THE EVERBORN

a novel
by

NICHOLAS GRABOWSKY
The Everborn
A Black Bed Sheet/Diverse Media Book

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2009908762

ISBN-10: 0-9842136-0-0

The Everborn
Nicholas Grabowsky

A Black Bed Sheet/Diverse Media Book
Antelope, CA
"My Dear Nicholas: You seem to me---in a way that's entirely admirable----a man out of time. You're writing horror epics when the audience has become increasingly numbed by cinematic hokum and stale ideas. I SALUTE YOU: your ambition, your dedication, your achievements. I have no doubt in my mind that there is much, much more to come from your fertile and blissfully complex imagination, and I'll await the next work with much anticipation!"

-----Clive Barker (*Hellraiser*, director, producer, artist and bestselling author)

"Grabowsky has melded Horror with Science Fiction with such expertise that I am left speechless. This is a novel of epic proportions and told in such a unique way that it defies explanation. By utilizing ideas from religious history, the reader is given a totally surreal reason for what UFOs really are and you will start to believe it's true."

--- *Gorezone Magazine*

"Grabowsky's writing is at times touching and emotional, however, his real talent is his ability to infuse his writing with a sense of dread and loathing that I have not experienced since H.P. Lovecraft.......(a) unique and often terrifying world that Sacramento novelist Nicholas Grabowsky launches us into.....(it) has the feel of an "X-Files" episode, at other very twisted turns it delves into the psychedelic. For those of us looking for something new in the alien horror genre, look not to the stars, but look to Nicholas Grabowsky's "The Everborn."

----- *Tahoe Daily Tribune*

Nicholas Grabowsky has succeeded in creating an entire world that is situated over our own, shading our every move with darkness and its ghostly alien presence....leaving the reader in utter astonishment as to the amazing detail that Grabowsky’s world has been created with. The detailed mythology that he creates with his alien forces ties together more than one earthly superstition, weaving a web that connects the world of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial.......the reader will be unable to get the terrifying and original visions out of their head!

-----Heidi Martinuzzi, E! *Entertainment Television, Pretty/Scary.net*
"Grabowsky exploits (the story) to explore concepts such as being, death & immortality in a fabulist world where more than a half-dozen major characters shift identities with Cronenberg-like regularity....a solid storyline, fresh ideas on everything from relationships to religion and blood-chilling violence makes Grabowsky's latest offering a compelling read!"

----Sacramento News & Review

***** 5 stars (highest rating) "ALL HAIL GRABOWSKY! .....a captivating plot completely unique...with a story so imaginative and profound, even I was astounded.....satisfying a reader's interest in alternative science fiction, classic horror, suspense and yes, folks, even gore. The atmosphere is complex, murky and entraps you. The style of writing is blunt, audacious and head-on.....this book rises above the average horror/science fiction novel!"

------Horror-web.com

".....an amazingly original way to treat the done-to-death alien motif. (This) really is an outstanding book....."

----Garret Peck (Bram Stoker Award nominee, Personal Demons)

“Nicholas Grabowsky has been around a while and I have read several of his books but this one will always remain my favorite as it is with most of his "fans". I say "fans" because once you begin reading his novels you will get hooked. He has a style unlike any other writer in this genre. He is really not just good at what he does - he is great! "The Everborn" is a classic and will be long read after he is gone from the face of this earth.”

------W. H. McDonald Jr., 128th Assault Helicopter Company (South Vietnam, 1966 & ’67, awarded The Distinguished Flying Cross, The Bronze Star, 14 Air Medals and the Purple Heart

“Forget sleeping, forget eating…you will live this book, every dramatic step, every action, every thought…this book will consume you from page one and the thing is…..you will be glad for it. Nicholas soars as one of the greatest Sci-Fi storytellers of all time. Watch out Anthony and Asimov……this Sci-Fi king is here and he means business.”

--Twisted Dreams Magazine

“...a well-crafted novel that seamlessly blends elements of horror and science fiction. This novel has it all: demons, apparitions, aliens, and serial killers. This novel will reach out and touch you on many levels and Grabowsky's compelling storytelling will have you reading well into the night, afraid to put it down........

------Holly Catanzarita, Sinisteria Magazine

“Spellbinding and utterly amazing……”

----Garry Charles (bestselling author, Heaven’s Falling series)

Golden Award winner! Best Science Fiction novel of 2004…..

--American Author's Association
“A well-established author of horror/fantasy fiction…..”

---Scary Monsters Magazine, 2004 Yearbook

“I don’t know what else to say about this that has not already been said by some of the best writers of the genre. All I can do is join them in singing his praises. Grabowsky is a master of taking old legends and giving them new life… discover for yourself one of the best up and coming writers of our decade!”

--Eve Blaack, Hacker’s Source Magazine, on RED WET DIRT

Also by Nicholas Grabowsky:

**Fiction:**

The Everborn
Pray, Serpent’s Prey (as Nicholas Randers)
The Rag Man (as Nicholas Randers)
Halloween IV
Halloween IV: The Special Limited Edition
Sweet Dreams, Lady Moon (as Marsena Shane)
The Wicked Haze
Diverse Tales
Red Wet Dirt

**Nonfiction:**

Nick Reads & Reviews 2004-2007
Nancy (Biography of the First Lady) (as Marsena Shane)
The Easy Way to Great Legs (as Marsena Shane)
Body Dynamics Vols. 1 & 2 (as Marsena Shane)

**Children’s:**

Flatty Kat: Tales of an Urban Feline (with Phyllis Haupert)
As editor (recent):
Buck Alice & the Actor/robot (by Walter Koenig)
You’re Dead Already….Living in Hell (by Jake Istre)

Recent anthologies:
From the Shadows (Triad Publishing Group)
Echoes of Terror (Lachesis Publishing)
Fear (Whiskey Creek Press, introduction)
Acknowledgments and sincere gratitude to the following for the very things I needed the most during the construction of this monstrosity --for support, friendship, and for believing in me, in various stages of my life but particularly during the 17 years it took to complete this book in its present form: Marybeth Harold, Mike Erlandson, Naomi Munton, Donna LaBartunek, Andrea Stinson, Scott Trepesowsky, Terry Robbins, Pat Simpson, Brandon Battle, Ryan Lightsey, Kyle Pamson, my fifth grade teacher and mentor Michael Montrief, Joe Randazzo, Josephine & Doug & Karen Davenport, Jake Istre, Frank Castillo, Robert Horton…..and Phyllis Haupert, because you can’t erase 8 years.

Dark Delicacies Book Store in Burbank, CA.

Clive Barker and Dean R. Koontz for great advice in spurts for two decades.

Walter Koenig, one helluva acting coach whose Star Trek credits don’t even come close to touching upon the great man and talent he is.

Moustapha Akkad, for phone conversations, awesome insight, and a warm soul. You will always be remembered.

Jeremy, my first beloved son, and my grandson Nathan….
Charlton John, my little Boo…..

.....and Mom & Dad.
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The Everborn
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“Some men a forward motion love,

But I by backward steps would move,

And when this dust falls to the urn,

in that state I came, return.”

--Henry Vaughan,
16th Century metaphysical poet
It was not supposed to happen this way, not any of it. And most certainly not to me. Yet I’m a part of it, immersed in it, quite like an actor immersed so intensely within a role that to him reality is reduced to an indistinguishable blur.

I have never exactly thought of myself as an actor, but at this moment I would surrender everything to distinguish the role I am forced to play from the man I truly am. If my circumstances dictate the role, then perhaps by playing it out I will find that man. This notion provides me with a subtle comfort, though my limited choice in the matter is evident even in the very nature of my writing these words.

So how, might you inquire, were things supposed to have happened, and, what tale have I to tell in contrast?

Firstly, for all of us, things went this way:

We were no more than a few decades into the twentieth century when the subject of Unidentified Flying Objects reached the attentive and ever-gullible ears of our society. The vanity and excessive ignorance of the notion that we were alone in the universe gave way to the restless ideology that there must be something more, something out there, something physical and independent from our otherwise spiritual concepts of God. The “science” of contemporary UFOlogy became the inevitable result of scientists, truth-seekers, and those obsessively curious trying to find a way to explain the outrageously downright unexplainable....

....such as, for example, supersonic saucers soaring quite rudely into USAF air space, time and again without so much as a knock on the door of our atmosphere before entering. Bodies of bulbous-eyed embryonic humanoids were recovered in Roswell, famously, though evidence of the wreckage of their craft suggests the incident was nothing more than a top secret kite the government was flying one day made of aluminum foil and balsa wood. I went on a picnic where once I flew a kite, and when the wind sent it crashing down and I recovered it, there were no alien bodies littering my surroundings, as far as I could tell. Way before any of this, Orson Welles broadcasts a War of the Worlds which caught those of us who didn’t know any better on a bad night, when even the Nazis seemed like bags of posed plastic soldiers compared to those invading Martian bastards. Sightings and reports eventually flourished in such whimsical diversities that, perhaps, the U.S. Air Force would have found things much simpler had they hired an illustrator for their Project Blue Book files, secured national syndication rights, and had themselves a lucrative Sunday comic the whole family could enjoy.

We cultivated these phenomena even through real wars, which in comparison proved to be frightening jolts into tangible reality, and it was from these wars and recurring pressures that we sought escape in UFOs. While our kids spent bedtime hours holding flashlights to Amazing Stories beneath tented bedcovers, we spent daytime hours watching The Day the Earth Stood Still and wondering privately about what we would do if what we saw came true.

Since then, the mythology surrounding E.T.s has become far more defined, as the human race advances within civilized society, boldly and often blindly leaping into new frontiers of awareness and knowledge, the phenomenon advances with us. Space aliens are no longer simply from Mars or Venus, as the limits of our imaginations once dictated. To some, they are hailed as saviors from a distant galaxy. Others believe they’ve emerged from black holes or time warps to mutilate our cattle or to sketch witty, circular doodles in wheat fields.

But even as our little green men mutated into seemingly less hostile, greyish, often coverall-clad beings (as in Whitley Strieber’s accounts and so many others all across the globe, from Budd Hopkins’ research to the Hill and Walton abductions) who traded their ray guns in for anal probes, much of this UFO business remains the same: there have always been believers, and there have always been non-believers, with various shades of believers and skeptics in between. Some claim to have physical contact with UFO entities, while the majority of us are left with no other
choice but to develop personal opinions based upon a mixture of what we read or view on educational cable channels, inherent common rationality, religious persuasions and our understanding of the way the world is supposed to work. But none of us are exempt from their influence, their nostalgia, their ability to challenge both our imaginations and realities.

Most importantly, I am impressed to add, is that significant ingredient, which makes this entire matter the head-turning, blue light special that it is. This ingredient is the fact that there is not one shred of concrete, out-in-the-open, eye-popping proof for the masses.

After a hard day of “right to know” rallies before government buildings, it’s enough to drive the more fervent believer to drink. And to make the skeptics laugh.

I stopped laughing way back; in Sunday School, in fact. Moses, Adam and Eve, baby Jesus and those silly felt board wise men the instructors displayed while all us impressionable youngsters sat littering the carpet with cookie crumbs......somehow these stories were all missing something. I, for one, longed for yarns containing wondrous and even frightening imaginings, stories of witches in flight, of tree fairies and ghouls and giants at the end of beanstalks, of mythical lands both over the rainbow and at the center of the earth. When other kids would ask where Jesus was, I wanted to know if Bigfoot was real, whether ancient serpentine sea creatures exist in modern lakes surrounded by a populace who swears to their existence, and, of course, if physical beings exist upon other planets somewhere, out there, beyond the vastness of the outer space between our worlds.

But as I matured something struck me, an observance the clergy folk sort of overlooked among the tedious fundamentals. It was a little tidbit in Genesis chapter six concerning the “sons of God” falling from the sky and sleeping with the “daughters of men” to create races of unearthly beings. This youthful discovery marked for me the beginnings of a lifelong obsession, and I uncovered truths which proved there was more to the Genesis account than dangerous angelic liaisons.

And in plunging myself into the depths of mankind’s folklore, I found similar “sons of God” embedded within the tales and legends of cultures both familiar and ancient. In them I beheld their offspring, the very ghouls and giants and fairies of whose stories I had so passionately longed to hear.

They were everywhere, and they had been with us all along. In many different ways, doing many inconceivable deeds, in many forms.

