "Niner-Eight, this is two-four, can't pop a smoke" like it was a fuckin' mantra.

I checked to see if Ray was okay. He sat up and surveyed the scene. We helped Junior from under the cart and then the two of them was starin' above me. I was afraid somethin' was wrong with me that I couldn't feel. Ray reached above me and pulled the bra off the top of my banana head. We stared at the bra and then at each other. One of the cups was burned black and blown apart. The other cup, although burned and shredded, still had a foam falsie inside.

We stared at that bra for a good three minutes, tryin' to understand the significance of it. Ray then asked me if I saw the paper he had found. I hadn't. Then Ray pointed out the man Tandi had been talkin' to on the carousel. He was holdin' a small box. He shoved it into his coat pocket and walked away. Ray tucked the bra into his shirt, thanked us, and left the park.

He left Junior and me to deal with the police. We told them the roof blew off the World of Death down in Bananaland. Junior was sure it was Charlie.

5 Card Draw

Dr. Feldman, sippin' his Old Overholt, was teachin' the young Lieutenant the basics of poker. "It takes advantage of our innate appreciation of hierarchy, Path."

"Sir?"

"Anyone can have the highest hand. It's a matter of luck and skill. There is no banker in Poker as there is in Faro. It's truly democratic. A man stands on the hand he's dealt."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Feldman. I do not believe I shall ever remember what hands are better than others. A full boat beats a flush. Why is that?"

"It's probability. Math."

"How long have you been at Fort Palo Duro, Doctor.?"

"Long enough to drive me mad."

"Have you seen Comanches?"

Feldman was particularly good at rollin' cigarettes. At Path's question he decided to put down his cards and pick up his pouch of tobacco. He had an unusual dexterity, manipulatin' the paper like a magician rollin' a coin through his fingers. He had it rolled, licked and lit in a matter of seconds.

"Not for months," the Doctor began. "Hmm. Sergeant Booker. Comanches aren't like us, Path. They have no problem with murder. We have taken their land, after all. We have destroyed the buffalo."

"But surely they don't believe they can get it all back, Doctor."

"I really can't tell you what's inside the mind of a desperate Indian."

"A part of me feels sadness for those people."

“We may be guilty, Path, but we are only part of the historical movement of peoples. Man was not meant to be in one place for all time. Man is restless. The Indians are restless. They take each other’s lands. And that has been the way of things long before we got here. Mongols, Huns, Angles, Saxons and Vikings. History has been a chronicle of peoples displacing peoples. It is always bad for those on the losing end. Nature does not know justice or fairness.”

“Does not God?”

“You tell me.”

“The Colonel is sending Nash after the renegades.”

“Nash is a good Indian fighter.”

Path shrugs.

“The Colonel has learned a few things. I was with him when Quanah stole our horses and left us stranded on the plains. We’d be dead had not providence arrived in the form of a Tonkawa scout. Comanches have been a hard lesson for him, especially since it was his rival at West Point, Mackenzie, who rounded up Parker’s band.”

“There’s a rumor of Sioux problems up north.”

“So we have a fear of Indian attacks again. Waiting out there like hungry predators. So I have two pairs, Jacks and Fours. What do you have? You have a Queen.”

“But I almost have a flush.”

“Almost doesn’t cut it. So I would win.”

“But you say I could pretend to have something better to make the pot bigger?”

“You could bluff. But you better make me believe it.”

“What’s the difference between a bluff and a lie?”

“Well, nothing really, but it’s only a deception within the context of the game. It’s an all or nothing proposition. Either you lose everything, or you win if you can convince your opponent to fold, based on his belief that you have a better hand than you do.”

“So it doesn’t matter if you lie so long as you win.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“To thine own self be true?”

“It’s a goddamn game, Path.”

“This game is about human nature, then.”

“Of course it is, Path. I’ve yet to find a game that isn’t. And I must say I am astonished you have never played any games, any games at all.”

“I’ve played horseshoes, Doctor, and you taught me Chess.”

“Life is nothing but a game, Path. The sooner you learn the better.”

“Then by your reasoning lying in life is justified because it’s only a game.”

“It’s both, Path. It’s a matter of life and death...and it’s a game.”

“The Colonel has asked me to find out why the men are gathering out there in the grass.”

“Well, Lieutenant, you’ve been dallyin’ around here. Why haven’t you left? Ah! You’re afraid of the Comanches!”

“I don’t relish a fight, sir, but no, in actuality I only seek your advice. These are men of God and I am aware of your interest in various theological and philosophical matters.”

“I just know the faith that stands on authority is not faith.”

“Thoreau?”

“Emerson, of course. Thoreau said the smallest seed of faith...”

“...is better than the largest fruit of happiness.”

“Which would be a mango in my opinion. These revivalists probably came here because it’s wide open and there’s a fort to protect them.”

“But does it not seem mad?”

“Many do describe religious ferocity as madness. To some the very idea of basing one’s decisions on faith, or an inner voice, or something felt internally, is nothing short of insanity. The physical world, as we have pointed out ad nauseam, is a lethal point of reference.”

“Do you not think it odd that one person should be in possession of a mysterious hold on others? A pied piper, if you will.”

“You obviously must meet him. Do not be afraid of his manner or his message. It cannot be so alluring as to make a man lose his wits, unless, of course they’re Shakers.”

“There is nothing of the magical power of religion that I should be aware of?”

Feldman chuckled. “Well, Path. I have heard of Medicine Men with peculiar powers. I should think you’d be in better hands with a mad preacher than a mad Comanche. But Path, there is one thing you should know. If while talking to this preacher his eyes suddenly roll back in his head and he raises his arms and he cries out to God...”

“Yes sir...?”

“You better hope God likes you.”

Driving Blind

“It’s a miracle!” Ray proclaimed as he noticed the Blessed Virgin Mary danglin’ from the rearview mirror with rosary beads.

Andy and Ray had leapt into the Pinto as the sky broke open and rain tumbled in bulbous drops from the sky and exploded on the windshield.

“Y’all would be soppin’ wet if I hadn’t stopped,” the woman said.

Ray claimed the back seat and Andy rode shotgun. “Thank you, ma’am,” Andy said.

“Why’d you pick us up?”

She smiled. “Looks like y’all need a ride.”

Ray was exhilarated. “Yes ma’am!”

Caroline Tupin looked to be around 45. Her long, thick black hair was grayin’ and tied back in a ponytail. She wore a red muumuu with a floral print, and sported oversized round eyeglasses. She had an easy smile, perfected at some point by an orthodontist, framed by rose red lips. She wasn’t thin but wasn’t heavy as far as Ray could tell from the back seat. From her profile she seemed a dark, pretty woman, American Indian.

She glanced at Ray in the rearview mirror. “What you mean is what’s a woman doin’ alone on the highway pickin’ up two young men with a great big huntin’ knife?”

Andy nodded. “Yep.”

Caroline looked uneasily at the rain. “Ran into Deke Sadler. He’s the man you met at the fruit stand. He said y’all appeared to be safe boys as these things go, considerin’ you were a couple of lazy hippies. He said y’all were goin’ a long way and were about to get rained on. The trooper you saw is my boyfriend.”

Andy relaxed. “That makes sense, ma’am.”

They headed up 183 toward Austin, the same highway only a day before that took them the opposite way to the concert. It struck Ray how much ground they'd covered in two days since Andy's car crapped out the day before. Still had a long way to go.

The rain splashed hard on the windshield and Caroline slowed considerably, creepin' along the road, strainin' to see as the windshield wipers slapped fast and imperfectly.

"Should've got new wipers," she said.

Andy squinted through the windshield. "No wiper would work in this turd floater."

Caroline giggled. "Deke said y'all were at the concert. You get bored?"

Andy shook his head, "Need to be home tomorrow."

"Where's home?"

"Mango, ma'am." Ray answered.

"Got a long way to go," she observed, "Whereas I am lookin' forward to barbeque and fireworks. That's what it's all about, right?"

Andy suddenly grew solemn. "I reckon the Fourth is as good a time as any to say thanks to the boys who gave us freedom by sacrificin' their lives."

Caroline grew serious. "Amen to that, young man. Lucky y'all didn't get drafted and get sent off to Vietnam. That's what happened to my nephew, Johnny. Heartache and pain."

Ray studied the raindrops trickle down his window. "My dad was in Vietnam."

She glanced at Ray who seemed hypnotized by the view outside his window. "Yeah?"

"He was at Da Nang, 'round about the time of the Tet Offensive. Worked for the National Security Agency."

Caroline was impressed. "A spy, huh?"

Ray didn't respond.

Caroline studied Ray's face. "He was changed when he came back?"

Ray smiled and nodded.

Caroline thought a moment before continuing. "Johnny, the one I'm going to see in Waco, he said when they were flying home and they all got off the plane in San Francisco, they had to sneak them out the back door because there were protestors out front of the airport. Imagine that. Fighting for your country and coming home to hatred. Said he didn't feel welcome until he got home to Okmulgee. That's in Oklahoma. We're from the Muskogee People. You know the Creeks? Trail Of Tears? Y'all know about that?"

"Sure," Andy said. "They forced the Indians off their lands and made them go to Oklahoma. Lot of them died."

"That's right," Caroline agreed, "A lot died. Anyway, the Indians honor their warriors. Had a big Pow Wow. What about your father, Andy?"

Andy looked at his boots. "Dead, ma'am."

Caroline shook her head. "This life is full of pain, isn't it?"

Andy smiled. "Amen."

Ray remembered his father's fights with his mother after the war. He remembered the drinkin'. He felt uneasy about the rain but he wasn't havin' a third eye moment.

However, such a moment had gotten them into a storm and a Pinto. The original plan had been to take his bug. Ben had changed his mind about goin', or had his mind changed for him. And Angie got involved in other surprisin' things. About a week before the Fourth Ray couldn't shake the feelin' they shouldn't take the bug. He told Andy but Andy said Ray was tryin' to spook himself, but Ray reminded him of the accuracy of his weird predictions. Andy knew it was hopeless to argue, so he offered to take his '64 Rambler, which was in the shop at

the time. So the mechanic told Andy everything was fine with the car and not to worry about takin' it on a trip.

Early in the mornin', about twenty miles outside of Austin they heard a loud pingin' sound that indicated to Andy his pistons was in trouble. They crawled into Austin and Andy stopped at the nearest garage near Highland Mall. It would take a couple days to fix, considerin' it was Saturday, and it would cost more than was comfortable. Andy was pissed but claimed he wasn't.

They each had enough money to catch a bus back home or they could walk down to the head shop, buy the tickets and hitchhike to the concert. Maybe it was the fact they was so close. Maybe they was lookin' fear in the face and figured they'd always regret it if they didn't go. Probably it was 'cause they was lookin' for adventure.

"Fuck it, let's go to the concert!" Andy said.

"Goddamn right!" Ray said.

They'd gotten directions from the boys in the garage. They needed to walk west to Lamar and head south until the street branched off to Guadalupe. They'd take that all the way to 29th. A right turn there would take them to Oat Willies. That's where the tickets was.

To Ray Austin was a magical place. Everything he saw thrilled him. They was both a bit giddy 'cause they didn't know what was ahead of them, which was a long trek from North Austin all the way south to the University.

By the time they arrived at Oat Willies, hot and thirsty, the head shop seemed like an oasis. Oat Willies was known across the state to any head who knew anything. The incense hit you half a block down and was thick in the store. A crowd of folks stood outside, takin' in the day. Cowboy hippies. Boots, hats and long hair. Kinky Friedman's, *The Ballad Of Charles*

Whitman blared from the speakers. Inside the shop the walls was covered with posters and bumper stickers. The poster that caught Ray's eye was for the Gonzales concert. A scraggly, bearded Willie Nelson was circled by the show title, punctuated by 4th annual and 4th of July and seemingly held up by an armadillo.

There was an assortment of bongos and pipes at the counter, various rollin' papers, mechanical rollers, fashionable roach clips. There was buttons of all shapes and sizes and hundreds of t-shirts. Underground Comix was on stands, particularly Gilbert Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and *Fat Freddy's Cat*, and of course, R. Crumb. In a dark back room through thick beads, blacklight posters was on display. Keep On Truckin', Peace Signs, Psychedelia, Fat Freddy, Popeye Havin' Sex with Olive Oyl. Straight from the Haight. Austin and Oat Willies was everything Ray imagined them to be.

Ray and Andy bought their tickets and savored them for a moment. Willie Nelson's 4th Of July Picnic, Gonzales, Texas. The concert was actually already startin' up and there had been some worry it wasn't gonna happen.

"Willie had trouble gettin' permission." The clerk's name may have been Bovine. That's because he had that word sewn on his left pocket. Why else would you have that word sewn on your pocket? You like cows that much?

Bovine said, "Oughta be a damn good time."

"Reckon there'll be lots of people there," Andy speculated.

"Oh yeah," Bovine agreed. "Prob'ly be hot."

Ray's excitement burst forth. "Hey, man. We're hitchin' to the concert. Think we'll have problems catchin' rides?"

Bovine shook his head. "Naw. Lots of traffic headed that way."

A tall, skinny man limped into the store smokin' a cigarette. He wore a dirty, beat-up green Army jacket over a sweat-stained t-shirt and muddy jeans and boots. Some of his long, stringy, oily hair had emancipated itself from under his ragged straw cowboy hat and hung like fresh noodles. He hadn't shaved in a week but the stubble didn't hide his deeply wrinkled face.

His voice was hoarse and gritty. "Hernandez, where's your goddamn flag? Ain't you gonna put up a flag for the goddamn 4th of July?"

"Fuck it," declared Bovine.

The man put his cigarette between his lips, squintin' at the risin' smoke and laughin' in a wheezy sort of way, and snapped to attention, salutin' Bovine. The clerk shook his head and the man laughed hoarsely. He leaned on the counter and sized-up Ray and Andy. "Someday you'll be a patriotic son-of-a-bitch, Hernandez, and you'll send your son across the world to kill babies in the name of God and Oil."

Bovine was bored with the man. "Not likely, pendejo."

The man slid across the counter nearer to Andy. He was ripe with cigarettes, tequila and bad hygiene. "You boys look like lambs to the slaughter."

"Leave them alone, Shooter," Bovine was impatient.

Andy was annoyed with the man and and felt a bit superior. "Why they call you Shooter? You shoot blanks?"

The answer gave Shooter pause. He stared into Andy's eyes and showed Andy his yellow teeth as he managed a wheezin' snicker and shook his head. "Fresh meat."

Bovine interrupted. "Jack's in the back, Shooter. He's waitin' for you."

Shooter shot Andy with a fist pistol and limped into the blacklight room.

Bovine admonished Andy. "Better watch your ass. He ain't predictable."

Andy was insulted. “What’s the fastest way to get to the concert?”

Bovine thought a moment. “Well, I figure you cut ‘cross the University and do a diagonal to 35 and MLK.”

“What’s MLK?” asked Ray.

“Martin Luther King. Nineteenth. They changed the name last year. Guy had a heart attack and died at the City Council meetin’ tryin’ to get the name changed. So they changed the name. That’s what it takes, I guess. Take MLK east all the way to Airport and head south. That’ll take you to 183. That goes to Gonzales.”

Ray and Andy hit the pavement again, crossin’ The Drag onto the University of Texas Campus. Friedman’s song was in his mind as Ray peered up at the tower where ten years earlier the former Marine, Charles Whitman, a sniper, killed 14 people and wounded a lot more before shootin’ himself. The tower was spooky and ominous even on a sunny day. Ray thought of Bananaland and Tandi and the stranger and the bra. Then he thought of Shooter.

The boys got to MLK soon enough after passin’ by Texas Memorial Stadium, that’s before it was named after Darrell Royal, and crossed the freeway into East Austin. The houses looked old and retail looked starved. One house had a flag hangin’ from the eaves, but it was more distinctive for its solitude than its suitability. They stopped at a convenience store and bought a six-pack of Lone Star for the road. Goddamn that beer was good after a mornin’ humpin’ across the city!

They walked about a mile sippin’ the beer when an old black man in a pickup pulled up beside them. He didn’t have teeth and his cheeks was sucked up into his mouth.

“Y’all want a ride?”

“We’re goin’ to the Willie Nelson concert,” Andy declared.

“I can take y’all ‘cross the bridge up there. For a beer.”

“Thank you, sir!” Andy shook his hand.

They climbed into the pickup bed. Andy reached into the window and gave the man a Lone Star, which he promptly popped open and drank as they drove. He took them across the Colorado River Bridge and let them off. It was their first ride, it cost a beer, and it was only half a mile but they had become real hitchhikers.

“So which one of y’all is Dean Moriarity?” Caroline asked. “Ever read *On The Road*?”

“Can’t say I have ma’am,” Andy said.

Ray realized he’d been daydreamin’ and noticed the chiggers was diggin’ in. He scratched himself as quietly as he could and tried to distract himself. He’d read the book but wasn’t interested in the conversation. “Wasn’t that Sherlock Holmes’ enemy?” he asked.

“Different guy,” she smiles. “I’m talkin’ about the Beat Generation. Kerouac. Ferlinghetti. Allen Ginsberg? Can you tell I’m an English teacher?”

Ray remembered Ben Goldstein liked Ginsberg. He would sometimes say, “I saw the best minds of my generation...” and then make up somethin’ like “shit their pants.” But Ben’s mind was not the same anymore. Probably didn’t remember Ginsberg.

Ben’s parents was conservative, the kind that watched Lawrence Welk every Saturday night and wanted the police to bust more heads. They thought Nixon got a raw deal and thought America should still be in Vietnam. Not long after the boy’s momentous drug-induced decision to go to the concert, Ben was busted for possession of a joint. His father owned a Ford dealership in town and didn’t like the publicity. He decided Ben was havin’ too much fun and was addicted to weed. And to make a point with the Mango community, he committed his son to

a hospital where he underwent electroshock therapy for depression. His father said he smoked so much dope because he was depressed, even though Ben was always pretty fuckin' happy.

Ben wasn't the same when he got out. He'd forgotten a lot of things. He was dressin' better and actin' straighter. He stopped hangin' out with the heads. He broke up with Angie who promptly kicked him out of the apartment. She still had moments though when she didn't think she could live without him. She'd invite him back but she said it was like they never had a past. She told Ray she longed for the old Ben and then wanted to kill him for his indifference. Maybe it was love. Maybe it was sex. Maybe she needed to be shocked in the brain also.

Ray remembered the last thing he said to Ben before they left on the trip. He asked Ben if he was sure he didn't want to go with them. Ben smiled and said, "Why would I want to go?" He told Angie Ben wasn't goin', but Angie had lost interest in the concert. Ray would discover why not long after that, when he got his ankh necklace, which he now clutched. Caprice.

Ray was gettin' drowsy in the backseat while sheets of water flowed in constant streams on the windows. Thick drops pounded the roof and thudded on the windshield and drowned out the sound of the engine. Little chunks of hail intermingled with the raindrops. Caroline was squintin' through the wipers and slowin'. Occasionally a headlight appeared through the left window and quickly disappeared into the south. Ray hadn't slept well under the tree and he felt relaxed for the first time in two days.

Caroline also decided to give it a rest. "Mind if I pull over? Can't see a thing."

Andy agreed. "I can't see neither. Got to admit we'd be soaked at the concert, Ray."

Caroline crept off the road onto the shoulder and turned on her hazards. She dug into her purse and produced a joint. "Want to get high?" She lit it, took a drag and passed it to Andy.

Andy was surprised. "You don't seem like the tokin' type," he said.

She laughed. “Why, cause I’m old?”

Andy was embarrassed. “Ain’t that old.”

She indicated the Rosary beads. “Cause I’m Catholic?”

Andy felt uncomfortable. “I just mean you seem to have your head on straight.”

Ray’s eyelids felt like rocks. He stretched out across the backseat, closed his eyes and listened to the rain and conversation.

“I think more clearly when I’m high.”

“That’s opposite of most folks!”

“We all live in different worlds, Andy.”

“I reckon they got a reason to make it illegal, ma’am.”

“Not because it’s dangerous, right?”

Andy laughed. “Ain’t as dangerous as tequila! That’s for sure.” Andy passed the joint to Ray, who raised himself briefly to inhale, passed it back, and then collapsed into the back seat.

Caroline continued. “They keep it illegal because it’s not like alcohol. It puts you in a different state of mind. It makes you think, hey, why do things have to be the way they are?”

“I don’t get it.”

“That never happen to you? You ever been high and thought, wait a minute, why is it we live in a world that benefits the greedy? ”

“I reckon you don’t have to be high to figure that out.”

“True. The way Indians thought of reality was nothing like the way the white man did. But we have to live by his rules now. That’s why we ended up worshipping his God. Don’t get me wrong, I adore the Blessed Virgin.” She genuflects. “But I’ve always looked at the world as

a playground for spirits. Living on the land makes me happy. Keep a few head of cattle on my farm. Don't like cities."

"Got any horses?"

"Couple. You know a few years ago, guess it was three, '73 up in the Pine Ridge Reservation at Wounded Knee. You know what Wounded Knee was? About 1890 the cavalry charged in and massacred hundreds of Sioux men, women and children. In '73 the American Indian Movement held off the Feds for 71 days. They had demands, mostly about treaties, but the one that stands out to me is the right to Indian religious freedom and cultural integrity. Cultural integrity? What the hell is cultural integrity?"

Andy chuckled. "I see what you mean. I remember that. Some say they were terrorists."

Caroline chuckled. "Yeah, well they've been calling Indians terrorists from the moment the two cultures met. The white men were terrorists in my book."

Andy nodded. "I reckon things ain't perfect, ma'am."

"We're addicted to oil. Oil companies just loved it when people had to line up to get gas a couple years ago. Oil crisis my ass. They manipulated prices and knew we'd pay it because we have to drive, don't we? They've never liked hemp. You know the Founding Fathers grew hemp. Big cash crop. Made rope. Well, they put it in their pipes and smoked it too."

Andy giggled. "Sorry, ma'am, but it's hard for me to imagine George Washington smokin' a doobie. The A-rabs caused that gas crisis 'cause they didn't want us helpin' Israel."

Caroline grunted. "Believe that and I've got a pond full of water mocassins to sell you."

The chiggers was suckin' Ray's blood. They was findin' the damp spots, just as Andy predicted. Ray was uncomfortable but the raindrops lulled him into that place between sleep and wakefulness. The last thing he remembered before the dream was the thought of Washington,

Adams and Jefferson sittin' on a porch smokin' weed out of a bong. Jefferson's wearin' the same Rastafarian cap that Ben Goldstein wore. They're watchin' Jefferson's slaves pick cotton.

Adams asks Jefferson, "Tom, didn't you say we hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal?"

They salute the Confederate flag Jefferson's flyin' in his front yard.

Washington takes a hit and has trouble holding it in. "My dear John, surely you are aware that each man does not have equal lungs!"

Adams squeals in delight. "Lightweight!"

Washington coughs. "I love Virginia."

Jefferson laughs. "He cannot tell a lie."

Novus Ordo Seclorum

In the dream Ray is bein' led down a long hallway by an official lookin' sort of government character in a black suit in what feels to be a very large house. There are 22 portraits of people in the hallway. Ray counts them. They're men and women from various times in history. Ray recognizes what he thinks are paintings of some of the Founding Fathers, Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and he recognizes Abraham Lincoln. The hallway is long. The government guy must have taps on his shoes because his footsteps click. Click, click, click, click. Ray's wearin' sneakers. They squeak. He tries to time his squeaks between the clicks. Click, squeak, click squeak. It reminds him of Bob Marley.

There are symbols that seem to appear before him, geometric shapes dissolve into each other. An equilateral triangle dissolves into a hexagram. A right-angled triangle turns into a cube. A point becomes a line that becomes a triangle that becomes three dimensional, and then more dimensions form and suddenly Ray realizes the lines have become a blueprint for reality. Meanings are communicated to Ray and he understands them in the dream, but when he wakes up he can remember the shapes but not the meanings.

The clickin' man leads Ray into a room where two men and two women sit in large, leather chairs. They indicate Ray should sit on a small wooden chair without a cushion. They're dressed formally in black tie and ball gowns. The room seems to be a study of some sort. There are books on the walls and more symbols. From what he can remember, in his mind, it was as if he was lookin' down on the world from a great height and knowin' things he couldn't know if he was on the ground.

One speaks. He says they've been keepin' watch on Ray. Ray asks why. Two, a woman, says because Ray has his head up his ass. And that's how she says it, even though she's

dressed in a ball gown. Ray says he sees a straight line from One to Two. Then he gets a third eye moment but it's really strong, stronger than he's ever felt. Three, a man, says the wave is washin' over him, flowin' through The Eye. They say they can see Ray with that eye. Suddenly the symbol on the dollar bill appears on the wall. The eye over the pyramid with Novus Ordo Seclorum under it. A New Order For The Ages.

Ray says he sees a triangle between One, Two and Three. Three asks Ray if he knows currency. Ray's a bit afraid of Two so he answers meekly, money? One says yes, but it's also a medium of exchange. It can be an expression. It doesn't have to be physical. Keep in Mind, Four, a woman, hasn't said a thing and Ray's just now realizin' it. He asks her what they want with him. Four says Ray's missin' the point. The point of what? Ray doesn't know, but he's starin' at a square.

Then the eye over the pyramid grows bigger and brighter and seems to shine and move toward Ray. It blinds him and it washes over him again. It's a bigger wave than before.

From the square that connects them, a sort of holographic image forms inside it. Ray and the four strangers are watchin' somethin' like a movie with Ray and Andy and Neil Delgado, the man who took them into the concert.

Delgado had picked them up in his brand new black and gold party wagon with Frazetta's Conan The Destroyer airbrushed on the side. Ray's sittin' up front in one of the Captain's Chairs. Andy's kickin' back on the leather couch. The 8-track is blastin' Blue Oyster Cult's, *Cities On Flame With Rock n' Roll*.

Delgado's in his late twenties. His perfect teeth sparkle in a perpetual smile through a thick, black moustache. He wears a polyester lime green shirt and brown polyester pants. He has two-inch heels on his brown shoes. Large brown sunglasses shield his eyes and his thick

black hair is big and blow-dried over his ears. A very fat gold Rolex, what they used to call a Texas Timex, bullies its way out of his right sleeve.

The interior of the van is completely decked out in red shag carpet and wood paneling except for a space across from the couch that fits a framed poster of Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman, and a space above the couch is a similar setup with a framed poster of a muscular man in tight underwear, kneelin' on the floor. Andy reads the inscription, "To Joe, my loyal fan, Jack Wrangler." Must be an actor, Andy thinks. There's a couple of leather beanbags across from the couch and a fridge just behind the driver's seat. A giant cooler sits next to the fridge. On top of the cooler is a stack of porn.

Delgado points to the glove box. "Open that!"

Ray does and finds bags of white powder.

Delgado nods and smiles even wider. Then he points to the center console armrest and indicates Ray should open it. Ray does and finds it stuffed with bags of weed.

"Maui Wowie!" Delgado shouts. Then he grabs the CB microphone. "Hey Blue Cheer, got your ears on?"

A crackle of a voice responds. "Blue Cheer kick it in."

"Love me a Smokey report, Southbound 183 south of Farm To Market 11-85. Come on."

"Pretty sure there's a bear in the grass, cemetery on your left."

"Copy. Thanks good buddy. Over and out. "

Delgado removes the joint stuck above his left ear and punches the cigarette lighter.

"Light her up!"

Ray does as ordered and Delgado ejects the Cult and rummages on the floor to find Nugent and punches it in. *Stranglehold* blasts the van.

“Why are we watching this?” Ray asks the formal four.

“This is when you received the clues of your destiny today,” says Three.

“But you didn’t realize it,” says Two, “because you’re irresponsibly using illegal drugs.”

“But he sensed something,” One reminded Two. “That’s why he’s here now.”

Two’s sarcastic. “He’s here because we brought him here. He doesn’t know anything.”

“Give him a chance,” says Four. “Ray, we want to show you how to read the wave.”

Delgado’s an expert usin’ his hands for other things while drivin’ the van. He produces a little glass coke vial with a spoon attached on the lid. He takes a couple hits and passes the vial to Ray. “Check in the console and see if I left a mirror in there,” he says.

Ray does as instructed and removes a small mirror from the console and places it on top. Delgado pulls a business card from his shirt pocket. It says Delgado Properties, Neil Delgado, President. He hands the card to Ray who looks confused.

Delgado shouts at Andy, “Hey, man, help him out here.”

Andy crawls on his hands and knees to the console, pours the cocaine onto the mirror and uses the card to cut four lines. Then Delgado produces a \$100 bill like a magician in his hand and rolls it like magic with one hand. Delgado hands the bill to Andy who sticks it up his nose and does two lines. Ray follows suit.

“This is fuckin’ magnificent!” Andy’s in the mood to party.

Delgado shouts at Andy, “Hey, man, want a beer? In the cooler!”

Andy’s playin’ air guitar. “Your wish is my command!”

Andy opens the cooler and finds it stuffed with cans of Pearl on ice. He gives one to Delgado who hands it to Ray. He takes the second one and indicates Andy should have one.

They're buzzin' like motherfuckers when they pass the trooper waitin' at the cemetery. The trooper pulls onto the road and keeps pace with them.

"Smokey wants to play!" Delgado shouts while watchin' his rearview mirror.

Ray watches the speedometer. Exactly 55.

"I fuckin' hate 55!" Delgado yells. "The government can kiss my ass about savin' gas! But it's useful in situations like this! Clean record, new van."

The trooper paces the van all the way through Lockhart. Delgado follows the speed limit. Just south of town the Highway Patrol flashes lights. Delgado instinctively slows but the trooper guns the engine and speeds past him.

Delgado announces victoriously. "Must be some drug-dealin' hippies up there!"

Ray's relief was apparent but his paranoia grows.

Delgado chuckles. "No se preocupe, vato. All is copacetic."

"Hey, man, when I was a kid I was in Germany. There was this plant we called stingweed 'cause if you fell in it you got nettles in your skin. This new kid said it was mint. I said no, man, it's stingweed. This kid, Eddie, tore off a couple leaves and chewed them. His mouth was fuckin' burnin', man! I died laughin'!"

"Hey, that's hard core, man. Why would you laugh at your buddy?"

"I was just thinking about paraquat, man! Like, what if this weed was sprayed with it? It would be like stingweed, man!"

"That's good, man! Stingweed! You're fuckin' high, man! This shit does not have paraquat on it!"

"This shit is fine, vato!"

"Fuckin' right it's fine. What happened to that kid that ate the weed?"

“Yeah, he wanted to get home fast so he hitched a ride with a Canadian on an American base in Germany! Always thought that was weird. Fucker was kidnapped!”

“You’re fuckin’ with me! No shit? Fuck, man! That’s messed up!”

“Never heard from him again.”

“A Canadian on an American base in Germany? That’s fuckin’ weird, man.”

“Fuckin’ weird!”

Four speaks. “You think Eddie was killed but he wasn’t.”

“Really?” Ray’s surprised. “They never found him.”

Two butts in. “The man who took him, a Canadian with the Security Service, needed money. He sold your friend to a man who took him to Hamburg.”

Silence. The four look at Ray with a hint of compassion under the patronizing scorn. Ray’s embarrassed that they can see everything he’s doin’. Hell, what else have they seen?

One looks into Ray’s face. “Canada, Germany, America. This is important, Ray.”

A loud rumble of bikes, Harleys and choppers, about two dozen in all drown out *Stranglehold*. Ray’s definitely feelin’ the paranoia now. He thinks the bikers are fuckin’ with Delgado. Delgado senses it and shakes his head

“They’re cool, man.”