As we take pride in the comforts of modern technology and civilized intellect, they are there to humble us with the reminder that there still exists within our culture the power of primitive folklore.

They do exist, inhabiting that point where human imagination meets that strange movement of shadow in the corners of our eyes.

I am a believer. And this, in my opinion the most rational explanation of my belief, was the course in which things were supposed to have happened. I expected everything to amount to something else, and now nothing appears to make any sense. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

But it happened for me on the evening of January second, 1995, when I awoke into nightmarish chaos; when that movement of shadow chose to step into full view and return my gaze as I turned to behold it.

Follow me now, and stay close.

I’ve something further I’d like to show you....
The driver of the ice cream truck hadn’t expected much money changing hands, particularly with his hands, today. It was supposed to be a slow day, and kids were supposed to be in school, but this was his only income and a good drive down Poverty Lane beat listening to his woman bitch about him staying at home scratching his crotch watching a full-figured female genie materialize out of a bottle to rescue her master from yet another weekly sitcom situation gone wrong below the rabbit ears of a black and white television set.

It seemed these days that Popsicle pushing was the hip thing to do, all of his relatives were doing it, and the area around the Los Angeles International Airport was infested with new trucks. They had begun their invasion as suddenly as though they had parachuted from the descending air traffic like fallen angels, forcing the truck further southeast and into a decaying portion of the city of Hawthorne. The truck slowed into virginal territory, splashing remnants of the late morning rain onto a litter-ridden curb. The ghetto children leaked onto the sidewalks like snails in a rainwashed exodus that livened to the truck’s serenade, its loudspeaker painted like a cherry atop a metal carriage of rust coated with chipped white and faded stickers.

As it crept along, rounding a corner, it met the fanfare of children’s cries with an abrupt halt so as to avoid serious injuries to the oncoming brigade. Two bicycles, then a training-wheeled third, burst from the depths of an alley behind the corner’s towering brick building.

“Sons of bitches!” its driver bellowed after them, and the children continued ignorantly with a destination in mind that had nothing to do with tasty treats, peddling their ways to the street’s opposite side and over the puddles of a driveway. An onslaught of other children, short of a two dozen count, various ages, hands waving and stretched upwards above their heads bills and coins to flag down the attentions of the ice cream man, surrounded the truck from every direction until the driver vacated his seat and opened a side window to greet them with a freshly lit cigarette hanging from his lips. The truck soon commenced its laggard crawl, all said and done, its cherry speaker
fumigating the neighborhood with an *Old MacDonald* that drifted and hung in the air like a vaporous dirge.

The three bicycles raced faster, over dampened concrete and past the graffiti of a lengthy wooden fence. Missing boards revealed vacant lots beyond and between the overlooking doleful buildings; crabgrass shot out from broken sidewalk and crept beneath the rusty metal of an old abandoned Ford, and beneath a slumbering transient. The reflecting tones of an overhanging billboard sported a gleaming medieval knight which, despite its spray-painted Spanish profanities, boasted that the detergent suspended from its lance was stronger than dirt.

“Jesus, guys, hold it a second,” declared the oldest of the children, the jolting KER-THUMP of a pothole meeting his bike’s front tire in a drenching splash. Threadbare Hushpuppies slid from spinning pedals and ground to a muddy halt, the other children stopping in turn. He was a haughtily streetwise nine-year-old, a bubblegum renegade whose appetite for daring mischief proved an enticing retreat from an asylum of dull poverty.

“What? What is it, Matthew?” breathed Dabby, disheartened by her friend’s startled aversion. She was second youngest, a pudgy elf of a girl whose emerald Asian eyes peered out from beneath a tattered grey baseball cap.

Matthew had silently fixed his gaze attentively upon something ahead. The three children were midway down a small cul-de-sac now, which jetted into several alleyways surrounded by still more decaying buildings. Directly before them loomed the rusty remnants of Rothchild Cannery, shut down and dormant since a month ago, about the time when Fall had announced its annual migration of lunch-pail juvenilities for the initiation of another school year.

It took a moment or two before the girl caught sight of what had drawn her friend’s attention. Throwing off a succinct giggle and proceeding forward with her bike, she informed him, “If it’s the s’curity man you’re wining over, it’s only the same man as last week. Gave me that groovy spaceship, remember?”

Imprisoning Rothchild Cannery was a tall chain-linked fence garnished with barbed wire. Behind this fence and no more than a few yards from it sat a secluded Volkswagen Bug, the rainwashed orange paint of its back end reflecting pale sunlight. Inside, facing sideways with an arm propped lazily against the steering wheel, Max Polito struggled against the remaining hours of uneventful guard duty. From his AM radio, the shrill monotone of a newsman babbled methodically about the Mexico City Olympics and the Apollo 7 spacecraft. Then, a bit more than dazed, Max upped the volume with the stroke of his thumb: A.J. Erlandson, a less-than-famous B-horror director, was once again a newsworthy notable. And, if only lightly, a concern to Max.

A.J. had directed several rather cool midnight movies before he disappeared without a trace in ‘66, a handful of months to spare before he was father to a set of twins. Both of Max’s parents had been employed by the studio which financed most of A.J.’s features, Max’s father having served as a camera operator on three of those, his mother production coordinator on the director’s last. That was two years ago, and the missing director was just as missing beneath even further mystery, for it seemed as though one of his twins had vanished now as well.

No one had a clue as to how or why, but Max supposed his folks would bombard him with theories upon his return to their Santa Monica home. Regardless of what anyone thought, Max carried his own concerns. And they had nothing to do with his parents or with Tinsel Town.

Max flexed his wrists suddenly and gazed at his watch. Webs of smoke rose softly from a cigarette crushed minutes before, and he reached into his ashtray to stifle the resurrected butt. He failed to notice the three kids wandering along outside the fence until their friendly waves met his sight at the rearview mirror. Without turning, he forced a wave in kind. He then returned his arm to the steering wheel and resumed to nod off, his ruminations of the missing director lulled by Simon & Garfunkle’s *Mrs. Robinson* from the dashboard speakers.

Yes, A.J., wherever you are, Jesus probably loves you more than you will know, too. We all do, but you better have a damn good tale to tell if ever your ass ever pops up somewhere alive.

To suffer through an otherwise promising Friday night for the sake of crude earnings was indeed a bitch, a sinister shrew of a bitch. This was particularly true for a fair-haired and attractive nineteen-year—old with an itch to socialize. But Max’s parents were among the ass-kissers of Hollywood, struggling for stability in a competitive cosmos where, in their eyes, the sole explanation to any livable income attained was because superior others simply weren’t available. They brewed over a low fire in the whopping caldron of the industry’s second best.

Unlike others, they were content with their son’s choosing to stray from the field. He mirrored their combined flair for science with a passion, and his potential was never hindered by the usual worrisome pleas for a more reliable trade choice. But the encouraging allegiance under A.J.’s direction had collapsed into a setback; regrettably, they could scarcely afford anything beyond textbook or gas moneys for Max’s education.

But Max was a diehard visionary, and sometimes this meant sacrificing the celestial curves of an astronomy major for an intimacy with the crampy universe of his V.W.’s front seat. His hard—earned dues were just beginning compared to the dues paid by his idols, the many notable professors and madcap mythology nuts he’d so often envied and now studied under. He would soon join their ranks, surpassing them and pocketing their wildest pursuits like a set of keys that could, and would, open an endless boulevard of doors.

He would better them in ways they had dared to dream, even if it took the donning of a dopey uniform and
staring half-alert down a desolate demolition sight on a double shift.

It was five past eleven, and at noon another dopey-uniformed watcher-for-hire would arrive with the anticipated gift of relief. Max leaned forward once more, this time seizing a hard-bound book and opening it to a folded page, smoothed over the crease, and began to read about UFOs.

***

“He gave you a spaceship?” Matthew said. “That’s stupid.”

“Not a real one....” argued Dabby.

“I know not a real one, lunkhead. He gave you a piece of aluminum foil. It can’t fly, you told me yourself.”

“I like looking at it.”

“Awe,” remarked Matthew, glancing back through the fence at the guard, “He’s no different than a bum from the ghetto. Only thing is, he gets paid for sleeping in his car.”

“Idiot. Bums don’t have cars.”

“Really,” agreed the third smallest, to which the girl nearly snapped back, irritable from Matthew’s cruel remarks, but instead quieted. He was also a pudgy one, this other boy, although much smaller than even she. He was a cheerfully innocent boy of African heritage with skin of the darkest kind, as spunky as a Saturday morning cartoon, with a smile which inflated his cheeks to the extent that they appeared to be stuffed with cheeseburgers. His oversized clothes hung about him like toga-type drapery, and at times his walk would catch the ends of his drooping pant legs beneath his shoes, sending him tumbling forward.

Before the three children, stood yet another building of brick, heavily boarded at its windows and entranceways, embellished with billings and advertisements which even the oldest child found difficulty reading, with the exception of....

“I know this sign,” exclaimed the girl. She pointed to a bright red series of words spread across the boards of what apparently was the building’s main door: “NO TRESPASSING. You know what that means?”

“Oh course I do, lunkhead,” spat the oldest, “I go to church. And lead us not into trespassing as we forgive those who are trespassing against us.”

“But we can’t go in there.”

“Like hell we can’t,” said the boy eagerly, climbing from his bike, his irregularly-cut brown hair falling into his face like stringy tendrils. The two others dismounted as well, joining him in momentary awe at the monster of brick and board. “This is where the Wraith-child lives.”

“Really,” challenged the smallest inquisitively.

“Yes really,” said the oldest with a mystical sincerity. “People get killed here. That’s what they say. People get killed, because there’s this baby that lives here. People hear it crying, and they go inside, and they never come out. Never!”

“Really,” replied the other boy, and his cheeseburger smile faltered in halfhearted disbelief.

“And you want us to go in there,” Dabby acknowledged frigidly. Then, “I’m not going inside.”

But Matthew was going inside. Defiantly, he abandoned his bike and proceeded toward the building’s side walkway. He gave the two a quick look back, after which he exclaimed, “This is what we came here for, Dabby! You’d think after coming all this way, bein’ such good friends and all, you wouldn’t let me go in alone like this....”

Dabby swallowed. She wanted to call after him, tell him to stop if only to postpone the sudden nagging persuasion to give in. She ignored the temptation to tell him to go to hell, for she feared hell was precisely where he wished to go. She pressed forward in pursuit, the other boy nearly stumbling over his pant legs as he hurriedly waddled to catch up.

Dabby halted to wait for her waddling friend, sighed, straightened her cap. “Come on, Nigel. There’s probably no Wraith-kid anyway.”

“Yes really,” replied Nigel, as he joined her, stealing an anxious look back upon his lonely bike sandwiched safely between the other two.

Lingering impatiently beside a boarded section of window, Matthew was tempted but hesitated to pry apart a medial opening from loose splinters of wood. His companions arrived, the girl folding her arms and slouching against a corresponding wall with equal impatience at Matthew. Nigel imitated her, his melancholy eyes fixed in playful preparation of her next move.

Matthew gazed within the child-sized porthole he had created the next moment. He listened. His fellow adventurers joined him at his side. Dabby was about to speak, but obeyed Matthew’s sudden command of silence, surrendering to her own curiosity and the dare to continue.
And they listened.
There were no sounds. No cries. No Wraith-child.

Yet.

“I heard it once,” Matthew turned to them, prematurely disappointed at the inner calm. “I heard the crying. I swear to God. I passed by here a day last week to check it out....”
Dabby cowered back. “And...?”

“Hearing those cries made me forget I even planned on stopping at all. I kept going. Hearing them was good enough.”

This would surely have frightened away the girl if not for the sly impression Matthew was pulling her leg.

“Hearing’s not good enough now, though, is it?”

“Whaddya think, lunkhead?” he chided. “We’re goin’ in.” Feeling all the bolder, Matthew crouched over and into the perilous wooden porthole.

The girl responded with confounded silence, gingerly removing her grey cap, lowering it down before her as though lowering the safety bars of a rollercoaster car.

And Nigel was no longer smiling at all.

***

For as long as any of the children remembered, this had always been the local haunted house. Its prolonged desolation had fostered a progeny of wild hearsay, though not much different than the unsettling gossip it knew back when it stood as purveyor of lower-class apartment dwellings.

But until the rumored ghostly cries, it had never known murder. Not like this. Not like the corpse of the young man discovered twisted and slumped against the muddy overgrowth of hedges at the building’s most remote side. The man’s head had been found resting sideways and sunken into the mud, appearing to almost float within the basin of blood formed by its shallow imprint. The real treat that impressed the coroner, however, was how the face of the skull had been crushed so far inward that the nose played peek-a-boo with the back upper neck in protruding cartilage.

No evidence of a weapon. Not one hint aside from the very corpse itself, betrayed the identity or methods of the force behind it. No one had seen the ill-fated prey wandering about before-hand, and no one had heard his screams. No one would know anything, period, until the officials and authorities chose to release this enigma from its bottle.

But it wasn’t due to the grisly shape of the corpse or any of these trivialities that enforced their decision to wedge the cork in tighter, and to keep it that way. What concerned certain authority figures most were the numerous, bewildering footprints all about the hedges. Clusters and trails of tiny footprints no larger than those left by a child.

In their eyes, these puzzling leftovers were no more made from a ghost than they were a Wraith-child. And whatever they were made from, it was somewhat unlikely that the makers of the prints were responsible for a slaying of such proportions.

For one thing, the prints had not appeared at all until six hours after the body was gurneyed away, at a time when surveying eyes were about to reap the misfortunes of having turned their attentions elsewhere. For another thing, these authorities claimed to know what it was that made those prints.

***

They were within the shadowy labyrinth now, sidestepping bits of decaying lumber and exposed dusty wiring wrenching from the structure’s inner framework, the results of previous intruders’ scavenging the grounds for useful hardware.

The inner reaches of the apartment building provided a perfect eerie landscape for the alert imaginings of neighborhood children, and the three huddled close as they inched across concrete and torn carpet. They carried with themselves no flashlight and regretted not having prepared for the unexpected, not to mention, numbly enough, the degradingly obvious. Luckily enough, streams and jets of mild sunlight managed their invasion through boarded window cracks and sections of missing brick within the walls. Partitions between the rooms had somehow crumbled, rotted through, or fallen prey to the mallets of vandalizing pranksters. Portions of ceiling had fallen through, providing partial glimpses of the overhanging floor and added lighting from unboarded second-floor windows.

The possibility suddenly occurred to the girl of the building collapsing around them in a quake of deadly plaster boulders, and her paranoia gorged hungrily upon the illusion that the ground floor walls were weakening with age beneath the floors above. She replaced her crumpled baseball cap upon her head as though this could shelter her and her hand darted for a portion of Matthew’s shirt and held tight for assailable comfort. Physical contact with girls
annoyed Matthew as he found no remedy to the unfailing tension brought along with it, and he swung a hand to self-
consciously fend it away. She responded with an irritable tug and wound his shirt tighter around her fingers.

Nigel let out a solemn yawn. As young as he was, he knew that anything called a Wraith-child could not possibly be as monstrous as what he heard. The fact that it was a child in the first place was a sure indication of harmlessness. Even if the Wraith-child didn’t exist at all, this outing certainly topped remaining at home with Ma. Ma was a penniless sexoholic and willing groupie to any rock-and-roll band passing through town toting needles to share; where Nigel was now couldn’t possibly be any worse than being with her, at least on weekends when she was most deliriously dreadful.

Without warning, Matthew screamed in terror. This abruptness could have come at no better time for Dabby’s poor, persecuted nerves, which reacted like the inner coils of a pocketwatch wound too tightly, propelling her forward and into Matthew’s side. The impact sent them both tumbling, her deathgrip on Matthew’s shirt stretching the material up and over the back of his head and into his face. The boy fought to wrench free, his cries muffled against the force of her smothering grasps. The wrestling ceased soon enough, and Matthew sat up from the decaying carpet to look at the girl.

“It was a joke,” he spat at her. “I wanted to make you jump. Jesus…”

Sprawled and panting, Dabby rolled to her side and rubbed her eyes. She looked up at him and began to laugh, if not for the simple fact that it had been a false alarm, which she’d prefer against the real thing. “You buttwipe.”

“You lunkhead.”

“You buttwipe.”

Matthew smoothed over his shirt and brushed the dust from his jeans. Gazing absently around, he rose to his feet. “Where did Nigel go?”

Dabby sprung from the carpet and darted her head. They were both alone. Desperately, she began to call out for him, and Matthew joined her.

The panic was real now, and little Nigel had vanished completely into the oblivion of the building’s shadowy, broken innards.

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Matthew’s inept scream had sent Nigel running; a suddenly frightened, scurrying vision of baggy clothes darted across sleek cement and into the blackness of an open section of wall opposite the direction where the three had journeyed.

He had been more excited than frightened. His first impulse was to run, and as he did so he squealed in frenzied glee as his two friends wrestled yards behind him. His second impulse was to hide.

And hide he did, right straight through a gaping hole surrounded by brick and plaster. It was like entering a giant, opened mouth, much the same as the uncanny entrance of a carnival funhouse. He once visited a funhouse, with its mirrors and bellowing mannequins and multi-colored mists. This, however, was much different. This was real, and a real friendly ghost was lurking about, waiting to be discovered.

Somewhere.

If the Wraith-child was real, Nigel thought, then maybe people were scared of it because it cried. Matthew himself admitted to have heard its crying and fled. If Nigel could make the Wraith-child stop crying, then perhaps it would befriend him.

Perhaps, except…no one was crying here. No one yet.

Maybe the Wraith-child was hiding.

But when Nigel entered the gaping section of wall, he hadn’t counted on falling, tumbling; apparently his feet met with a floor board which sloped into the darkness at an angle. His chest met with smooth concrete, and if he had been arched differently his chin would have felt the impact with a sharp and painful slam. Instead, he skidded, unharmed, to a halt within the center of a large and empty room, absent of carpet and nearly totally absent of light.

At first, within the abrupt confusion of the fall, he felt the tremendous urge to cry himself. And cry he would have, upon the sudden overwhelming impression that he was lost. But he wasn’t lost entirely; deep, deep into the walls behind him, he heard the faint sounds of his friends calling his name.

That, however, did not stop him from crying.

What stopped him from crying was the unexpected vision to his side, to the wall at the corner of the room beneath a boarded windowpane. A broken portion of bare glass allowed a slanted stream of vapidous afternoon sunlight to illuminate the corner.

And within that corner sat silently a naked baby boy.

*The Wraith-child.*
It was not much less than four years younger than Nigel, perhaps merely a couple of years old. The child was Caucasian, but aside from this he in many ways bore facial features which resembled Nigel’s. And he was dirty, he was filthy, as though he was a cartoon character and a grenade had just went off in his hands, as though he’d been dragged through a coal mine.

“Do you live here?” he asked the infant.

The baby was silent, squatting diaperless, within the surrounding blackness under the filtered beam of sun. He glanced up at his visitor, then down again at something he appeared to be playing with, something he held within his hands. Whatever he held, it seemed to be moving. Something small, no more than the size of a human eye.

Nigel picked himself up from the stretch of concrete floor and patted white plaster-dust from his clothes. The dust rose upwards and around his face like a cloud and he swished it from his eyes. He coughed once, twice, from the dust, stepped forward little by little to the baby. He entered into the dim sunlight stream just enough to cast a shadow...

...and just enough to view the thing which captivated the infant’s attentions so. It was shiny black, rounded at the body into a slick polished teardrop tip, eight legs contracting around a ruby red hour glass.

Nigel knew what it was. He had been taught what bugs to touch and what not to. And he knew big black ugly spiders could bite. Could kill. Like snakes. Like strangers. Like crossing the street without looking both ways.

And he knew this spider was a bad one.

Or was it?

Why wasn’t it biting the baby?

“Is that a pet?” inquired Nigel. “Is it? You shouldn’t play with spiders, you know. Is it a pet?”

Just then, slowly, the infant raised its hand, palm upwards, exposing a candid presentation of the creature crawling deliberatively upon a bed of fleshy pink and five outstretched digits.

A black widow.

“Did you take out its teeth?” asked the boy now, taken aback by the infant’s gesture, a move which suggested a bid for Nigel to handle the menace himself. Dismayed at his own temptation to oblige the infant, Nigel scrubbed his hands into the knees of his trousers in sweaty preparation to accept the offering. “Is it your friend? Is it really?”

As it lifted the spider persuasively closer, the infant opened its mouth to speak. It spoke in a faint, slurred whisper. “Reeeeally.”

Reeeeally.

It was imitating him. “I’ll be your friend, too...okay?” And with that, Nigel fearfully extended his arm to receive the creature. Very, very carefully...

The spider’s soft, bulbous body tumbled from the infant’s overturned hand and plopped dead center, onto the yielding flesh of Nigel’s, its legs recoiled by the sudden turbulence.

And then came the screams.

***

Matthew and Dabby had been calling out for no more than a handful of minutes before they heard the screams. Matthew’s first impulse was to escape into another room and away from a second assault of Dabby’s hystericis, but she had stiffened with the cries in suspenseful expectation. It was not very often that Nigel so much as cried, let alone screamed and the two youngsters feared their own mounting suspicions that these were Wraith-child cries. Or worse.

The Wraith-child got Nigel.

Without a second to spare, the two raced toward the sounds, up and over plywood and broken concrete and piles of bricks, past torn walls and jet streams of light, to the opposite wall’s gaping hole.

Matthew peered inside. He could see nothing. “Nigel?”

Another scream, this time less distant, but nevertheless quite faint.

Quickly, the boy lunged through the torn hole. His feet fumbled onto an angled plywood board and he came crashing down, sliding, vaguely attentive to Dabby’s shrill outcries behind him. Within the next instant, he found himself face-down upon icy cement. Rising rather awkwardly to one side, he flinched at the sudden jolt of pain within his left elbow. Turning, the pain subsided as his attentions riveted to the convulsing specter of his friend. Matthew leapt over to the small boy, seizing him immediately, turning him onto his back.

“Nigel,” Matthew bellowed, “Nigel, what’s wrong?”

Just then something distracted him, and he repelled against the unexpected vision of another presence in the room beside him. A hand, a baby’s pale, dirty hand, was groping for an object on the ground several inches shy of
Nigel’s feet. Dwarfish fingers fumbled and found their grip, lifting the object into full view and suspended before the boy by a single tenuous leg. Its remaining limbs protracted, twirled and caressed the air.

A spider. A black widow spider.

As Matthew gazed upwards, he beheld an infant, clutching the spider carefully and proudly, an infant of bloodless white and sooty with filth, retreating into a dimly lit corner. It sat there with its vile plaything, withdrawing into a curious stupor and ignorant now to its mettlesome guests.

Without further thought, Matthew called out to the darkness behind him, gathering his friend hastily into his arms.

“Get someone!” he shouted, he bawled, “Oh please...the security man, hurry, go get the security man, he’s dying!”

Tears flooded the boy’s face now, tears which anguished for his little friend’s life, of grief over the woeful fact that it was he himself who brought the boy here, that it was his own damn fault.

He turned, called out again behind him, but Dabby did not respond. Did not, or could not. Perhaps she had heard him and his pleas for the security man. She would bring him, and he would know what to do.

Nigel’s spasms and breathless gasps weakened sedately within Matthew’s arms. Matthew struggled feebly to keep him alive by rocking him almost furiously, instinctually believing the boy would remain conscious if only he was kept in constant movement.

At first, he did not notice the massive pool of shadow which now towered over and above him, nor did his senses reveal the currents of warm air against the sudden rankness of the decaying room surging into the back of his shirt and rippling against his skin.

And the shadow moved.

His face met the malodorous rush as he pivoted into it unexpectedly, alarmingly. The dark silhouette of what now filled his vision was shrouded by a warm and wispy blur. Matthew stared into it, glaring, his thoughts racing then slowing then numbing like a ferris wheel grinding to a stop. His fear and panic ceased as though the currents of warmth had snatched them away, sucked them up the way a drinking straw drains the contents of a cola cup.

And Matthew remained that way, even after the echoes of the security man’s shouts announced the advent of what could have been salvation if only by then they were still not too late.

Max Polito would not sleep that afternoon; and for many years afterwards, languished dreams would remind him of the confoundment beheld in the moments to come. He would remember the first hazy mutterings of a nine-year-old treated for shock, the boy who sat silent and totally alone when Max had discovered him just beyond the ramshackle walls of unsettling memory.