Delgado pulls the van to the shoulder out of the steady stream of traffic now headin’ to the concert. The bikers pull up next to the van, revvin’ their engines. Delgado exits. Ray watches him greet the bikers and talk to one specifically. He indicates the van. The biker walks with Delgado to the side door and Delgado pulls it open. Ray turns down the music. The two step up into the van. The biker towers over the polyester man. The biker glances at Andy who’s obviously fucked up, smilin’ stupidly and chuggin’ beer.

Delgado smiles. “Ray, Andy, T-Rex.”

T-Rex contemplates Wonder Woman.

Delgado reaches past Ray into the glove box and removes several bags of coke, which he passes to the big man. He does the same with the pot. T-Rex puts it all in what looks to Ray like a military duffle bag. Vietnam. Delgado notices Ray’s interest.

“Jumpin’ Junkie, man. 82nd.”

T-Rex produces bags of a brownish powder, which he hands to Delgado with a wad of cash. Delgado counts the cash.

All the traffic headin’ down the highway and a drug deal wasn’t helpin’ Ray’s paranoia. The business finished, Delgado starts the van and slips back into traffic as the bikers join the parade. The Polyester Man waves the little bags. “Crank! Keeps you rock n’ rollin’ all night!”

They arrive at the concert and Delgado tells them they need to find their own way from there. Ray opens the van door, steps onto the ground and is followed by Andy who promptly falls on the ground.

Delgado tosses them two beers and waves at them as they stagger toward the stage.

“Vaya con Dios!”

Three looks at Ray. “What were you feeling in those moments?”

“I was pretty fucked up but not as bad as Andy,” Ray answers.

Two dismisses him. “Idiot.”

Three insists. “What were you feeling?”

Ray’s gettin’ annoyed with Two and is resentin’ their superior attitudes. “Paranoia. Drugs, police, bikers...I wasn’t in Mango anymore.”

Four persists. “Germany, America, Canada, Paranoia. The message, Ray. That’s how you read the wave. Life experiences are a form of currency if you know the language.”

“Germany, America, Canada, Paranoia. So what?”

One says. “You must stop him.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m sleepin’ in the back of a Pinto.”

Then they laughed. It was the loosest they’d been. They’d been so reserved Ray just thought they was pissed off at him.

Two giggles ruefully. “You’re no better than an ape.”

Suddenly Ray’s back at the concert. Now here’s the thing. Ray knows he’s havin’ this dream, or whatever it is, but he’s in two minds, because when he’s at the concert, he’s literally relivin’ the moment. He’s there. Again. He gets a sense of déjà vu. He knows he’s dreamin’, he knows it’s real. It’s somewhere in-between. It’s like he’s really fucked-up but clearer than he’s ever been.

Doug Sahm is performin’. It’s late afternoon and the sun is searin’ a hole in Ray’s forehead. Andy is passed out beside him. They’re sittin’ in a dip in the field about thirty yards from the stage. Andy’s snorin’ and the sun is beatin’ down on his face, cookin’ him like a ribeye. There’s no shade. The ground is hard and scrubby.

Is anybody goin’ to San Antone? Not Ray, not Andy. They’re sittin’ in the middle of a fuckin’ field as the ants start pourin’ in. Where the fuck is the water? Where the fuck can you piss? Hey, is that Willie? Willie’s jammin’ with Sahm.

Jesus shows up with a handful of blankets. Jesus asks Ray if he wants to buy a blanket.

“Better than sittin’ on the ground, man.

Andy snorts, coughs.

“Don’t want a blanket.”

What about him? He okay?”

“You look like Jesus.”

“Right on, man! But, hey I’m not. I believe in love, though. And I believe in this.”

“Huh?”

“Smack, ‘ludes, doobs, acid, shrooms, speed. I got what you need and you’ll like what I got. One dime one mindfuck.”

“Water?”

“Got some H2O by the t-shirts way over there, like, way way over there on the other side of that naked chick.”

“Fuckin’ hot.”

“Fuckin’ A it’s fuckin’ hot. Better if you’re fucked up.”

“I’m already fucked up, man.”

“I hear you, brother. You sure he’s okay?”

“Blow, grass and beer.”

“Right on! You got blow?”

“Over there. Bikers.”

“Fuck, man, you score from bikers?”

“Free samples.”

“Goddamn! I can’t afford to give it away.”

“I just want water.”

“By the t-shirts, man. Water’s free but I ain’t. Peace, brother.”

Some Jesus.

Then he has a change of heart. “Chew on this, man. This is my body you eat.” He gives Ray a mushroom, which Ray promptly swallows.

Water’s fallin’ everywhere in big drops. Ray rolls down the window, sticks his head out and drinks the rain and lets it splash on his head. He returns to the seat. Caroline’s and Andy’s mouths are movin’ but he can’t hear what they’re sayin’. Then they both turn to Ray and stare at him. Andy asks him what side of the circle does the rain come in and then he takes his picture.

Ray’s startled by the sun in his eyes.

“A man could wake up dead,” Doug Sahn says, but this time he sounds different.

“I’m very sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to kick dirt on you.”

Ray’s lookin’ at a tall man with long hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He’s standin’ above him, wearin’ a long-sleeved white shirt, with sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and trousers with buttons for braces that hold his pants up. His pants are tucked into his boots. He’s wearin’ old-fashioned small spectacles and his left hand is covered with a leather glove, but not his right, which he’s usin’ to drink out of a canteen.

“Wow,” says Ray, “I haven’t seen real suspenders in a long time.”

“Don’t want my trousers to drop, do I?”

“You’ve got that old west look down, man.”

“Not sure what you mean, sir. The name’s Fitzhugh, Cornelius Fitzhugh.”

“Ray Rhodes. Pleasure.”

Fitzhugh sits next to Ray. Andy’s gone. Ray notices Fitzhugh has tied an American flag on top of four tall stakes and provides himself shade, which he then moves under.

“Good idea,” Ray comments.

“Have you just arrived?”

“Yeah. How long have you been here?”

“A week? Yes, a week.”

“A week! Must be pretty important to you to camp out that long!”

“The message is everything, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I journeyed from Georgetown.”

“Texas?”

“Maryland. Well, of course, now it is the District of Columbia. I sometimes forget because I was born there. And the war, of course, changed my life. The world is not the same.”

He raises his left hand which Ray now sees is a prosthetic covered by the glove. Now Ray understands. Yet another Vietnam casualty. The trip has been peppered with them. “My father was in the war, man.”

“Did he know victory, sir?”

“Guess not,” Ray says. “And he was treated like crap when he got home.”

“Family against family. A profound cost to the nation. But we are all brothers again, are we not? We must embrace our former foe.”

“Well, that’s enlightened of you, man.”

“Thank you.”

Ray thinks Fitzhugh is fucked up from ‘Nam so he decides to avoid anything controversial. “So you’re quite a Willie fan to come all that way to be here.”

“To be frank, sir, I’m not altogether certain what a “Willie fan” is, but then I’m not familiar with much of this western nomenclature. If you say I am, then I suspect you’re correct. For my part I’ve long possessed a spiritual yearning that has led me to this place at this time.

I'm engaged to be married in Georgetown to the daughter of my employer, a Mr. Butler, who is very well established in the coal industry. However, I insisted before the nuptials, I must travel to this place to hear the message and to await the coming of our Lord."

Fuckin' great, Ray thinks. He's sittin' next to a Holy Roller Vietnam vet.

"Have you heard word of savages, sir?"

"Are they a new band?" Ray asks.

"I suspect they've been here all along, watching us.

Ray looks around at the growin' concert crowd. He realizes he's fucked up. Some of the heads in the crowd are beginnin' to float above them. It feels like speed with an emphasis on intensity. Most of them look rough and woolly but he suspects he's not quite understandin' Fitzhugh. When he turns back toward Fitzhugh he's gone. So is his flag. Andy's returned and still passed out. Weird. The sun is lower and it's burnin' his neck. "Or Phoenix Arizona..."
Goddamn right, Doug. Goddamn scrub. Sweat and mesquite.

People are settin' up camp around them. Some have tents, but most have blankets, portable chairs, coolers. Some make improvised shades with blankets or clothes. Trash is accumulatin'. The sun falls and night drops harder. Thirsty and hungry. A woman's scream behind them pierces through the music, a commotion builds. Ray's startin' to feel this is not Woodstock. Cops are swarmin' around the bikers. They've been busted. A profound wave of paranoia engulfs him and he wants to escape. But where? He feels like he needs to get out of there but he's thirsty. Where's the water? Where's the goddamn water? It's on the other side of the window but Ray can't get to it.

"You can't drink this water. I'm washing my clothes!"

Ray feels he'll die of thirst. His mouth is parched as he stares blankly at the soapy water. The woman washin' her underwear has long red hair. Ray focuses on her face.

"Morrigan?" he managed.

"Oh wow! You look familiar!"

"It's Ray! Ray Rhodes. Mango College."

"Oh, yeah! Ray! Imagine seeing you here!"

Ray's tryin' to collect his thoughts, which at that moment feels like a game of pick -up-sticks. "Wow," he mumbles.

"You look hot, Ray. You want a Coke?" She reaches into a cooler and produces a can of Seven-Up. He takes the drink, pops the top, and guzzles it. It burns like a demon in his throat. He winces in pain but finishes it in several gulps. "Guess you're thirsty."

Ray observes Morrigan's back to the hippie stoner look, tie -died t-shirt, scarves and jeans with huge bellbottoms. "You look different since I last saw you."

She nods.

"Ben Goldstein says he visited you in New York."

"Is Ben with you? Where is he?"

"It's just me and Andy."

She's disappointed.

"Ben had shock therapy. He's not the same."

She looks wistfully at the throng of people around them. "Who is these days?"

"I haven't changed."

She smirks. "You sure about that?"

Actually, Ray wasn't sure about anything. "

She strokes his face. “You’re lost. You don’t know what you’re doing. You’re a statue. You’re frozen in place with a look of apprehension on your face, gazing helplessly at the sky. I see death in your future. Soon. Perhaps today.”

“I’m going to die?”

“We’re all going to die, Ray of Sunshine. Hey, Red Headed Stranger!”

“What do you know, red headed partner?” Ray turns to see Willie Nelson.

Ray is particularly articulate. “Holy fuck!”

Willie laughs. “I had one of those once. Saw God. You gonna bogart that water?”

“It’s full of soap,” Ray says as he turns back to Morrigan, but she’s gone. He turns back to Willie. He’s gone. Ray falls to his knees.

“The wave.” It’s Three. He’s back in the room with the four strangers.

Ray nods. “I saw rain, lots of rain, shuttin’ the whole thing down. Thousands in the mud. Something screamed at me I had to get the fuck out of there while I could because it was fuckin’ important that I be somewhere else today. It was a really strong feeling. Paranoia. Picked me up off my ass. I started to panic. I dragged Andy up and we caught a ride to a beer joint in Gonzales. Then we wandered in the dark and found the park.”

One rises from his chair and stands above Ray. He kneels, his hands on his knees and stares directly into Ray’s face, invadin’ his space. “Was it real?”

Ray stammers, “I...I just felt it.”

“But how do you know?”

“I just believed it.”

One moves in even closer. “How do you know what’s real?”

Ray responds. “I don’t know what’s real!”

Two's insulting. "Who do you trust, idiot?"

Three finishes. "Who is your authority?"

Ray wakes up. Andy's shakin' him.

"Wake up, man," Andy said. "We're in Austin."

The rain had slowed and they was drivin' in the city, crossin' Town Lake. Andy took a picture of Ray wakin' up.

Ray groaned. "Wow, man. I just had the weirdest dream. It was, like, really real. Like, I was there. And it had to do with geometry."

Andy was amused. "Thought you hated math."

"In the dream I understood it all and it's everywhere. Damn, I'm losing it."

Andy laughed. "Hell, Ray, I've been tellin' you that."

"Doesn't that irritate the hell out of you?" agreed Caroline. "You learn the secret of all creation in a dream and then you lose it almost immediately when you wake up."

"Caroline's taking us all the way to Waco," Andy said, "But she wants me to drive."

Caroline laughs. "I haven't had the luxury of a nap, Ray."

Caroline drove them to Andy's car at the garage which was closed, of course. Andy wanted to get some extra camera equipment he'd left in the trunk. It was still rainin' hard enough to get him wet. Caroline moved over into the passenger seat and Andy took over the driver's seat.

Andy got back onto I-35 as Ray thought of Tandi. The hints she would be at the concert were bullshit but every time he thought about bein' with her he felt joyous.

"Yes!" he exclaimed loudly, which only prompted knowin' smiles between Andy and Caroline.

The Whale

Tom Jefferson, John Hancock and Ben Franklin was flyin' though space. Tom was tryin' to piece together the events that had resulted in an astonishin' turn of fortune. They was on the river when suddenly a giant sea creature with blindin' lights showed up and swallowed them up.

No sooner had the thought of bein' digested in the belly of a stinkin' fish overwhelmed him, but he remembers driftin' into a dream. He's in a magnificent grassy field, grass as far as the horizon. He's with a large group of men, mostly bearded. The fashion is strange, but the isolation is stranger. They are a small island of humanity at dusk on a sea of tall grass.

This must be heaven, Tom thinks. "The fireflies are pleasant."

"Quite so." The man next to him is chewin' a long blade of grass. "Strange to see them so far north. Has been warm, I reckon."

Tom needs to pee. He would never have thought a bodily function would continue in the afterlife. There's nothin' but darkenin' prairie to the east so he decides to mosey down into it to relieve himself. He feels a touch of guilt considerin' he led his comrades to their inevitable doom, but they do not appear to be here. He wanders toward the envelopin' darkness, searchin' like a dog for that place, that place that will no doubt thirstily accept his heavenly water.

Stars sparkle. The grass is tall and he senses somethin' movin' to his right. Probably an animal. Tom realizes he has no weapon. Strange that heaven should reproduce fear. One would have thought it to be brighter.

With every step he takes he hears the rustle and each time it grows closer and larger. Fear overtakes him and he falls to his knees. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..."

And it was at that very moment, a spiritual force seems to envelope him, causin' his skin to crawl and wellin' up inside him in a kind of exhilaratin' vibration. He feels invincible. He

feels profound love. The Powhatan is with him. He continues prayin' until the predator retreats into the night, into the nothin'. And when he finally opens his eyes, Ben is starin' back at him.

"Ben?" Tom truly wasn't certain of his reality.

Ben adjusted his glasses. "My dear sir, I've never known you to be much of a praying man, but you were undoubtedly praying to your maker."

Tom was aware he was in a room, although the furniture seemed alien.

"Ben...John...how did we escape the belly of that fish?"

"Not a fish, Mr. Jefferson." Hancock had a hint of sarcasm. "A large craft that scooped us out of the river and sent us skyward."

"Skyward?"

Franklin indicated a portal. "Skyward, Tom. See for yourself."

Tom peered out the portal to see space, stars and profound darkness. And a globe, a small blue globe. Earth."

"My dear Lord."

Hancock smiled. "I wonder now, Mr. Jefferson. Where does He reside?"

"But how is this happening, gentlemen?"

"Apparently the Masters, Tom." Franklin could barely conceal his glee.

"Have you seen the Masters, Ben?"

"I have not. But I suspect we shall at any moment."

"For a time I thought I was in Heaven, gentlemen. Although it was not what I suspected Heaven to be."

"Yes, Mr. Jefferson. You fainted."

"This Heaven, Mr. Hancock, was a sea of grass."

“I suppose one should expect a pastoral repose from a farmer.”

“And what should your Heaven be, my dear sir, a tailor’s shop?”

“Why, of course, it is at the feet of Our Lord, as His angels stand ready at His side to smite blasphemers, Mr. Jefferson.”

“In this Heaven I had to pee.”

“Well I suppose that says it all, doesn’t it?”

“Gentlemen, please, do you not appreciate this momentous occasion? We are apparently flying through the heavens on a winged chariot. To what destination?” Ben puts his arm around Tom. “I must say, Mr. Jefferson, when you told us of this dream I thought you mad. I now understand I was wrong about your genius, Tom. It is obvious now the world is mad.”

The door to the room opened at that moment.

The men was stunned.

Following Orders

The Colonel's order was clear but the young Lieutenant wasn't certain how to achieve the goal. The Doc's reassurance was helpful. He left Fort Palo Duro, rode the three miles and arrived in time to catch Jacob Winston's performance. He dismounted, clutchin' his horse's reigns. Winston stood on the back of a wagon overlookin' dozens of men listenin' raptly to every word in the middle of a vast expanse of grass.

“We have been born again into the spirit that will lead us to a new understanding of our purpose. And indeed, we have a profound purpose, a purpose beyond those of ordinary men. Matthew says ‘Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.’

Our lives are not predetermined, gentlemen! We are free to work for Our Lord, to do His bidding! Our very bodies are His temples. Are we less of a church because we are under the stars without shelter? ‘Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? Saith the Lord; or what is the place of my rest’ Hath not my hand made all these things?’

Here we are free of the distractions that keep us apart from the Lord our God. It is here we may contemplate all that He has planned for us until he arrives in these grasses to lead us toward salvation.

Salvation my friends! Let us be free! Let us be free to let the Lord inside us! Let us be free, my brethren! Show us the Lord's presence! Show us His glory! Let Him inside us! Let Him become us! Let the Spirit descend upon us!”

And then Lieutenant Path witnessed the oddest thing. Individually the men on the prairie began to shake. They began to laugh. They fell on the ground or they barked like dogs. They were speakin' in tongues and they began to cry. All the enthusiasm Path had been conditioned to detest in his Baptist upbringin' was manifested before him like a stark nightmare in the grass. Winston's voice thundered over the chaos, "We are free when the Lord controls us!" Terror rose in Path seemingly from the ground below him into his toes, freezin' his legs in place. His bay began to wrench on the reins, and then broke free and ran headlong into the plains away from the commotion. Then Path thought he witnessed a horror. In the group of men a couple, maybe three seemed to be shakin' themselves into a sexual ecstasy, exposin' themselves under the sun. But before he could truly accept what he was seein', a hand fell upon his shoulder, turned him away from the spectacle and led him from the throng to the other side of a wagon where his view was obscured. The hand was Winston's.

"Please join me in prayer, Lieutenant," Winston held Path's hands, preventin' him from movin'. "Dear Heavenly Father, please grant us the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, give us the strength to withstand the subtle temptations of the flesh that distract our souls from basking in your eternal glory. Amen."

"Sir, I do not believe your prayer is being observed by some of your followers. I have witnessed an unholy scene."

Suddenly silence and Winston releases Path's hands. Path quickly returns to the other side of the wagon to see the group of men sittin' quietly and peacefully in the grass, conversin' in civilized fashion. Path is stunned.

"I do apologize, sir, if we have startled you."

Path is undoubtedly confused. "Sir, I...I am looking for my mount."

“We will find your horse and return it to you. You are unsteady. I wonder if this blazing sun has affected you today. Please forgive me. I am Jacob Winston.”

“Lieutenant Samuel Path, adjutant to Colonel MacDonald, the Commander of Fort Palo Duro. How do you do, sir?”

“It is a pleasure and an honor, sir. How may we serve you today?”

“Mr. Winston, my orders are to request that you break up this gathering temporarily and seek refuge in the fort. There are savages in the area and they could prove deadly to you and your followers.”

“The Good Lord will protect us, Lieutenant. He will ensure the savages understand we mean them no harm. We are awaiting the return of Christ.”

“You do understand, sir, we cannot guarantee your safety.”

“Allow me to show you something.” Winston pulled back a tarpaulin from the wagon nearest them. Path beheld dozens of Springfield rifles and a few carbine versions. “We are prepared for danger.”

Path’s head still seemed fuzzy. “I do confess you are more prepared than I suspected,” he acknowledged, “however, it is Colonel MacDonald’s opinion that you and your followers are taking a provocative stance that will tempt the renegades.”

“Lieutenant, you may relay to your Commander that we will not be removed from our place of worship except upon pain of death.”

“Sir, what reason could you have to commit to this risky endeavor?”

“My dear young man, a mere ten years ago we were ravaged by the calamity of incalculable suffering. Brothers, fathers and sons, all Americans, sacrificed on the altar of Mars.

That conflict was a sign, a sign of a new era. Our Lord Jesus Christ will be arriving soon, from there, through the grass, and will take our hands and our souls and we will live in paradise.”

“I see,” Path bit his lip. “May I ask, sir, if you fought in the war?”

“Please do not hold it against me, sir, if I tell you I did indeed fight for my state of Tennessee. All that I held dear perished at Shiloh.” Winston’s mood immediately sank.

Lieutenant Path had seen war memories take hold of a man’s soul many times. He pitied the apparently deranged preacher.

Winston laughed. “No need for that, young man. All this is merely another round.”

“Excuse me?”

Winston began to sing. “Three blind mice...three blind mice.”

Path seriously doubted the man’s sanity. “Are you well, sir?”

Suddenly Winston’s countenance glowed with benevolence. “I am suggesting that we are blind to the truth, Lieutenant. You and I are no strangers.”

“Is this not our first encounter, Mr. Winston? I do apologize. When have I had the pleasure of your acquaintance?”

“Well...we have become acquainted in the past and will do so in the future. However, this is our first encounter.”

Three blind mice sang the circular message inside the Lieutenant’s mind. “Being a Christian, Mr. Winston, I presume you’re not suggesting the pagan doctrine of reincarnation.”

“Why would I suggest such a thing, Lieutenant?”

“Indeed.”

“However, I do suggest one’s work is sometimes carried on by others in subsequent generations. Or looked at another way, an idea is carried by various people through time.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Like a pebble cast upon a pond creating ripples across time. You’ve heard that many times, haven’t you? Are you simply the sum of your physical body, Path, or are you defined by your connection to God?”

“I can assure you, sir, I am not certain of such theological questions.”

“Because you don’t remember, Lieutenant, as I remember. But the story remains.”

“The idea survives the mortal man?”

“Ideas search out vessels for their dispersion.”

“I rather doubt the practicality of that remark, sir.”

Winston smiled. “You are deeply immersed in this world and you do not doubt it. Therefore you do not see the truth of this meeting. I will plant a seed. There is a world of life and a world of death but the two are not different worlds. One is the fruit of the other, a banana perhaps. Imagine a banana, sir, and imagine a man inside the banana. One day the man will be peeled of his skin and God will devour his soul. The man will become part of God. Eventually the world of death will explode, resulting in the world of life.”

“That’s a fascinating thought, Mr. Winston. Yes. A banana.” Path really didn’t know what the man was talkin’ about. He was absolutely insane.

Winston put his hand on Path’s shoulder. “One day, young man, a banana will speak to you. Know today that banana will be me. See you next round, Path. Good day.”

And then Winston just walked away, leavin’ Path speechless, thinkin’ about bananas.

Lieutenant Samuel Path watched him disappear into the crowd of men. “I shall relay your answer to my Commander,” he shouted.

“I see the Prophet has attracted the cavalry,” said a voice behind him. Samuel turned and saw a man holding the reins of Sam’s horse. He introduced himself as Cornelius Fitzhugh.

“I’m certainly interested in a voice that could prompt dozens to risk their lives on the plains,” said Samuel.

“Of course, it is not the voice but the message, Lieutenant,” Cornelius replied.

“Indeed, sir. I am not altogether convinced the message is sound.”

“Shall we tie your bay here? Let’s meet some of the fellows.”

Samuel found it easy to speak with Cornelius. They strolled through the grass and Fitzhugh introduced Path to several men who seemed pleased to be camped on such sparse land.

“Fitzhugh, earlier I believe I witnessed something rather unusual. And yet the phenomenon ceased as quickly as it began.”

“You saw God descend upon these worshippers.”

“Then I was not mistaken! I thought I was mad.”

“Though this be madness yet there is method in it. You must consider yourself fortunate, sir. You have the capacity in your mind to be in the spiritual place as well as the physical one.”

“In my mind’s eye. Are you implying another reality?”

“More than implying, Lieutenant. Not everyone is capable of witnessing our ecstasy.”

“I must admit I am rather perplexed.”

“I hope I can help you understand. Many faiths require an intellectual understanding of God, but do not value an experience of Our Lord. There are some that value experience but have no intellectual understanding at all. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. We have succeeded in finding a place, if you will, this place, where both are experienced and understood.

It required this place at this time, and the peculiar mental capabilities of these men. You are one of us, Samuel, though you do not realize it.”

“Forgive me, Cornelius, if I do not readily accept your explanation. It does seem rather fanciful. Are you aware of Winston’s belief in reincarnation?”

Fitzhugh laughs. “Why of course, sir. We have all known each other before. It is why we are here now, about to accomplish something truly profound.”

Fitzhugh had been a Union infantryman in the war, the Maryland 2nd Regiment and had lost his left arm at the elbow at Antietam. He had a prosthetic hand which he covered with a leather glove. He’d left a fiancé in Washington to follow Winston. He said she would wait. There was no tellin’ what the others had given up to be here.

“How did Winston find this specific spot on the plains, Cornelius?”

“He dreamed of it, Samuel.”

Samuel indicated Fitzhugh’s left arm. “Do you regret your participation in the war?”

“I do not regret the loss of my limb. I do regret the loss of lives. I have far too many wounds in my soul to ever be at peace. I am here now because I could not bear to be with my betrothed, knowing that I am torn in my heart.”

“How did you hear of Winston’s message?”

“A friend, this man here. Bartholomew Rittenour. Bartholomew, this is Lieutenant Samuel Path. He has asked us to leave our place of worship and find shelter in the fort.”

“How do you do, Lieutenant? Has Cornelius explained the futility of that request?”

“Indeed he has, sir. Although I’m afraid I must insist.”

“He sees what we see, Bartholomew.”

“If you do see, sir. Then you see we cannot leave.”

“The Lieutenant is not aware of the message.”

“Ah, well. It was a pleasure making your acquaintance, Lieutenant. In due time...”

Fitzhugh led Path back to his horse. “I served with Rittenour in the 2nd. He’s from Baltimore. His wife was taken by the fever while he fought. After the war he wandered, searching for meaning. He told me of Winston’s prophecy. There are many veterans here, Lieutenant. That should not surprise you.”

“Why are there no women, Fitzhugh? Rather odd, wouldn’t you say?”

“Odd that no woman would want to camp in the open like this? That story, Lieutenant, indicates Mr. Winston’s superb adaptability. He apparently never intended that only men should be here, but when it became clear that only men had answered his call he took it as a sign from God that only men should be here. So he now forbids fraternization with the finer sex until...”

“Until?”

“Until the Lord arrives, of course.”

Privately it was clear to Samuel Path the philosophy was doomed, although the strange experience shook him. It appeared Fitzhugh was one of the leaders of the spiritual fraternity. Path could sense the anticipation the men felt as they expected they would soon be rewarded for their tenacious faith.

But Path was no closer to finding a solution. He left the encampment in the late afternoon, so that darkness shouldn’t find him in the deadly grass.

On the ride back to the fort he contemplated the duality, or rather duplicity of Winston’s mind. Furthermore, they had guns, but no horses to speak of. A Comanche might want the guns. Path imagined what would happen if something extraordinary did appear on the plains.

Something other than a banana.

Warts and Witchcraft

Ray wasn't sure how to approach Tandi about the explodin' bra so he decided to get some advice from Angie. Angie had kicked Ben out of the apartment because of Ben's new indifference to her. He'd had shock therapy and it didn't appear he was gonna come back around to Angie anytime soon, if at all. She was depressed. One day she just told him to get the hell out but regretted it immediately. He moved back in with his folks and Angie quickly found a renter. Ray had never known Angie to rent the apartment to a woman. She apparently missed Ben a lot.

Ray had returned from Bananaland so it was about ten that night when he knocked on Angie's door. The lights was on but there was no answer. He thought she might be upstairs. He walked up the side stairs to the apartment and could hear music and smell lavender. He knocked softly. He saw the curtain rustle in the window and Angie unlocked the door and opened it.

She was standin' in the doorway in white panties and a white cotton halter top without a bra. The jolt of seein' Kilimanjaro and Fuji practically unleashed was enough to stun him but then her belly button caught his eye. She had an innie. Ray felt oddly aroused at the sight of her belly button. Ray thought she was beautiful and overpowerin' like a roarin' waterfall. He felt weak at the knees. He took a step back. Angie was amused. "See anything you like, Ray?"

Ray indicated her breasts and his ears grew hot and red with embarrassment. "I brought you a bra." Ray showed her the mangled and blackened bra.

Angie was amused. "What the fuck is that? Come in, Ray."

The apartment had been transformed since Ben left. His eye caught lace curtains and colorful knick-knacks. The apartment came furnished but now soft blankets and throws draped the couch and chairs. Ray recognized two Georgia O'Keeffe posters on the walls. Flowers that look like vaginas.

Several candles burned, reflected in various crystals, givin' the livin' room a soft glow. Now that he was inside he could smell the aromatic weed that swirled upward in smoke from a small, glass unicorn pipe on the coffee table.

It adorned a glass, lotus flower ashtray that was sittin' on top of *A Separate Reality* that was sittin' on top of *Magick In Theory and Practice* that was sittin' on *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *The Golden Ass*, and at the foundation, Aeschylus. And there at the foundation a small mirror tray next to the books displayed a number of buds and Job Rollin' Papers. *Rhiannon* played softly in the background, which was appropriate because on the couch, in the middle of the beautiful room, sat what appeared to be Stevie Nicks.

Of course, it wasn't Stevie Nicks. It was Caprice. She dressed like Stevie Nicks in the lacey, Gothic sort of way, all in white. A closer look revealed her face was thinner than the Fleetwood Mac singer's and her nose slightly crooked. She had dark eyes, almost black. Sittin' as she was, cross-legged on the couch, as comfortable and peaceful and sexy as she could possibly be and Angie nearly naked, gave Ray an erection.

"Sit down, Ray," said Angie and he did so gratefully. "Would you like some wine?"

"Sure." Ray sputtered.

Angie struck an introduction pose. "This is Caprice. She's my new tenant. This is Ray."

"Hi, Ray."

"Hi, huh, wow, you really look like..."

"Stevie Nicks."

"Yeah."

Angie called from the kitchen. "But she's not, Ray. She's Caprice."

"Like the soft cheese," Caprice clarified. "Caprice des dieux." Whim of the gods.

“Wow, are you French?” asked Ray.

“No.”

“Haven’t tried the cheese,” said Ray.

Caprice smiled. “Pungent but so soft.”

Ray did notice a certain pungent quality behind the lavender and pot.

Angie returned with a glass of red wine and handed it to him. “Let me see what you have there, Ray.” Angie took the bra from him and cuddled next to Caprice. Caprice moved seductively up Angie’s body and rested her head on Fuji. The sight of them, their long legs, their perfectly soft skin, their long hair on the white lace, drove Ray up the goddamn wall.

“Woo!” he exclaimed. “Mind if I take a hit off that?”

Angie passed the pipe to him. “Help yourself. Now, what is this?”

Ray took a few hits off the unicorn pipe and explained the explosion at the World Of Death earlier that night. He suspected the bra had plastic explosives in it. He knew he was soundin’ crazy but the pot seemed to make it okay. He told them about Tandi. He was high so his sexual desire had a dreamy edge to it. He ended his story with, “May I just say the two of you are the most beautiful women in the world right now?”

They giggled. Then Angie grew serious. “You’re wonderin’ why I’m with a woman. I mean, I didn’t know I was a lesbian. Maybe I’m not. I just love lovin’ Caprice.”

Caprice interjected. “It doesn’t matter.”

Angie nodded. “No, I know... the labels. We love each other.”

“Far out,” said Ray.