The Wraith-child got Nigel.

These dreams would come to involve and encompass him, in time, and in them he would discover his own desperate dreams.

And perhaps he would live to regret them.
PART ONE:

MAX & THE WATCHER SWAP STORIES

“What we call the beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

-- T.S. Eliot
1.

*Message of Untimely Importance*

-January 2nd, 1995-

Let me take a moment to properly introduce myself. I am Maxwell J. Polito. At the time of this writing, I am forty-six years old. I am three years into my first marriage, and my wife and I are happy together. My full head of light-brown, greying hair gives me a rather scholarly appearance when I slick it back with protein gel. I keep a slim, athletic build with daily exercise routines and by avoiding red meat, and I drink water from small, expensive, corrugated plastic bottles. From the way I dress to the way I vote I am methodically conservative in style, and I carry a keen business sense by which, like an aggressive newspaper reporter, I let nothing stand in my way.

If my parents had not sought careers in the film industry early on, I can only envision myself encompassed within a life of priesthood and pasta in a Queens, New York neighborhood where they hailed from, where their parents would still be hailing Mary and taxi cabs from if they were alive today. This would probably have been better for my own eventual good, and my folks would’ve given me brothers and sisters rather than being so excessively preoccupied with making film features. Instead, I was raised in and around Los Angeles, and if it had not been so, I would not be where I am today.

And I wouldn’t be telling this story.

Over the years, I have been regarded as one of the world’s foremost authorities concerning the unknown, and more precisely on the subject of UFOs. Most of you may find yourselves familiar with my public television series, with my books and lectures, or through distastefully written one-liners by late night talk show hosts. I hold a Ph.D. in Psychology from Hawthorne University and have undergone extensive studies in the fields of physics, parapsychology and ancient history. I have worked in eleven different countries and speak five languages fairly fluently. When people think of the cosmos, they think of Sagan; when they think of UFOs, they think of me.

I owe much of my success to only a few very human simplicities. I know how to appeal to the common sense of the average skeptic by remaining candidly honest and persuasively rational. An open mind has earned me the respect of the fanatical. My success could never have been possible, however, if it were not for that basic universal human trait we all share differently: a belief in the unknown.

The way I see it is this: I have always believed in the existence of myself. Before I could ever believe in the unknown or in anything else, I became aware I was alive. This self-awareness is a kind of introductory courtesy bestowed upon us by the powers that be, a “welcome-to-the-planet” free parking pass for a global theme park that still requires “E” tickets if you wish to enjoy the rides.

The second thing I ever believed came along so quickly afterwards, my awareness and I were left with scarcely time enough to become remotely acquainted.

That second belief was, you guessed it, the unknown.

The unknown hit me as early as when I coughed out my last spew of womb water upon the hospital floor, allowing me that first inverted view of objects and beings I then could not understand.

It is 2:27, Tuesday morning, January 3rd, 1995.

It seems as though only several hours ago I was forced to become self-aware all over again.

And, as surely as I am alive, the unknown was swift to catch up behind.

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When the truth of the events I am about to describe were made known to me, my rattled senses still hadn’t adjusted to the remarkable realities of what I was already experiencing. It was as though some maniacal prankster had subtly slipped LSD tabs between my lips as I slept, soon rousing me into this madness.

That was how I felt when I did awake, quite literally, on what should have been a dismally rainy Sunday
evening, the twenty-eighth of August, 1994. But it wasn’t. And for that matter, nothing else was as it should have
been, either.

I awoke in startled alertness to the chill of an icy breeze, and to the pale contortions of my own arms which had
cradled my buried face a moment before. I found myself struck the next instant with the impression of having been
jolted out of a nightmare. I felt both distressed and exhausted just then, as though I had somehow overslept, perhaps
having slept for days.

No; I felt like I had slept through something, something important, something I was supposed to do or attend. If
I had missed an important business event, missed it by oversleeping, for chrissake, I could have risked a hefty dent
in my reputation.

Sonofabitch.

It would have occurred to me how crazy I sounded, how utterly witless it was to panic over something so
uncertain and improbable. I realized, instead, that the nightmare I may have had was still going on.

I realized this, because I suddenly could not believe where I was. Or how I got there. I could not remember
anything, and in my mounting disarray I found I could not attain a sober reality to do so. Not even if my sanity
depended upon it.

Perhaps I was so accustomed to the upstairs office of my Malibu, California, home that I had failed until then to
comprehend the profound absurdity of my very presence there. If I woke up to find myself in bed, it wouldn’t have
been as much of a shock; if Melony, my wife, was there with me, I wouldn’t have been so disoriented, so overcome
with dread. And if it were ever possible for me to sleep through an important event, she would have made damn sure
I wouldn’t.

I awoke in my upstairs office, not the bedroom. I had fallen asleep at my wife’s desk, slumped over her
typewriter, and I somehow was not supposed to be there. All I could do was sit there mindlessly and hope reality
would trigger my memory once I gave it the chance to sink in.

And then I noticed the letter.

The white page drooped lazily backwards and wound loosely within the typewriter before me, its freshly-typed
contents exposed as though I myself had depressed the concluding letter keys in my slumber.

Reaching, I held the page upright and in full view. If I had indeed typed this, my memory of doing so had gone
the way of the forgotten nightmare and the unknown, slept-through business engagement. The word URGENT hung
isolated in its top left-hand corner and it appeared both rushed and personal.

As I scanned the opening salutation and then the date, it struck me as dizzying nonsense. The letter was written
to me, and dated more than four months ahead from what I would have naturally acknowledged as that final August
Sunday when I awoke:

URGENT 1/2/95

To Maxwell J. Polito, world
renown investigator of
UFO phenomena:

This was as far as I read before I abruptly pulled the sheet from the machine and withdrew from the desk. The
sense of dull reality which lingered with me still had cowered against my newfound conviction that I was the object
of some ridiculous put-on.

If this was proven to be true, that some psychotic wacko whom I somehow offended was wreaking his
vengeance behind it all, I had much more to fear than the possibilities of having been knocked out and tossed before
a typewriter with a funky message. Where was my wife? Was she home?

I set the letter aside and fled from my office. I called for my wife, but Melony did not answer. Heading down
the upstairs hall, I entered the bedroom, but all that lay before me was a vacant bed. Down the stairs, my living room
and kitchen seemed dark and empty even as my fingers found the knobby protrusion of wall switch and announced
my intrusion with an instant rupture of light. The revealing peacefulness mocked me in response, as though my own
home wished to be left undisturbed and that nothing was wrong except what was only in my mind.

I continued to call for Melony. For anyone. I spread wide the pleated doors of the pantry, doubled back and into
the den, even probed the closets and behind the bathroom shower curtain. Hell, I would’ve checked the kitchen
 cabinets if it had occurred to me. I refused to believe I was alone. Alone like this.
After rambling about the back yard and patio, I surveyed the quiet, evening street from the driveway. I opened the garage to inspect both our cars, both nestled safely within, and I re-entered the house through its inside door.

At that point I remembered the letter at my wife’s typewriter, and I cursed myself for not having fully read it at the start. In despondent grief, I realized that this letter could very well be some sort of ransom note, and that Melony was in danger. I thought impetuously of friends and colleagues, of phoning for help. Indeed, it was as though some fiend had slipped me drugs, for the inner workings of my head grew throbbing and feverish. And I had emerged into hell.

Rushing up the stairs and returning to my wife’s desk in frantic assault, I grasped the message. And I read it word for word.

URGENT 1/2/95

To Maxwell J. Polito, world renown investigator of UFO phenomena:

I see you’ve returned to actually read this message now. That’s okay, though; you’re an investigator, and investigators such as yourself have always scurried off in pursuit of critical knowledge when all along that knowledge was sitting right from where they scurried.

Ever heard of a UFO discoverer?

All right, then.

I fully understand the overwhelming displacement you must be enduring at the moment, having awakened to find yourself at the desk before you. The steady hum of that obsolete typewriter of your wife’s needs silencing, which I think you’ve failed to notice among the disarray.

I believe you seek an explanation for all of this, and I wish to grant you one. Although it’s not entirely what you’re expecting, you will find yourself with no choice but to accept it.

And you must immediately do so.

Time is but a bothersome sentry where my efforts are concerned, seeking the submission of both of us as we together struggle against it.

Speaking of time, by the way, I believe you’ll find yourself missing some. As you lift your gaze in the direction of the wall calendar – the silly Land of the Lost one your wife pinned up while you were away… you will innocently assume that Autumn is just around the corner.

Being that your reputation is one of a responsible and devoted man, well-recognized and established as among the most credible authorities on UFO research, it pains me to inform you that Winter is now well upon us and Autumn is very much a thing of history. Not to mention, that certain worldwide UFO conference you were scheduled to host last October.

But don’t let all this upset you, dear Maxwell. No one believes you’re a flake.

Despite the popular notion that you are devising some hoax and will soon reappear to announce that you were abducted by aliens, evidence suggests that you were actually murdered when you entered that church attic last August.

Even though nobody has ever been able to find your body.

You awoke from death, Maxy, not from anything as trivial as sleep.

If I had no conception of what all of this was, compared to what I know to be real, I would have right then and
there abandoned this insanity and phoned for the police.

I’m grateful I didn’t give in to that impulse. Knowing what I know now, it would have been the wrong thing to do. Terribly, horribly wrong. Even at that sudden suspension of time, before my eyes contended for the message’s final sentences, my comprehension overpowered me. As the letter stated, I had no choice but to accept its explanation. Its very existence, though cloaked in numbing mystery, seemed so rational yet so utterly impossible.

I was beginning to recollect fragments of what had happened before the hollow black of sleep delivered me into this present dilemma. I found myself horrified with each recollection that surfaced, with each clue and faded vision.

I recalled my ongoing attempt to achieve what could have been my crowning glory, the discovery that would earn me a permanent place in the forefront of human scientific history. After twenty-six years of professional research, I was on the verge of providing mankind with indisputable proof that there exists among us a race of nonhuman beings, living as we do, appearing as we appear.

In pursuit of this proof I was led to the attic of a certain fundamentalist church in the city of Lawndale, located somewhere below Los Angeles. I did not remember anything else before I awoke amidst the drifting vapors of disturbing dream, inside the office of my home, dozens of miles away.

I knew that this letter was authored by someone or something linked with my own research. This was, by my own personal instincts, no prank. I could not explain what had exactly happened to me, nor what was happening still. Perhaps the letter had been placed along with me at my wife’s desk, though the reasoning behind where I found it was no more clear than the reasoning behind where I found myself. But my acceptance of this typewritten conundrum as the gospel truth provided little remedy for my near-crippling distress. In a way, it fueled it. I still didn’t know what to expect.

I felt much the same as when one is awed by the impossible feats of a master magician. Everyone knows what to expect of a master magician, for experience dictates that we should expect the impossible from him. We anticipate unexplainable acts that further and further defy what we know to be real. We may even invest both time and money to watch him perform as we sit tottering within creaky, cushioned theatre seats, fully prepared for an onslaught of things we could never truly prepare for. But regardless of what he performs, we do not flee the theatre in deranged panic when he divides a young lady into thirds with a hacksaw.

Even when that young lady happens to be you.

I must take the letter seriously, for I have made this theatre seat my own, and I intend to sit through the show. At least, now that I have reason to believe what I am dealing with here are my own master magicians and now my wife’s involved.

I should add that it is no longer entirely true that man fears what he fails to understand. These days, man lines up to buy tickets for it.

Somewhere down this line I had stood to buy tickets, never expecting that my response to a show of hands would lead this volunteer to center stage, let alone never dreaming that the magician might choose to confide in me a few of his secrets.

The letter ended:

Anyhow, my persevering rival, I sympathize with your predicament as it came about through no intentions of mine. It was purely a matter of things meant to be. I only work here, as they say.

And you will, too.

Isn’t this what you always wanted?
Your wife says so. And she needs you here, too.

Come, visit us, and behold, we shall show you a great mystery. Perk up some coffee while we’re at it. Write a bestselling novel, even.

Take the Mustang to Carbon Canyon. Santa Monica freeway to Interstate five going south. East on ninety-one to seventy-one north, and left on Carbon Canyon Road. Keep going until you get hungry. Heaven knows it’s been months since you’ve eaten.
2.

Maxwell Gets A Grip

It was as though they had recalled my sanity and this letter was my receipt to run down and pick up a new one. When I finished the letter, the very mention of my wife’s involvement rendered me nauseous. I could not allow my anxiety to invoke further morbid imaginings, and I fought to refuse any notion that Melony had fallen into mishap. If the matters expressed within the letter were truly as I perceived them, there could be no doubt she had been safe all along.

What tormented me was my not knowing for sure. All the letter revealed was that she needed me and I was to be on my way shortly. If I gave in to any further panic, it would surely slow my departure, if not paralyze it. If only I could grab hold of the reins of my rampant senses and conquer this madness, I could approach this situation with all the disciplined conduct I normally should have. I needed respect and reverence, as this promised to be the climax of twenty-six years of ambitious exploration, the ultimate discovery of our age. With that in mind, I should expect myself to be as anxious and as giddy as a child.

I should be any of these things, any and all, but I wasn’t.

Re-examining the letter, welcoming now its contents and working my mental disarray into a serene compliance, I sat within the brown leather of Melony’s desk chair and found myself slowly relaxing, giving in. It occurred to me that I should be grateful, for I could have been further disadvantaged by awakening elsewhere, in an environment totally alien to me. I could’ve found myself soiled and ragged and staring up euphorically at a family of spotted llamas in some grassy Peruvian valley, for all I knew. Or worse.

Whatever I had been through, the very fact that I ended up here, inside my own home, perhaps even placed here purposely and thoughtfully, eased my mind. It comforted me in a way so intensely relieving that I was not at first aware of my own tears.

And the letter....

What if I had opened my eyes to the letter’s author, without there ever having been a letter to prepare me for
what I would see?

Rising from the office chair, my body still trembling from the aftershocks of nervousness, I gazed about the room. I realized I was nearly freezing, and moved to shut the side window. I paused to take in a few breaths of the outside ocean air.

After this, I turned to the red digits of the clock radio roosted atop a corner file cabinet. It read 8:16 p.m. It couldn’t have been more than half an hour earlier when I was first embraced by this chaos; looking at the ordeal then as I did, my recent actions felt almost primal, racing about the house as though my ass was ablaze.

The letter stated I had been murdered. Although I could not bring myself to fully face the memories of my fateful attic visit, I knew that what happened to me there was why I was here now. Despite this, and despite its accompanying dread, I felt suddenly very much alive.

I was home.
And I knew what I needed to do.

***

Back to the master magician again, if only but for another moment. Is it such a crime to ask how he does it, to allow him to make you think for awhile? I found I needed only a little while to collect my thoughts, to be a bit more rational, to get a grip. If I was to truly encounter something extraordinary tonight, I needed to prepare, to become focused.

Whoever awaited my arrival wasn’t going anywhere. Or was he?
(I only work here, as they say. And you will, too.)

I didn’t need to know right then how this master magician accomplished anything, for this I knew would be answered in due time. What I wanted to know was how I would go about following the letter’s instructions; it wouldn’t be as simple as taking the Mustang for a drive.

Was I really dead? Where had my body been for the past four months? How did I end up home?

The clothes I wore were newly washed and pressed. My black leather shoes glistened as though new, and the knitted brown and beige sweater rolled up to my elbows had that lemon-fresh scent I always pretended to fancy. The pockets of my beige cotton trousers held loose change in their right front, and from the left I retrieved my handmade “Communion” alien key chain baring its proper assortment of keys. There was also a half-empty packet of plain M&Ms, a favorite inside joke Melony and I shared from our initials and our favorite munchies as well. I slid my wallet from my rear for likewise inspection. My license, business and credit cards were untouched, and I disclosed four twenty-dollar bills and a few ones within the main pouch.

Curious, I optioned to explore the house only to confirm my inklings. During my previous stampede I failed to notice how remarkably tidy everything was. Naturally, one does not pause to appreciate the spotless linoleum when he suddenly fears his wife has been abducted. But free of immediate alarm, I was beginning to take oddly delightful notice of my surroundings, and was able to finally evaluate my circumstances with a reasonably sound mind.

I must admit that the questions which plagued me were growing all the more numerous and perplexing along with my calm. And I still wasn’t quite myself, not that I ever again would be.

Due to the often nail-biting schedule kept by both my wife and I, our income provided us with the convenience of maid service every Tuesday, Friday, and sometimes Sunday afternoon. Perhaps, in our absence, they had continued their schedules until they found we could no longer be contacted for payment. They were extremely trusted and employed by only one other household, so they were given keys and the security code for the alarm system. Were they still cleaning for us? After all this supposed time?

And who had dressed me in clothes such as these, in a manner which suggested that my wife herself had done it?

Standing there, gazing downwards in consternation towards a carpet so disturbingly shampooed that its normal ruby tone seemed almost orange, I realized I was still holding my wallet. That was when I decided to experiment.

It was intuition which made me first submit to the authenticity of the upstairs letter, but the cowardice I faced by the mere notion of challenging its message made me hesitate. Something within me whispered that I was wasting precious time; that I should have been out the door by now.

I stepped into the kitchen. I made up my mind. I opened my wallet and reached for the wall phone.

Outside, the wind rapped steadily against the glass of the curtained kitchen window, and for the first time since I awoke I caught the gentle clamor of the pipe chimes swaying and suspended beneath the patio awning. Before the first number was dialed, it was their wispy serenade which tenderly hinted that perhaps the source of my calm had
risen from the reassuring efforts of my home itself.
And my home did not want me to leave.
3.

*A Boulevard of Doors*

A strange, restless urgency to abandon everything without further thought or delay would not let me be. It was like being hounded for loose change by the vagrants at the corner store while trying to use the payphone. Aside from this annoyance, there was not a doubt in my traumatized mind that one or two inquiring phone calls would bring me closer to my rational perceptive self. I could not comply with the letter’s invitation until I was satisfied by this simple task. The Master Magician, whoever he may be, could wait an extra ten minutes.

On the other hand, what about Melony?

My speculation was cut short as was the dial tone of my cordless, and I moved for a seat at the dining room table nearby. I spread my wallet and its selected contents before me as the mannerly effeminate voice of my bank’s twenty-four-hour customer service representative put me on hold. After a minute or two with an earful of an instrumental rendition of Blind Faith’s “*Can’t Find My Way Home*,” the matter of my conventional obligations was put to rest. Somehow, my monthly banking needs had been tended to, as was everything else, as though I had never been gone at all.

This amounted to two reasonable explanations: either I hadn’t been gone at all but instead suffered four months’ worth of amnesia, which meant this whole letter thing was a joke...

...or my wife had been living here without me all along.

Needless to say, this discovery put me at ease all the more and I found no desire to continue with the experiment. I withdrew from the table and replaced the phone into the wall cradle. I fought against any further urge to speculate or delay and the growing temptations to place additional calls to friends or associates might prove futile and even dangerous.

I made my way back up the stairs and returned to my office. Standing beside my wife’s desk one final time, I noticed the *Land of the Lost* calendar my wife had apparently placed upon the wall. It bared the month of January ‘95 and it made me feel distant and alertly out of place.

I snatched the letter and gave it a quick re-read, then proceeded to my own desk to retrieve an organizer notebook and micro-cassette recorder. As it was with everything, I located them in the places they normally would be. I checked the tape in the recorder and removed extra ones from a sealed package inside the middle desk drawer, then reverted for the entire package. These necessities now gathered, I shut off the lights and returned to the stairway, hurried across the living room, and exited out the front door.

At last.

Not far out on the walkway, I shifted to return to the upstairs office only once more, grumbling, as I recalled the letter’s mention of the humming of Melony’s typewriter, and of my neglecting to turn it off.

***

It was quiet in Malibu that night as I departed, driving south down Pacific Coast Highway and scaling the oceanside. Gazing alternately upon the stretch of road before me and then at the coast to my right, I felt as though I was embarking on a secret mission to smuggle forty-six years of reason into the heartland of unreasonable chaos. The coast was like an endless welcome mat of uneven wasteland molded into the roadside like adhesive siding, its colossal door open wide to a swollen, black terrain.

As my pale-brown Mustang climbed upon the freeway onramp and proceeded eastward, I found myself facing the emergence of traffic and engulfing city lights. I was too much aware of myself and my impending destiny and drove with all the careful attention of a driver in combat with his own drunkenness. Life was active and bustling around me and I felt unique to a secret, which concerned every aspect of it. I felt profoundly chosen.

I wondered what secrets were carried by the cities and buildings and vehicles around me, by the lives behind them all. The more I wondered about them, the more I wanted to know them and this was how I came across my own
secret to begin with.

It was as though I hadn't enough to wonder about already.

That night, the whole world seemed unknown to me. It was like starting all over again, back to the basics with Discovery 101. Continuing down the freeway and merging onto the Corona Expressway, everything I passed was to me an everlasting and boundless boulevard of doors, each door containing secret upon secret awaiting revelation. That was the way my life had been. That was the way all life around me seemed now. I imagined this was the way one felt while journeying through that infamous tunnel of light on the verge of meeting his maker.

I was now entering Carbon Canyon.

Stretching northward from the Carbon Canyon Reservoir and up through Chino Hills State Park, this was the home of manifold mysteries, each shrouded subtly amidst the innocence and solitude of rural ranch house turf. Stories have trickled downwards from beyond its lofty hills and grasslands like melted snow upon the ears of neighboring communities. To most, these were nothing more than rumors of supernatural mayhem, whimsical accounts of witchcraft and occult rituals in the hours of late night obscurity, of strange greenish mists emitted from alleged government bases, of floating balls of light and vanishing yokels.

Nothing but the finest in Backwoods Town, U.S.A., superstition.

These tales would thrive as long as humanity maintained its imagination. I, however, would just as soon be interested in most of them as I would be exploring the underbellies of rocks in my backyard. It never used to be that way, and fifteen or so years ago one would easily find me in hot pursuit of these less-than-credible countryside flights of fancy. Yet here I was now, in the middle of it all, adding to this trivial folklore the very ingredients necessary to change the course of civilized man.

And goddamn, was I ever hungry.

Under normal conditions, one would not expect this to be the proper time to think about food. I did not wish to be hungry, but I was overcome with the desire to eat as instantly as I had glanced upon the letter's final instruction. Keep going until you get hungry.

Besides, it was apparently true that I hadn't eaten in more than four months. And these certainly were not normal conditions. However inappropriate it seemed in my mind, I was already digging into my pocket for that half-empty M&Ms wrapper.

***

Carbon Canyon Road, at this time of night, turned out to be a treacherously abysmal obstacle course, a twisting and turning labyrinth of formless black wilderness. Every so often, I would spy a lonely street light or two illuminating a cluster of quieted homes or stables. I assumed the canyon had fallen victim to a power outage until I noticed there were no street lights anyway.

Towering dark formations in the distance before me soon became walls of rock revealed by my Mustang's high beams. A mountaneous borderland lay ahead, floating upon the distending vista like a deluge of lofty apparitions, rising with every moment of my approach from the depths of a thick, Stygian pool of nightfall. It was a disclosure both menacing and beautiful, surrounding me fully much sooner than I'd expected. Within the next moment, the road diverted abruptly to the right, my lights pivoting in rapid secession from the sloping hillside walls. Steering viciously to retain my course, I navigated the bend only to be pitted against an ambush of bright light.

An onrush of three or four vehicles swept into the opposing lane, passing me and plunging into the darkness from which I came, a welcoming committee of sorts to the challenging thruway I had just entered. Nearly every sharp curve promised a showdown of more oncoming headlights, splashing into my view without notice, my eyes dripping with blindness as they billowed past. Their sporadic stampede and the narrowness of the road together gave me the illusion they were racing directly into me. The urge to swerve off in panic was a deadly instinct held into check by my frozen grip upon the wheel.

I wondered if the hands of fate ever did drugs. As I endured this portion of my journey, I began to draw the conclusion that the fate folks upstairs were wide and flying and flicking cigarette butts at a television screen displaying my feverish image. They had only to depress the button which would make my illusion real, thwarting my newfound realities into a speeding semi and tomorrow's six o'clock news.