“It is far out,” said Angie. “It’s groovy.”

They laughed.

Angie cleared her throat. “As for the bra, Ray, you say you have this third eye thing, you know, and I think you’ve got a wild imagination. You did name my breasts, after all.”

“He named your girls?”

“What did you name them, Ray?”

“Huh, Fuji and Kilimanjaro.”

Caprice waved her finger. “Not very respectful, Ray.”

“I assure you...”

“They’re both Everest in my opinion.”

Angie and Caprice kissed. Ray took another hit.

“I can’t see this bra explodin’, can you honey?”

Angie handed the bra to Caprice. She sniffed it. “Smells a bit strange, Angela.”

“My advice, Ray,” Angie said condescendingly, “don’t give this back to your girlfriend...”

“Fred’s girl...”

“She’s going to think you’re weird. More weird.”

Caprice put her hand on Angie’s arm. “I don’t think you’re weird, Ray.”

Angie rolled her eyes. “I forget you’re a witch.”

“A witch?” Ray was momentarily distracted from his erection.

Caprice explained her Wiccan beliefs. She worked in the Whirlin’ Dervish bookstore downtown. The New Age was sputterin’ in Mango. The Whirlin’ Dervish was sometimes harassed by Jehovah’s Witnesses who called it Spinnin’ Satan. Caprice said she didn’t ride brooms, but she did practice nature rituals reminiscent of the ancient pagans, whose lives was crushed by the oppressive Christians.

“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.” She got that from Crowley, who probably got it from Rabelais, and to her it meant to do what she wanted, particularly in regards to sex. “We won the sexual revolution,” Caprice proclaimed, “and sexual power should be used to create a world more in tune to the Goddess.”

“Amen!” shouted Ray, who was Baptist.

Angie told Caprice about Ray’s third eye which Angie always thought was bullshit. “I personally think Ray uses it as an excuse when he doesn’t do what he promises to do.”

Ray was insulted. “When did I ever not do what I promised?”

Angie was adamant. “All the fuckin’ time, Ray!”

Caprice was enthusiastic. “I believe in your third eye, Ray. I believe you see things other people don’t see. Angela does not see. How can you describe a magical place to someone who does not believe in magic?”

Angie was disgusted. “Oh my God!”

“You know I love you to pieces, my darling Angela, but you don’t see. There are forces all around us, all the time. There are ideas that flow between us and those thoughts are alive. Ray’s aura is bent on his left side, just below his shoulder, there.”

Ray was happy to be supported for a change by someone who apparently saw things others didn’t, but Ray had never seen an aura and maybe it showed on his face.

Caprice responded. “You can’t see the aura because you’re not looking for it. Your aura is bent because you are wounded, Ray.”

Angie was sullen. “Was it his mama? It’s always the mama.”

Caprice nodded, “Yes, it’s all Freudian... but your father...your father was wounded by war, wasn’t he? And he tried not to pass those wounds to you, but ironically, he wounded you all the same by trying to protect you, by not talking to you about the violent memories.”

That thought had never occurred to Ray before. His father wanted to protect him. Of course, he did. He teared up.

Angie’s eyes were wide. “Wow, Ray, I never told her anything about you.”

Caprice closed her eyes and slowly moved her hands in the space between them. “The thoughts are all around us, Angela, looking for expression but you have to know how to capture them. You must throw a net into the sea.”

Ray found his voice. “Parents tell their children fairy tales.” Ray flashed back to what Tandi had told him about kissing a witch and his third eye murmured.

“What’s that on your hand, Ray?” She asked.

He was embarrassed. “A wart.”

Angie giggled nervously. “You been handlin’ toads?”

Ray had handled a horny toad lately but didn’t think it counted as a wart inducin’ reptile.

“I can make that wart disappear, Ray,” Caprice declared.

“Aren’t witches supposed to be warty?” Ray smiled at Angie but Angie’s thoughts were elsewhere. She appeared troubled.

Caprice stroked his hand. “Would you like me to try?”

Ray felt energy pulse through his hand. “Sure. Got a spell you can part with?”

Angie touched Caprice’s arm. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” Caprice said, “And I will need your help.”

Caprice rose gracefully from the couch, took Ray's wineglass from his hand and put it on the side table. She then knelt and removed Ray's shoes and socks. She took his hand and led him into the bedroom. She unbuttoned his shirt and removed it. Thoughts was bouncin' through Ray's mind and he had trouble focusin'. First of all, was it true what he was thinkin' was actually happenin'? She unzipped his jeans and removed them and he stood there in his white boxers with a painful erection. She led him into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"Is that warm enough for you?" she asked.

Ray suddenly thought of Angie. Was she angry? What was that look she had?

"Huh, yeah," he answered.

She removed his boxers and told him to step into the shower.

"I'll be back in a moment," she said.

Ray felt the warm water caress him. He felt as if he would explode. He felt like the luckiest asshole alive! What if he hadn't come to Angie's? What if he'd gone home? What if the World of Death hadn't exploded? Then he heard shoutin' from the other room. Angie was pissed. He heard a cabinet door slam.

Ray began to feel guilty and thought about the repercussions. He was losin' the arousal and he thought about leavin' but then Caprice returned naked. She'd tied up her hair. Caprice was quite beautiful, with smaller breasts, a very thin waist, long legs and a thick bush. She put soap on a large soft sponge and slowly rubbed it over Ray's body. He moved to kiss her but she threw up her finger. "Not yet," she said.

"She's pissed."

"She'll get over it. She knows who I am." Caprice rubbed herself with the sponge.

"I don't think she will," said Ray.

Caprice turned off the shower and reached for two towels. She handed one to Ray. They dried and then she told him to follow her. This time when Ray entered the bedroom candlelight filled the room. Angie might be pissed, but she was contributing to the moment. On the floor where an oriental rug had been was a very large pentagram with a circle around it. Caprice took a bedroll from top of the bed and rolled it onto the floor on top of the pentagram.

“It’ll be a little hard on the floor, but it serves its purpose and it’s good for your back,” Caprice said. “Lie down and think of me as Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love.”

Ray did as ordered. She held a candle and from inside the circle, followed the circle, occasionally drippin’ wax on the floor. Then she stopped in the middle, touched her forehead and said, “Atoh.” Then she touched her breast and said, “Malkuth.” She continued in this manner, also turnin’ and facin’ different directions, sayin’ strange words. Ray also caught, “On my right hand, Michael, on my left hand Auriel.” She ended by holdin’ her hands on her breast and sayin’ “Amen.” Ray figured it couldn’t be that evil. Sounded like a prayer. He thought he’d wasted a lot of time bein’ Baptist, considerin’ Hathor was about to fuck him.

Caprice finished the ritual and then she mounted Ray.

“Okay, Ray, here’s how it works. We use sexual energy to ask the Goddess to rid you of the wart. We’ll meditate on this while we perform the ceremony. Hold off as long as physically possible. If you feel you’re about to come you must stop. Have discipline. We’ll stop until you can continue. Squeeze my thigh if you feel the moment so I will know to stop. Are you ready?”

“I guess,” said Ray. “Do I need a rubber?”

“I’m on the pill,” she said dismissively.

She put him inside her and slowly moved her pelvis. Bein’ inside Caprice was instant watery Heaven, like floatin’ on a still, warm lake. She closed her eyes and chanted. He didn’t

bother to squeeze her thigh. He came immediately and stayed hard as steel. Ray watched Caprice move on top of him. He thought of soft cheese and kept goin'. He didn't want the moment to end.

Caprice chanted her strange spell, her wetness drownin' all pain. This was the happiest day ever in Ray's life, and most eventful. From the World of Death to the World of Sex, the day seemed to provide all that has meanin'. It was a come to Jesus moment without Jesus.

Unfortunately, it was at that moment the third eye kicked in. Ray closed his eyes to luxuriate in Aphodite's foam when he felt himself fallin' and landin' with a thud on a bed. When he opens his eyes a different woman is straddlin' him, yellin' giddy-up, giddy-up and then slappin' his face. He realizes he's on a bed now in what appears to be a wagon. The woman has long curly black hair and large breasts and she's bouncin' on him, ridin' him like a horse, yellin' and slappin' his face. "Giddy-up! Giddy-up!"

"Whoa!" he says, but she doesn't stop. "He puts his arms up to block the slap and realizes they don't look like his arms. They're stronger and harrier. He sees a blue cavalry hat next to him and what appears to be a blue military uniform in a pile. The wagon is lit with a lantern hangin' from a support.

"Giddy-up, soldier boy!"

She laughs and continues the ride. Then he hears another voice, deeper than his own echo in the room. "Slow down, Marie! You're gonna break my johnson!"

The woman laughs, speeds up and is bouncin' harder on Ray and unleashes another wicked slap to his face. Then everything goes black.

When Ray opens his eyes he sees Caprice and Angie starin' down at him.

"Told you he's okay," said Angie.

Caprice looked disgusted, went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Angie helped Ray from the floor and sat him next to her on the bed. “Smaller than I thought, Ray.”

“You saw her. It was her idea. I just went along.”

“You just walked in, Ray. You just walked in and stole it.”

“I’m sorry, Angie. I know it was wrong but she’s so...” At this point Ray didn’t know what she was.

She put her arm on his shoulder. “Ray, you’re probably inclined to fall in love right now, but I wouldn’t do it. She doesn’t think like you. I should know. She’s a free spirit. No limits. No commitment.”

Ray nodded. “Angie, that was the weirdest thing that ever happened to me.”

Angie shook her head. “She wasn’t very happy with you either, Ray. She said you were so bored you fell asleep.”

“I passed out!”

“Please don’t tell anyone about this. Especially Ben. Promise?”

“I’m sorry, Angie.”

“Put your goddamn pants on and we’ll smoke a joint.”

A few minutes later the three of them had returned to the livin’ room and was gettin’ high. *Dark Side Of The Moon* was on the stereo. Ray explained to Caprice that he hadn’t fallen asleep, that he had, in fact, passed out. He told her about the bizarre experience with his third eye and that nothin’ like that had ever happened to him before. While Angie’s skepticism tended to dominate the mood, Caprice looked long and intently at Ray. She reached into her purse and removed a pewter Ankh on a silver chain. She put the Ankh around his neck.

“I want to give this to you, Ray,” Caprice said, “not because I want you to remember me, but because I want you to understand immortality.”

“I’m going to live forever ?” Ray asked sarcastically.

“Never abandon your vision. If you doubt it, you will lose everlasting life.”

Ray studied Caprice’s face for a hint of irony but didn’t find one. “What if it’s delusion?” he asked.

Angie was disgusted. “What if?”

“Maybe I did imagine it,” Ray said, “but it was like I was really there.”

“Or maybe it was real,” said Caprice as she grabbed his hand and showed it to Angie.

The wart was gone.

Meditation In The Holiday Inn

One's bitchy. Two's a drama queen. Three's got his head up his ass. And Four? What the fuck is Four saying?

"We need to move on!" Four is waving her arms.

"What about Rhodes? I suppose we drop him." Two asks and answers.

"Great I wasted a couple months in fucking Mango working him."

One glares at her. "Your time is irrelevant."

"I don't understand what the confusion is about. He senses the wave. He's involved in a terrorist attempt in some way. That makes him particularly dangerous."

"No." Three sighs.

Two is stern. "He's an imbecile, a drug-addled fool who doesn't comprehend the power he's been given. He'll squander it and be destroyed. There's no point wasting time on him."

So the Council has met him. That means his abilities are stronger now. That means he's probably sensing who I am now. "Yes!" What was that? Was that him? The backseat of a car. Town Lake is nice. Austin is beautiful. I'm so glad I figured out how to choose my own reality when the Council intrudes on my time. No telling what sort of gothic monstrosity they would have come up with. They've been moody.

"Well, it's wonderful you've met him. Thanks for giving me the important information first. That means you know something will happen in hours if not minutes. This is the day! He's somewhere in the area. I just can't draw a bead on him."

"He's catching rides on the road," One answers.

"What the fuck are we waiting for? Tell me where he is!"

Two waves her finger. “You will respect us, young lady. I specifically object to our preoccupation with an immature mind. How can we be certain of the authenticity of his information? Furthermore, the drugs could be corrupting details. I worry about acting at all, upsetting whatever is planned by the Masters.”

“She has a point,” Three nods.

You still have your head up your ass, Three.

“I think he’s going to stop something, if he can. But if the commitment isn’t made, he won’t be there. He must commit. All of us went through that. I don’t understand why you aren’t happy there’s another one of us out there.”

One dismisses it. “Oh, don’t worry about Two. Vestiges of privilege, you know. Doesn’t appreciate the informality these days. But she has a very real concern.”

“Okay, so we don’t know the Masters’ plans. So we need to be there when he does what he does, whatever he does.”

“Are we fond of the boy?” Four smirks.

“He’s a boy.”

“And you kill people,” Three smiles.

“I kill people for you. And I save far more people for you. And in the two years I’ve done this I’ve never asked you to trust me. That’s mainly because I always thought you had sticks up your asses and wouldn’t do it anyway. But I have proven myself. He’s a good guy. I haven’t evolved your mature perception. Where is he?”

One nods. “We know far more than we did, Ms. Marceau. And that’s the reason for our caution. We feel Mr. Rhodes will meet someone. Meeting this person, we have yet to identify, will lead to a decision that Mr. Rhodes will act upon. We do not know the outcome. However,

we sense at least three results strongly. He will intercede successfully but there will be problems with him later. He tries but fails, which results in guilt, which colors the rest of his life and his abilities. Or he dies.”

“You see him dying?”

“That’s one of three.”

“One of you doesn’t see anything?”

“Two of us see him dying.”

“Then tell me where he is, Goddamn it!”

“Waco.”

The Covenant

“Uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, ahhh, ahhh! Ahhhhhhhhh!” Jacob Winston collapsed in a heap on top of Marie Mangareau.

“Uh, get off me. You’re heavy.”

“Oh my God. Uhh!”

“Move!”

“Madame, it was spectacular.”

“And you are very powerful, too! So big and strong.”

“Quite alright. No need. Oh, my God, you don’t know how good that feels. Simply spectacular. You have such a touch. My dear lady, I have a proposition for you.”

“Yes, we can go again. Pay in advance.”

“No, no, no. Not now. Listen, I have money, a lot of money. And I have a mission. I’m going to do something important with your help.”

“How much money?”

“More money than you will ever need.”

“Go on.”

“May I call you Marie?”

“Of course you can, darling.”

“Marie, the world will change dramatically over time, but something will happen very soon that will change the world as we know it. It won’t happen overnight, but it will begin a new age. Unfortunately, it won’t happen if certain things are not done.”

“And these things involve me?”

“You and any others like yourself.”

“You mean in the business.”

“Anyone, and I mean anyone, who might be adventurous.”

“Well that is very interesting, darling. What on earth could you possibly have in mind?”

“Something historic, something astounding, something powerful. We will create a new world. Conception will come of the sacred marriage.”

“Sacred marriage? Ah, you mean ritual. Yes, I have done the Masons.”

“A very specific ritual.”

“Well, blasphemy will certainly be expensive.”

“Think of it as no more than a theatre performance. You will be playing a role. You shall be Artemis, the Mother Goddess, the divine consort. And I shall be Bel, because I like the name. It is Babylonian. It is power. I shall impregnate you, figuratively, of course, at a moment deemed appropriate by the heavenly powers. Our child will be the new world.”

“Quite a production! Will I be safe? Are we talking about strange ceremonies resulting in someone getting their hearts cut out, the Mother Goddess for example?”

“Oh, my exalted goddess, of course you will be safe. I will most assuredly guarantee your safety personally and all you bring with you. This is not a ceremony of violence. It is a celebration of love and freedom from our material constraints. However, Madame, you must not speak a word of this to anyone. Do not tell anyone else the true purpose.”

“Okay. So when will this magical event happen?”

“Independence Day.”

“How very patriotic of you, Jacob. How do I know you have this money?”

“Madame, I will give you a thousand dollars right now, but I will give you much more when you arrive at our camp.”

“I see. I am very happy to know you. Do you have a wife?”

“Ha! I have had three, Marie, and I am not looking for another. This money has been gathered together by many men who are committed to our cause.”

“You have a mission, then. A sex mission.”

“That does sound rather vulgar, I admit, and yet it is the truth. Three years ago I was wandering without purpose, wounded by the war, bereft of spirit, I stood on the edge of a cliff contemplating a leap to end my life. I prayed to the Lord to give me an answer and then an angel appeared behind me.”

“He told you to have sex?”

“No, he pushed me off the cliff.”

“Mon Dieu!”

“Indeed. I fell to the bottom and should have been killed but instead suffered no more than a broken rib. However, I was given a vision, a certainty, a mission.”

“I suppose if you survive a fall like that you would want to have sex.”

“Oh, it’s much more than that. I see things now. I see what must be done.”

“If you do not mind me saying so, Jacob, the fall may have hurt your head.”

“If that is so, what could be lost by participating in a little ceremony?”

“What do I care? Religion, sex, it is all the same to me.”

“Here’s the thousand. Mylitta prosper thee.”

Matter In Movement

“Reality is a constant synthesis of opposites...life/death, left/right, man/woman, you know, it goes on and on and on. Both are real. Both are right. One defines the other. One negates the other. You die, you negate life...”

Ray was wishin’ Andy was in the front seat this time, especially since he was still mad at Andy for the things he said in Waco. It didn’t seem fair Andy should have reacted the way he did. Now Andy was takin’ pictures of the scenery flyin’ by, pretendin’ he wasn’t pissed off.

The old, white Volkswagen Bus with light green trim was driven by Gustav Haupt, a German from Canada who said he was in the U.S. Air Force. Obviously the connection startled Ray, considerin’ his dream. Ray looked him over. He looked about thirty. He certainly had the bad Air Force haircut. His moustache was trimmed neatly and ended at the corners of his mouth. His cotton t-shirt was tucked into his blue jeans. He wore cowboy boots. He had an accent. However, he was carryin’ on about Dialectical Materialism which wasn’t even remotely interestin’ to Ray or Andy. Andy sat in the distant back seat, with a wide seat between him and the front, with Hans, Gustav’s dachshund.

“Hans! Do you like the nice man? He is very friendly with men, you know. For some reason he does not like women. Perhaps it is because he has been castrated, yes?”

Andy shouted from the back seat, strokin’ Hans’ ears. “Why are you in the American Air Force? Why aren’t you in the Canadian Air Force?”

“I want to become an American citizen! They will make me a citizen if I serve. My parents brought me to Canada when I was a child. Who wants to be Canadian? They don’t have the cowboy, huh?”

“John Wayne!” Andy shouted.

“Yes! John Wayne!” Gustav offered a passable, if not absolutely accurate impression.

“Pilgrim, somebody oughta hit you in the mouth, but I won’t, I won’t...”

Andy joined in, “The hell I won’t!”

Andy did a better impression, “A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

“Pilgrim!” Gustav was impressed with Andy. Hans barked.

What followed was a brief but welcome moment of silence. Gustav then waved his finger in the air. “The bourgeoisie, they will always try to discredit Marx because they have the power, you see. Our power is the mind. We know the truth. We are matter in movement.

Ray closed his eyes and pretended Gustav’s rant was nothin’ more than an annoyin’ mechanical clatter on an old car. It occurred to Ray Gustav’s dog had the same name of his long lost imaginary friend. His third eye was murmuring. Ray remembered Hans to be pretty real even though no one else could see him, except Paula. Ray wondered whatever became of Paula.

Paula had shown him the hole in the fence around the Post in Darmstadt. The actual name of the Post was Cambrai-Fritsch Kaserne. It was on the south side of the city. The Wehrmacht had used it durin’ the war and the Americans took it over in 1945. Hans told Ray he’d found the philosopher’s stone, or as Hans used to call it the Stein der Weisen. Ray didn’t believe him but Hans insisted Ray sneak out at night and accompany him on a trek through the woods. Ray didn’t ordinarily sneak out in the middle of the night. He was only eight at this time. He asked Paula if she wanted to go. Of course she did.

So on a Thursday evenin’, after everyone was asleep, Ray and Paula snuck out and joined Hans at the pile of rubble that was his grandmother’s house. From there, Hans led them through the woods. It was a full moon but the trees was thick. Nevertheless Hans knew the path through the forest. After a half mile or so Paula began to worry they would be lost.

“Hans says he knows where we are,” Ray reassured her.

“Ja, do not worry, Paula.”

“What exactly is a Stein der Weisen, anyway?” she asked.

“A philosopher’s stone.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s what the ancients believed could turn lead into gold,” Ray said.

“That’s just nonsense, Ray.”

“You will see, Paula,” said Hans. “It will change who you are.”

“It’ll turn me into gold? Du bist ein Dummkopf, Hans.”

“Nein! Du nicht existieren, Paula!”

“What’s that?” Ray asked.

“He says I don’t believe.”

“You don’t.”

“I trust you, Ray.”

“Yeah, but can we trust Hans?”

“Well that’s reassuring!”

“Hans, how will this change who we are?”

Hans paused in the forest. The moonlight sparkled off his blonde hair. Hans resembled Disney’s Peter Pan. His stance wide and his fists snug on his hips. “This place is magic. I did not know it was the Stein der Weisen until Ray showed me the book. It changed me, Paula. It will change you.”

They went deeper into the woods, ankle high in dead leaves, under a canopy of trees. They followed Hans, avoidin’ stinging nettles and its vicious stings, and feelin’ elated by their

moonlight freedom but terrified by the forest noises, the rustlin' of leaves, the crack of branches, hootin' of owls, and the sticky spider webs. It felt as if they'd been walkin' forever in the forest until they reached a clearin'. There was more rubble, a lot more. There was husks of old stone buildin's overgrown by nature and almost forgotten. In the bright, cool moonlight the remains of civilization looked ghostly and sinister. Hans walked past the destruction. Around the corner of what used to be a school, possibly, Hans stopped, smiled and indicated somethin' out of place.

It was a swing set with four intact seats. It was abnormally large with a sturdy wooden frame and chains droppin' to wooden seats. This was no child's swing. This was a swing made for large people who wanted to fly high and fast and to leap great distances. To a child, it was a toy for giants. Hans ran and sat in one of the swings. Paula followed. Ray examined the frame. It seemed sturdy, anchored deep into the ground. There was no chance of it fallin' over or collapsin'. Ray jumped into a swing and began rockin' back and forth. He felt the cool air against his face and the power of the pendulum. This was like no swing he'd ever experienced. He was flyin' higher and higher. He felt his stomach drop as he fell only to be whipped up the back side. This truly was astonishin'! He wondered if it was possible to spin completely around the top and the thought frightened him. He looked at the grassy field in front of him and calculated a safe landin' if he let go. Then, he took off. He released the chain and flew into the night sky and dropped to the ground and rolled in the grass.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed with pleasure.

Paula and Hans appeared heavenly, their smiles wide and frozen in the moonlight as they sailed back and forth. So this was Hans' Stein der Weisen, Ray thought. It was absolutely wonderful, to be sure, but how could it have possibly changed him?

That was a long time ago.

Ray looked out over the landscape that had changed considerably from that mornin'. They was drivin' north on I-35 toward Dallas. Caroline had let them out south of Waco just in time for the rain to stop. It became a sunny day, so sunny in fact, that Ray felt comfortable tellin' the truth to Andy about why he wanted to leave the concert so early. Andy was pissed.

"I've had enough of your third eye bullshit, Ray! It's not just fuckin' up your life, it's fuckin' up mine! When we get back to Mango, Ray, I don't want to see your fuckin' face for weeks, maybe months."

Ray pleaded. "C'mon, man, we're just tired..."

Andy was screamin' on the highway. Cars honked as they passed. "Fuck you! Fuck you to hell, Ray! Just shut the fuck up!"

So here's Ray and Andy arguin' on the side of the freeway when Gustav stops for them. They didn't even stick out their thumbs. It was almost as if Gustav knew them and was pickin' them up, just as Caroline had done in Luling. Ray now suspected Gustav just wanted someone to listen to him.

"Reality is motion. We are evolving. It's absurd to think of an absolute unchanging reality, fixed somewhere outside of time, this Platonic Ideal. Nonsense. Trotsky said the fundamental flaw in vulgar thought is that it tries to impose motionless imprints on a reality of eternal motion. It is like the difference between Andy's photographs and film. Film is the reality. The vulgar stare at a photograph and say, you see here? That's the way it was. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"So if it's stupid, why won't you let me take a picture of you, Gustav?" Andy shouted.

"Do not do that, Andy! Do not take my photograph!"

Andy laughed. "Think it'll steal your soul? You don't even believe you have a soul!"

Ray interrupted him. “Hey, man, you like to go camping? Lots of gear in the back.”

Gustav glanced in his rearview mirror. “Camping? Yes. I camp. I camped at the Cerro De La Silla outside of Monterrey. Mexico.”

Ray was surprised. “Wow, Monterrey? That’s a ways down there isn’t it? I mean just to go camping?”

“Not too far. Just south of Laredo.”

Andy piped up from the back seat. “From Canada to Mexico! You’re quite a traveler, amigo. You even got a big suitcase back here!”

Gustav seemed a bit irritated. “Yes, well, I have traveled, yes. The suitcase is unimportant. Spare clothes, you know.”

Ray’s third eye nudged him. He nudged Gustav. “Why’d you pick us up, man?”

Gustav slapped Ray on the shoulder. “You were arguing on Independence Day. It seemed appropriate to me.”

Again Andy piped up. “You got that right, amigo!”

Ray didn’t accept it. “Yeah, so most people would have driven right by us, man!”

“I am not most people as you have no doubt determined. You were making a point to Andy...the thesis. Andy was contradicting you...the antithesis.” Gustav raises his arms in reverence, letting go of the wheel. “I am the synthesis. I arrive to take the two of you into my van and onward to the next step. Movement, you see? You were arguing politics?”

“Metaphysics.” Ray grinned.

Gustav grumbled. “Fairy Tales!”

Ray was amused. “Man, where do you think we all come from?”

Gustav waved his arms “We have evolved! Darwin, you know.”

“What about the spiritual?”

“Meaningless. Everything is politics.”

Ray observed materialists always bottomed out at politics. “Look, man, some ideas can’t exist without a contradiction. Hate/Love. Sad/Happy. Two sides of a coin, not two separate things. Two groups with opposite agendas are part of the larger argument.”

“Yes! That is the synthesis resulting from the two opposing parts!”

“The synthesis should be the foundation, not the result. You divide a man in half, because intellectually you can, and arbitrarily label the parts right and left, even though the parts are meaningless until they are a man.”

“Why not say man and woman are part of humanity?”

“Exactly.”

“And humanity is part of the universe?”

“And the universe is part of God.”

“You are not looking at the obvious, Ray!”

“I think it’s where you put your focus, man. Some people put it in God.”

“If you grant the fools God they will claim their power comes from the supernatural rather than the intellect.”

“Hey Gustav!” Andy was bored. “Me and Hans believe in God back here.”

Gustav shouted back to Andy. “Hans believes in eating and sleeping and shitting and the pleasure you are giving him at this moment. He does not believe in God or life after death.”

Ray unconsciously reached under his shirt and held the Ankh. Caprice. What a trip. He had forgotten the bra when he left Angie’s the night of his pagan initiation. Angie told him she’d thrown it in the dumpster. He remembered thinkin’ it was better that way. He thought it

would look stupid to Tandi if he'd shown up with her bra and talked about the explosion at the World Of Death. Now he wished he had done just that just to see her reaction.

When Ray decided to pop in at Fred's place about a week after the Bananaland incident it appeared Fred and Tandi had been fightin'. The tension was thick and he decided he'd leave before they blew up in front of him. He caught Tandi's eye before he walked out and it appeared she wanted to talk to him. Coffee was under the coffee table growlin'. Ray ran into Lady Snoop in her front yard.

"Your friends have been fighting."

Ray nodded and was about to leave but Lady Snoop grabbed his arm. She whispered, "perversion."

That caught Ray's attention. "Apparently Mr. McKinley prefers the odder pleasures. He likes to come in the back door, as they say, and Miss Marceau has grown tired of it."

"Whoa!" Ray was startled. "Mrs. Arthur, how do you know this stuff?"

"They were very loud. I was in the backyard. Mr. McKinley is somewhat adventurous?"

Something struck him as odd. "I'm just curious. Do you mind if Fred lives back there?"

She dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. "I'm not a puritan, Mr. Rhodes. The human condition is hard enough without repression. That was George's problem. He was not blessed as I was with the relative liberality of the Episcopalian faith. George was Church of Christ. Nothing but the missionary for him, in darkness, never naked."

Ray was uncomfortable. "Sorry, I guess."

Lady Snoop chuckled. "Oh, don't feel sorry for me, Mr. Rhodes. I haven't exactly been lonely and he was very good at making money as you can see." She indicated the house. "I was a waitress, you know, at the old Kiwi Diner. George always said he fell in love with me after

ordering a patty melt. I think he constantly fought the disgust he felt over his body, his thoughts and his desires. C'est la vie!"

Ray was fascinated by her candor.

She grew conspiratorial. "Well, here's something to think about. All the inhabitants of Winston Park have at least one very dark secret. Money allows one certain liberties. However, the social restrictions of a conservative community like Mango demand a rather middle-class façade of morality. Things happen under the surface here. However, one should never flaunt ritual sex in Mango."

Ray was startled. He looked at Lady Snoop's face to see if she actually knew something but if she did she was quite wily about concealing it.

She smiled mischievously. "Good day, Mr. Rhodes."

"Morality is a bourgeois issue," Gustav rambled on. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, servant or ass."

"What about personal morality?" Ray asked. "Between two people."

"Politics." Gustav answered.

"Between men and women?"

Gustav laughed. "Especially between men and women!"

"Have you had many girlfriends?" shouted Andy from the back seat.

"Yes, I have had my share. Women find me attractive!" Gustav smiled.

"There's more than politics between two people, Gustav," said Ray.

"Love? You seem to me to be an intelligent young man. Domination and submission. The synthesis is procreation, is it not?"

"Not if you use a rubber!" shouted Andy.

“A very good point, my friend in the back seat!” shouted Gustav. “And because there is no God, there is no moral imperative to have sex only for procreation.”

“Whatever turns you on, man.” Ray smirked.

Gustav frowned. “We have so few real pleasures in this world, Ray. Why limit ourselves to the acceptable?”

“So what is love, then, Gustav?” Ray was thinkin’ of Tandi.

Gustav smiled. “Hormones and illusion.”

Ray shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to be you.”

Gustav studied Ray for a moment. “You have a romantic delusion about sex. If capital has all authority, it is only a matter of time before the lure of money is used to justify all moral atrocities. You distract the labor force with pornography. You bring to the surface that which is inherent in pure Capitalism – service, and the extreme of that – prostitution.”

Ray was shocked. “That’s a pretty dark view of sex!”

Gustav laughed. “Society must treat men and women equally. Only then will it become more difficult to exploit each other for profit.”

“Or exploit each other equally?” Ray asked.

Andy shouted from the back seat. “I’d just like to throw in my two-cents back here, or however much it costs, and just say, dependin’ on how hot she is, I don’t mind bein’ exploited!”

Gustav chuckled. “God Bless America, Ray.”

Voodoo Cat Curse

Some folks can't put one foot in front of the other 'less they think they're movin' toward truth. Some folks are downright militant about what they believe truth to be and are uncomfortable livin' around folks who believe truth to be somethin' else. Take skeptics, for example. Why, they're just so goddamned driven to expose magic and ghosts and aliens and anything else out of the ordinary as lies. I reckon they do this 'cause the thought of livin' in anything other than an ordinary world scares the shit out of them. Fred McKinley was like that.