No sooner had I begun to pray for relief when the gorge yawned into open terrain once again. Even better, I saw that I had emerged into a more populated area. Intersections branched outwards, both to my left and right, leading through scattered residences bathed in yellow lamplight. Somehow, I felt overwhelmingly redeemed.

Until, within the next few minutes, I felt lost.

Where was I to go? I was still hungry, of course, but was I expected to simply follow my empty stomach? Follow it like that damn animated toucan follows his nose to the flavors of fruit in that cereal commercial?
If I was, it wouldn’t surprise me.
I had a good mind to pull over and park at the roadside, and wait for the unknown to come to me. With my luck, what actually would come to me would be a cop. And what would I say to him?
I dug into my pocket for more M&Ms.
There were only three left.
And they were already melting in my hands.

***

The countryside view I had wished for only lasted a mile and a half, and my precious street lights decreased in number with the concluding remnants of community farmland. The road curved at an incline as my headlights reflected back from steel guardrails perched upon fat wooden pegs rising from the embankment, directing me around a sloping grassy hillside.

I slowed to a crawl. I clicked down my high beams finally, preparing in advance for a second stampede of heavy traffic, my nerves preparing for another envelopment of rocky walls.

I didn’t prepare for what came instead, as the foothills parted and the road gave way to the approaching vision to my right.

Peacefully anchored along the shoreline of a gravel sea was a solitary diner. It was average in size and structure, and nameless but for the pale blue neon of a generic diner sign mounted above a level rooftop and between two rotating air vents. Its interior was brightly lit, a beacon in the midst of consuming shadow, disclosing a view of the scattered occupants within.

So enticingly welcome was this sight that I made it a necessary destination at once. My appetite had swollen in painful succession to each moment of anxious starvation as I neared. It occurred to me that the letter’s mention of hunger was a riddle to be understood only at a specific point in time.

This point in time.

It made complete sense to me then that hunger was a predetermined reference to this diner, a reference both puzzling and vague to any who should happen across the letter’s contents unintended. Contrarily, I thought it to be outright silly that I should meet an entity responsible for timeless universal mystery over a cup of coffee and a bagel. Surely I was not drawn here for vain disappointment, bewitched by some hi-tech subliminal publicity stunt pushing midnight meal specials to superstitious nitwits.

I veered onto a driveway of broken asphalt which tapered into the diner’s parking lot, its gravel crackling beneath my Mustang’s tires like crispy toasted rice in milk. The fact that mine was the only vehicle in the lot alerted me to a sudden self-consciousness. An imaginary vigil of countless hidden spectators gazed upon me in simultaneous fixation, their heads extended like a herd of gazelle startled from my mind’s whimsical waterhole. I felt like a first-time courier of drugs for the mob. I wondered what might be watching me. I wondered if this was a mistake.

I crawled into a halt a few yards from the entrance. I silenced my car’s engine and pocketed the keys, and killed my headlights. I regarded a wooden sign suspended into view beyond my windshield, held by chains descending from a looming archway:

“We’re never close.”

Behind this, in the window, was a poster board declaring midnight meal specials.
Tonight’s was Malibu chicken.
I snatched the notorious letter from my side, along with the organizer notebook and micro recorder and gathered the blank cassettes which slid between the seats during the drive. Without further delay, I abandoned the familiar comforts of my Mustang to the rush of bitter canyon air. My emergence from the vehicle was like a bold step into a foreign world. I felt myself an adventurer suddenly, a discoverer, an astronaut, a visitor to a place which should not ordinarily exist and which perhaps would vanish like a dream into the earliest morning light.

I shut the car door and surveyed the property and I was reminded of my view of the starlit coastline from the Malibu highway before. I breathed in deeply the frosty air, enraptured for the moment by its relaxing freshness until my skin grew numb against its chill. I cast a curious gaze into the dining room windows and spied an elderly man
stABBing salad greens with a fork at a corner booth. Before he could catch notice of my scrutiny, I proceeded across
the gravel towards the entranceway's glass double doors.

The glass door to my right hung invitingly open as I arrived beside it, extending its patient courtesy to not only
myself but to the coldness I now sought to escape. In passing I thought to shut this door, and I shuffled the
belongings I held for a free hand. I reached for its handle, the horizontal bar kind common to emergency exit doors,
and I shot a quick glance to the empty vestibule and vacant counter for a self-conscious acknowledgement of
approval. I was actually somewhat relieved to find no one there and I cringed to myself as I realized I might not yet
be fully prepared to face what I had come here for. As much as I longed for my wife, I feared her confrontation as
well. Up until now I had been alone in this and in a matter of minutes the impending company would make real what
still to me remained dreamlike.

I drew myself toward the door until my breath became an explosion of white misty cloud upon the surface of
the glass. It was as though I’d inhaled any hidden complacencies into a breath-frost which dissolved like water
beads heated upon a kettle into ripples of steam. I grappled with my confidence until I willed it to rise. I stared for a
moment through the glass at the wispy torrents of life as I knew it, and in my blurred reflection I beheld the
fossilizing remnants of a Max Polito that once was. Silent and sentimental, I bade it a final farewell.

I hadn’t expected anything short of a casual entry after this. I gripping the door’s handle, but several futile tugs
revealed it was somehow locked into place. Feeling a bit foolish, I would have abandoned my efforts as I had not
come all this way to contend with an unruly door. But as soon as I released my grip the door creaked disastrously
ajar, christening my entry with a confounding loss of balance; I found myself slipping impossibly backwards, my
frozen ass plummeting to a painful collision with the hard entranceway flooring. In striving to retain my grip upon
the door’s handle I clumsily lurched forward, further complicating the embarrassing episode as my armful of
journalistic accessories spilled from their brown-and-beige-sweatered hammock, splashing across my feet and the
encircling tile floor in a bedlam of clamorous grief. Inadvertently, as if to polish off the performance, my restored
grip upon the handle issued a faceful of glass which could have shattered had I not at least some small degree of
luck and the door locked firmly in place, pitting my nose no more than an inch away from a blue and white
dero endorsement for Diner’s Club.

Time appeared to stop amidst the following silence, and I dared not turn to the presence I felt behind me. I
leaned over to retrieve the clutter about me, fighting against the weight of attention which tried to paralyze me,
ashamed and distressed of the notion that the unknown itself could come running to my aid at any given moment.

It was not supposed to happen this way.

My organizer notebook lay unscathed amidst a dispersion of microcassettes. My microrecorder had fallen face-
down, and I cursed as I raised its rectangular body to find the plastic window severely cracked. Then two AA
batteries spilled out from their ruptured compartment.

I failed to notice, at first, the reflected image of the woman before me in the closed entry door’s glass.

I was distracted by the movement of light from her flickering image....I shot my gaze to the glass pane, my full
attention seized but for the awareness of my quickening heartbeat.

The woman was approaching me in determined but politely cautious strides, disproportioned into a seemingly
impossible distance behind me, beyond me and dwarfish enough to present the illusion of being perched upon my
reflected shoulder like a voluputous human parrot. I spied the front register counter following up in stunted visage
upon the view’s horizon. The counter truly could not have been more than several yards away from my crouching
back, which logically placed the woman’s actual position a mere few feet from me.

I feared a hand upon my shoulder at any given moment. I could almost feel her breath there. I could almost
catch the drifting fragrance of Channel mingled with the sweet scent of familiar hair spray. I could see the shroud of
lampblack luster limply draped and shoulder-length, hair framed about flawless Venezuelan features, caressing
waves sweeping against tan brown skin and the shoulder straps of an azure autumn house dress.

I sat trembling. Any strength I thought I had in facing my wife suddenly crumbled into chalk dust set adrift
from a denuded slate. I was a thunderstruck corpse of petrified flesh and blood beneath the fear of what actually
might be there, that if I was to turn I would find not my wife...but in fact something else.

My eyes fixed upon her ghostly figure in the glass, my body hunched awkwardly over forgotten research relics.
My hearing was by now acutely attuned to the sounds of clanking dishes and the sizzling of grills, sounds fading
against the mounting threat of Melony’s voice speaking to me. I was aware of only silence until then, as though
someone impulsively popped a quarter into a jukebox selection of kitchen clatter chorus to revive me from my
stunned state. Just as instantly, I could smell the aroma of broiled and boiled banquet, as though it had not existed a
moment before. All this would have surely antagonized my empty belly into record depths of growling rage if my
hunger had not been snuffed beneath the numbing blanket of my wife’s semblance.

As my senses livened to the environment around me, I found myself able to think, able to move. I felt myself
capable of spinning to face my wife, to leap upon my feet and embrace her as I should have within the very instant I saw her, to cry out with every emotion suppressed until then by the confusion I had awakened to, to exclaim to the world and to the forces which separated us that I missed her, missed her deeply. I wanted to proclaim that regardless of unknown destiny, I could not face such an appalling isolation from my most precious beloved again and to do so would be an act of unmistakable evil I would fight against to the death.

This resurgence of will was more than enough to encourage any conscious ability to move, if not to face my fears nor to embrace Melony, then to simply get out of the goddamn doorway. And I moved, turning in dilatory incline, my vision panned like a surveillance camera reviving from a power loss.

I continued to turn, even as I sensed the touch of her hand. I felt it upon my shoulder, resting suddenly and comfortably and I had no recollection of it having actually been placed there. It was as though it had been there all along, even before the spectacle of my arrival, fingers molded gently against the arch of my collarbone, subtle palm cupped shallow into the knit sweater-cloaked soft flesh above my shoulder blade. It could be true that this touch alone initiated my ability to move and it had not resulted from my own strength after all.

If this touch called me into motion just steps ahead of my own awareness, this would account for the strange, detached sensation which swept over me, a sensation cruelly overridden in the incessant parallel drawn for me since this whole mess began. It was at this particular moment, however, when time as I knew it broke free from its linear shell and emerged scrambled before me in mismatched fragments.

To perfect a description of what came next, I would have to be dyslexic. Even still, only I could truly read and understand.

But there came a voice: she was speaking to me, and as my eyes drew further into my wife’s direction I knew instantly that the voice I heard did not belong to the woman I knew.

It was the voice of another woman entirely. What she said did not seem directed at me. It was more of a general announcement.

“*We’ve got tonight’s special!*”

And as I looked, I saw that what spoke was not human. Whatever it was, it was clearly female and quite curvaceous, but legless and floating upon a bed of invisible currents of warmth, unclothed, its skin gleaming with the luster of polished bronze. It raised its arms to me.

As I dropped further to the floor in a trance of crippling weakness, my vision fell upon the typewritten letter that brought me there.

I lost all consciousness then, but in my last remaining thoughts I realized what the voice had meant.

And I thought of midnight meal specials.

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4.

*Time Retold At the Motel Untold*

My second episode of lost consciousness.

So far to memory.

And no matter the amount of days or hours or chunks of moments then passing beneath linear time’s eternal scrutiny, the occurrence, when I came to, felt like I’d *blinked* out rather than *blacked*. 
The abrupt rudeness in my unforeseen dismissal left me with a resentment of having been cheated out of a promise. Had I done something wrong? Had the plans been diverted, relocated elsewhere? Had the torch been passed to a more suitable and less clumsy candidate?

If I opened my eyes, would I find myself home again, shaken to attention by Auntie Emm’s black-and-white realities where all my friends had been with me all along?

It appeared that the scene had made its debut almost as awkwardly as I had made the scene, toppling from what I knew into what I knew the next moment, then into what I was learning still. I was a victim of parody, a parody of myself, an obscene portrayal of mock tangibility suffering sporadic power failures from a projection room in the theatre of my mind.

As for the Powers That Be...well, for me, the Powers That Be weren’t the powers that they used to be.

I opened my eyes.

I was no longer in the diner.

I found myself before an electric typewriter baring a blank sheet of inserted paper.

I jolted upwards and awake.

Jumping the gun of throttled instinct gave way to realizing I had not been rejected and returned to my home after all. My environment remained foreign. I faced a cheap wooden student’s desk, its two drawers planted like two weathered square boxes to the right of the encompassing leg space beneath my view. I faced the swirls of plain plaster yellow of a wall against which clung the desk’s backside, and the wall opened to my left, into a gaping black vestibule which reflected dim movement from deep within its center. An overhead lampshade blossomed from drooping chain links in a tarnished embroidery of rose petals, bathing me in a spotlight of webbed fumes from a cigarette.

Without thinking, I reached towards a desktop ashtray that wasn’t there. I’d quit smoking years ago, sometime in my mid-twenties, and I had to remind myself so.

Someone else was smoking.

The movement of light within the black vestibule upon my next gaze was now a splinter of reflection from a mirror hung over a wash basin.

Someone was with me.

Someone was behind me, smoking a cigarette behind me.

I was no longer in the diner.

I was in a motel room.

***

The Watcher made himself known when I turned to face his presence behind me.

He was smoking, exhaling smoke which tumbled and twisted in vaporous streams throughout my realm of lamplight. He was seated at the edge of the room’s only bed, a queen-sized bed, unmovable and silent, his cloaked configuration facing an average-sized rectangular motel room window, his back turned toward me. The drapes were opened, the window was shut, my lamplight’s reflection bouncing blindness off the window’s glass surface together with the circular birch brown embroidery of the bedcovers thrown evenly and smoothly over the mattress and bloated twin pillows.

Cigarette ashes fell from a smoldering filter tipped between fingers tenebrous and pale. It lowered, the figure lowering himself slowly with it, crushing the butt into an ashtray nest half full of smokes previously spent and destroyed upon the bed beside him.

His countenance drawn for a moment beneath a perimeter of light, I beheld the windowed reflection of a wizened and familiar creature, clothed under a thick garment of cotton-white complimentary motel bathrobe, complete with what appeared to be an attached hood shrouding its head like a Bible-land holy man.

My pulse quickened at its very sight, and I was at once frozen in a half-twisted turn against the padded cup of my chair’s wooden back rest. Speechless, I knew only the thrill of enchantment within the presence of destiny’s unspeakable climax of enlightened truth; I could not imagine a sensation more sobering than this, than at long last brought into an intimate confrontation with mankind’s ageless mystery in the flesh.

Rubber-smooth knuckles curved and curled into a lemon-sized fist which lazily lifted to stifle a raspy cough. His lipless mouth could not have opened any wider than the face of my wristwatch. When his mouth closed, it formed a simple, placid, horizontal line.

I expected his body to be hairless and sleek, with skin of slate, or skin of creamy-colored off-white as his hands and visible facial features appeared to be against the lamp’s soft glow. Standing, he could not have been more than four feet in height. He sat with legs crossed, silently but for a series of ill-repressed coughs. I could not yet see his
eyes, could not strain my own should any attempt at deliberate observation prove offensive to his company.

He spoke to me, and in the reflection in the window I could see the fleshy, horizontal slits of his mouth which indented vertically, then expanding into a diamond-shaped cavity in much the same way the top flap of a milk carton would open. When he spoke, he did so in a voice completely unexpected to me, for I hadn’t anticipated anything less alien than a high-pitched sort of intonation or a bass-low royal utterance of authority.

Instead, he spoke with the voice of a man. A contemporary human male, no less, with a kick-back slang spoken almost lazily, almost in depressed sorrow, hinting of a certain sarcastic resentment I could have taken personally if I hadn’t noticed immediately that it was directed not towards me but towards circumstance. There was an air of confidence, not in how he spoke but in the words themselves, which he used, carefully chosen, and in these words I found the underlying pronouncements of a being agelessly knowledgeable yet somehow human enough to remain at odds with that knowledge.

“How do you love your wife?” he asked me.

I did not expect this to be his first words, and I placed myself in check to expect the unexpected. Feeling subjected to a surge of humility in his presence, I instead gave in to my own professional instinct to question and not to simply kiss ass. And I had many questions. “Why do you ask?”

He answered with a shrug, and was silent, but his shrug displayed an indifference which assured me there was no cause for alarm, although the apparent lack of concern pissed me off.

Maybe this was his way of breaking the ice, because my sudden indignation reduced my awe considerably and I felt free enough to speak on human terms. But before I could answer, and quite demandingly I might add, yes I love my wife, what of it, he spoke again.

“She loves you, and very much, I should say.”

I didn’t expect this, either.

Okay, so I still expected things.

When I chose to keep silent, not knowing what to say to this, still absorbing my delight in his words and anticipating more, waiting for him to go on, he continued.

He changed the subject.

“How was your journey? Manic? Surreal? Frustrating?”

I didn’t know how to answer.

“You hungry at all?”

I had forgotten about that. I remembered my M&Ms feast on my way there, and I couldn’t believe I was as hungry as I was. I couldn’t believe I wasn’t the least bit hungry now. This reminded me for crazy reasons not of food but of my equipment I had brought with me, the microcassette recorder, and I cringed as this in turn reminded me of my clumsy pratfall at the diner entrance.

“You don’t talk very much, do you, Mister UFO Investigator? Or is it detective UFO Investigator?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Church On The Rock. Lawndale. Remember? You went there looking for my kind. You couldn’t very well tell the pastor of that holy place that you were there on official UFO business now, could you? You were the sly one, weren’t you? You could tell, Uncle....”

Again, the detestable sarcastic cool. Wasn’t there a more reasonable method to pacify my butterflies than to pique my temperament?

“Private Investigator,” I found myself answering, “I did not impersonate an officer.” I also found myself remembering. Remembering more. I thought to tell him, purely out of offense, I am not your Uncle, but the thought why did he call me Uncle distracted me, and instead I found myself dumbfounded, and I asked him, “Who are you?”

“I am a Watcher.”

I waited. In waiting, I noticed he had not changed his position, but remained in a half-turn, leaning toward his ashtray and I got the self-conscious feeling he was scrutinizing me from the corner of an eye that appeared to be bulbous and black.

He continued, “Don’t ask me why I’m called that. That is what they call me. Why they call me that is a long story. What matters now is that I’m watching you.”

I said nothing. I couldn’t say anything.

“And you are watching me,” he said. “I must be very new to you, yet I’m very old. Older than you may suppose. Older than what I supposed when I thought I was human. Does that surprise you? That I thought I was once human?”

This time he waited for an answer and, mesmerized, I gave him one. “I don’t know what surprises me anymore. When I was still in college, I was earning my way as a security guard. I was making minimum wage guarding this old cannery, and some children I knew decided to take a tour of this condemned apartment building, God knows
where they got the guts, on the other side of it. They got around me, and before I knew it, I was pulled from my post by one of them, this little girl. She told me her friend was in trouble. When I got there, deep inside the building, I came across a boy who had seen something. It turned out that another boy, a little black boy, had died in his arms and was taken away by that same something afterwards. The older boy who had come upon him went into shock and later said that he’d seen some sort of a monster. Their reason for going there was to see a ghost baby, a superstitious rumor the people in that area were nuts about. But what the older boy saw wasn’t any ghost. It turned out to be huge, whatever it was, and it was guarding an infant. That is, if you buy the story. I learned to buy the story.” I could not take my gaze from the Watcher. “And I guess you buy it, too.”

“News came in that the body of an infant was discovered in the back alley of a nightclub this summer,” I remembered I was now in January, “last” summer. That news eventually led me to a church, and I was the only one who knew the child’s murderer went to that church. This toddler was verified as missing in 1968. And he was still a toddler. Dead. Talk about a ghost baby. But he wasn’t a ghost baby before he went looking for a ghost baby. I believed this other mysterious child grew to maturity, and eventually murdered this black child again, the one they found behind the club.

“Second, that thing I saw in the diner, when I came up here, before I blacked out and found myself here, looked exactly like what that boy with the spider bite described way back when. Jesus, I thought it was my wife, at first. I mean…”

“You thought Bari was your wife?” the Watcher asked. “You’ve been gone way too long, my friend.”

I did not appreciate this whitewashed ridicule. “You know exactly what I mean.” I bit my lip before any uncertain convictions drove me to ask, don’t you? And then, in effort to restrain that uncertainty and retain my focus, I added, or rather, forced, “You mean, I’ve been dead way too long.”

“No, gone too long. You’ve been dead long enough.”

There appeared suddenly a new cigarette between the fingers of the hand that dowsed the last. I had not noticed how it got there, had not noticed any movement for him to reach for one. But as soon as my eyes fell upon it, and this realization had sunk in, he lifted the unlit smoke and offered it to me. His hand reached out in mid-stretch behind his back, over his shoulder.

I declined. “Haven’t picked one up in eighteen years.”

“And you died anyway.”

“Am I still dead?”

“You want this?”

“If you were once human,” I half-challenged, half-reasoned, fully irate, “and if you know what I went through driving over here... hell, if you know all the shit I got into before I woke up tonight, you’d full as fucking well know I want answers, not a cigarette.”

“Listen, Uncle,” he told me, addressing me as such, perhaps to insult me further, “I was once human. I was human a thousand times over you. When a being as elusive and illusory as myself offers you even a cigarette, you’d better take what he gives you. He might be preparing you for what kind of shit there is to follow. I full well know you had little to prepare you for anything until now, since you awoke tonight. You want it or not?”

I stood, leaned across the bed, and took it from him. My fingertips brushed against his, though the instantaneous touch was void of sensation. I dared not gaze beyond those fingers, for fear I might behold his full face unprepared. As I withdrew, a red Bic plunged upon the bedsprad beneath me. I took it, sparked a light, inhaled. I took in the smoke, expecting to cough it out immediately. I didn’t. Exhaling, blowing a smoke stream upwards and to the ceiling, I felt admittedly refreshed. In thinking so, I felt like a cigarette billboard slogan. I flung the lighter back to him, and he snatched it from between the white cotton crease of his bathrobe and where he sat. I returned to my wooden desk chair.

“In all actuality,” the Watcher continued, “you smoked quite a great deal when you were dead.”

I gagged on my half-inhaled smoke.

“In fact,” he added, “you smoked a great deal just before you died. Like an oil refinery. Took up the nasty habit again not long before, when tension in life and more precisely in your marriage lured you to return to the habit. Shortly after your death, Melony had an affair, you know, before she found out what happened to you. You worked her ass off, in that business partnership of yours.”

I did not like where this was leading. I was recalling more and more of the truth in the words the Watcher spoke of and I detested more and more both what he said and how he said them. I had not been summoned here to discuss my marriage nor cigarette smoking, had not been prepared to be grilled beneath the thrift-store-flowery lampshade of a motel room I did not enter on my own accord. The recurring fears of my wife’s safety were becoming replaced with a swelling conviction that it was I who had been kidnapped, if anyone was at all. I slid a pink plastic wastebasket I found at the desk’s side across the carpet with my shoe to catch my ashes.
Then I spoke my mind.

“Just a minute. Just a goddamn sixty seconds. Can I say something, here? Are you through? I can’t believe I’m here to listen to this, can’t fucking believe I’m sitting here, smoking a fucking cigarette, with you talking to me like this, smoking a fucking cigarette yourself! Hell, I can’t believe I’ve finally met one of you, and I’m talking to you like this! Is that what you do to people, how you abduct people, ‘cause I’ve been under the impression it had nothing to do with smoke sessions in motel rooms and goddamn electric typewriters and letters to meet somewhere at Joe-Billy Bob’s Breakfast in the Boonies if you survive the Death-diesel Brigade getting there—.”

“Are you finished speaking your mind?” the Watcher spat an interruption of smoke and words from an exhaled first drag of a new cigarette, another of which I had not noticed until it made an announcement all its own by a flaunt between fingers.

And then he rose from the bed and turned to face me fully.

He stared straight into my own eyes; I knew he did, yet his eyes bore no pupils, therefore this knowledge was more of an awareness than anything, yet this awareness was so strong I felt his glare blazing headlong through my own, locked into mine. If it were laser beams they surely would have blinded me and pierced clear the hell out of the back side of my fragile human head. His head appeared even more flimsy, almost ghostly white, yet darker, an off-white, almost grey, although I do admit the color of his skin, particularly the skin of his face, played with the shadows of the lamplight and the perceptions of certain dull reality within my mind.

I witnessed infinity in those eyes. I do sincerely mean infinity...those two optical crevices, slanted diagonally as decades of research and even more decades of reported encounters have made me come to have expected, those two eyes drew me into them, and the further they drew me, the more I found I could not escape their gaze, or at least the ultimate attention their gaze commanded me into. Those black, glossy, infinite eyes were hypnotic unlike any human hypnotist I had ever encountered, almost impossible to describe on human terms because human was most definitely what they weren’t, yet, somehow, in that motel bathrobe getup, standing still and silent and facing me as he did, he looked like Yoda. Even still, Yoda’s white, earless, second cousin. Smoking second cousin, the one out on parole.