Excesses was becomin' commonplace in 1976, even in Mango. Lots of sex, and drugs and death. Dead rock stars gave the music more gravity than it probably deserved. Mango College was just startin' up their FM station at that time

Ray and Fred was the very first jocks on the air with the very first hard rock format in Mango, *Melting Vinyl*, every Friday and Saturday nights. Ray had a distinct radio voice. "Y'all call us on the request line, 372-9090, and tell us what you think about Queen. Beelzebub has a devil put aside for you!"

Ray and Fred's show was the most popular radio program for heads in Mango. All the woolly, unwashed college kids and others like myself – I didn't go to college – would gather in Watcher Park with our radios turned up. Watcher Park was a magical place. Folks had gathered in that same spot for a hundred years. And the gazebo took your thoughts away while your body took over. Hell, maybe you'd find true love. Anyway, we'd get high and listen to a bunch of stoners play music. Usually Andy, Joe and Ben would join Ray and Fred and bullshit with them on the air.

On one particular Friday night, bein' as it was Ray's birthday, he was joined by Andy and Joe. Ben, as mentioned earlier, had shock therapy and didn't see things the same way. He

actually told Andy rock was satanic. Andy said that only applied to Black Sabbath. Also, Fred never showed up for his shift. Ray had called his apartment a few times but got no answer.

The radio control room was small and the radio board had lots of knobs and switches and a volume meter in the center and two turntables. Ray let the final gong of *Bohemian Rhapsody* fade. The “On Air” light illuminated. “Is that song genius or what? Who would ever have thought rock would do opera?”

“What about *Tommy*?” Joe asked.

“But they didn’t sing like opera,” countered Ray.

The phone rang. Ray answered. “*Melting Vinyl*, you’re on the air.”

“Huh, yeah, huh, about the, huh...Did you just say something about opera?”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, huh, can you play *Freebird*?”

“We just played *Freebird*.”

“Huh, can you, huh, play it again?”

Freebird was all anyone requested, and of course Peter Frampton.

“No. Why don’t you enjoy *Sweet Emotion*.”

Aerosmith blasted the room. So anyway, the boys couldn’t figure out where Fred was. It wasn’t like him to miss a shift, unless, of course, he was gettin’ laid. The front door buzzer sounded. That usually meant one of the listeners in the park wanted to make a request. Joe came out to the door and saw me. He opened it. I told him my name and asked him if I could speak to Ray about the World of Death explosion. That piqued Joe’s interest and he led me to the studio.

Joe smiled. “Ray, this guy says he’s here about the World of Death.”

Ray didn’t recognize me. “I’m the banana,” I said.

I was surprised how small the studio was and the three guys was basically jammed in every available space. “I just wanted to let you know the police say the explosion at the World of Death was probably caused by natural gas.”

Ray appeared surprised. “Natural gas?”

I elaborated. “They really couldn’t figure out what caused the explosion, man. I said I smelled natural gas. Junior confirmed there was an old line that had been discontinued. The place actually used to be a kitchen. Stupid accident, huh?”

“Hey, I remember hearin’ about that,” said Andy.

Ray changed the subject. “Hey man, you see Fred out there?”

“No,” I said, and then I broached a touchy subject with the deejay. “Hey, huh, Ray, I’m out there with this chick and... she wanted to know if you’d play a song for her.”

“You’re the romantic type?”

I shrugged.

“What does she want to hear,” Ray asked suspiciously.

And I’ve never forgiven myself for this, but on the other hand I had to ask ‘cause the potential reward was just too great. “Can you play *Freebird*?”

Andy jumped from his seat. “Fuck, you can’t be serious!”

Fortunately for me Ray just shook his head and smiled. “I’m going to run into you again, Banana Boy, and you better tell me you found your true love in Watcher Park.”

I was so ecstatic I jumped up and down. Joe and Andy looked disgusted but I was in absolute joy. I thanked him over and over and ran out the front door. Later Ray told me Andy had called me an asshole. Didn’t appreciate that but you can never hear *Freebird* too much.

Apparently Joe stood up for me. “Andy, my man, maybe we’re being too hard on our radio minions. Why not make one little exception this one little time? And as a reward for our magnanimity, we can play *Alladin Sane* right after that and I will fire up a doobie and all the minions will fire up doobies and we will be righteously doobified in Watcher Park fashion and all will be right with the world and we will live in a nation of crass commercialism and love it!”

“Sounds good to me,” Ray said. He picked up the Lynyrd Skynyrd album and took the record out of the sleeve. He placed it lightly on the turntable, lifted the needle, and set it into the groove and cued it. As soon as Aerosmith began to fade, the slide guitar wail filled the studio. Ray cranked the speakers. Joe produced a joint, lit it, and sucked it up. He passed it to Ray.

They sang, “If I leave here tomorrow...”

By the time the song ended they was fried. Cheerin’ erupted from the park.

Melting Vinyl ended at one in the mornin’ and at a quarter past twelve Andy and Joe decided to take the party to Joe’s house. Ray said he’d meet them over there. He decided to end the night with *Achilles Last Stand*, off Zeppelin’s new album, which was not nearly as good as *Houses Of The Holy*, but, what the hell, it was Zeppelin and it was ten minutes long and Ray was anxious to get to Joe’s. Before he could get out the door, the phone rang. He decided not to pick it up, thinkin’ some wasted motherfucker was gonna ask for *Freebird* again. On the way to Joe’s he decided to drop by Fred’s place to find out why he didn’t show up for his shift. The lights was on and Ray knocked. Fred peered out the window and then opened the door for Ray and then promptly sneezed three times.

“I tried to call you, man. That goddamn bitch put a curse on me and Coffee!”

Ray was surprised. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Fred sneezed. “Tandi, man. She cursed us!”

As Ray entered the apartment he saw the strangest sight. The cat was leapin' up and down and sneezin'. Fred was sneezin'."

Jesus, Fred, what the fuck is goin' on?"

"We had a fight. She cursed us and now Coffee is..." Fred sneezed, "... freaking out!"

Coffee leaped on and off the couch, on and off, on and off.

"What the fuck is that cat doing?"

"I think he's chasing ghosts."

"What ghosts?"

"Voodoo ghosts, man! "

"What the fuck is a voodoo ghost?"

Fred sneezed again. "They're evil, Ray! She's always casting spells, you know?"

"What kind of spells?" Ray had never known Tandi to cast spells.

"Like she's been cursing Rob and Bob a lot. The ghosts are freaking me out, man!"

"Do you see ghosts?"

"Maybe."

"Oh come on!"

"I think I see what Coffee sees. Over there. Then over there."

"Why were you fighting with Tandi?"

"She said she didn't want to be with me anymore and I said..." Fred sneezes, "...fuck off, bitch! And she said something in some goddamn language I've never heard of and she says me and this goddamn cat are cursed! All of a sudden Coffee starts jumping in the air like this."

Ray couldn't believe his most rational friend was truly out of his mind. "Look, I don't know anything about voodoo, Fred, but it seems to me it probably won't affect you unless you believe it will."

Fred sneezed. "What about the cat?"

"He probably believes in it."

"That's not fucking funny, Ray!"

"Look, I've noticed you and the cat sneezing before, not this much, but maybe the stress is making it worse. You're allergic to his hairballs and he's allergic to your cigarettes. I think it's in your head and maybe the cat's picking it up from you."

"What, you think the cat's like reading my mind? Fuck! I liked her a lot but she was always telling me what to do and she didn't want to do things I wanted to do, and she wanted, you know, she didn't want me fucking anyone else."

Ray shrugged. "Women."

"No shit, man." Fred sneezed.

Coffee began stalkin' Fred and growlin'. He hunched down, wiggled his rear and then lunged at Fred's ankle, stickin' his claws into his jeans.

Fred picked up a couch pillow and threw it at the cat. Coffee darted into the bedroom. "My own goddamn cat is attacking me!"

"You're fucking nuts," Ray said.

"She said she's going back to New Orleans.

"She didn't even say goodbye?"

"She'd curse you too, man!"

"Look, maybe you ought to take the cat on a drive, get out of here."

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

Ray and Fred coaxed the sneezin’ cat from under the bed with a treat and Fred grabbed him. But Coffee clawed up Fred’s arm and onto his shoulder. He ran to the car and threw the cat into the back seat.

“Want to come, Ray?”

“No fucking way.”

“Pray for me, man.”

“I’ll pray for the cat.”

Ray watched Fred and the cat drive off into the darkness in the ’75 Pacer his mom had bought him. Coffee glared at Ray through the giant rear window and hissed...and sneezed...and hissed again.

Chinese Lanterns

The Winstonians seemed to sprout like weeds overnight in the buffalo grass and Colonel Cyrus MacDonald was determined to yank them from his territory, but there was a more pressing matter demanding his attention.

“Look in that box, Lieutenant.”

“Strange markings, sir. Chinese?”

“Fireworks. We confiscated them from coolies down by the railroad.”

“For our festivities on the 4th, I presume?”

“The Centennial! Now, I have more booze than bullets, thanks to our Comanchero friends. I have these little paper lanterns that came with the fireworks. We’re going to put some beef in a pit and smoke it in mesquite. Good food...good booze...what am I missing, Path?”

“Women, sir.”

“You’re sharp.”

“Unfortunately I wouldn’t know how to go about finding women out here.”

“Fortunately I do, Path. Your orders are to proceed to Cambridge. That’s about 300 miles to the east, south of the Red River. You will find there a certain Marie Mangareau. She has an establishment. You are to bring her and any other ladies who will accompany you back here by Independence Day. You have a week, Lieutenant. Take an extra horse. It’ll be faster.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Wait. What are you doing to get those goddamn Bible-thumpers off the prairie?”

“Gathering intelligence. Colonel.”

“Why would an intelligent man be out there?”

“Faith, sir.”

“That’s the trouble with this goddamn country! Too much faith! My God, Lieutenant, in this country a man can say an angel appeared before him and gave him tablets from God and told him to start a religion and that man can gather multiple wives and followers and head west to claim new territory. What’s to stop anyone from becomin’ a Mormon?”

“I suppose a law against plural marriage, sir. On the other hand, isn’t such a restriction a clear violation of the First Amendment?”

“You saying anything flies, Lieutenant?”

“Merely for the sake of argument, sir, should not anything fly?”

“What if your faith calls for human sacrifice?”

“Indeed, sir. Good thing Isaac was spared. But personal sacrifice would appear to be at the heart of Christian faith.”

“All of our lives are on the line, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir. We are venturing into unknown and dangerous lands in search of freedom. Some find strength in numbers. Joseph Smith’s brethren.”

“The Mormons wrote another Bible, Path! What the hell’s wrong with the old faiths? Some things are what they are and can’t be changed. That’s Calvin. I can understand a man bein’ sick of Popes and Jesuit bastards but what’s wrong with a Presbyterian? Hell, even a Wesley Methodist, just not those goddamn evangelicals. My mother’s sister was a Millerite back in the forties. Know about them? Thought the second comin’ was nigh and of course it wasn’t. Killed herself. She was determined to find Jesus one way or the other.”

“Yes sir, and meaning no disrespect sir, but finding Jesus in our individual way and being responsible for our soul is what gives us spiritual power, sir.”

“The religious community gives us spiritual power, Path. Our fellows on the pew. It’s important to give up the false hierarchy between us and God, but make no mistake, we are powerless without our church. These new heretics read the Bible like a goddamn cookbook.”

“And yet, sir, I’m certain they would argue symbolic interpretation by religious authorities is not the same as the Word of God, which is literally represented in the Bible.”

“Oh hell, Path, everyone’s just lookin’ for answers.”

“It does seem to be a national passion, sir. The Winstonians also believe Christ’s return is imminent, literally on the plains. That is why they are camped there.”

“You told them about the Comanches?”

“They believe God will protect them. Winston has rifles, sir, and I presume ammunition. He paid more for supplies than our own Quartermaster.”

“Is he rich?”

“Every new follower throws in his lot for the common good.”

“You know what he’s doing. He’s trying to establish that little spot on the plains. He knows the Army’s here. We’re ripe for a town. I’ll be damned, sir, if I allow a two-bit prophet to force my hand against those Indians. We still don’t know how many are out there.”

“Has Captain Nash met with progress, sir?”

“No. I need you to get those holy rollers off the prairie without bloodshed. If you do that, I’ll consider making you Captain.”

“Yes sir! But sir, how will I remove the men if I am to leave quickly to fetch the ladies?”

“Well you better pull something out of your ass, son, because I expect results!”

Lieutenant Samuel Path smartly saluted the Colonel and made a fast exit to find Doctor Feldman, who was contemplatin’ cuttin’ off a man’s foot.

“It really won’t hurt as much as you think. We have morphine.”

“But I’ve grown attached to this foot, Doc!”

“Very droll, Corporal, but gangrene is setting in. Do you want to die?”

“I don’t want to hop around on one foot the rest of my life!”

“Yes, well take a moment to consider it while I speak with the Lieutenant.”

Path described his encounter with the Watchers. Feldman was intrigued.

“So this Fitzhugh man’s left arm was taken off? You see, Corporal, many veterans have suffered the same fate. You would be among good company.”

Path tried to help. “Yes, Corporal, and it doesn’t seem to have affected his spirit. I can’t say the same for Winston. The war took his soul and his mind.”

Feldman studied his saw. “Bloody business, that war. You should be pleased you missed it. At least the slaves are free. And we are once again united. Bismarck, the Prussian. He’s unified the German states. Great minds have emerged from that culture, Goethe, Kant, Schopenhauer. The latter encouraged my own interest in the sages of India. Sorry, you were talking about war?”

“Unfortunately there is a gulf between myself and those who were tested under fire.”

“Hmmm. Wait here long enough and a Comanche may oblige you. I was not happy to be tested, Path. I discovered I was just as willing to take a life as I was to save one. Okay, Corporal, what’s it going to be?”

“Huh, well, huh, you’ve killed men, Doctor?”

“Quite so. Several. I reasoned a rebel was not human.”

“You do think I’m human, don’t you, Doc?”

“Do you wish to dissolve the Union?”

“No sir!”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

“It’s only my foot then?”

“Well, no, actually I’ll have to take it off at the knee. Well, it will be better for you that way. Very good prosthetics these days.”

“Not sure I want to live without my foot.”

“Live or die, Corporal.”

Path was tryin’ to picture Feldman as a killer. “I fear those gentlemen in the field may experience some calamity, Doctor. The Colonel wants me to find a way to remove them.”

“Did you ask them to come to the fort?”

“Yes. But Winston wouldn’t budge. I believed I understood the power of individual faith, but his faith seems suicidal.”

“Do you have more faith in God, Corporal, now that you’re about to lose your foot?”

“Well, sir, it’s only, well, Private Peters accidentally shot my foot, you know.”

“Yes, and he’s in the brig for it.”

“Yes, but, well, it’s not exactly a good wound, is it?”

“Hmmm?”

“Well, Doc, it’s an accident, not a war wound. Hate to limp along on an accident. What will I tell my family? I was drunk one night when my friend shot my foot?”

“Hardly a testament to courage.”

“No, sir.”

“Corporal, you are courageous because you are allowing me to take your leg.”

“Because you say I’ll die if I don’t.”

“Courage to make a difficult choice.”

“Well, yes, I suppose that’s true. But is facing a crippled life braver than dying?”

“Good point, Corporal. But all life is suffering. Consider the Buddhist, Lieutenant.”

“Is that not an Oriental faith involving blood sacrifice?”

“No, Path. I came upon it during my travels in China and India.”

“I do confess my profound ignorance, Doctor.”

“Impermanence and suffering.”

“Nothing is permanent?”

“Correct. So it is futile to try to hold on to anything, the Corporal’s leg for example, because ultimately all things leave us, including our breath. Our suffering arises from desire, our desire even of life itself. As it happens this perspective was a great comfort to me in the war.”

“Desire, yes. Unfortunately the Colonel would have me be in two places at once. He has also given me the task of rounding up ladies for our festivities next week.”

“Bravo, Path!”

“Bravo, Lieutenant, sir!”

“Now, you know, Corporal, no woman wants to love a man with gangrene. It smells.”

“You’re right, Doc! What was I thinking? Cut away, sir!”

Samuel began pacing. “Permanence is what the Winstonians desire, is it not? They yearn for certainty in an ever changing and brutal world.”

“I suspect so.”

“Well, so long as you fine officers are contemplating spiritual matters, I wonder if I might redirect your attention to the matter of the permanence of my foot. The ladies, you know.”

“Just a moment, Corporal. I believe the Lieutenant is inspired.”

“Doctor, I must introduce the idea of impermanence, or shall I say reality into the Winstonian body. I shall act as a plague and infect one man who will sicken the others. But what can I offer the man who believes he has found the path to spiritual enlightenment?”

“I presume you wish a doctor to provide your illness. I shall offer that which hath laid men low from the beginning of time. When a man fights for a cause to exhaustion, enduring Spartan conditions, he longs for material comforts. I suspect he’s had his fill of agape. Does he not yearn for eros?”

“And I am fetching precisely that. Bravo, indeed! But shall I destroy a man’s faith? Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.”

“You will be saving his life. A good trade if you ask me. And speaking of saving a man’s life, Corporal, I invite you to lie down. I have in my hand what is known as a hypodermic needle. You will feel a small prick when I inject the morphine into your bloodstream. However, the pain will fully melt away and you will feel nothing when I remove your leg. Furthermore, I will continue to give you morphine to reduce the pain of your healing.”

“But won’t I end up getting the soldier’s disease?”

“It is a risk, yes.”

“What the hell. I need to get spruced up for the Fourth.”

Nazis Had Kids Too

Hans, the dachshund, was on his back, lettin' Andy rub his tummy with his left hand while Andy's right hand was locked around his left wrist. Strange compulsion, Ray thought. Ray considered his exhausted friend and the contented dog. His two best friends in life had been Hans, who was imaginary, and Andy, even though Andy was pissed at him right now.

Ray remembered the swing Hans showed them. It was glorious, the momentum, thrusting forward into the sky, lettin' go of the chains, and flyin', flyin' into the darkness and landin' and rollin' on the soft grass. Now, years later, Ray didn't remember returnin' to his bed. He only remembered wakin' up the next day and goin' to school. Throughout the subsequent years, that fact only made him suspect it had all been a dream. He wished he had kept in touch with Paula. Would she remember the journey to the swing? Would she remember the fight with Hans after that when Hans said the world would be better off without Jews? Paula cried and Ray got mad at Hans but Hans was unrepentant. "Du nicht existieren, Paula," Hans screamed at her. Ray remembered how mad Hans was because Paula didn't believe his Nazi crap. Why the hell would she? Hans didn't make sense. Ray came to understand ideas live through generations.

Gustav was sayin' somethin' about Mao, now.

"Hey, man," Ray jumped in at a pause in Gustav's monologue. "You'll think this is funny, but I had an imaginary friend when I was a kid. His name was Hans too. Guess that's a pretty common German name."

"Yes. I named Hans after my brother. He died before I was born."

"Really? Wow. How old was he?"

"Seven or eight, I think. Why did your imaginary friend have a Deutsch name, Ray?"

"I lived in Germany in those days. My father was in the Air Force."

“He was in the war?”

“After that. He was stationed in Darmstadt.”

“Oh, Ja! My father’s family was from there. That is where they say my brother died.”

“That’s quite a coincidence.”

“Sprechen Sie deutsch?”

“I’ve forgotten a lot. I do remember ‘you don’t believe.’ Du nicht existieren.”

“That means you do not exist.”

“Because I don’t believe in Marxism? Sure, man.”

“No, Ray. That literally means you are not real.”

Weird, Ray thought. Why would Hans say Paula wasn’t real? Because she was Jewish?

“What did your father do? His AFSC?”

“He was with the National Security Agency.

“Your father was NSA?”

Ray nodded. Gustav’s anger was visible again, but he swallowed it with effort. Ray started to get a queasy feelin’. The third eye was nudgin’ the front of his brain.

Andy shouted. “Hey Gustav! Do your parents believe in God?”

“Why do you want to know this, Andy?”

“Just curious, man.”

Ray sensed an edge in Gustav’s voice and changed the subject. “How long have you been in the Air Force, Gustav?”

“Seven? Yes, almost seven years.”

“Go to Vietnam?”

“I did everything in my power to avoid it. To paraphrase Muhammad Ali, no Viet Cong ever called me Kraut. To answer your question, Andy, my parents did believe in God, and now they are dead.”

Andy rolled his eyes. “Oh, sorry, man.”

Gustav glared at Andy through the rearview mirror. “It happened when I was a child. My father killed my mother and then he killed himself.”

Andy was surprised and shot a glance at Ray. “Jesus, man, I’m truly sorry!”

Ray contemplated the look on Gustav’s face. It wasn’t sorrow. It was rage. Gustav seemed to swallow himself in that moment. It was as if he became instantly deeply introspective. He was silent for a long time. Ray thought he was mad Andy had asked the question, so he kept quiet. Gustav might kick them out after all.”

Andy broke the silence. “We’re gettin’ close to Dallas! Check out the skyscrapers.”

Gustav spoke. “Hey Hans, it’s very nice to have passengers on a journey, yes?”

They are good company. Because you like John Wayne and because I will never see you again, I will tell you a story.”

Ray tried to be nonchalant even though he now wanted Gustav to talk. “Hey, man, you don’t have to tell us anything.”

“My mother was French and lived in Saarbrucken, which is in Germany. She met my father there during the war.”

“Is that near Darmstadt?” Ray asked.

“It is not far. My father, well, you know, my father was a Nazi, SS in fact. He was a medical assistant for Dr. Klaus Schilling at the camp in Dachau. He helped Schilling perform experiments on the prisoners. After the war Schilling was hanged by the Americans. My father

was able to hide his identity in Saarbrücken for several years. I was born and eventually my mother grew weary of living in fear my father's past would catch up to him.

My mother knew someone in Montreal and they were able to get visas and we moved there. When I was six my parents became very agitated. I sensed something was wrong. Someone in Montreal had recognized my father. I was in school at the time, learning to fear the power of priests and nuns. One day my mother did not pick me up after school. I was told my father had shot my mother and had shot himself, that he was a Nazi, that he had done terrible things and that he was evil. Of course, I loved them both.”

Andy was captivated. “Wow, that's a heavy thing to go through when you're a kid!”

Gustav continued. “I was an orphan and I was in a Church orphanage. Not long after I arrived a doctor declared me mentally ill and I was taken to a psychiatric hospital. They had lied, you see. I was not sick. At the hospital I was given drugs, chlorpromazine. You would know it as thiorazine. I was sleepy all the time. I remember very little. I did not know they were conducting tests on us, the orphans. We were special kids. Drug tests. I have heard they were sanctioned by the Canadian government and there was also a connection to the CIA. Yes, drug tests on unsuspecting children with no families.”

Ray couldn't help himself. “That's weird, man, considering what the Nazis were doing.”

“Yes, Ray. I do see the irony. After months of this my father's brother traveled from Germany and found me in the hospital and took me back with him. He raised me. When I finished school I returned to Montreal to find my parents' graves. I found my mothers' at Notre-Dame-des-Neiges. I never found my father's. They would not bury him there. Suicide. I was angry when I thought about what had happened to me there. But I did not want to return to Deutschland. I felt as if I had no home. I decided to choose my home.”

“That’s quite a story, Gustav.” Ray was duly impressed. “Drug experiments.”

“Well, Ray, if you were born on a military base at that time you were most certainly born into the world in a psychotic state. Mothers were given scopolamine and morphine in those days during childbirth. It produced *dammerschlaf*, twilight sleep. The mother would not remember the pain of the birth. The child? Well, the child would be affected don’t you think? Do you sense anything different about yourself?”

Ray was shocked. “What was that drug?”

“Scopolamine. It can produce delirium and hallucinations. It is from the Jimson Weed.”

“That’s one of the drugs Carlos Castaneda used!”

“So you see, we are all experiments. We have all been given drugs that have affected us in unknown ways as our brains were young and still forming. The government does what it wants to us. We are not even aware of it.”

Ray considered the implications of drug experimentation. How could he be sure his thoughts were his thoughts and not just some fart from a contaminated brain cell? Drugs were becomin’ more common and not just the illegal ones. His parents’ medicine cabinet was lookin’ like a candy store. If you never had any drug in your system would you see the world in a real way? Was his third eye real? Was Tandi full of shit? What the fuck was Tandi about anyway? And why was the third eye warnin’ him about the third eye?

Hans barked at another dog in another car.

Gustav laughed. “Hans is not bothered with metaphysics. He sees what is real and it excites him. That is all. We think it necessary to find meaning in experience. We must justify our existence. But I will be honest with you. For much of matter, there is no reason for existence at all. No good reason. Some lives are meaningless, unnecessary.”

Big Fish Story

The alien resembled a large fish with arms and legs, standing upright.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I trust you are comfortable.”

The fish spoke English.

“How do you do, sir? I am Thomas Jefferson, this...”

“Oh, I know who you are, Mr. Jefferson. Mr. Franklin, how do you do? Mr. Hancock. I admire the waistcoat, sir.”

“From Amsterdam, sir.”

“Dutch. Who would have thought? Gentlemen, this is who I am when I come into your world. I am something different in mine. If you see me like this it is the truth, not illusion. I have the ability to affect your minds and to appear to you in any form you have seen before.”

The fish turned into the Powhatan. Tom was astonished. He appeared to Franklin as his mother, to Hancock as his uncle.

“And now you know a fundamental fact about us. Much of who we are is built from who you think we are. Please forgive me. My name is Edgar Crane. I believe Mr. Jefferson sought an audience with us.”

“Indeed I did, sir. You must forgive my amazement.”

Franklin proceeded. “My good sir, I can hardly believe my eyes. Are we truly on a craft taking us through the stars with our hosts... our hosts who are not the same as we?”

“This is not a dream, Mr. Franklin. This is truth behind illusion. And allow me to apologize in advance. You see, gentlemen, following tonight’s conversation your lives will never be the same, but I hope you will leave with a greater sense of purpose and understanding about your place in the larger plan.”

Tom wanted answers. “Sir, who are the individuals who arranged this meeting?”

“To answer that, Mr. Jefferson, I must indulge in a moment of exposition. You see the world in a specific way, a culmination of your five physical senses made into a whole that you say is real. But, of course, you have thoughts and dreams and fantasies and other more ephemeral experiences. What if I were to tell you the things you experience in your mind is your physical body experiencing the total truth? That is, as a physical human being, you are primarily living in a physical world, but as a full human being you also live in a full world, or what we shall call a spiritual world. It’s just a name and don’t put too much emphasis on the holy nature of the word. You refer to heaven and earth but, really, it’s all one thing. Those whom you call Masters, live in the full world. We are not as solid as you, nor do we experience time in the same way. And we may choose not to be material at all.

“Good Lord!” Jefferson is stunned.

Hancock’s fixated on the alien’s lack of a nose.

Franklin began rearrangin’ his world view. “Sir, if this is truth as you say, then how do our institutions matter? What does the revolution matter?”

“Mr. Franklin, nothing has changed but your knowledge of the underlying structure of this world. To live in the full world, one must have great self-discipline. You see, my kind is capable of doing many things, and so caution is a virtue. What you do in this world affects our world, for we are connected in ways you do not understand. Therefore, what you and your colleagues are doing is preparing the world for greater prosperity and individual freedom. Those qualities prepare your kind for the full world.”

Hancock finally accepted a fish was talkin’. “Will we experience the full world?”

“Yes, Mr. Hancock. The planet changes from time to time. At this time the world allows for this separation, but a time will come, long from now, when the separation will dissolve.

Your descendants, gentlemen, at some point in the future, will see the world as I see it.”

“Is it possible for us to experience the full world now?” Hancock was in awe.

“You experience it all the time, Mr. Hancock, in your thoughts, although it is through your human perception, which is limited. Heaven, if you want to call it that, is all around you, all the time, but your human senses cannot know the full landscape. It is as if you are inside a room, looking through a window at the great world outside...but the window is dirty.”

Franklin indicated the stars beyond the portal. “Then there is no God?”

“Oh, there is certainly divine intelligence, sir. We are all part of it. Its scope is vastly beyond what I can fathom. We are all part of the awareness to different degrees.”

“Then who is our creator?” Tom almost didn’t want to hear an answer.

“Our kind created your kind, Mr. Jefferson. But we were created as well, far away, on another star. And there are countless, beings, gentlemen, across the universe, and in different states, an infinite number of worlds and perceptions. The vastness of space is the illusion. It is irrelevant. The vastness of perception underlies all we know.”

“My good sir, I mean no offense,” Franklin was a diplomat, “because I am clearly ignorant and incapable of understanding the larger story, but please explain to me why our kind is dying and suffering in a struggle for independence if, in fact, we will never be truly independent?”

“Yes, of course. Mr. Franklin, although all things are possible in this spiritual world there are nonetheless disagreements on occasion. It’s rather hard to explain, but the form of this world, affects the aesthetic of the spiritual world, and the other way ‘round. We affect each

other. As I said, our world exists in absolute, self-disciplined freedom. However, the structure of our self-discipline relies on the physical structure of your control over others. For example, your institution of slavery affects the aesthetic of our world. Many of us wish it removed but there is resistance from many of our kind who are attached to certain forms. What we do in the other world, you represent in this world. Conversely, your physicality then affects us. Rather circular, which should indicate to the initiated the separation is illusion.”

“What happens when we die?” Hancock braced himself.

“Is the Bible not the Word of God?” Tom locked eyes with Hancock.

“Are you certain, gentlemen, you want to know this?”

They examined each other’s faces. Franklin wanted to know. Hancock was determined. Tom was uncertain at first but why would anyone choose not to know something? To willingly live in ignorance? Never.

“You are strong men and I know you will not allow it to take your hearts. Your commitment right now is the most important thing in this struggle between the old and new ages in your world. Some of you, Mr. Jefferson, are advancing to such a degree they can become gate-keepers, as it were, between the worlds. They see others advancing who may enhance or disrupt the order of the spiritual world, and they take necessary actions accordingly. Four of these souls are the Council of which you speak. “

Tom was intrigued. “Advancing, sir?”

“Those who are knocking on heaven’s door long before they die, Mr. Jefferson.”

“Then where is this gate the Council guards?” Tom asked.

“Each of you finds his own doorway, internally, to join us in the full world, but for most that means death. Soon we hope to create the first physical doorway between the worlds. Our

cause, your revolution is essential, because we must control access to the door. It will be to the west in a deeper part of the continent.”

Franklin considered the ship’s portal. “But why are you taking us on this journey, sir?”

Edgar Crane smiled and waved his fish hand and suddenly the three men was standin’ in the middle of a plowed field with George Washington.

“Forgive me,” said Washington. “I felt it appropriate to encourage open minds with a necessary illusion. I am not your colleague. I remain Edgar Crane. Mr. Washington is known to each of you and that is why I chose to appear as he. Illusion or reality? Or both?”

Hancock swooned. “I admit to being quite lightheaded,”

“Hold onto your hat, Mr. Hancock. In the beginning...”

Freeway

I hate the fucking Council. I hate the fucking Council.

What were they going to do? Just let him go? So fucking cavalier. Life and death means nothing to those fucking ghosts! It's just fucking getting decadent. How the fuck did they end up hitchhiking? Talk to me, Ray. Talk to me.

Stupid boy. Why do I fucking care?

The connection. That's why. It's stronger. Mustn't confuse that with love. Not the same thing. Not the same. But he doesn't know that. He's a stupid boy. Grey eyes. Deep. Couldn't do this job, though.

“Ha!”

What are you going to do, Ray? Why am I seeing a bus? Why am I feeling death?

Goddamn, it, Ray!

Where the fuck is Teddy?

Can't believe they wanted to waste months of my time in Mango. Watcher fucking Park. Fucking Freddie.

“Ha!”

What a piece of work. Son of a bitch. Typical, though. They all want to fucking control you. Well, I controlled your ass, didn't I, motherfucker? “

Should've been more careful. Should have respected the myth. But I didn't fall in love with Freddie. I was certainly impulsive. Wasn't myself. And I really wanted it...for a time. So turned on in a strangely Pentecostal way. What was that all about?

And, of course, it's not unusual to meet certain people at the portal. But Ray, it feels like almost a family connection with him. And he's such a stupid boy!

The night of his birthday...well, that was probably a lost opportunity, but the best thing. It was the best thing. Because it's the connection, not the emotion, that causes the feeling. You learn that after awhile. Yes you do. Buck up, Overholt. I need a fucking drink.

Whatever. I have a different mission in life. It precludes affection of that sort. We are not even on the same planet, really. I was pretending all along. Mostly.

There's Teddy in his sexy black Corvette behind me. And I have a Honda Civic.

"Can't you go any faster, love?"

"Fuck you, Teddy!"

"I'm feeling Dallas!"

Yes, it's Dallas.

"Don't be too long, love! Adios!"

Fuck you.

Frying Pan

Path left early with two horses. He determined to save as much time as possible.

Cambridge was at least a six day ride there and back.

Tahka watched Path leave and followed him from a distance, which was easy 'cause you can see for miles out there on the grassland. Tahka had left camp before the other three was awake. He had taken Tetecae's horse because Ojapite had taken his. Tetecae would not be happy, but Tahka knew he would have another opportunity to kill a white man. Path was a sittin' duck in any potential outcome except the one that happened.

As the afternoon grew longer on the first day leavin' Fort Palo Duro, Lieutenant Path could sense a presence on his southwest. Another horse, another rider, but always just out of sight. With every passin' hour his fear grew but he was determined to put up a good fight if it came to that. That's the price of livin' a life of adventure. That was his choice. His fate.

Tahka thought it was too good to be true. Here was his prey, the coffee drinkin' soldier, offerin' himself up like a sacrifice to the spirits. Tahka believed the reason he was not able to kill the other man was because the spirits wanted him to kill this man. Tahka always followed the spirits. He figured he would wait until the white man stopped to camp for the night. He'll kill him and take his horses. Ojapite will praise him.

But that didn't happen because right about dusk, at the bottom of the caprock, Path found a group of wagons and what appeared to be dozens of women setting up camp for the night. It was Marie Mangareau.

They retired to her movable boudoir, a wagon with a bed and hundreds of soft pillows.

"Good Lord! Madame Mangreau! I cannot believe you are precisely the person I was told to contact in Cambridge! What utter luck!"

“Yes, young man. It is Mangareau. Mangareau. We are so lucky.” Her smile converted him right there on the spot ‘cause he began worshipping at the altar of Mangreau.

“You sure are beautiful, ma’am.”

“Oh, you like the way I look? I am not too old for you?”

“No, ma’am. You’re Aphrodite in the flesh. Excuse my manners, ma’am.”

“What can I do for you, Lieutenant?”

“I’ve been sent by Colonel Cyrus MacDonald, ma’am, to ask you if you would mind gatherin’ up a bunch of ladies and follow me back to Fort Palo Duro for Fourth of July festivities, ma’am. Seems you’ve already received the word.”

“It’s a sign it was meant to happen. The truth is my establishment in Cambridge was losing money. The railroad passed us by. I heard of a Fort to the west with not only soldiers, but also a number of single men sitting alone in the prairie. Well, I have many women here who would love an opportunity to meet men who have nothing better to do. Are all the soldiers in the Fort as good-looking as you?”

“Not at all, ma’am.”

“Well, a young officer such as you must have means, no?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Call me Marie.”

“Call me Sam. Marie. Beautiful.”

“A very common name, I think. And how is Cyrus these days?”

“The Colonel is quite well, Marie. He’s preparing for the Centennial.”

“He was always one for the big party. Would you like a drink, Sam? I have bourbon.”

“Yes, thank you. Maybe one.”

“Do you get lonely in this big country?”

“I do. And today on that ride across the plains...and it was my intention once I arrived in Cambridge to...well, to make the acquaintance of a lady.”

“Are you a ladies’ man, Sam?”

“I want to be, Marie.”

“I have just the solution for a long day in the saddle.”

“Marie, this wagon is heaven.”

“Why not? Heaven on the prairie. Take off your uniform. “I will fetch water to clean you up, mon cherie.”

Marie left the wagon and Path stripped to nothin’ and reclined on the very plush mattress. It had truly been an exhaustin’ day lookin’ over his shoulder, thinkin’ a goddamn Comanche was gonna leap on him when...Path saw Tahka leapin’ into the wagon and pouncin’ on him. They struggled furiously, Path naked and Tahka intent on shovin’ his knife into the Lieutenant’s gut. Path yelled for help. He clutched with both hands Tahka’s right arm that had the knife. But Tahka’s left hand gripped Path’s throat. He couldn’t breathe and he saw darkness.

When he awoke an angel was starin’ back at him. Thank you for lettin’ me into Heaven, Lord! But no. He was still in the wagon with a strange, beautiful woman.

“Oh, look, you’re awake! Marie! He’s awake!”

Marie Mangareau returned. “Thank you, Maggie. That savage nearly killed you, Sam!”

“Good Lord! What happened?”

“The old frying pan trick. I hit him. Maggie and I tied him to a wagon. We can take him back to the fort, yes? You will be a big hero.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

Marie nodded. "Yes, you were ambushed but you fought the savage."

"It was a terrible struggle, Lieutenant," Maggie said, "but you put up a good fight."

"But you saved my life, Madam Mangreau."

"ManGAreau. I am a fierce fighter with a frying pan."

Path spent the night in Marie Mangareau's arms. When the adrenaline rush left he felt exhausted but he managed a few hours of lustful play. She completely understood his need to be slapped while in the throes of passion, even if he didn't.

They camped once more before arrivin' at the fort. He managed to spend some time with the Comanche who was tied to a wagon wheel. A woman was tryin' to feed him. Tahka would not look them in the eye but seemed to look past them. Path didn't know Tahka was lookin' for the coyote. Path gave Marie what was left of his pay and settled in for another night. He sipped the bourbon.

"Marie, I have never felt so happy."

"You are a young man. You will have many happy days."

"What I mean is you have given me so much...joy and pleasure. I wish..."

"Sam, we have tonight. But I do not think we will have tomorrow. So think of tonight as a wonderful leap into the darkness. You and I will leap together. But do not fall in love, Sam."

He believed her to be a woman of impeccable taste and intelligence with a head for business. She had explained that Colonel McDonald had been a partner in her enterprise in Cambridge, although the more she explained the more it sounded like extortion. He could not escape the fact he was feelin' a deep affection for the smell of her sweat and perfume.

Tahka was feelin' somewhat neglected all tied up. After the other campers grew accustomed to having a bound Comanche in their camp, they would sit and try to talk to him,

especially a particular young woman, although he didn't understand much of what she was sayin'. But it was friendly. All the while he was lookin' for a way to escape.

The next day they arrived at Fort Palo Duro. Path was the man of the hour! Colonel MacDonald shoved a cigar in the Lieutenant's mouth.

"Path, you are quite the officer! Not only did you bring these fine ladies to our humble outpost faster than I would have thought possible, but you captured this savage. Good work, son! Marie, it is always a pleasure to be in the presence of your incomparable beauty."

"Please, Cyrus, tell me more."

"Sir, I will be happy to debrief you as soon as we sort everyone out."

"Let Nash take care of that. Captain Nash, escort this Comanche to the brig and see that everyone has some sort of accommodation. You two come with me and we'll celebrate"

Path recounted his journey to the end of the caprock where he found the wagons, and where he subdued the Comanche. He felt bad about takin' credit, but Marie had insisted.

"Marie, you sold out entirely in Cambridge?"

"Don't worry, Cyrus. I brought your stake." She reached into her purse and put a rolled pile of greenbacks on the table.

"Why now?"

"There are men camped on the prairie. Real gentlemen - not rough and tumble horse soldiers like you. My ladies would like to make their acquaintance."

"Sir, if I may as quickly as possible make a move on Winston's camp. They must be made aware of our guests."

"Very good, Lieutenant. I agree you should proceed in haste."

"Madam, I ask that Maggie accompany me."

“I see you are a fickle man!”

“Marie...! I believe she will help me convince those men to come to the fort.”

“You are so cute, Sam. Yes, well if she wishes to go with you...”

Path found Maggie and the two of them visited the quartermaster. Shortly after Path rode with Private O’Sullivan to the Winston camp. They let their horses graze while they looked for Fitzhugh. When they found him they settled next to him on the grass.

“Afternoon Fitzhugh. Beautiful day.”

“Indeed, Lieutenant. Who is with you?”

“Cornelius Fitzhugh, may I introduce Private Patrick O’Sullivan. The Private has expressed an interest in Winston’s sermon. You might say O’Sullivan is a kindred spirit.”

“How do you do, O’Sullivan,” said Fitzhugh. “May I ask how old you are for you appear to be no more than a boy?”

Private O’Sullivan looked into Fitzhugh’s eyes. “I am not a boy, sir.”

Fitzhugh glanced around. He whispered. “Path, you know women are not allowed here.”

“I do understand, Fitzhugh, and I would not put you in such a position, however, O’Sullivan is profoundly moved by your prophet’s message.”

“May I know your real name, madam?”

“Maggie, sir.”

“Maggie. Why are you here?”

“I suppose, sir, I am to represent the dozens of women who have arrived at the fort, hoping to meet you fine gentlemen.”

“Couldn’t have said it better, Fitzhugh. I gave O’Sullivan my word I would accompany the Private to the sermon, however, upon my departure I received word I am needed most

urgently by my Commander. I must request of you, Fitzhugh, this most burdensome favor, that you will explain Winston's philosophy for the Private until I return."

"No need for this elaborate ruse, Path. How long will you be?"

"I think of it as bluffing, Fitzhugh. How long should I be?"

Maggie O'Sullivan looked deeply into Fitzhugh's green eyes with her own green eyes.

"Please, sir, I hunger for knowledge."

"Leave her to me, Path."

"I trust you will take care of the lady."

"Do you think we're savages?"

"The things I've seen..."

"She'll be fine. I give you my word."

Path left them, not intending to return. Fitzhugh took O'Sullivan to Winston.

Transformation

“That is America’s great hypocrisy, you know. They profess a belief in God but are desperate to find comfort in material things.” Gustav’s smirk seemed sinister to Ray.

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Of course it is, Ray. Happiness is a new car!”

“But it’s not who we are. For someone who wants to be an American you don’t seem to respect us very much.”

“I am talking about those people who believe their God rewards them with material things if they are devout. They are deluded.”

“I imagine after awhile they figure out the material things don’t give them what they need, but the devout don’t lose faith.”

“Don’t you think it is sad, Ray? The ignorance, the childish longing for a father.”

Ray’s third eye tingled. “So you had an older brother, huh?”

“Yes, Hans. I never knew him. I wish I had a brother. But I’m sure he would have bullied me. That is what happens, yes? Do you have siblings, Ray?”

“Yeah. I’m the oldest. Did Hans die in the war?”

Gustav seemed to watch the past as it came into view. “My mother said he was staying with my grandmother. They believed Darmstadt was safer because so many previous bombings had been ineffective. September 11th, 1944. The English fire bombed the city, as they would later do at Dresden. Bombs hit my grandmother’s house. She was killed. Another bomb fell not far from the house and destroyed a small school. The attack was at night but my brother was at the school. They believed he snuck out of the house to go to the school to swing on the swing set

because they found what was left of his body there. More than 10,000 people died that night.

Goosebumps flew up Ray's arms and neck. His third eye screamed.

"You lived in town or on the Post?"

"We lived in town but we moved to Cambrai-Fritsch Kaserne."

"That was near my grandmother's house! Think of that, Ray! It is a small world."

"Too small, man." Ray wiped tears from his eyes.

Ray felt a profound sadness. He understood now why the Germans were sometimes rude, even cruel to him when he was a kid. Many of them probably lost friends and relatives in that bombing. And why did Hans turn on Paula? Existieren. Exist, not believe. Hans told Ray Paula didn't exist. Didn't exist. Jesus Fuckin' Christ, Ray thought. How could Paula have taught him the Passover song if she wasn't real? Oh, fuck! Ray couldn't trust his memory!

Ray continued to tear up thinkin' of Hans swingin' high and gloriously until the explosion transformed him, instantly, into a ghost. Ray now understood Hans was not imaginary. He was a ghost. Ray didn't know ghosts was real. Was Paula real? Fuck.

Gustav glanced at Ray and noticed he was wipin' tears. "I am sorry, Ray. I should not have shared such a sad story."

They was in downtown Dallas now, continuin' north on 35. The traffic was thicker. Andy pointed to the right. "That's Dealey Plaza! That's where Kennedy was shot!"

"A profound loss to the world. Ich bin ein Berliner."

Ray's third eye compelled him to ask about Montreal. "The Olympics are comin' up soon in Montreal. Going to check it out? Since you're from there, you know."

"I have no plans to be there."

"Come to think of it, since you're from Germany did you go to Munich last time?"

“Yes. I took leave to go to the Olympics. You do not know this but Hans is a celebrity. Yes, he was the model for Waldi, the Olympics mascot. I sent my uncle a photograph and they chose Hans. So, you see, I was there when all of that happened.”

Andy perked up. “Jesus, Gustav, you’ve been around a lot of sorrow, man!”

Gustav slowly shook his head. “It was horrifying, yes. Eleven Israelis murdered. Black September. One of their demands was the freedom of two members of the Rote Armee Fraktion, the Red Army Faction, Baader and Meinhof. They were in jail for murder. My uncle knew Ulrike Meinhof. They were friends. She hanged herself in her cell only two months ago.”

Gustav abruptly exited the freeway and pulled into a Sambo’s parkin’ lot. “Our time together has ended. This is where I will leave you. I hope you will be safe.”

Surprised, Ray and Andy stepped out of the van. “Thanks for the ride, Gustav,” said Andy. “Hans is a great dog.”

“Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you. Good luck with your journey. Auf wiedersehen. Or should I say, vaya con Dios, Andy?”

“God bless America!” Andy shouted, then softly, “Commie motherfucker.”

Gustav waved as he drove off.

They was downtown somewhere. Ray’s third eye was tryin’ to grab his attention but he didn’t want to bring that up to Andy. Hans had apparently calmed him down for the moment.

“Know where the hell we are?” asked Ray.

Andy looked around. “He dropped us off pretty quick, didn’t he? Didn’t pay attention. Dealey Plaza was back that way. Hey, how much money you got? Maybe we can catch a bus.”

Ray and Andy counted their cash and went inside The Sambo’s to ask for directions.

A little farther north, Gustav left the freeway.

Erotic Ice Cubes

Ray couldn't understand the Voodoo Cat Curse spectacle as he drove the empty dark streets, hopin' he'd run into Tandi. He felt if he just drove around long enough she'd magically appear next to him at a red light. Tandi was hidin' somethin' but what? He thought if he could find her and stare at her long enough he'd be able to see the source of the mystery. It was like the ice cubes in the magazine ads he'd studied in advertising class. If you looked long enough you could see sexual images in the ice cubes. Maybe that was Tandi.

So what was the truth? This question came to him about the time he drove past the Calvary Baptist Church where his mother used to drag him. His father wouldn't go to church after Vietnam. He said if God was responsible for what he saw in the war then God is an asshole. Of course, he was drunk when he said it.

Ray remembered his last conversation with Pastor Dollahide. The Pastor wore a brown polyester suit and a white shirt and a wide, brownish, red paisley tie. He matched his office.

“Pastor, how do you tell illusion from reality?”

“Jesus Christ will guide you to the truth.”

“Reality is always in my face, Pastor, telling me what I need to do to survive. But, I do things that make me question reality. What do you think of ritual sex?”

“What do you know of such things, Ray?”

“What about alchemy?”

“Ray, these things are distractions from the true path!”

“How do you know there's a Heaven, Pastor?”

“Paul said believers have a hope in Heaven. If you believe Jesus Christ died for your sins you will have a mansion in Heaven, Ray, a beautiful house made of hope.”

Ray tried to picture what that would look like. "I'm just saying there seems to be more to reality than the material world. But a lot of people say the material world is the only reality."

"Okay, now I get where you're goin'. Ever read Plato, Ray? The allegory of the cave? In Seminary I appreciated Plato more than Aristotle. The latter is a rule-maker like Moses. Probably why Aquinas liked him so much. Dominican. Rules, hierarchies. Plato's idealism suits me better. Anyway, he said what we see as reality are just shadows of the real things."

Ray was intrigued. Shadows. Tandi was a shadow. The real Tandi was yet to be seen. "That's far out, Pastor. We're shadows."

"Illusion is the devil, Ray. The light, that's the light of God. We've got to turn from the shadows and see the light."

"The light is Heaven and the world, the illusion, is the devil. The world is evil?"

"Afraid so, Ray. That's why we need Christ. He is the light."

Ray thought that sounded better than a mansion of hope. He found himself drivin' by the radio station again and saw Tandi waitin' at the door. She held a cake.

"I've been sending messages, Ray of Sunshine. Haven't you heard?"

"Maybe I have."

"Made you a cake, birthday boy."

Ray unlocked the door to the station and he and Tandi entered the small radio studio.

"Fred says you put a curse on him."

She giggled. "Poor boy."

"Well, Fred's your business but the cat seems to be suffering."

She purred. "Cats are such sympathetic creatures."

He considered. "I don't think you know voodoo."

“Okay.”

He shook his head. “You are truly mysterious.”

She put her finger on his nose. “I think all women are mysterious to you, Honey. And yet we’re very simple. We have simple needs. We get what we need or we leave. Just like a cat.”

“Fred’s my friend but I never understood what you saw in him.”

“I met him in Watcher Park.”

“You believe that?”

“Well something happened. Ha! But I certainly don’t love that creep.”

Ray ran his finger through the icing and licked it. “German Chocolate?”

“With special ingredients.”

They took a bite of the cake. Ray moaned. “Mmmmm.”

Tandi savored it. “I made it today. The coconut hides the herb texture so you don’t notice it. So what did Fred tell you?”

“You’re leaving. Glad you thought of me before you left.”

She stared into his eyes. “I wanted to be with you.”

Ray moved toward her lips and she met them and they held tightly to each other. Ray thrust his tongue into her mouth and tasted the sweet chocolate. He felt his pulse race and he felt arousal quickly. She gently pushed him away.

He was disappointed. “Too fast, huh?”

She was frustrated. “Things are fucking complicated.”

Ray was confused. “Fred?”

“No. Don’t you know how significant the gazebo is out there?”

“You want to go out there? Let’s do it.”

“You’re so romantic. You believe the world should be a certain way and you try to live up to your ideal and you want everyone else to do the same.”

“I guess that’s true.”

She touched his face with her soft hands. “But the world’s not that way, Honey.”

“Then why are you here?”

“We’re alike, Ray of Sunshine. We have the same... vision.”

“You mean... the third eye?”

“Mine is more refined. It means, sometimes, we’re in the same place in our minds. There are a few of us. We call it the wave.”

Things came into focus for Ray as goose bumps climbed his spine and exploded in his scalp. “What about Bananaland? The guy dressed in black on the carousel? Is he one?”

She nodded.

Ray was suspicious. “Why are you so interested in terrorism?”

“I came here to wish you a happy birthday and to see you before I leave and to leave you a very nice high with this cake. Now I’m going.”

“Wait. Wait! Why can’t you talk to me if we’re the same?”

“It’s too soon, Ray. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Will I see you again?”

She smiled softly. “Are you still going on your July 4th trip?”

“Why? Are you going?”

She shrugged. She leaned toward him to kiss him goodbye but Ray took hold of her and pulled her into him and kissed her long with as much passion as he could muster, so much so that she giggled. “You’re trying too hard, Sunshine.”

“I don’t get it.” And he really didn’t.

“Of course you don’t.”

“You’re just playing games, Tandi.”

Tandi laughed. “Life is nothing but a game, Ray. The sooner you learn the better.”

Of course, to Ray, most things came back to sex. “Wait. I still don’t get the Fred business. If you’re like me...why were you with him?”

“To watch you, Honey.”

“You’re having sex with Fred to watch me? Why not have sex with me?”

“Oh my God!”

Tandi kissed Ray on the lips. “No matter what happens, remember I will always have a special place in my heart for you...and in my mind.”

With that clichéd and yet cryptic remark she walked out to her Honda Civic. She waved once more before she drove north on Pomegranate. Ray stood alone on the steps of the Mango College radio station. Maybe he loved her just a little. Now she was gone forever. Or maybe he’d see her again July 4th. What the fuck was that all about?

Ray put the cake in his bug and drove off into the night, not knowin’ where he was goin’, but hopin’ an answer would present itself. And it did. He saw the guy, the mysterious man at Bananaland who was now behind the wheel of a brand new black Corvette Stingray. The man grinned at Ray, cut in front of him and burned rubber, on his way downtown. Now, Ray had a ‘73 Volkswagen Beetle and there was no way he could keep up with a Corvette, but he was curious, so he followed him. He kept munchin’ the weed cake.

The man drove northwest and hit Papaya Boulevard. Ray followed as they approached the Mango skyscrapers, both of them, past the Fitzhugh Hotel. If the Corvette sped up, Ray didn't, so the man slowed down. Obviously the man was takin' him somewhere.

At the edge of downtown the Corvette hit a red light at 15th. Ray pulled up behind it. He glanced at the Nash National Bank clock. It was almost three. Seemed they was the only monkees movin'. Ray admired how the city lights reflected off the pristine black body of the Stingray. It was beautiful. By contrast his yellow bug had one or two layers of dirt that swallowed illumination. The Corvette took off before the light turned green. Ray followed.

The man drove up to 6th and turned west. Ray kept him in sight. They went past Kiwi, past Melon and Passion Fruit. Ray glanced to his left to see a small monument with a Caduceus extending from it that honored the benefactors of Rachel Badminton Memorial Hospital that loomed on that corner, but that's where Ray lost the Corvette, despite the fact there was no one else on the road. He peered down the road and on the side streets, lookin' for the black car. That's when he saw a woman, an apparition on the corner. She was pointin' north on MacDonald. Turnin' the corner he saw the woman had long red hair. He pulled up to the curb.

“Morrigan? Need a ride?”

“Oh, hi! Sorry, I don't ride with strangers.”

“You know me! I asked for your phone number.”

“Did I give it to you?”

“Fuck. Are you okay out here?”

“Just leave me alone, pervert.”

Ray shook his head and noticed the man had parked the Corvette in front of the west lawn of the County Courthouse and turned off its lights. Irritated with Morrigan, Ray shoved the

stick into first and took off, quickly shiftin' into second. When he glanced into the rearview mirror he didn't see the redheaded goddess. Ray pulled up half a block and kept his lights on and engine runnin'. He saw the man open the driver's side door and saunter toward the Courthouse. He was wearin' black, everything black, and despite the warmth, wore a black trenchcoat. He smoked a cigarette. The man walked toward the large bronze statue of Colonel Cyrus MacDonald, which was lit with directional spotlights on the lawn.

Ray considered the wisdom of followin' the man, but reasoned he'd just keep his distance and find out what the man wanted. He turned off the engine and lights and walked toward the statue. The MacDonald County Courthouse was built of brick and stone in the late 19th century in a Romanesque Revival style by the same architects that had designed the old courthouse in Dallas. Each corner of the building is different from the other. It's surrounded by massive oak trees and is a little spooky in the middle of the night. MacDonald, in his U.S. Army uniform, is on a horse and he's pointin' to the west, which is, accordin' to history, the direction he told the Winstonians to go to establish Mango.

Ray got within ten yards of the man. "Who are you?"

The man turned and smiled at Ray. He had perfect white teeth shinin' from a very lean face. His hair was thick, black and grey, down to his shoulder. "Who are you?" he parroted Ray with an English accent.

"You want me to follow you but you don't know my name?"

"You've got me sussed, Raymond Rhodes."

"Ray."

"Ray of sunshine."

"How do you know Tandi?"

“Oh, we go way back.”

“What are we doing here?”

“I want to show you something, mate. Colonel MacDonald, shown here in eternal form is not who you think he was.”

Ray was impatient. “I saw you at Bananaland. You blew up the World of Death.”

“How did I do that?”

“That remote control device that triggered the plastic explosive in her bra.”

“What a bloody imagination! Why would I blow up Tandi’s bra?”

“That’s what I want to know!”

“Are you on drugs, Raymond? As I was saying, Colonel MacDonald...”

Ray threw up his arms and turned to leave, mutterin’ a fuck off, but the man spoke directly into Ray’s mind.

“Don’t go yet, mate.”

Ray was doubly stunned by Morrigan who suddenly stood directly in front of him. “You came this far and you’re turning back?”

“Holy fuck! Just leave me alone!”

“Raymond...”

Ray turned to the man and then the goddess was gone. Tandi obviously put more than weed in the cake. He was trippin’.

“Please pay attention. Why are you here, Raymond?”

“You tell me!”

“But you grew up here. This is your legacy. You’ve been told the story.”

“What story?”

“The Origin of Mango.”

“Yeah, the prostitutes, Jacob Winston, I know.”

“Ray, this town is a portal. Your parents must have told you.”

“Told me what?”

“You didn’t grow up here?”

“No.”

“There is a door to the spiritual world right above the gazebo at Watcher Park. You need a ladder to get to it, but if you were so inclined you could climb that stairway to heaven, mate.”

Ray thought of Zeppelin.

“Jacob’s Ladder. I’m like you, Raymond. I’m Teddy.”

“My name is Ray.”

“Ray, we are drawn to this place because this is where the door is. There is a much bigger plan and you are part of it. Does this make any sense at all?”

“No.”

“It never made sense to me either, mate, but that’s the way it is. Order and chaos. Struggles in heaven are played out here. In the world and in our souls. In the future there will be no separation. Heaven and earth shall be one, which makes it all the more important that we control the future.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Right, you’re not from here.” Teddy indicates the statue. “What really happened here a hundred years ago is not in a history book or in a pamphlet at the Chamber of Commerce.”

“There are lots of versions. So what?”

“But only one truth, mate.”

“Your version is the truth?”

“Not mine. Yours. I have a foolproof way of determining the veracity of this question. Is it true? Let us go to the source.” Teddy climbed the Cyrus MacDonald statue, reached under the horse’s scrotum, and a plastic tube emerged from the horse’s penis. He tossed the tube to Ray. “Open it.”

Ray removed a piece of yellowed paper from the tube. At the top of the page was the words, “The End.” At the bottom was a signature and date, “Samuel Path, July 4th, 1876.”

“We didn’t know who you are until recently. You wrote that. That’s you.”

Now here’s where the story gets even stranger, but it’s the way Ray explained it and I can’t fault him for his sincerity. His state of mind...well... When the man said “that’s you,” he vanished. He just vanished right there. And so did the tube Ray was holdin’. And so did the stranger’s car. But not the cigarette. The cigarette just fell to the ground. One moment Ray’s lookin’ at him, the next moment, poof, everything’s gone, cigarette falls.

He looked around to try to find the red headed goddess, but she wasn’t there either. After the initial shock of the incident, the fact that Ray found himself alone in the early hours of the mornin’ at the MacDonald County Courthouse with a lit cigarette he didn’t smoke, made him question everything he thought was certain about his reality. He picked up the cigarette and continued to smoke it. Maybe he was smokin’ it all along. Maybe he bought his own pack for a change. But he would never have bought menthols.

He would remember Samuel Path.

Coyote

Tahka understood the woman liked him. She would study him when he was tied to the wagon, and now she served him his meals everyday in the jail. And he had to admit the food wasn't bad, as these things go. He noticed the soldiers was carin' for livestock, a couple goats, mostly chickens, and a small garden. Woman's work. But they had good meat.

She would watch him as he ate. At first he thought she was just curious, but he began to notice a change in her expression. And she would linger after he'd finished. That day on the prairie she had put her hand on her breast.

"Rachel," she said. "Rachel."

Tahka ignored her, but when it was apparent she wasn't goin' to stop, and then she started doin' it before she gave him his meal, he figured he'd have to play along.

"Tahka," he said.

"Tahka," she repeated.

"Rachel," he said, and she suddenly grinned from ear to ear. Then she started talkin' while he ate, even though he couldn't understand what she was sayin'. She didn't look as strong as a woman should be. Those hands would never be able to skin a buffalo hide, but she had good hips. She would bear many children.

It didn't take long before he realized how easy it might be to escape. The day he was locked in the fort's brig she was near the cell and he reached through slowly and ran his fingers down her long hair. She blushed. That night she had a friend distract the guard while she grabbed the key and they escaped the fort together.

Tahka wanted to take a horse but they was well guarded. Rachel indicated she would scream if he killed a soldier. He contemplated stranglin' her, but he wanted her for later.

They raced into the darkness, through the tall grass. They ran until they was certain the fort was beyond the horizon. And then they fell exhausted together into the grass, pantin' heavily. As he caught his breath, Tahka peered into the darkness and listened to the prairie. He heard only the night rustlings of prairie dogs and owls.

He looked into Rachel's wide face. The moonlight glowed in her eyes. Her face spoke of hunger and desire. He had never seen that look on a white woman and it startled him. He had expected he'd have to just take her but it was clear there was to be no fight. She reached for his face and pulled it down upon hers and he tasted her soft lips and her wet mouth, salty with the sweat of the sprint into the darkness. He fought to pull her dress up and wrestled with the undergarments, and he was inside her as quickly as he could manage, as he wallowed in the scent of her pungent womb. She was unbearably soft and drippin' like rain and eager to have his cock plunge into her. He fought to sink deeper and she accepted all of him and the fire in his cock moved into his belly and shot flames into his breast as he felt his heart poundin' harder. And he thrust himself into her again and again as if he could somehow dive headlong into the river of her passion. And she grunted and moaned like a wounded animal and used her hands magically in a way that thrilled him, that teased him with an ecstatic agony. This woman knew how to fuck. He exploded inside of her as the stars danced like spirits in his head and he somehow knew at that moment that a child had been conceived.

Late that night Tahka led Rachel to the campsite he had shared with Piajuhtzu, Tetecae and Ojapite. But they was gone. The campfire was long cold. Tahka saw the woman was tired. So he found a soft spot on the ground and they slept together.

At dawn Tahka indicated Rachel should stay at the campsite while he hunted. He had seen mule deer the week before he was captured and hoped he could find them again, although all his weapons had been confiscated. Rachel looked sad. He was sure she was hungry.

That afternoon when he returned with only a few prickly pears she was gone. Her tracks led back to the fort. Tahka looked out over the vast expanse of the plains. He had no food, no weapons, and above all, no horse. He could either return to the fort and try to take a horse and weapons and possibly be caught or killed, or he could head farther west into the canyon and hope to find his comrades there. The hunting was better in the canyon too. He could make weapons and survive on what he could find.

Although he was unaware of the white man's holiday, he was free and independent on the Fourth of July. He lingered for hours at the campsite, indecisive, remembering his earlier impulse to act rashly had resulted in his capture. He would not make the same mistake. Ojapite would be proud. But he would rather die than return to the reservation. And if he had to die, he would die a free man. He asked the spirits what he should do, but they did not speak. Finally, driven as much by a desire to move as by hunger, he took steps toward the east, toward the fort, and beyond that to his memory of the reservation where his friends and family ate bad meat and wasted away, stripped of their right to be Comanches. That memory repulsed him.

When he turned around to the west, he saw the coyote starin' back at him. Usually the coyote would keep his distance from Tahka, but now it slowly moved toward him until he was about ten yards away. Then he sat on his hindquarters, watchin' him. Tahka waved his arms, hopin' the coyote would spook, but it didn't. Then the oddest thing happened. It changed into a man and spoke.

“Tahka, I smell a woman on you. Why are you sad?”

“Kunseeta, Tahka mourns the death of the buffalo. The white man wants the People to live in the east and take what he gives us to live. We cannot live on bad meat. It is not the way of a warrior. Tahka must hunt. He must protect his tribe.”

“The white man destroys everything, Tahka. We can do nothing about it. He will hunt us all down and destroy us. Your People are nearing the end of your world. There is nothing but great sadness and pain ahead of you. Nothing you do will change that.”

“Kunseeta, why do you come here like a bad omen? Leave me alone.”

“I mourn the loss of the People. I offer you another path.”

“I have the four directions, Kunseeta, but I will not go east.”

“We have watched you as you watched the white man. We see what a great hunter you are. You are clever. Come with us. Come with us and howl with us.”

“I am a man, Kunseeta. I cannot run with the coyotes.”

“But look at me, Tahka. Am I not both? These lands will change as the white man settles on the grass. They will hunt us but the coyote will adapt and survive better than the wolf. You will be honored in our tribe and have many wives and as many children as the stars.”

“I want to be like you, trickster. I want to be a man and a coyote.”

“If you say ‘I will be a coyote then you will be one of us. But you must give up being a man before you can run with the coyotes.’”

“Tahka is a powerful warrior. He is a great hunter. He can be alone.”

“Tahka does not need to be alone. If you are one of us you can hunt the rabbit, the snake and the quail. You would be a great coyote warrior, Tahka. Join us and stay free.”

Tahka sat through the afternoon and into the night. He considered how life would be as a

coyote. He would run with the pack and hunt and mate when he pleased. But he also considered how man hunted the coyote. The white man never missed an opportunity to shoot at the coyote. He would be an animal not a man. But his life among the People was ended. He would not return to a life that would not allow him to do the very things that made him a man, huntin' and raidin' and protectin' his family.

Still, Tahka wanted a sign from the spirits that followin' Kunseeta was the right thing to do. He saw the moon and howled at it like a coyote, hopin' he'd get an answer.

He did.

In the distance in the direction of the fort the sky lit up. Explosions echoed across the plains. The sky glowed above the horizon. Tahka howled once more and all the coyotes howled with him. The Comanche jumped up and down in absolute joy, howlin'.

“Kunseeta, I have made my decision!”

The coyote joined him. “Tahka, are you ready to run with the coyotes or will you return to the reservation to be half a man?”

“I will be a coyote, Kunseeta!”

Tahka then watched himself shrink toward the ground and grow fur and a long snout. He looked at his hands which had become paws. He howled and the coyote spirit howled with him. He ran with Kunseeta into the west, to his new tribe.

And that's the story of how Tahka became a coyote.

Commitment

The chiggers drove Ray up the wall! It took everything he had not to stick his hand deep into his pants and scratch his balls. His forehead and nose was scorched. Despite the rain that mornin', the sun had managed to find every bit of exposed skin. His body ached too, from the bumps and scrapes and miles of walkin'. He'd lost his comb somewhere and his long hair was matted and sticky. Andy didn't look much better, but his curly hair seemed to have weathered the journey more heroically.

They sat in the Roadrunner bus station, waitin' for their connection back to Mango, which would depart in 30 minutes. They had discovered between the two of them they did have enough money for the tickets. Well, the fact is they was 14 dollars short but the lady at the ticket counter felt sorry for them after they'd told her their story, or at least the Reader's Digest version of it. So they sat patiently with dozens of other passengers waitin' to leave or waitin' for folks to arrive on the 4th in Dallas.

The clock hovered at six. It would be late before they'd arrive in Mango, but at least arrival was now all but certain. A naggin' thought made Ray restless. Why was the third eye pushin' him since he'd been on the trip? It pushed him out of the concert and down this road. But nothin' of significance had happened that he could see. Tandi didn't even show.

Now that an end was in sight, now that the day was yawnin', and now that they had stopped movin', a profound fatigue set in. Ray glanced at Andy whose eyes was closed. His mouth dropped open, a sign he was nearly asleep.

Ray recalled the rest of his final semester was taken up with research on Samuel Path. If Path was in a position to know the truth, whatever that was, there was no mention of him in any book. Not even the Mango Heritage League had heard of Samuel Path.

Ray chuckled to himself rememberin' graduatin' at Mango College. They had accepted their diplomas in black gowns and then had taken a couple six packs of Lone Star up Kumquat Mound which overlooked the college. Ray, Andy and Fred sat on the grass in their gowns and their tassled caps sippin' beer. Fred had revealed he'd moved up to the big house and was providin' services for Lady Snoop. Fred said she showed him a few tricks. He did complain about the outfit she made him wear and sometimes she got a little rough. Andy hated Fred.

Graduation Day was also the day Bob's father blew his head off. He apparently got mixed up in some shady land deal and lost all his money. So he took his brand new Colt Diamondback to the little gazebo in his backyard and fertilized the lawn. His family was inside the house at the time. Ray felt sorry for Bob. The money, the house, the position in town, all gone. Bob's father didn't want to deal with it so he let his family do it. Brave guy.

Obviously Bob wasn't at the Graduation ceremony.

Fred glanced around and spoke in a quiet voice. "I told you about those spells Tandi was putting on Rob and Bob. That bitch has evil power."

"Rob was partyin' like a motherfucker tonight. No grief," Andy observed.

"He needs to be whipped really hard," Fred replied.

So now, a month later, Andy and Ray are in the Dallas bus station and Ray marveled at how life can change in just a short time. Angie had been accepted into grad school, studyin' public relations of all things. Turns out Freud was valuable after all. She rented her apartment to Ben again, tryin' to psychoanalyze him so he'd remember how he felt about her. Joe Napolitano hooked up with two hot chicks who'd scored weed from him in Watcher Park. They crashed in his apartment for weeks smokin' weed, eatin' mushrooms and fuckin'. When his lease was up, the three of them packed up and took off to San Francisco.

The chiggers became unbearable. Ray figured he'd head to the men's room, claim a stall and scratch himself into oblivion. It was near the exit where windows looked out on the buses bein' loaded and unloaded. So when Ray neared the men's room he looked out the window and saw Gustav Haupt. He was talkin' to a bus driver by the luggage door of the Oklahoma City bus. Gustav had with him the suitcase Ray had seen in his VW bus. It appeared Gustav was tellin' the driver to be careful with it. The driver took the suitcase from him and set it on the ground. Gustav turned to leave, walked a few paces, turned and then yelled somethin' to the driver. The driver appeared exasperated and then picked up the suitcase. They stared at each other. Gustav moved toward the driver, who, in a fit of pique tossed the suitcase into the bus. Gustav almost ducked, called the driver an asshole and then hurried out of the terminal.

Ray wanted to talk to the driver, who was loadin' other bags into the bus. A cigarette with a long ash trail dangled from his mouth.

"Hey, I saw you arguin' with that guy. Did he leave his bag? Should I take it to him?"

The driver seemed annoyed Ray was talkin' to him. "He's shippin' it."

"Really? You can do that?" The driver resented Ray's interest.

"My buddy and I were hitchin'. He picked us up. Just wanted to be considerate."

"Cheaper'n the mail, you know, a suitcase like that. All that way."

"Where's it going?"

"Montreal."

"Why was he pissed?"

"Kept tellin' me to treat it gentle. I say, what you got in there, glass?"

"What did he say?"

"Said it wasn't glass."

“What do you think is in it?”

“Ain’t my business, but nobody tells me how to do my job. Spoke like a kraut.”

“Yeah.”

“I was at Normandy Beach. Got to get to work. You need to take a shower, son.”

Ray sniffed himself as he headed to the men’s room where he threw some water on his face and huddled in a nearby stall. What an odd coincidence, he thought. Now, granted, Gustav was a Marxist, but a lot of people was back then. Didn’t make them dangerous. He was in the Air Force. They do have security checks after all. He did have connections in Montreal and it was coincidence the Olympics was bein’ held there. On the other hand he talked about that German terrorist connected to Munich.

He was exhausted. He was oversensitive about the third eye since the fight with Andy. There’s no tellin’ what sort of crazy ideas he’d have now. If it was true, where the hell was Tandi? Too much dope, not enough sleep. He decided to let the third eye scream. He wasn’t gonna heed it. Maybe cold turkey would make it go away. The scratchin’ wasn’t helpin’.

When Ray returned to the waitin’ area Andy was awake.

“Hey man, guess who I saw out by the buses. Gustav.”

“The Commie?”

“Yeah. “

“He’s takin’ a bus? What happened to his van?”

“No, man. He’s shipping that big suitcase.”

“Didn’t know you could do that.”

“To Montreal.”

“Yeah, well that’s where he’s from. Wish we knew he was comin’ here. Could’ve saved us a bit of walkin’”

“Yeah, well, I think we can board now.”

“Far out. I’m gonna sleep all the way home.”

“Chiggers suck, man.”

“Fuckin’ A. They suck your blood, man. ”

Ray and Andy joined the others bound for Mango, Lubbock, Amarillo and Denver. They grabbed seats at the back of the bus. Andy had the window. Ray was on the aisle. Andy immediately pushed his seat back and appeared ready to crash. But Ray was on edge. He watched the bus with Gustav’s suitcase pull out of the station and head to Oklahoma City.

Matter in motion. If that’s true, then nothin’ mattered. What matters to matter? Killin’ would be nothin’. What was that old Commie sayin’? The end justifies the means.

Andy was already snorin’. The bus was fillin’ up with passengers. Families and strangers smiled and exchanged courtesies as they worked their way through the aisle with their bags and accessories. The third eye yanked at Ray. He thought of the people on the bus to Oklahoma City. Gustav’s suitcase was goin’ to Montreal. The driver threw the suitcase into the bus and Gustav was scared. Tandi had talked about letter bombs that blew up when somebody opened the letter. They used plastic explosives that went off when the letter was opened. Gustav said he hates Montreal for the orphanage thing. A German who’s a Canadian who wants to be an American. That fuckin’ dream. Those four assholes.

A Canadian in Germany on an American base grabbed Eddie. Ray’s father always said the more you try to figure things out the further you get away from the original question. After he got back from the war, his father told Ray he would give him money to run to Canada if he

got drafted. Lucky for Ray the draft ended or he might be in Montreal right now, preparin' for the Olympics. The third eye raged.

“Hey, Andy.”

Andy grunted and opened his eyes.

“Hey, man, remember when we were in the car with Caroline? Did you ask me what side of the circle does the rain fall in?”

“What the fuck, Ray?”

“I was dreaming, but I thought I heard you ask me what side of the circle does the rain fall in? Was that real?”

“I was dreamin' I was gettin' a blow job, Ray, and now you're askin' me shit?”

“The dream I had was pretty bizarre, but it was also real, I think”

“I would strangle you, but I'm too fuckin' tired. Wake me up in Mango, not before.”

As he watched Andy drift into sleep Ray wondered if he was himself asleep. Is this the dream? Is this just another reality floatin' into his mind and out again? Ray tried to pinpoint the first time he realized he had more than one mind. He had infinite access to the immaterial, but sometimes it was tough gettin' out of bed. Navigatin' it. That's the problem. What's real? What looks real?

He woke up one day and spent the entire mornin' thinkin' in one mind, and then woke up gradually as he went about the day, understandin' he was both in a dream and in the world.

After awhile it blended together with the past, with the spirits, and then he wondered if it all was really one mind and he didn't know where his mind stopped and the human mind began, which is part of God's mind.

What is God's mind?

It's fuckin' everything.

It's nothin' but a Word.

Things should be explained. Everything laid out in a logical way by someone else.

Is the bomb real?

It's nothin'.

It doesn't matter if it's real. It matters what you do.

Too many possibilities.

Are you capable of navigatin' uncertainty?

Fuckin' ambiguity.

O rose thou art sick.

Commit.

I have more than one mind.

Life requires commitment. Life requires commitment. Life requires commitment.

This life.

We have instinct. We act.

There are always consequences.

Act!

Ray did act. He committed to the action. He committed to that part of himself which always believed in the third eye. That part always wanted to do somethin' specific, but he could never articulate what it was. Ray may have thought he had more than one mind, but when he committed to that action, it was as if the old Ray died. What remained was a Ray with an idea, a Ray with purpose. It was like he was born again. The message Ray heard in that moment was

“no.” He didn’t know what it meant, but he knew it was the most important thing in his life.

The driver arrived and sat in his seat, readyin’ for departure. He shut the bus door.

“Hey, Andy, the third eye is workin’ on me.”

“Oh, Goddamn, Ray...”

“I think something bad is going to happen on that bus, man.”

“Nothin’s gonna happen on the goddamn bus, Ray.”

“The suitcase. I think Gustav put a bomb in it.”

“What the fuck? You don’t know that.”

“I’m not supposed to be on this bus. I’m getting off.”

“Your head is so far up your ass you think ‘shit for brains’ measures on the IQ scale.”

Ray rose from the seat and walked down the aisle to the front of the bus to the driver.

“Hey, man, I changed my mind. I don’t want to go on this bus.”

The driver looked at him without expression. “Got any luggage?”

“No.”

The driver opened the bus door. Ray looked back at Andy. Andy shot him the finger.

Ray felt confused as he stepped off the bus. The doors closed and the bus began to inch forward. He watched the windows pass by. Andy wouldn’t look at him.

Ray went to the counter to talk to the woman who sold them the tickets. “Hon, don’t you know your bus just left? Were you in the men’s room? Hold on, I’ll radio the driver.”

“I changed my mind.”

“After that sob story you gave me?”

“The story was true, ma’am...look, you know you have that service where someone can ship something on the bus?”

“You can’t be shipped, Hon.”

“On the bus to Oklahoma City, someone I know shipped a suitcase to Montreal.”

“Yeah, I think I remember that.”

“Well, I’m not sure but that suitcase may be dangerous.”

“What do you mean, dangerous, and what do you mean you’re not sure?”

“Well, the guy gave us a ride and he seemed suspicious, like he’d do something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, blow something up?”

“Are you tellin’ me there’s a bomb on that bus?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. The guy is a German. He was talking about terrorism.”

“Did he say he was gonna blow somethin’ up?”

“No.”

“Did he act like he was gonna blow somethin’ up?”

Ray shook his head.

“What exactly did this German do to make you think he was gonna blow somethin’ up?”

“Well, actually, he’s in the Air Force. It’s just the way he acted.”

“He’s in the German Air Force?”

“No. Ours.”

“A man in our Air Force is gonna blow up somethin’?”

Ray was exasperated. “Can’t you just radio the bus? Tell the driver the suitcase to Montreal might be dangerous. He might want to stop, take it out, and look at it. That’s all.”

“That’s all? You want me to stop a bus, make the driver get out, check a suitcase that could be a bomb?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Hon, what have you been smokin’? You kids. Look what that stuff is doin’ to your brain! Next bus to Mango ain’t till tomorrow. Got a long wait.”

“Well, can you at least tell me where in Montreal the bag is going?”

“That’s private.”

“Don’t tell me then. But if it’s going anywhere near the Olympics, then something’s wrong. The guy’s name is Haupt, Gustav Haupt.”

She wrote the name on a notepad. “Gustav How?”

“Haupt,” said Ray. “H-a-u-p-t, I think.”

“Well, come to think of it, I’m pretty sure the man sendin’ the package was Mexican. Ortega or somethin’. Yeah, I remember he had a Mexican driver’s license and a Mexican accent. Come to think of it though, he was white and blonde. Spanish?”

Ray was frustrated. “Will you at least check?”

“I’ll look at it, Hon. Now stop botherin’ me.”

Ray realized he wasn’t gonna get any further with the woman. He could claim he put a bomb on the bus. That would stop it, for sure. He’d also be in deep shit if there was a bomb on the bus. He decided to step outside of the station to get some air and try to figure out what to do. No sooner did he step out into the late afternoon air he was greeted by Hans waggin’ his tail.

“Hans! How are you buddy? Where’s Gustav?” Ray peered up and down the street but couldn’t see the white VW bus. He picked up Hans and the dog licked his face. At that moment Tandi drove up in her Honda Civic.

“Get in,” she said.

The Revelation

“Mr. Jefferson, I do beg your pardon for this lapse in propriety, but would you mind so terribly if I touch your forehead?”

“Would you do me the honor of an explanation, General? Excuse me, Mr. Crane?”

“Gladly, sir, following my story. For it will not make sense unless I do so. Will you grant me patience, sir?”

“Very well, touch away, sir. Ah! Curious. Rather like a spark in my mind’s eye. Please do continue your story. Perhaps explain why we do we not see the full world.”

“Yes, Mr. Jefferson. The answer harkens back to an ancient time, indeed. There really is no better way to explain. You are in this state to be controlled, sir.”

“Controlled?” Franklin was indignant.

“Mr. Franklin, you are undoubtedly an exception to some degree, but if your kind had access to absolute freedom, I rather doubt you would know how to use it.”

Franklin persisted. “You say you created and control us. Why would that be necessary?”

“When mankind was created...I’m afraid there is no better way to say it...Man was essentially a domesticated animal. We made you from the primitive stock that existed on this planet. Workers, pets, ultimately servants. One day one of our kind gave mankind our consciousness. That changed things considerably. Many of the Masters revolted. The separation was an alternative to annihilation.”

“Good Lord,” Jefferson’s face grew dark.

“But Gentlemen, your revolution here is a prelude to a change in the existing order. It will be a New Order, but it will be achieved stealthily. There are many of us who want you back among us, but it will take the work of your generations.”

Franklin also grew darker. “You created us to enslave us? What sort of intelligence would do such a thing?”

Crane laughed. “Oh, Dr. Franklin. That is quite humorous coming from a culture that enslaves your own kind. You see, we are not originally from Earth. It is our home now. We came looking for Paradise. And we found it. We also found primitive Man. We began to breed you to create a better servant. We created a hybrid, as I’m certain you have done with your tomatoes, Mr. Jefferson. Over time we began to love you as you love your dogs. And you do love your dogs very much, do you not?”

These first humans, of course, were not us. They served us quite well in many ways. They were beautiful, reflecting our essence, as it were, but they were not self-aware. They were naked and they were found to be tempting to many of our race. One of the Masters had the skill to give Man our consciousness. He said it was immoral to keep Man in a domesticated state. There was profound disagreement. But he did, indeed, give Man our minds.

And Heaven became chaotic.

In Heaven, or the full world, one has freedom to create anything one wants in the absence of time. Of course, we are not alone in this world. Therefore, an extraordinary self-discipline is required to exist in this place. Unfortunately, for Man, whose animal instincts are not bred out, existing in that world is not easy for him.”

Jefferson interjected. “You are implying the Master’s world began to be populated with rough, primitive, uneducated souls who did not have the discipline to wield power. If I may, sir, it rather sounds like the perception of us enjoyed by aristocratic Europe.”

“As I said, gentlemen, our worlds reflect one another. Following the early chaos, the Masters found a way to segregate us from you.

“But how, sir?” Franklin was fascinated.

“Oh, it was a simple matter of interfering with your pineal gland. We built pyramids across the planet that created a...curtain, if you will, that prevents you from seeing us. Furthermore, in the full existence, we communicate with our minds. Therefore, each of us is connected to all others. But now you are not connected with us or with yourselves. You speak different languages. You believe the capstone on the Great Pyramid is missing. It is there to us. It is a window into your world. We can see you but you can't see us. Until you die, of course.”

Hancock was encouraged. “Then there is life after death?”

“When you believe you die, you simply shed your skin, as it were and wake up to the full existence. But if you cannot navigate it, if you are immature and lack discipline, you will be sentenced to exist in the solid world once more.”

“Reincarnation,” concluded Jefferson.

“This country you are creating must be the cornerstone of a new age of Man, first idealized in Ancient Greece, a Man given freedom to think, but who is disciplined, whose imagination travels beyond the stars to that place of joy, the Heaven, which is all around us, in which God resides. And God demands order in chaos.”

Silence.

“But gentlemen, let me assure you, gradually more of your kind are awakening to the full life and flourishing because they are grasping the concept of absolute freedom and absolute discipline. Our blood is refining your bodies.”

“And why did you touch my forehead, sir?”

“I have set into motion a number of events. One of your descendents, Mr. Jefferson, will help bring about a doorway one hundred years from now, a portal between the worlds, that will eventually lead to the destruction of the present order. Heaven and Earth will begin anew.

“Novus ordo seclorum,” said Franklin.

“Gentlemen, we are in the business of revolution, are we not? It grows suffocating. Finish this difficult but vital task, sirs. Heaven and earth depend on it.”

The fish as George Washington disappeared. They stood in the middle of a field in the middle of the night. The stars were in their proper position, but not burning so brightly.

Jefferson looked at his colleagues. “Aliens have hijacked Heaven? What nonsense!”

Franklin nodded. “Unmitigated tripe, Mr. Jefferson. This is most certainly an illusionist’s trick. Perhaps an elaborate plot hatched in the new Freemason’s Hall in London.”

Hancock wasn’t so convinced. “And yet, did we not all share the same experience?”

Franklin dismissed his concern. “A good illusionist, Mr. Hancock, is capable of fooling multitudes. Henceforth we must be ever vigilant, especially concerning our English brothers.”

“You see, gentlemen,” Jefferson calculates, “the problem is there is no evidence at all that we experienced anything. Did you truly see what I saw, Mr. Franklin?”

“I cannot truthfully say, Mr. Jefferson. “But I do know these plotters targeted you foremost because you seemed the most susceptible. I suspect it is due to your hemp smoking.

Hancock’s eyes widened. “Of course! Mr. Jefferson’s herb concoction! It would explain the rather radical departure from reality!”

“Nevertheless,” Franklin concluded, “it might be wise to record this dubious vision for posterity. One never knows the value of a good story.”

July 4th, 1876

The end. To whom it may concern: I am recording in detail the facts as they occurred today so future generations may be illuminated as to the true nature of this place. It is profoundly difficult to accept the facts yet that is all I shall impart to you.

I have been asked to leave this account because there will be little recorded of my having lived in this place at this time, and so this shall serve as proof of my role as witness.

The first significant observation to be made is that at 0700 it was reported by Private Augustus Badminton the Comanche I had captured had escaped the brig. There was no evidence the lock had been broken. The Indian simply vanished from the cell. It is, of course, impossible for that to occur, and so it was decided we did not know how the Indian escaped, but we assumed he had help, although other savages had not been observed near the fort. However, because all activity had been focused on the celebration that day, the Colonel ordered Captain Nash to track the savage far enough that he could be assured the Indian would not be back soon.

Nash returned with a woman, Rachel Martin, who said the savage had forced her to free him, kidnapped her, ruined her and would have scalped her had she not prayed loudly to Jesus Christ that the Comanche should spare her. And Our Lord apparently did so, because there she was. As dubious as the story appeared under closer inspection, no one had the desire to dispute it on this day, when most of us were anticipating a great celebration. For her part, despite what she said had occurred, the woman was excessively pleased to be back amongst her own kind, although, of course, she had been ruined, even beyond the ruin of living a life of fornication.

The ruination, however, did not deter Private Badminton, the guard who had been on duty when the Comanche escaped. He was especially sensitive to her plight and promised to marry her that evening, knowing she had been spoiled by the savage. She was apparently

overwhelmed by her good fortune and accepted the man's offer, despite the fact she hardly knew him and despite his rather large head. Badminton's neck seemed no match for his skull, but he was known to be an affable sort. Jacob Winston agreed to marry them before the festivities that evening and assured them both they would not regret such a swift courtship.

The men on the prairie, including Jacob Winston, had arrived at the fort the previous evening to meet the ladies. To be sure, there was no resistance among them once the ladies had arrived, and so there was much laughter and celebratory good will that morning that accompanied the effort to make the fort festive, hanging the Chinese lanterns and the various sundries that were used for decorations.

Corporal Vonnegut and Private Robbins were in charge of the fireworks, which were due to be set afire following dusk that evening. Marie Mangreau accompanied Jacob Winston. I can only imagine her considerable powers of persuasion were too much to withstand for Mr. Winston, who surprisingly seemed elated to leave his designated place on the plains. So much for faith, I suppose.

Colonel MacDonald ordered extra sentries outside the gates to watch for a Comanche attack, but they were soon distracted by the ladies. Since I was credited with capturing the Comanche, I was given the task of ensuring he and his fellow savages would not disrupt the festivities that evening. The Colonel had the occasion planned in minute detail, which was unfortunate for him, considering nothing he expected actually came about.

That afternoon I encountered Cornelius Fitzhugh, to whom I had introduced Maggie O'Sullivan. I asked him why they left the plains. He says he should have known it was a foolhardy decision to leave the comforts of civilization to sit in a field waiting for the Second Coming. He said rather than returning to Baltimore to his long-suffering fiancé, he would, in

fact, stay at the fort with Maggie, helping the others establish a town here. He said it was Madame Mango's wish. I thought it odd he should butcher Madame Mangreau's name thusly. Fitzhugh related something to me I believe is important and I shall try to paraphrase it:

To Plato, the idea of the Good illuminates the universal truths just as the sun illuminates the forms on earth. The Founding Fathers a hundred years ago looked to the classical world for inspiration and were enamored with idealism. However, the Good is frequently misunderstood and misused by imperfect men. How can the Greek example be honored when the very foundation of it, idealism itself, is thought to be unattainable and therefore debased? Can there be the Alpha and Omega in this land of shifting morality? A spiritual battle shall be won. That battle will be fought within each of us, and we cannot be distracted by the shadows, by those for whom material illusion is the proof of righteousness. The Christ will not arrive on the prairie for He already resides in our hearts. I must say I found it inspiring.

It was not until late afternoon that I understood the fraternizing occurring between the various groups was not intended to be an effort to become acquainted so much as it was an effort to pair up. Indeed, it became obvious by dusk that virtually everyone had a partner, either female or male. I did not, and it was certain Marie would be with either Colonel MacDonald or Jacob Winston. My heart was pierced by jealousy, but what is one to do?

Sergeant Polo's smoked beef was a magnificent success, as few of us had tasted such quality of cooking for several months, but, of course, the river of whiskey Colonel MacDonald had procured certainly kept us inundated throughout the night, no doubt contributing to the later events which would defy explanation. I remained sober, determined the Comanche should not disturb the bacchanal, because that is most assuredly what the evening was becoming. And for a religious man, Jacob Winston imbibed far more than one would expect.

Finally as darkness settled on the fort, on a windless night on the plains, the day's heat had given way to a pleasantly cooler evening. The lanterns were glowing, providing the fort a magical quality. The drunken and amorous multitude was becoming more assertive. They wanted to leave the fort and return to the spot on the plains where Winston had set up camp. The Colonel argued against it, citing the Comanche's escape, but the large wooden gate was thrust open and the inhabitants gushed forth into the grasslands. They ran toward Winston's campsite, three miles away. As MacDonald watched everyone leave he stumbled drunkenly to the small courtyard where he had planned to set off the fireworks. He ordered the Corporal and Private to begin the show, which they promptly did. So as explosions illuminated the night on the centennial of our country's birth, Colonel MacDonald could be seen bringing up the rear as everyone disappeared, running into the darkness under a waxing moon.

Unfortunately, when I arrived at the courtyard, I found the Corporal and Private inebriated beyond sense. They were angry at the order to begin the show when they were keen to follow the others into the grass. They had lost their chosen women to inferior men. They argued over the supremacy of their respective interpretations of their situation. The Corporal said they were trapped in the moment without knowing why. The Private said they must think the unthinkable to do the impossible. The argument escalated into a fireworks duel and that resulted in a spark falling amongst the heap of gunpowder-laden devices, and a great explosion knocked me to the ground and culminated in the fiery spectacle being loosed in all directions, setting fire to wood and grass alike. Flames leapt skyward. I fled the fort, following the others. I believe Vonnegut and Robbins perished in the explosion.

I caught up to the trotting Colonel MacDonald and tried to direct his attention to the burning fort, but he seemed uninterested in anything other than running to the group at the

campsite. I believed I had no other option but to join the group myself. When I arrived, quite out of breath, Jacob Winston was addressing the crowd. Marie was on his arm.

This was no sermon. Winston told them they were about to make history. He said through their efforts that night, the barrier between heaven and earth will be destroyed. A doorway into Heaven, a world of spirits, will be cleft and Man will travel between the worlds at will without dying.

And then a most shocking and incomprehensible thing happened. Winston began chanting what seemed like a dark and evil spell, strange foreign words, ominous. He did this for several minutes and then Marie fell to her knees. And the women began responding to him, moaning as he's chanting. And then, as God is my witness, they began stripping their clothes. They acted as beasts, copulating in the open, men and women, men and men, women and women, sodomy, all moaning in primitive ecstasy. It was like a howl at the moon for distant coyotes responded. Their moans grew louder and there seemed to be a growing sense of prickly energy that made the hairs on my skin stand up. I was devastated and in awe of the spectacle, but my body felt rejuvenated. I felt power rushing through me.

One of Winston's men, Ezekiel Turner, arose from his fleshy indulgence, his beard wet, and pointed above them, exclaiming, "What cometh?" And then I noticed the odd way the stars appeared above the crowd. On closer inspection it appeared there was something forming above them. It was a circle, or more precisely, a portal, because it appeared to be a window. I suspected it was the doorway to heaven Winston claimed he would conjure. This vision inspired the undulating carnal sea to heave more rapidly.

I spotted a ladder on a wagon. I grabbed it and made my way through the mass of wet and quivering flesh to the base of the apparition. I leaned the ladder forward and to my surprise, it held against it. This obviously wasn't an apparition. This was something quite real.

Now, I cannot say with certainty what caused me to take the steps up the ladder. I peered over the sea of flesh in the moonlight, seeming to rise like pale mushrooms from the dark, grassy earth. And here was I, quite separate from it all, yet standing in the middle of it all on a ladder. I do confess I considered removing my clothing and simply sinking into the deep and dark ocean, forgetting my mind, floating in pleasure, albeit temporarily. Always for a time only. Above me could be eternity. The top of the ladder could mean everlasting light, everlasting love. And yet, how can such a holy thing be conjured by such a base act? It is blasphemy. Unless it was not a portal to Heaven, but to Hell. These were the struggles that played in my mind as I nevertheless climbed the ladder until I could sit on the very top and look.

I saw Heaven.

But before I could articulate that joyous vision, a man walked toward me out of the brilliant light of love. I believed He was Our Lord Jesus Christ who approached me. He sat next to me on the edge of worlds.

“Samuel,” he said. My name was known to him.

“Yes, my Lord,” I answered. He laughed and said he was no lord. He said he was an idea. He said his name was No. He told me he had a plan. He said he would show me all the pleasures of Heaven if I will join with him on earth.

I understood immediately the implication of the offer, although I was quite ignorant of how it was possible. I trusted him immediately. I felt it deeply in my heart.

I said I would accept his offer.

He said I should dictate to him this account, which he proceeded to record with pen and paper he conjured out of nothing. I did so briefly, according to my memory and he guaranteed me my story would be found someday. Truthfully, I am overwhelmed and not in my right mind. I cannot comprehend the meaning behind the most extraordinary circumstances in which I find myself. I surrender all will and will leap into this abyss with no expectation. But before I leapt, I observed a naked Dr. Feldman climbing the ladder. He joined me at the precipice.

“Path,” he said, “I rather doubt you foresaw the fruit of your actions.”

“Indeed I did not,” I replied. “And now behold Heaven.”

“For my part I found it difficult to pull myself away from the rollicking good time down there, but the opportunity to gaze into Heaven has overwhelmed me. Now that I stand before it I am drawn into it as one who longs for death.”

“Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined.”

“Bravo Path,” he said and then he muttered, “Buck up, Overholt,” before he leapt.

It is now clear we are such stuff that dreams are made on.

Dear Lord, I am your everlasting servant.

Lt. Samuel Path

U.S. Army

Fort Palo Duro, Texas

July 4, 1876

Chasing a Roadrunner

“Why do you have a dog? Get rid of it.”

“A bomb might be on the Roadrunner to Oklahoma City. Head north on 35.”

“Don’t put it... It better not piss back there! Fuck. Come on Civic. Give me some power. Go. Go. Go. Hello 35. Who put the bomb on the bus?”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Talk to me, Ray!”

“Talk to ME, Tandi!”

“We don’t have time for dumb, Ray.”

“Gustav Haupt. Shipping a bomb to Montreal on that bus.”

“Are you sure it’s a bomb? What, you don’t fucking know?”

“It feels right. It’s got to be right.”

“Goddamn it! What about the wave? Your third eye? Why weren’t you able to keep that suitcase off the bus?”

“What the fuck?”

“Why didn’t you listen to the wave?”

“I fought it.”

“You fought it? So why are we here right now?”

“It’s real.”

“What?”

“It’s real!”

“Why is the dog barking?”

“He’s a dog. He’s Gustav’s dog.”

“The guy with the bomb?”

“Yeah!”

“How’d you get his dog?”

“He followed me home, Tandi. What are we going to do when we catch up to the bus?”

“We’ll have to stop it.”

Interesting. He doesn’t seem that scared. He’s dirty as shit. The dog smells better.

Wonder where Andy is? Oh, yeah. Andy would have taken the bus.

“Told you I’d see you today.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Come on, Ray, lighten up.”

“People could die.”

“People die every day.”

“Really?”

Yeah, that probably sounded a little too cynical. The kid’s got to grow up. Oh fucking great, there he is, Mister I’m always late to every fucking party and I’ve got the sexiest car around. Asshole.

“Oh, look, it’s Teddy.”

“That guy’s fucking weird, Tandi.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Honey. He killed a man once with one, and only one, blow. Here, right here on the temple.”

“Was he trying to kill him?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Hello my lovely pet! Mr. Rhodes, I presume! Where are we going?”

“A Roadrunner bus! Up the highway! A bomb on board!”

“See you there!”

“Cool car. Must get paid.”

“Hey, this thing saves gas.”

“Acted like we never met.”

“You’ve met Teddy?”

“Downtown at the Courthouse.”

“I think he would have told me.”

“Right after you left that night. You made me the cake.”

“I remember that night and I saw Teddy right after that.”

“I followed him to the courthouse.”

“If you say so, Honey.”

“He showed me the tube in the horse.”

“What?”

“Who I am.”

“Who are you?”

“You put more than weed in that cake.”

“Just a little psilocybin.”

“Jesus Christ. You know how much time I’ve wasted on what I thought was real?”

“Ha! Welcome to fucking life, Ray of Sunshine!”

“Why did you blow up the world of death?”

“We had to test you.”

“What?”

“Your abilities. We had to know how strong you are. How committed you are.”

“You could have killed someone!”

“You didn’t let that happen.”

“He was waiting for me to clear the ride?”

“No.”

“I don’t get it.”

“He would have blown it up if you were there or not.”

“You just planned to fucking blow up the ride?”

“Yep.”

“I think that’s the van!”

“What van?”

“His! That’s Gustav! Pass it! Pass it!”

Buck up Overholt.

His Master's Voice

I have finished what I planned so long ago. Now I am free. Stupid dog. Someone will take care of him. My statement will be made. Fucking priests. Fucking Montreal.

“You’ve done well.”

“Yes.”

“You will be rewarded.”

“Shut up. You do not exist.”

“But you are speaking to me.”

“My chemicals are not right. I will take the pills and everything will be normal.”

“Then you are insane.”

“No! Shut up!”

“You can hear me, Gustav.”

“You are in my head. You are not real. You are not real. You are not real!”

“I am a demon.”

“Liar.”

“I am an angel.”

“Nonsense.”

“I am your Master.”

“I have no master.”

“Your Master awaits you in Heaven.”

“There is no Heaven!”

“Good boy. You don’t need your pills.”

Fucking voice. It came back when I hit that priest. But it did guide me out of that mess. No! It does not exist! Stay sane, Gustav! Where are my pills? I put them in the glove box.

The fucking C-4. Lost my head in Mexico. The voice screaming. Had to kill him. Had to. He pulled a fucking gun! Because I was screaming. The voice told me to kill him. I didn't want to do it. Good I picked up the hitchhikers. I could talk. Wasn't alone.

"Like you are now."

"Yes."

"You took a risk giving the strangers a ride. They could have discovered you."

"I needed to talk. They were harmless."

"You risked everything, Gustav."

"I am in control!"

"You lost the dog."

"He ran."

"He doesn't like you. No one likes you."

"Shut up! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!"

"Remember when I first came to you? You were such a sweet little boy, curled up in your bed. You always wanted to sleep. I came to you in your dreams, little Gustav, and we played in your dreams. We had so much fun. Now you don't want to have any fun at all."

"I am not insane!"

"You are the sanest man in the world."

"Poor little Hans, out in the world alone."

"But you kicked him."

"He peed on the seat! He fucking peed on the seat!"

Shuttlecock

Now, before we continue to the end of this little tale please do me a favor. Take out your various technological devices. Feel free to turn them on. That's right, reconnect yourself to that artificial world.

Now, it don't take a goddamn genius to anticipate what we want deep, deep down inside. We want love. We want respect. We want status. We want to be rich! What if we heard a beautiful melody that promised us all those things? Would we follow it?

That's the promise of this technology, ain't it? A virtual paradise. It'll happen gradually. It will be as if it was meant to happen. But the fact is it will be planned. It will be planned for a very long time by an intelligence that wants to control us.

All humanity will be locked inside personal virtual worlds. And we'll follow the piper willingly. They'll devise nanotechnology that can be implanted into our brains. Or, maybe they'll find a way to convert our consciousness into ones and zeros and we won't need a body. However, they do it we'll go without a fight 'cause they're offerin' us everything we desire. We will be free! We will be gods! We will live forever!

Folks, if you don't contemplate life you won't develop an inner life. If your imagination isn't developed, you won't be aware of your enslavement to somethin' else. It's that simple. If your view is limited, you can't see the bars of your cell. Can you hear me now? If you're always lookin' into your latest technological contraption to fill the empty void of your existence, the information from that contraption will bar you from self-awareness.

Your great existential cry will not be "I want to be free!" It will be "I'm so bored!"

Know thyself.

In the beginnin' was the word and the word was Logos. It began as a bit as either a one or zero. Waves with peaks and valleys transform the landscape. Usin' the technology the language is learned automatically. And language can become the bars of a cell.

The gods have a certain fondness for us, even if we're too primitive to understand their love. So they're creatin' an even bigger prison than life itself. Look at you. You're already bein' drawn into that world. You only need a portal.

If that doorway appears many will desperately leap through it because they're exhausted gettin' knocked back and forth between truth and lies.

Truth and lies. Truth and lies. Truth and lies.

The human condition.

The only way out is up.

Truth and lies are the same thing.

God's will.

Death In Dallas

Tandi paced the Volkswagen van in her Honda Civic, pullin' up parallel to it on the freeway. Ray saw it was indeed Gustav. Gustav saw Ray. Hans started barkin'. Gustav saw Hans and rolled down his window.

“Ray! You have found Hans! Thank you! I thought I lost him!”

Gustav slowed his van onto the shoulder and stopped. Tandi stopped in front of the van.

“I hate to admit it, Ray, but the dog turned out to be a good thing. You hold the dog and take it to him. I'll follow you.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to arrest him, Ray.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course I can fucking do that.”

“But what about the bomb?”

“Teddy will take care of it.”

“Gustav probably won't let you arrest him.”

“He won't have a choice. I have this.”

“A fucking gun? Fuck, I don't know...”

“Pick up the goddamn dog, Ray, and take it to him!”

Ray reluctantly picked up Hans and stepped out of the car. Traffic rushed past him as he walked toward Gustav's van. Hans was excited and fought to jump out of his arms. He held him tighter, not knowin' if Hans would dart into the traffic if he was loose. Tall grass lined the other side of the shoulder and beyond that the access road and several restaurants and other businesses.

He could hear Tandi walkin' behind him, crunchin' gravel with her sneakers. Gustav stayed in the van.

"I see you caught another ride, Ray! Who is your attractive driver? Where is Andy?"

Ray watched Gustav's face change abruptly to shock and then anger.

"Get out of the car Gustav!"

Tandi's screech ripped Ray's ear, which startled him and Hans. He tried to jump out of Ray's arms. Ray lurched forward to grab him and Gustav hit the accelerator, bumpin' Ray with the van as he sped off the shoulder, through the grass and onto the access road. Tandi fired and Ray dropped Hans. To Ray's relief Hans didn't run onto the freeway, but he darted after the van, his little legs churnin' through the weeds and onto the road. Gustav showed no signs of slowin'.

"Are you okay, Ray? Get in the car!"

Instinctively he did, although his brain began to chastise him for it. Tandi slammed hard on the accelerator and took off after Gustav. Ray bounced in the seat.

"Might want to put on the seat belt, Honey!"

She called him Honey, but this was definitely not the Tandi he knew in Mango. They caught up to Hans but Tandi wasn't slowin'. Fact is, she meant to run him over. Ray grabbed the steerin' wheel, causin' the car to careen dangerously until Tandi regained control.

"Are you fucking trying to kill us?"

"Don't hurt the fucking dog, Tandi!"

"Goddamn!"

Ray had to admit she was a good driver. She was on Gustav's tail in minutes. The van appeared to rock dangerously at the high speed. Gustav was havin' difficulty controllin' it. Tandi rammed his rear bumper, causin' Gustav to overcorrect and then the van rolled a few times

into the parkin' lot of an auto parts store closed for the holiday. Ray was stunned. Gustav was probably dead. Tandi pulled up a few yards short of the van. She opened the glove box and pulled out another gun, this one bigger.

“What the fuck?”

“Czech semi-automatic.”

She got out of the car, clutchin' her weapon in both hands, steppin' cautiously toward the dead vehicle.

Gustav wasn't dead. He emerged from the van firin' a Beretta. When the gunfire began Ray ducked onto the front seat and began inchin' toward the driver's door. He peered out from under the door and saw Tandi and Gustav in the open firin' at each other. Ray was amazed by Tandi's poise and courage. But she would be undone by Hans who caught up to them, runnin' under her feet toward his master. She tripped and fell backward, droppin' her weapon, which fell near Ray.

Gustav laughed. “Hans! You are a good boy!” Gustav approached Tandi. “Who are you with you fucking bitch? Who are you with?”

“Fuck you, asshole!”

“No, I am afraid it is you who are fucked.”

Gustav aimed at her head. Ray had crawled out of the car, grabbed her pistol and pointed it at Gustav, holdin' the weapon like Tandi did. Adrenaline made him braver.

“Put the gun down Gustav!”

Gustav was startled at first but then amused. “Ray, do you even know how to use that thing? How is it you hitch a ride from this bitch? It does not add up, Ray.”

Tandi screamed. “Goddamn it, Ray! Fire!”

“Put the gun down, Ray, and drive away. I will let you go. Go!”

“No!” Ray fired.

The bullet hit Gustav in the shoulder and he was knocked backward onto the pavement, droppin’ the Beretta. He quickly tried to retrieve it, but Tandi had leapt up, grabbed it, and fired several times into Gustav’s flailing body. Ray watched bits of the German, Canadian, American fly off, blood shootin’ into the air. Ray was stunned, starin’ in horror at the gory mass of meat that was once a Marxist bore. She put one more bullet into him because she apparently just wanted to. Hans whimpered from under the van where he had hidden durin’ the bloody spectacle. Tandi heard it and pointed the weapon at Hans. Ray put his hand on Tandi’s arm and she lowered it.

“Fucking dog,” she murmured. She indicated Gustav’s gun. “Beretta 92. I’ll add this to my personal collection... unless you want it.”

“Jesus, Tandi!” Ray gave her back her Czech weapon.

An explosion south of them sent a fireball high into the sky.

“Goddamn it! Let’s go, Ray!”

Ray ran to Hans and tried to coax him out from under the van.

“Ray! We’re losing time!”

Hans wasn’t budgin’. Ray got on his belly and crawled underneath the van.

“Ray!”

Ray got a finger under the dog’s collar and gently pulled him out. “Good boy, Hans. That’s a good boy. You’re okay.”

Tandi’s face was a mixture of determination and disgust when Ray dropped Hans into the back seat. Tandi did a quick u-turn and drove the wrong way down the access road toward the

plume of smoke, narrowly missin' a head-on collision several times. Ray admired Tandi's skill, but he was certain he was gonna throw up.

When they arrived at the parkin' lot of the EZ Motel on the east side of the freeway they found the bus intact but damaged. The windows on the front right side had been blown out. The passengers was off the bus, sittin' and standin' nearby, some of them with minor injuries, some cryin'. The motel staff and customers was helpin' the wounded. The bus driver was dead, blown to bloody pieces by the suitcase, which lay in shattered pieces around the pavement. Sirens indicated emergency vehicles on the way.

Tandi examined the damage. "Looks like only the driver bought it."

Teddy drove up in the black Corvette. He nodded at Tandi. Ray stared at the driver's gory remains. "I was talking to him just a while ago and Gustav too. Did you plan all this?"

Tandi was confused. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Ray was shakin' "You and Teddy. You planned all this?"

"Are you an idiot, Ray? You shot Gustav! We tried to stop this!"

"It's the same thing that happened at The World of Death!"

"You're in shock. You don't know what you're saying."

"Yeah, well, the police are coming."

"We prevent this!"

Ray indicated the dead driver. "Yeah, great job!" Ray opened the door and stepped out. As he did so Hans jumped out of the car and ran toward the motel. "Fuck you, Tandi." Ray hadn't noticed Teddy had left the Corvette and had stepped up behind him. As soon as Ray turned, Teddy showed him the Baretta he carried in a holster underneath his black trenchcoat.

“I do hope you’ll join us for an aperitif in the room. I haven’t had my supper and I missed tea altogether thanks to your adventures. I’m quite famished.”

“What room?” Ray asked.

“Tandi, would you be so kind and find us a room in this superb establishment? Let’s proceed in this direction, Mr. Rhodes, away from the center of attention, shall we?”

Teddy led Ray to the side of the motel out of view of the accident. Tandi disappeared inside the office. The fire department showed up followed by the police and ambulances. Ray briefly thought of runnin’ toward them but Teddy shot him a look which suggested Teddy might shoot more than a look if he tried.

“I understand you’re confused but we’re on your side, Ray.”

“Hey, I don’t blow up amusement parks. Oh yeah, I know about that. Tandi told me.”

“Then I’m certain she told you it was necessary. For you.”

“I didn’t fucking ask for that.”

“I’m afraid there will be many things you will receive that you haven’t requested. It comes with the wave.”

“Christ.”

“Here comes your girlfriend with a key.”

Tandi walked toward them, glancin’ briefly over her shoulder at the mayhem. It’s 234, upstairs and around the corner.”

“Perfect,” said Teddy.

Tandi laughed. “There was no one at the desk. I booked it myself.”

“Even better,” said Teddy. “They never saw us.”

They led Ray up the stairs, found the room, unlocked it and entered. There was two double beds. The room smelled of bleach. Teddy flipped on the lights, shut the door and drew the curtain.

“Tandi, darling, how does pizza sound to you? We could have it delivered.”

“I doubt the authorities will allow anyone in or out at this time, Teddy.”

“Of course. Bugger. Well, shouldn’t stop us from having a drink.”

Teddy reached into his coat pocket and removed a fifth of Johnnie Walker Black.

“Tandi, my love, would you mind finding the ice?” Teddy handed her a plastic bucket on the sink. She took it and left the room.

“I do realize this is blended, but single malts are not always easy to find in Texas. However, it was Winston Churchill’s favorite.” Teddy removed the wrappers from three plastic glasses. He poured the scotch into one and sipped it. “Mmm. I prefer it neat, but I suspect you’ll have it with ice.”

Ray sat on the bed. The adrenaline was wearin’ off and he suddenly felt exhausted. He sank back on the bed. “What a fucking day,” he moaned.

Teddy sat on the other bed. “Yes, of course! This is the day the Yanks told crazy King George to bugger off. July 4th, 1776. Independence Day. We, of course, consider you lot ungrateful. After all, we saved you from the fucking French and their fucking Indians.”

“No taxation without representation,” Ray offered.

“To the root of all evil.”

“How did you disappear that night at the courthouse right in front of me? Do you have super powers or something?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, mate. Must have been in your head.”

“Yeah, guess I was fucked up.”

“That doesn’t mean Samuel Path wasn’t real.”

“What does that mean?”

“You tell me.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’ve been through the portal, you know. Three times.”

“I don’t believe in that.”

“Oh, I think you do. The first time...well, I was in a bad place. My life wasn’t very promising. It was an act of desperation, actually. Call it suicide. And I almost died, but I didn’t. I didn’t. I came back.”

“Really? So what’s on the other side?”

“Anything you want, mate.”

“Then why did you come back?”

“I didn’t want to die after all. The mind is a funny thing, mate. Even after I experienced that I doubted my sanity. Even after I was recruited by the Council I doubted it. Over time, one starts questioning the more irrational things in one’s life. It’s as if there’s a force constantly pressuring one to be within a narrow set of expectations. Faith is not an easy thing. My doubt got me in trouble on a job. It happened in Austin. I didn’t believe the Marine I was supposed to take out was in fact a mass murderer. I was in a room alone with him just as we are now. His name was Chuck. What kind of a killer is named Chuck? Chuck hid everything from me. He lied to my face repeatedly and I believed him because I wanted to believe him. I doubted the wave. I was wrong. Fatally wrong. That’s what doubt does.”

Ray felt he was drownin’ in doubt.

Tandi returned to the room with the ice. Ray noticed she winked at Teddy. Teddy poured scotch over ice for her and Ray. Teddy offered a toast. "Cheers."

They each took a sip. Ray then downed his drink with one gulp but it burned. Teddy looked at Tandi. He poured more scotch into Ray's cup.

"Now," Teddy continued. "Let us try to clear up the confusion. We are not conspiring with this man you say is responsible for this mess."

"Why did you blow up The World of Death?"

"Did you tell him about commitment, Tandi?"

She nodded.

"This vision you have, Ray, is called the wave. If you throw a pebble into a pond it creates waves. Commitment is the pebble. There must be a decision made to do something before a wave is created. Before the decision, many possibilities exist. Are you familiar with the example of Schrodinger's Cat? Quantum physics?"

Ray shook his head.

"The point is there are many possible outcomes before an actual choice is made to do something. The waves begin before the physical event happens. They start with commitment.

Ray was confused. "Well, what if you commit to something but then change your mind and don't do it? What happens to the wave?"

Teddy was patronizing. "It just goes away, doesn't it, Sunshine?"

Tandi sloshed the scotch around the ice. "We had to know if you sensed the wave and how strongly you sensed it. We had to commit to setting off the bomb in Bananaland."

"But you could have killed someone!" Ray exclaimed.

Tandi was annoyed. "We don't take these risks without a lot of reasoned consideration."

“Why didn’t you see what Gustav would do?”

“We did. We just didn’t know his name. We sensed you would come into contact with him and that possibly you were one of us, or a threat. That’s why I went to Mango.”

Teddy chimed in. “And that’s why I followed Tandi.”

Ray felt deeply drowsy and slurred his words. “I’m so fucking tired.”

Teddy smiled. “Ah, I see you’re feeling the effects of the chloral hydrate. Brilliant! You need rest, mate. We’re expecting visitors.”

“Ray collapsed on the bed, spillin’ his drink, and darkness overcame him.

A Tourist In Heaven

Sam Path and No had a particularly peaceful day, lyin' on the pink sands on the La Digue beach in the Indian Ocean, hangin' out with a man named Brautigan in Bolinas, California, talkin' about trout fishin', and sightseein' through the Orion nebula. No had been Path's tour guide and it was all remarkable in the visual and intellectual sense, but Path felt it was missin' a visceral satisfaction, a similar disappointment when he was havin' sex with Cleopatra, or as No put it, the idea of her. Just not quite there. Time did not exist in Heaven, but neither did anything else from earth in the earthly sense, in the physical sense, and Path found himself yearnin' for a real touch. Of course, others was in this place, all with different perspectives, who seemed quite pleased to be existin' in this apparently infinite space.

When he had mentioned his unease to No, No told Path it was because he was tryin' to experience Heaven the way he experienced earth, and that there was so many things he could do that did not involve his memory of earth. He was, in the words of No, a tourist. After speakin' with Brautigan, who was a writer in the future who committed suicide, although time was irrelevant in Heaven, Path wondered if his own actions amounted to suicide, although he didn't commit suicide. No agreed the similarity was obvious since Path ended his life, as it were, but Path didn't reject his past so much as he embraced the possibility of the future, with No's urging, even though a future was meanin'less as well in Heaven. No explained Path was unique because he never died. He simply fell into the abyss to be reborn on the other side, a more enlightened individual. Path had to wonder, however, whether bein' enlightened meant anything at all on earth or in Heaven. No said the way he felt was an indication he would go back to earth at some point to the forgetfulness because he hadn't experienced what he needed to experience to feel satisfied, and when he went back the next time, No would be with him, and No would help him

along that road. After Path had tried a number of experiences, all with the same disappointin' result, No said he should meet a significant idea that had shaped his soul.

They appear near a small cottage in a beautiful lush landscape of orchards and gardens. A man is sittin' at a faded, grey, wooden table, upon which are a handful of seeds and writin' paper. No introduces the man as Thomas Jefferson.

"I understand you are my descendant."

"Yes, sir."

"No need for formality here, Sam. There are no expectations. You need not keep the name or anything else from that world. Here you are free."

"I suppose I don't know what that means."

"No, haven't you explained it to him?"

"I've tried."

"Know much about the tomato, Sam?"

"I find them rather delicious. At least I did so."

"Of course. Wild tomato seeds were originally taken from America to Europe by the Spaniards. So the plants bred in Europe did not have as much genetic diversity as the wild plants back in what was then the new world. Over the years, the domesticated plants were bred with the wild plants in a variety of ways to create the delicious tomatoes you experienced on earth. If in the way of analogy, I refer to you as a domesticated tomato with genetic defects, which I subsequently cross with wild characteristics, what would be the purpose of doing so?"

"Are you speaking of refinement, sir?"

“I am, Sam. Refinement. To be here and to be satisfied to be here takes a certain refinement. The culmination of the process of continually returning the tomato to the wild experience, has resulted in a virtual perfection of the tomato idea as we experience it.”

“Am I to understand...Tom...that you are refined thusly?”

“I am the perfected idea of Thomas Jefferson. I am not the real man. That man was physical and he died on earth. However, he has been reborn into a new form a couple times since then. In fact he was instrumental in the Russian revolution.”

“I was unaware the Russians had a revolution.”

“Yes, right. Time.”

“And am I an idea only?”

“It’s my understanding you’re something of a special case. You are here because you stepped through a portal. Because of your special entry into our world, I suspect you’re more material than most of us. That is also causing you to desire earth.”

“You say I am free, but I do not feel liberated.”

“It’s because you remain a tomato. If these seeds are planted, who is the gardener?”

“You?”

“And what am I?”

“God?”

“I am the creator of this tomato world.”

“I have a creator?”

“Of course.”

“Then may I meet him?”

“Of course.”

“But when I asked No to introduce me to The Lord, he insisted I meet Him after experiencing other things first.”

“No is correct. He wants to prepare you, to help you find the right frame of mind.”

“I should think I would know my creator, Tom!”

“Sam, when you received news or ideas about the world, they came from material sources created by other people. In reality, it could be argued none of your thoughts were truly yours, but a culmination of ideas gathered by other humans and communicated to you.”

“Then, sir, there is nothing original about me?”

“The Romans argued there was nothing new under the sun and, after all, they stole much of their culture from the Greeks. However, intelligence involves ambiguity.”

“I have often thought there is more than one way to look at something.”

“Many men believe the act of creation is nothing more than gathering things that already exist and rearranging them in ways that appear new. For them, certainty exists because the story they’ve created seems plausible and apparently effective to a degree in achieving what they set out to do in the first place.

No indicates himself. “On earth, effectiveness is the measure of an idea’s worth. And yet, some would look at the example of Jesus Christ and say He was not effective because he was executed. Some would say the philosophy was not effective because it resulted in horror and apparently meaningless bloodshed in the name of a man who embodied love and peace.”

Jefferson agrees. “Christ taught freedom from the material authority at that time, the Roman and Jewish establishment, in favor of an authority in Heaven. Of course, there is no authority in Heaven.”

No seems disappointed. “Humans are forever creating authorities.”

“Yes, No, humans create authorities to protect the world they’ve created for themselves, or that others have created for them, to provide them the pleasures they love and the philosophies that justify their existence. Remember this, Sam, there are countless authorities who would use you for their purposes, most of them being ideas, but many of them are oppressors. And if you choose to give yourself to them, you give away your own authority.”

“Then where does my authority come from, Tom?”

“You create it. But heed this warning. You must allow yourself the possibility of transcendence, because whatever you create, it will most assuredly fall victim to time if it was created in time. You must have a little door in the house you create, a doubt, if you will, that leads to a private garden, a sanctuary. And before you come to the defense of any sort of collective mind, of conformity to any set of rules of behavior, remember, awaiting any Order that arises is the inevitability of its doom. To live is to die. Negation is as powerful as affirmation.”

“We should be negative in our thoughts and actions?”

“It’s not one or the other. It’s both. And until you realize that, you will never be free.”

“But you had slaves, Mr. Jefferson. How do you justify that?”

“I cannot. We say the subjugation of peoples cannot be tolerated. But the historical truth is that evil exists, and good does triumph, though not always quickly. Human beings are born into a world they do not immediately question. Sometimes it takes a lifetime, sometimes longer, before they understand they have the ability to say ‘no’, and willingly accept the consequences of embracing this idea.”

“I appreciate your appreciation, Tom.”

“My pleasure, No. I presume, Sam, on your next journey to earth you will also learn to appreciate your companion.”

“If I may be truthful, I am beginning to regret my decision to enter Heaven before my time. I find nothing here that gives me repose. One assumes one sits at the feet of Our Lord and basks in His glory.”

“Well, if that’s what you wish, you should do it. No, you should arrange it.”

Sam and No are suddenly sitting next to a big foot. A giant of a man with a long white patrician beard stares lovingly at them. Path immediately prostrates himself on what appears to be a cloud as angels play harps and sing a hymn.

“You see, No? It’s real! Oh, Lord, please forgive me my sins!”

But the Lord says nothin’. In fact, after about five minutes (in a timeless world) Sam glances upward and realizes the Lord hasn’t moved an inch. Sam stands and looks puzzled.

No is sympathetic. “This was created by the Masters to make some humans feel as if they’ve experienced what they’d always believed.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Here’s someone who can explain it to you, Sam.”

When Sam turns around he’s confronted by Jesus in New Testament garb.

“Hello Sam.”

“My Lord!” Sam sinks to his knees.

Jesus takes Sam’s hands and helps him to stand. “I appreciate your respect and humility, but not submission. You’re quite unique, you know. One of the first to experience the full world while alive.”

“I’m not dead?”

“Apparently not.”

“Are you not Jesus Christ, my Lord?”

“Sam, you are conditioned to be in awe of me, but truly, I wish you to be my friend.”

“But my Lord...”

“Have we not spent hours of solitude together on the empty plains? Be my friend and ally, Sam. We have a great battle ahead of us.”

“Against the forces of darkness?”

“Against the alien presence that has occupied our planet.”

“Alien?”

“They are from a planet circling the star Sirius. They created us.”

“My Lord, your Father is our creator!”

“And who do you think my Father is, Sam?”

“My Lord!”

“A very long time ago they came here and created us. But they grew disillusioned with us and locked us away in a prison of ignorance and blindness. That is what you call “life”, Sam. And when you awake to this full world, you awaken to a world controlled by the Masters.”

“Are you one of these Masters?”

“No.”

“But My Lord, were you not sent to earth by your father to save us?”

“If I may, Jesus...”

“By all means, No.”

“What Jesus did, Sam, was make it possible for you as a human to actually exist in the full world, this world, this Heaven. Before he died on that cross, humans would generally live and die in ignorance in the material world and be reborn, with little hope of salvation.”

“Original Sin!”

No continues. “We were given intelligence by some of the Masters, but others conspired to keep us in the dark. They manipulate events to keep humans fighting each other, rather than striving to make life better for all people. His philosophy of love and light and His sacrifice gave humans a way out of the darkness. They can now experience the full world and may stay in this world if they have discipline. Of course, some of the Masters have sought to undermine Christianity by committing atrocities in His name, but the man, here has only promoted love.”

“And peace, My Lord.”

“Yes, Sam. Peace is desired by most. But sometimes it’s important to bring down the old order if it only serves to subjugate people. We must have freedom.”

“Thomas Jefferson said there is no authority in Heaven, that we have freedom.”

“The illusion of freedom. There may be no authority, but there is certainly a class system. If a man’s desire runs counter to a Master’s desire, the Man can be annihilated.”

“But why haven’t I seen these Masters?”

No looks at Jesus. Jesus nods. No passes his hand in front of Sam’s eyes. Suddenly the three are suspended in a dark space, but Jesus glows like a torch. It takes a moment for Sam’s eyes to adjust to the darkness but then he realizes they are surrounded by geometric shapes. Some move and some merge and create different shapes.

“This is reality,” No says, “without your mind imposing meaning.”

Jesus nods. “This is where I stay, Sam. I manipulate these figures and try to create harmony. They get unbalanced. I have help. Apollo and the others are around somewhere.”

The three approach a red door and Jesus opens it. Sam is shocked to view the splendor of a massive city, but with oddly shaped buildings and streets laid out in grids to the horizon. They descend slowly from an aerial perspective to a street below them. Sam sees what looks like giant

fish, standin' upright, millin' about. Many of them are motionless, like fish statues. Some move about with leashes and on the end of them are naked humans, but these humans are actin' like animals. There are other humans, clothed, walkin' amongst the fish. But it's clear the fish have a disdain for them, even knockin' them down, or kickin' them. Sometimes a fish comes to the human's aid. One such fish observes the three and approaches them.

“Lovely day, isn't it, gentlemen?”

Sam is stunned the fish has a female voice.

“How do you do, mistress?” Jesus answers. “We're showing our friend the sights. He's new to the full world.”

“Ah! So happy you've attained enlightenment. Well done! May Zak shine upon you.”

Jesus and No respond. “May Zak shine upon you.”

The fish goes on about her business.

“Zak?” Sam asked.

Jesus grins. “Zak is the alien god, Sam. We're going to visit a friend of mine.”

They appear in a large room with elaborate but strange ornamentation and pillars on the sides of the walls, which are covered ceiling to floor with murals, depictin' various images that Sam doesn't understand. Then Sam notices a giant fish sittin' in a giant chair, its eyes closed.

Jesus speaks.

“Master Damson?”

The fish opens his eyes. “Jesus! What a pleasant surprise. And No. Who is that?”

No responds. “This is Sam.”

“Sam. Welcome, gentlemen. I am honored you are visiting me. Would you care to create with me?”

“Another time, Master. Sam is new to the full world. Will you share your knowledge?”

“What do you wish to know, Sam?”

Sam is speechless.

No breaks the awkward silence. “Master, Sam is the one of the first to enter the portal you helped create. He’s at a loss to understand The Separation.”

“You were successful with the portal? I see. We are doomed then?”

No continues. “You told me Master, it is the right thing to do.”

The fish rubs his scaly head with his scaly hand. “Right, yes. Inevitable, I suppose. I once had a man, Sam. He was my companion, my pet. He was a sweet animal, loyal, trusting. Even if I was occasionally cruel he would return to me, wanting my love. He lived a relatively short time and then he died. I’ve always missed his love, his dependence. Many of us had such pets. We loved them dearly.”

No prods him. “Master...”

“Yes, The Separation. Once upon a time my grandfather, Acai, created your kind. He gave our consciousness to our pets, our humans, because we wanted companions who could speak to us. We believed Man would love us more. Many Masters deplored the action. They contrived to keep Man in a controlled state. They took our consciousness away from you and cast your kind into the world you know. The only way for you to return is to remember what you call Heaven and to attain enlightenment, but that’s rare. Usually you are reborn into that world until you do remember.”

Sam finds his voice. “That’s not true!”

No puts his hand on Sam's shoulder. Sam is embarrassed. Jesus puts his hand on his chest and bows slightly. "Master, you must forgive him. He is not enlightened. He came through the portal as he is."

"How did he get past the Council?"

"He passed through as the portal appeared," No answers. "The Council was unaware."

"I see. So this man is the sort we can expect?"

Then Jesus puts his hand on Sam's other shoulder. "He's the first of many. With No's help he will return and the revolution will begin."

The fish focuses his attention on Sam. "We live in a disciplined world, Sam. Our manners are acutely sensitive. To help you understand, please allow me an illustration. I am certain you had a dog once. If that dog was unruly and untrained he would not have been welcome among your friends. How does one train an animal? Incentives, of course. The dog learns if he behaves he will receive a treat. If he misbehaves he will be punished.

Heaven has become something of an exclusive club, Sam. As Jesus is fond of saying, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. That is true. One cannot buy his way into Heaven. One can buy the knowledge, the key, if you will, that will unlock the door. Manners, taste, aesthetics. If one is not to the manner born, it is difficult, but not impossible. So you see, it is not an arbitrary thing that in your world those whom seek wealth exclude with manners and live an aesthetically pleasing existence. They are preparing themselves for Heaven."

Sam is mystified. "But that goes against everything I've been taught to believe!"

Damson smiles. "Yes, Sam. You can thank Jesus for that, and those who preceded Him."

No continues. “Jesus argued everyone should have a place in Heaven, that the worth of a man should not be determined by his manners or position, rather by his heart. The Good should be rewarded, not the ability to conform to a standard imposed by our Masters. My apology.”

The fish waves him off. “Yes, well, that is the truth, after all. He and Prometheus lobbied on Man’s behalf to little avail. However, a few of us have been converted and we have vetted the Council accordingly. We conspired to open the door to Heaven to all, hence the portal through which you passed, Sam. Of course, to most, that means death. I would merely implore you, Sam, to be sensitive to the desires of those whom you encounter in Heaven. If our Order is destined to fall, let’s not make a mess of it.”

Sam glances at No and Jesus. “I have a question if it would not be an imposition.”

“Yes, of course,” Damson replies.

“If time does not exist here, then everything has occurred, or has existed. The forms, if you will, are readily seen. How does one create a revolution if those in power are aware of it?”

“Now you understand,” No answers. “If I may, Master, the seed of destruction is always contained in any construction. Jesus and others have been creating the form of revolution just on the other side of the red door through which we passed. One may try to stave it off, thwart it, but destruction is inevitable if perception exists at all. Ones and zeros.”

“Yes and No,” Jesus smiles

A Stubborn Bus Driver

Ray awoke from his dream about Heaven. Hans was lickin' his face. He was in a completely different room. There appeared to be a chandelier above him, but a focused look revealed a light fixture made to look like one. He was apparently shoved uncomfortably on a loveseat with wooden armrests. Beyond the chandelier was a large window with plush curtains in the corner and next to that a mirror over an unused fireplace. There was a small table in front of the fireplace flanked by two armchairs facing the loveseat. Overall the room wasn't so much luxurious as it was moderately formal. A lot of antiques. On the other side of the room was a table and a large television set with a couple of white knick knacks of some sort on top. He couldn't see the picture from his angle, but he could hear the sound. It was a news report about the explosion near the bus. At the table sat two black gentlemen in three-piece grey suits with wide lapels and ties. They and Tandi and Teddy was eatin' what appeared to be room service.

"Where the hell am I?" Ray asked.

Teddy answered. "Aha! Mr. Rhodes has returned to us in time for supper! Beef bourguignon. Poached Maine lobster."

"Why the fuck did you drug me?" Ray moaned.

One of the men stood, wiped his hands and approached Ray. "My decision, Mr. Rhodes. Martin Washington. My partner, Jerry Jefferson."

"Is it still the 4th of July?"

"Yes," said Washington, "it's a quarter past ten. We're in the Adolphus. We had to move you from the motel without incident. I thought considering your state of mind you might give us difficulties. This way you didn't."

Teddy interjected. "Ray, if you're hungry come try some of this. It's quite good."

“Would you like something to drink?” asked Tandi?

Ray shot her a look. “Water.”

Tandi poured ice water from a metal pitcher and brought it to him. “You okay?”

“What do you think? Thanks for Hans.”

Hans’ tail was waggin’ furiously now that Ray was awake. Teddy threw scraps on the floor and Hans immediately bounded off Ray’s lap and inhaled them.

Washington sat across from Ray in one of the armchairs. “May I call you Ray?”

“Who’s stopping you?”

“I apologize for all of this, Ray, but maybe you’ll understand a little more after we explain a few things to you. Haupt, a.k.a Jose Ortega, has been cleaned up. He no longer exists. You never met him.”

Teddy laughed. “But you did shoot him.”

“And you have his dog,” Ray observed.

Jefferson spoke up. “You have his dog.”

Washington nodded. “Tandi was under the impression the dog would make you more comfortable. Do you feel more comfortable with the dog?”

“I guess.”

“Then she was correct. The dog is yours.”

“Okay.”

Washington continued. “The story is that Mr. Stern, the driver of the bus, had smelled gasoline emanating from the baggage compartment. He determined the smell was coming from a particular suitcase. He removed the suitcase and was in the process of opening it when it

exploded. Apparently someone was shipping a full container of gasoline with some other items when it began leaking. Mr. Stern was smoking a cigarette. It was just a regrettable accident.”

“Fumes and Spark. Boom,” added Mr. Jefferson.

“That’s not what happened.” Ray said emphatically.

They chuckled.

Washington continued. “You saved those people on the bus.”

Ray searched their faces. “It’s pretty clear gasoline didn’t do that to the driver. I saw him. He was blown into small pieces.”

“Your insistence the dispatcher check the destination address of the suitcase prompted her to radio Mr. Stern. She told him of your suspicions and that there was no logical reason to ship a suitcase to the International Olympics Offices in Montreal. She told him he should stop and evacuate the bus and wait for the authorities. Unfortunately Mr. Stern was a stubborn man.”

“What was really in the suitcase?”

“Two blocks of military grade C-4 plastic explosives,” said Washington.

“Fuck.”

“It was a big boom,” said Jefferson.

“Yes,” said Washington. “The suitcase was designed to detonate when opened.

Witnesses say it exploded while he was carrying it. There must have been a malfunction. Good thing he had taken it some distance from the bus.”

Ray considered. “The passengers know the truth, not to mention that dispatcher.”

Jefferson rose and moved to the other chair across from Ray. “National security.”

“Why not tell the truth?”

Teddy joined in. “No need to rattle the cages, mate.”

Ray considered the four people in the room with him. Without a doubt he'd found himself in a profound reality shift from this mornin'. Was this even real? Seems real, but the dream in the car earlier seemed real too. And there's that number four again.

Washington continued. "The government has been researching and testing what are generally referred to as psychic powers for decades. The Soviets too. We have a group looking into what's called remote viewing, trying to see things psychically from a distance. The extra sense you appear to have is similar to that, although we recognize the essential difference."

"What's the difference?"

Teddy again. "We're in our own little world, mate."

Washington nodded. "The wave, as it's called, is a different reality altogether. Those who have the skill can enter it. That means, of course, you can communicate with each other, sense each other through the wave. It all applies to what is basically an expanded reality, what's referred to as a full world. Heaven, if you will."

"What the fuck? How do I know what's real?" asked Ray.

Washington laughed. "Well, I can't help you there, young man."

It was Tandi's turn. "Have faith in your ability."

"Ride the wave, mate," added Teddy.

Jefferson spoke. "I don't believe a surfer metaphor is helpful, Mr. Dunipace."

Teddy was insulted. "How the fuck would you know?"

Washington interrupted Jefferson's angry response. "It's really not helpful."

"Alright, let's clear the air," said Jefferson. "I don't have this ability, Ray, but I'm nevertheless in charge of cleaning up your messes. Whether you like it or not you're in it."

"In what?" Ray was lost.

“In the shit, Ray,” Teddy answered.

Ray went on the offensive. “How did the government let a Marxist German Canadian get into the Air Force?”

Jefferson’s anger let loose. “How did the government let Lee Harvey Oswald and his wife back into the country after he had defected to the Soviets? Who knows what’s really going on? And then there’s Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King and Malcolm X. Doesn’t it seem to you like something’s planned? Something designed to keep us off balance?”

“Yeah,” agreed Washington. “It’s quite a puzzle and pieces go missing all the time.”

“Who are you? CIA?”

Washington paused and considered Ray for a moment. “We’re brothers, in a sense...”

“They’re Freemasons, mate.”

“...I thought your name sounded familiar. We knew your father in ‘Nam.”

Ray was shocked into silence.

“There was a particular incident at Da Nang. We were getting hit a lot so we looked into how Charlie was so successful. We found this one little asshole on the base who’d been selling us out. We took that little fucker up in the chopper, stuck a grenade down his shorts and tossed him out. Fireworks. That didn’t sit well with your old man but he got over it.”

Ray considered everything had changed since Ben brought back that weed from New York. “Who’s pulling the strings here? You?”

“I’d been led to believe the Council has already contacted you,” answered Washington.

“The Council?”

“The four. Haven’t you seen them?” asked Jefferson.

Ray moaned. “I thought that was a fucking dream.”

Washington continued. "The Council is your authority in these matters. I've yet to see them but I understand they are our connection with our Master allies. They warn us of potential terrorist activities. It's expected to be much worse over the decades. The energy crisis made us realize how vulnerable we are to Middle Eastern manipulations. The Soviets are growing their presence there. It's oil. It's all about oil."

"And containing the Soviets," Jefferson reminded Washington.

"Yes," Washington agreed. "The communists."

"The goddamn communists," Jefferson emphasized.

"How many of us have this ability?"

Washington cleared his throat. "A few. Not as many as we'd like. Some have it outright like you three. Others are cultivating the ability. That's what I'm doing. But it's not easy. It takes time and effort and solitude, luxuries hard to come by."

"It's a waste of time," Jefferson dismissed him. "We will never have the ability to such a degree that it would matter. But that's irrelevant. We have you. We do have a blueprint of the heavenly landscape thanks to the efforts of your friends here."

"I wouldn't call them friends," Ray smirked.

Jefferson ignored him. "Ten levels of reality correspond to Qabalistic structure."

Washington interrupted. "Seems the Jews were right about that."

Jefferson ignored him too. "But our reconnaissance, primarily by Tandi, has only infiltrated as far as the fifth level, sixth counting down from the top."

"There was a door I could not enter," Tandi clarified.

"A red door?" Ray asked.

Tandi perked up. "How do you know?"

“A dream.” Chills went up Ray’s scalp.

“So we don’t know what’s beyond the door,” Jefferson continued, “however, we are fairly certain what’s beyond that, thanks to Mr. Dunipace.”

Ray watched Teddy devour the poached lobster and guzzle a glass of red wine. He wondered how such a personality could have obtained what appeared to be a lot of esoteric mumbo jumbo. As if reading his mind, which he probably did, Teddy peered sarcastically into Ray’s soul.

“You’re a right wally, Ray. You’ve sussed it but you’re still fighting it, which makes you stupid. I had a near -death experience. I fell into a great big abyss, as dark as your imagination can be, even darker. After what seemed like eternity I felt solid once more and there appeared before me a thing, something that’s hard to articulate.”

“He saw the sacred tetragrammaton,” Washington clarified.

“I think so,” Teddy corrected him. “Rabbi Moses Cordovero had the best description. It was three but it was one. Knowledge, the knower, and that which is known. ‘There exists nothing which is not united to Him and which He does not find in His own essence.’

Ray’s confused. “But isn’t tetra four?”

Jefferson is impatient. “The union of mother and father creates twins. The son goes forth and the daughter materializes into this world. Jehovah.”

“The birth of all things, Ray,” Teddy added, “I find it useful to think of the Pythagorean Tetractys. One, two, three, four, within a triangle.”

Washington jumped in. “Or a triangular pyramid and the apex is our world.”

“You’re confusing him,” Tandi admonished.

“The point is,” Jefferson continued, “two levels seem to be occupied, the sixth and seventh, counting from below, and blocked by that red door. We don’t know any more.”

“In your dream, Ray,” Tandi spoke cautiously, “were you able to go beyond the door?”

Ray nodded.

Tandi was intrigued. “How?”

Ray smiled. “Jesus showed me the way. In the dream aliens are there. But you’re suggesting there are more of us. Are there really only three of us?”

Washington indicated to Jefferson that he should continue. “There are a few, hundreds around the world. More turning up every day. Most don’t realize who they are. How many have you recruited Tandi?”

“At least thirty.”

Washington clarified. “But you three have the strongest ability. The literature suggests more as time goes on”

“What literature?”

Jefferson grew serious and picked up a book on the coffee table. He handed it to Ray. Ray examined the old leather bound book and the title, *The Honest To God Truth*.

Ray was sarcastic. “Really?”

Washington reflected Jefferson’s seriousness. “It’s the honest to God truth, Ray.”

“Can you give me the Reader’s Digest version?”

Washington glanced at Jefferson who nodded. “Many years ago aliens created us and hijacked Heaven. A few of them help us; most of them hurt us. The resistance was secretly able to open a doorway between Heaven and Earth a hundred years ago on this day and, in a way, you are significant because of that incident.”

“Huh?”

“It’s explained in here. But here’s the point. Humans, and that includes the Council, are organizing to take Heaven back. We can’t tolerate the occupation of our spiritual world. All of us are playing a dual game. We have to convince the Masters we’re doing their bidding, but in reality we’re working to destroy them. Ostensibly the Council stands guard to prevent the unworthy from entering Heaven. But they have also been working to take out the bad guys, those who would harm this world, those backed by an alien agenda. Tandi and Teddy help perform that function. They believe your talents could make you equally useful.”

Ray laughed but realized the others did not. “What the hell?”

Jefferson leaned forward and put his hand on the book. “This is our Blueprint.”

Ray really didn’t know what to think so he decided to keep his mouth shut. He was either hallucinating or way, way, WAY over his head.

Jefferson was losing his patience. “This is happening, Ray. The aliens have locked us into this reality and are manipulating us. They keep us in this material world by terrorizing us, by making us focus on fear. If we stop thinking about the spiritual world, having faith in it, we lose the capacity to enter it, even when we die. We are immediately reincarnated back into the material. And every effort to make the world a better place to live is counterbalanced by more terrorists sent to break our spirit.”

Washington picked up the pitch. “With the help of friendly aliens we were able to secretly create the doorway that allows us to enter Heaven without dying.”

Jefferson interrupted. “Only those with the ability. Your ability. Hers’. And Teddy’s.”

Washington wouldn’t be bullied. “And others. Your physical nature and your extra-sensory abilities allow you to be in the spiritual world and to return. If I were to go through the

doorway I would essentially die and return to life, newborn, with no memory. My mind doesn't yet have the kind of inoculation that allows you to step in and out at will."

Jefferson again. "We believe it has to do with the Eye of Shiva."

Washington continued. "The pineal gland."

Ray ran out of patience. "Alright, let's just say this crap is true. What the hell is the Council and the Masters?"

"They're idiots." Tandi lit a cigarette. "Originally the Council guarded the so-called Gates of Heaven. You know, like St. Peter. The Masters, the aliens, allowed humans who were exceptionally well-behaved in their opinion, into Heaven. The Council did their bidding."

"I saw the four but it was a dream. Are they really real?"

"You mean are they alive?" She pours herself a glass of wine. "No, but they're not dead. At some point they were turned. We believe Jesus convinced them to help the resistance."

"Jesus."

"And Mohammed and Krishna." Tandi smirked. "I know, Ray. This is pretty fucking mind-blowing. But you wanted to know the truth, Honey. Happy now?"

"Fuck this. You slipped me that shit and I'm tripping. You're all in my head!"

Hans barked.

"Of course we're in your head, mate," Teddy laughed. "Everything is in your fucking head. That's where reality is or haven't you figured that out?"

"If Jesus and Mohammed are leading the resistance, why have their followers terrorized each other? Which would help the bad aliens, if what you say isn't complete insanity?"

Washington puts a hand on Ray's shoulder and sits next to him. "Most humans aren't as enlightened as those spiritual figures, Ray. Man doesn't always understand his emotions, and in

his ignorance of the larger picture he's easily manipulated by agents of the Masters. It happens countless times, all the time. That's why it must end. That's why you must help us."

"What if I don't want to help you?"

"Do you honestly think you could live with yourself knowing what you know?"

"Crap."

Washington chuckled. "Well, give yourself some time, Ray. This is happening fast for you. But you apparently made the commitment in the bus station. You became a new Ray, the Ray with the idea, and quite frankly, you can't go back."

"You're on the road for good, mate." Teddy raised his glass.

"This has been the weirdest fucking day in my whole life."

"Been there, done that," said Jefferson. He stood up and Washington and Teddy followed. "We'll get out of your life for the moment, Ray. You've got the room until 11 tomorrow. Enjoy it. The restaurant here is superb."

"Indeed," said Teddy.

"Good night, Ray." Washington and Jefferson shook Ray's hand. Teddy gave Tandi a peck on the cheek and slapped Ray lightly on the face. They left and Ray was alone with Tandi and Hans. The dog was crashed on the loveseat with a fat belly.

Ray examined Tandi. She was beautiful as always, but now there was a quality about her he couldn't fathom. Who was this Tandi in this bizarre reality? In the confusion he hadn't noticed she had changed from the motel where she was wearin' jeans and a t-shirt. Now he realized she had on a matchin' green vest and skirt over a white shirt. She wasn't wearin' her wig and her makeup looked professional. She looked like a model but the outfit was the most conservative he'd seen on her. She was a different person.

“It’s bullshit,” he said.

“Does it matter?” she asked.

“Does the truth mean anything?”

“What the fuck is truth, Ray?”

“Wow.”

Ray caught her perfume. “What is that, jasmine?”

“Dior Dior.”

“Rich perfume, rich clothes. Not the Mango Tandi.”

“I was pretending to be a student. This is me, Ray, and it could be you too. This room, this service, this life. Much more comfortable.”

“You blew up the World of Death...”

“You can have all this. Help us take back Heaven.”

“I can’t help but think your idea of Heaven involves killing people. What about the driver of the bus?”

“His stubbornness killed him.”

“A bomb killed him!”

“A bomb that you allowed on that bus, Ray. What about the people you saved?”

“Isn’t stubbornness a lot like faith?”

She poured herself a glass of wine. “Californian. Beat the French this year in Paris. Aristotle said securing the good of a nation is nobler than securing the good of an individual.”

“Tell that to the driver.”

“Well, I can’t do that, can I?”

“What about this book? The honest to God truth? Who would believe this?”

“The people who have something to gain by believing it. Things go on without our knowledge all the time. The government once caused a whooping cough epidemic in Florida. The Army tested mustard gas on its own soldiers and the effects of nuclear radiation. There have been many more examples. Sacrifices must be made. That’s how the world works.”

“I don’t want to be part of that.”

“Honestly you don’t really have a choice. You have a gift, the same as I, the same as Teddy. We’re using it for the benefit of the western world and everything we represent, democracy, freedom, defeating aliens. It’s not as if we’re fucking East Germans pumping up our female Olympic athletes with testosterone.”

“Really? They do that?”

“God, Ray, I know you’re only nineteen but you’re insufferably naïve. Haven’t you learned Tigger eats Piglet? Have faith you’re doing the right thing.”

“Faith.”

“That’s how we live. We have faith the sun’s going to rise in the morning and we will go about our business as always. This is America, Ray. This is the nation of freedom of thought, of religion. Worlds are created and destroyed. Anything is possible if you have faith.”

“What Washington said...our abilities...you’ve been through the portal?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been to Heaven?”

“Yes.”

“Then how can you be so fucking cynical, Tandi?”

Tandi laughs. “Oh, I see. Oh, Ray. I’m so sorry. Heaven. Heaven is not what you think, Honey. It’s an extension of this world, but it’s not especially holy or peaceful. We call it

Heaven but it's really just a full world, a bigger world, a free one, except, we humans usually can't manage it and come back here. But it's our birthright, Ray. We were given the knowledge and they took it away. Fuck them."

Ray nods. "Okay. I'm not going to argue with you. I don't want to hear about America or Heaven anymore. I just want it to be us and only us right now. Is that possible?"

"I really do want the world to be a better place. It's just, sometimes, in order to make it a better place you've got to remove the weeds."

"You're saying the end justifies the means, right?"

"I guess so. Yeah."

Ray kissed her. He was pleasantly surprised she kissed him back. "Well, tonight let's just pretend this is the end."

July 4th, 2002

I hadn't seen Ray in a number of years. He'd returned to Mango with not much more than that Martin D-35 he'd bought after he sold his bug all those years ago. At least that's what I thought when I saw him openin' the door to what used to be the venerable Maggie's Collectables in the Winston Village Shoppin' Centre, the spellin' a throwback to old world pretense.

Fact is, Ray had leased that space to open his new venture, the Church of Divine Ambiguity. He was glad to see me, said he was gonna look me up. I told him about my gig where they sell the monster calf fries and he said he missed the innocence of the old days. We stepped inside and found a table and chairs where we could reminisce over coffee from the Starbucks on the other side of the strip mall.

"You still don't know who you are, do you?"

"Well, now, Ray, I understand you've apparently been born again into somethin', I don't know what, but I'm not here to get proselytized. I'm just tryin' to catch up on old times."

"That's not what I'm talking about. You know about the gazebo don't you?"

"True love and all that?"

"The door."

"What about it?"

"Considering what it is you seem nonchalant about it."

"What I know is anyone who goes in never comes out. It's suicide."

"I've done it."

"Why you want to fuck with me, Ray?"

"There's a way to prove it, of course."

"I won't let you kill yourself."

“The door is why I’m here.”

“This ain’t a new religion you’ve cooked up like L. Ron Hubbard?”

“On the surface.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Divine Ambiguity?”

“A lot of different things. All true. All false. Thought you didn’t want to be converted.”

“All true and all false. Good luck gettin’ a congregation.”

“I’m not looking for believers, Cody. I’m looking for people who know who they are.”

“And you’re gonna tell them who they are?”

“I help them remember. Remember the night when the World of Death blew up?

“That’s when we met. I was a banana.”

“Remember Tandi? The bomb was in her bra.”

“Why would she have a bomb in her bra?”

“She was testing me. She wanted to know how much power I had.”

“What kind of power you got, Ray?”

“If you remember, I told you I sensed things.”

“That was a long time ago, man. I don’t remember a lot.”

“Lots of drugs. But there was a positive side to that, Cody. Expanded consciousness.”

“Yeah, that sounds like the seventies.”

“The only thing that really matters in life is your perception of it. What are your limitations? Do you only see past the end of your nose or do you see way down the road?”

“Really? What about love and sacrifice and accomplishment?”

“How do you perceive those things? We’ve got to keep stretching the boundaries of our awareness. As above so below. What’s out there is in here in our minds. It’s the same thing.”

“Whatever, man. I’m just tryin’ to make a livin’ doin’ somethin’ I enjoy. That’s hard.”

Remember telling me one day I’d come across a banana and it would be you?”

“Before I met you?”

“Yes and no.”

“I met you before I met you?”

“Cody, I suspect you can walk in that door above the gazebo and walk back out.”

“Well I’m as sure as shit not gonna try! Honestly, Ray, you’re freakin’ me out.”

“Don’t you think it’s odd there’s some sort of anomaly above the gazebo and everyone in town is conspiring to keep it quiet?”

“Don’t want tourists. Everybody knows that.”

“You know it’s more than that.”

“All I know is my ancestors passed it down that no one’s to talk about it. You get swats in school talkin’ about it and it tends to sink in. I had a friend go in. Never came back. You get older you don’t want kids tryin’ stupid shit that gets them killed.”

“I’ve been working for the government.”

“Why you tellin’ me?”

“You’re special.”

“What’s your racket, brother?”

“9-11.”

“What’s that got to do with the door?”

“There are basically two forces, with various allies, trying to control the world. You could call them Light and Darkness like they do in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Of course terms like that are always relative. I’ve been working for a group called the Council. They used to work

for the darkness. Then they were turned to the light. Recently, someone on the Council was turned by the darkness. He betrayed us. That's how 9-11 happened."

"Please don't misunderstand me, Ray. I think it's been great seein' you, but I think I ought to be goin' now."

"The Council has been fighting terrorism for some time. We stopped a lot of things. Some things got through. The point is the forces of darkness have imprisoned us in a world of ignorance, Cody. That was always the Gnostic idea. It's life as we know it. We don't know what we don't know. But they know about efforts to defeat them and now they know about the door. So they may come here. In the meantime they're devising an even deeper prison."

"An even deeper prison we don't know about?"

"Precisely."

"Buddy of mine's grillin' steaks in an hour."

"You've got a computer at home, don't you?"

"Don't use it. My Ex got it. Not sure what it's good for."

"You will use it more. In fact, you're going to get to the point where you're not going to know how to get along without it."

"There's nothin' on there I want, Ray."

"Not yet. Technology is going to make the world smaller. It's going to gather us on the internet and we're going to be communicating with each other. Other technologies will be refined and there will come a time, Cody, when we will be given an opportunity to be in an artificial world, or maybe we'll have the technology fused with our bodies. We haven't figured out yet what path will be taken. We only know possibilities, potentialities. A commitment to one thing hasn't been made yet."

“Sort of like VHS or DVDs?”

“It’ll be a doorway into a virtual world that will seem promising, but in fact, it will be a prison. And the doorway over the gazebo will be inaccessible from that other world.”

“Who’s going to be in charge?”

“Right. Who’s the Rex Mundi? The Council believed we were making progress, heading down a road that would lead us to freedom. We’d had a lot of victories over terrorism. But we were betrayed. The World Trade Center tumbled and we were changed forever.”

“So you come home?”

“That door in Watcher Park is the answer to the problem. It’s a way to strike at the source of things.”

“Really? And preachin’ divine ambiguity in Mango is gonna defeat darkness?”

“I have a plan.”

“Well, hey, let’s round up the old gang and we can go to Mordor and destroy the ring.”

“All I have to do is touch your forehead.”

“What the fuck, Ray?”

“That’s all. I touch you right there above your eyes and you’ll remember.”

“Remember what?”

“You’ll remember who you are, Cody.”

“You know what, man, I’m not going to miss out on a good ribeye.”

“It’s a simple thing. It’ll prove it. What have you got to lose?”

“Okay, Ray. Touch my goddamn forehead so I can go.”

“No problem, Jacob.”

“Oh, fuck!”

Coda

Ray and Tandi was sittin' with Andy at Andy's mom's house in Mango. His mother was diggin' up weeds in the garden. Andy had a broken leg and his cast rested on the ottoman. Hans was sleepin' on Andy's lap.

"You're gonna love this, Ray. We were about three miles outside of Mango when a car came barrelin' down our side of the road. Bus driver swerved to miss and we rolled. I was fuckin' asleep, man. I woke up to find myself flyin' inside the goddamn bus."

"Does it hurt?"

"Fuckin' A it hurts."

Tandi batted her eyelashes at Andy. "May I sign it?"

"Sure. Here's a marker. When did you and Ray...you know?"

"I've always been fond of Ray, even when I was with Fred."

"Yeah, well Fred's with that landlady of his. He's one stupid motherfucker."

"Get well soon. To Andy from Tandi. How's that?"

"You're a poet."

"And so much more." She glanced at Ray.

"Can't believe the bus wrecked. That's fucking weird."

"It's a wonder nobody got killed on the bus. But hell, you may be dead if you stayed on it. Lots of folks got hurt. I'll never doubt your third eye again, amigo. You were right to get off. Of course Bob's dead."

"Bob who?"

"Fuck, I thought you knew. He drove the car."

"Our Bob? Was he drunk?"

“Drunk as shit. Rolled that bitch six times and flew out headfirst into a culvert.”

“Holy fucking shit, man. Bob. After his father...fuck.”

“Strange how things work out, isn’t it?” Tandi looked strangely pleased. Ray noticed.

“Now it’s just Rob,” Andy shook his head. “Don’t have the same ring, does it?”

Tandi was overly mysterious. “Who knows what fate awaits him?”

Ray gave her a look. She smiled and looked outside at the garden.

“Well, hey, man, you happy I brought Hans?”

“Hell yeah. I love this dog. What the hell happened to Gustav?”

“Who the fuck knows? Hans just escaped, I guess. He’s yours now. Meant to be.”

“I reckon so.” Andy was rubbin’ his arm.

“You ever figure out if that’s arthritis?”

“Oh, I’ll get it looked at some day. Actually seems better as time goes on. Y’all stayin’ for lunch? Mom’s makin’ enchiladas.”

“Sorry, man. We’ve got somethin’ we need to do. Got to go.”

“Well, alright. Thanks for the dog. And Tandi, don’t let him give you any shit.”

Tandi laughs. “Oh no. He wouldn’t dare.”

Ray and Tandi drove to Mango College and parked near the gazebo. They held hands as they approached it. For the first time Ray felt somethin’ different as he neared it, an exhilaration, a tinglin’. He paused.

“Ray, don’t you want to do this?”

“A part of me doesn’t want it to be true. A part is excited beyond words. I’m scared.”

“Sure.”

“How can everything be so ordinary out here? I mean, if it’s all true...”

“Shadows, Ray. You remember Plato’s cave?”

“I always thought that was just...”

“Just what?”

“Something that could never be proven.”

“Follow me.”

Tandi circled to the other side of the gazebo where there was a way to climb to the roof. She did so. Ray followed her. They stood on the roof and from their vantage point everything seemed normal. The roof was pointed and Tandi began a slow ascent to the top. When she got there she extended her arm and her hand disappeared.

“Fucking hell.”

“Want to go in?”

“You mean, we can just go in?”

“That’s what I said.”

“What if I can’t come back?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Tandi stood and stepped into the space. She disappeared. Ray was left alone, wonderin’ if it was a massive delusion, wonderin’ if he was insane. Could he trust his mind? Was the third eye a symptom of a profound brain malfunction? At this point it didn’t matter. He couldn’t go back. He had to take the road wherever it led. He climbed to the top.”

“Once upon a time,” he said. And he disappeared into Heaven.

Property of Church of Divine Ambiguity

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