“...In speaking your mind,” he told me as I sat, forgetting my own cigarette, the one I wasn’t smoking now, its ashes falling where they may within the pink wastebasket or the shaggy shabby carpeting, I didn’t care or notice at that point which, “have you taken into account that I can read your mind? That I know your thoughts? That you haven’t really said anything to me at all yet, haven’t told me anything I didn’t really already know, let alone told me anything?”

I could not release my gaze from his. I understood what he was saying to me, yet I could not feel any reaction to what he was saying, like the occasional times past when someone would talk to me and I was so incredibly tired or dazed I would find myself more attentive to who was talking rather than to what they were talking about. His words were seeping into me, however, and I would remember them enough to carry them with me as though what he said were to remain a part of my very existence for the remainder of my life and beyond into eternity.

He continued, and in doing so, he proceeded to explain what I did not know and what I already knew, my past, present, future, my situation with him and my destiny in the tasks which I have even then performed by my very presence there and the tasks that I was to perform still, for his sake, for the sake of my wife, myself, and for the sake of time untold.

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He explained to me a few things. Only a few. Everything else I needed desperately to know would be explained to me soon, over the course of time and over the hours I would spend in the endeavor I was about to undertake, with his help, for his benefit and for the benefit of all involved. He was about to explain to me that I was about to do this for him and willingly, I might add, though the way he imposed this upon me came about so naturally that likewise naturally I could not refuse him. To refuse him was inevitably to refuse what I had come there for, or rather what he summoned me there for. I had come there for many reasons, but he, I found, had summoned me there for a matter of utmost importance, a matter I was as of yet very much unaware.

I was about to become aware.

And this was how the Watcher made me thus.

This was what he explained:

“Although you may not have said very much, you must have thought a great deal, ‘cause I’ve gotten a Goliath of a headache from your thoughts, Mister UFO Busybody, Mister Detective or Private Investigator or whatever you call yourself. For starters, don’t get the idea that I’ve achieved this mental capability from something as mundane or universal as evolution. I am not a being as simple as having been evolved from humanity’s future, am not an example of what you guys are gonna look like a thousand years from now, am not a volunteer space cadet on a
rescue mission to preserve the species, any species, except maybe to preserve my own interests for the time being. Any preconceived notions you have learned or heard or yearned for can be put to rest right now, before we begin, before you fuck things up with limited vision and observation. You terrestrial people, for crissake...always looking for something beyond yourselves for the answers to everything. The answers are right where you are. Right where you’ve always been. And they’ve always been there with you.

“For instance, this reading of minds....you can do it, too. It’s not something the human mind will evolve into. It’s a matter of tapping your strengths. It’s a matter of needing to tap into your strengths to do so. It’s also a matter of fucking things up if you don’t know how to control it. People will learn all about that, in time. Don’t try too hard to harness it. Remember, everything is meant to be.

“Oh... you haven’t learned that yet, have you? Don’t worry, I’ll teach you all about things meant to be. That’s pretty much the core of why I’ve sent for you.

“You see, there is something I need you to do for me. That is where this business of typewriters comes in, that is the purpose of that typewriter at the desk behind you. Funny things, typewriters. Typewriters, computers, word processors, the pen. Not just mightier than the sword, I should say. They’re mightier than diddlydamn Doomsday. Words and the conveying of words, thoughts which are essentially preconceived words, communication, all are the building blocks of the universe. AND GOD SAID.....IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, and so forth.

“You following me?

“Oh, and sorry for calling you Uncle. My sarcasm is vented through my circumstance. All that shall be explained in the task which I am about to ask of you, what you are about to write for me on that typewriter behind you. It’s a magic typewriter; I say magic only in the context of showmanship, in being the master magician you have foreseen me to be. I made use of that very typewriter to project that letter you received from me into the one on your wife’s desk, the one you woke up to.

“And you, my friend, are about to write a story for me, which will be projected from that typewriter to another one back in time, back six months ago, because we need to reset the course of things meant to be. If you don’t do this, we’re all fucked. You, your wife, a few other people you may be familiar with throughout all that UFO research of yours, and, not to mention me. I am risking my goddamn neck for this. Other Watchers, guys like me, that look like I do, serve a certain important purpose once they become the way I became. That purpose isn’t to meet with UFO researchers in remote motels to dictate international bestselling novels. I can get in deep shit for this, if this doesn’t work out the way we want.

“We have very little time. We must work fast. I have a story to tell, a story you may find yourself partially familiar with, a story you never knew had been going on amidst your kind, right under your noses. Right smack dab under my own, I might add, in my last life as one of you.

“In this story, you’ll find the answers you seek, as long as you do what I say, type what I say, and you’ll find yourself unlocking an entire ecosystem of doors, let alone a boulevard.

“And when we are finished, we shall experience the results, hopefully the fruits, of our combined efforts. Let us kick ass together, my friend.

“Are you ready....?
“Do you understand...?”
5.

No True Beginnings

True beginnings are but simple reflections of what had always been, mirrored images of similar beginnings enacted time and again in ceaseless encore. Every beginning owes its existence to another beginning before it, ultimately reaching deeper into eternity past. Locate a mirror, if you will, and see for yourself.

Where does your reflection begin? Does it begin with the mirror before you, or with yourself within the mirror?

If you were to pause, curiously and attentively, before the mirror of your own beginnings, you just might catch the sight of your infinite self. Either that, or of something watching you from out of the corner of your eye.

I became aware of my own perspiration as I readied before the electric typewriter in anticipation of the Watcher’s first words. My fingers poised and hovering less than a centimeter above the keys, I curled them tightly into clenched fists several times to keep them from trembling.

Previous to this, my Master Magician revealed to me what seemed to be many things, perhaps not in their entirety, but in any case just about as much as I needed to understand at the time. He assured me everything else, all the major importances, would be revealed in time.

As long as I did as he requested.

And they were requests, not orders.

They were only, in the end, orders put in force by myself, requests that I required myself to obey to the fullest and with the most complete of faiths, because they adhered to my interests and to the interests of those around me which I held dear. This had been no kidnapping, not of my wife nor myself, no frivolous runaround the likes of which swelled within the deep, back edges of my sanity as I had feared. This had been a desperate plea for help, from a Watcher to a human, a human who had made himself involved long ago, a human who had been involved unawares (at least to a knowledge of this extent) and maybe the only human who could side with and cooperate with a being such as Mister Watcher (who, by coincidence, claims to have been human many times around...).

One of the insights he had given me within that motel untold led to an offspring of A.J. Erlandson. A.J. was the famous B-movie director who’d been a friend and employer of both my parents, and his son had been an object of mystery and scrutiny to varying degrees in my career.

What I was about to undertake was to write about what the Watcher had revealed to me and the entirety of what he was about to reveal to me still, which, according to our plan, should set the course of events that have already occurred but couldn’t have occurred unless I typed what the Watcher had yet to dictate.

I wouldn’t expect you to understand just yet.

The Watcher remained silent at first and for what seemed to be quite some time.

Then he spoke, his first uttered command before I was to actually start.

“Let’s begin with the son of A.J. Erlandson....”

I began to type, to work the Watcher’s magic.

To learn the whole story of how I ended up here.

To continue the story.

To find out where I’m going from here.

And you...you’ve followed me this far....

Follow me still, and keep close.

I’ve a story further I’d like to tell you....
PART TWO:

INFORMAL INTRODUCTIONS

“You shall find out how salt is the taste of another man’s bread, and how hard is the way up and down another man’s stairs.”

-Dante
The obscure configuration of a slender shadow stood still behind the bathroom mirror’s misty residue.

A slight hesitation, a blurred agitation...a sudden, dark sweep....

And then there were eyes.

Smeared from the beads of moisture, yet visible and apparent.

The surrounding dimness provided a welcomed surreal backdrop rather than the otherwise sobering brightness of the vanity light, the nightlight’s orange lucidity reflecting first from pools in lampblack pupils and then from the mirror image itself.

From the image of the eyes.

Staring.

Andrew Erlandson took the towel and gave the mirror a second stroke, then a third.

He continued to stare at himself. At his face. At his stalwart chin and thickset eyebrows. At his pale nudity. At his dark brown hair cut modestly behind the ears giving him a juvenile semblance even more evident in baby’s-butt-smooth flawless skin and a face of innocent charm.

At his twenty-eight-year-old eyes.

Andrew held an ardent fascination for the mysteries behind those eyes.

Some of those mysteries, he believed, could be revealed at the right moments, at the quickest flicker or slightest dilation, if only he could ever just manage to notice those revelations some day.

Mysteries inhabiting the darkness beyond those eyes.

And the darkness itself was indeed another fascination as well. There was something oddly mutual about human eyes and darkness, something curiously ironic.

Andrew wondered what it was.

Quite often, he wondered.

But his thoughts scattered with a knocking at the bathroom door, and in the abruptness he answered; timidly, although thoroughly annoyed.

“What is it?”

A voice, Ralston Cooper’s half-drunken slur, echoed from behind the door. “I got the manuscript myself, Andy-man. Found it. On your desk, in your bedroom. You knew it was there, didn’t you? I got a gig at *The Crow Job*, man. You almost screwed it up, makin’ me wait for you to get outta the goddamn shower.”

Ralston’s voice trailed, faded. He was headed for the living room, possibly for the front door.

*Impatient bastard*, Andrew thought, but did not answer. Andrew threw the towel onto the toilet seat and lazily reached for the mound of clothes piled upon the hamper to his side.

He had risen a little more than an hour ago to an incessant ringing of the doorbell, finding himself seated at his desk and slumped over his typewriter, his head pillowed by the cradle of folded arms. He had been working undisturbed for hours and hours on end, hours which seemed like days, attempting to finish the newest novel ghostwritten for Ralston before he arrived to retrieve it. Today had been the day Ralston’s agent anticipated its delivery, and Andrew had laboriously slaved in preparation.

Slaved so hard, in fact, that in his extended weariness he had completed the final pages just before the electric buzz of the typewriter managed to lull him to sleep, without so much as allowing him the memory of having typed anything at all.

He simply awoke, his finished work before him, a shower beckoning, his impatient employer at the front door.
It had been 9:00 p.m. then. An entire morning, noon, and evening had swept by. And Andrew Erlandson had things to do, places to go, asses to kiss. And a shower to take.

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Ralston Cooper was seated on the black leather recliner in the living room of Andrew’s apartment. His attentions riveted now from the room’s eccentric environment to the vivid rock images of MTV on the projector television.

That’s the place for me, Ralston maintained, the crystalline line of meth he had snorted before his arrival maintaining the rhythmic flutter-tap-tapping of his black leather-booted right foot against the shag carpet. Rock videos, man. Not books all my life, no siree Bob. ‘Specially books written this way. He gazed down upon the thick black and white of the manuscript in his lap, its pages corralled by a topless cardboard stationary box. I wanna be known for something I knew I did myself for a change. Although, fame and fortune for this writing shit is still heaven and a bag of chips...

With the exception of the flickering T.V. light, the only illumination in the room was from the single lamp protruding from a clamp situated on a shelving fixture above Ralston’s recliner. This annoyed Ralston; it was the brightest Andrew allowed the room to be regardless of time of day. The man lived his life like a reclusive elderly mole for godsakes. Ralston was also for that matter accustomed to space, and with the princely sum he typically paid Andrew for his literary services, he’d expect the fool to at least lounge in spacious luxury.

And then there were the books... shelves streamed across the expanse of wall space, filled with diverse volumes of both fiction and reference and whatever else could conceivably be of interest or fancy to Andrew enough for such a library. All Ralston could see of this was uselessness and wasted space, but then again Ralston had never been much of a reader.

At least the furniture bore a dose or two of extravagancy, though the dismal redundancy of matching black common to every piece suggested images of a lived-in funeral parlor. The drapery of the patio doors echoed the apartment’s somber shades, and Ralston could never recall them being parted, regardless of day or night.

The air conditioner to the right of the drapes hummed softly, its mild currents of air providing salvation enough for the mock—novelist/rock star wannabe to maintain his sanity.

But it wasn’t Ralston’s place to condemn or criticize, and he often managed to ho-hum the apartment’s claustrophobic eccentricities away. He simply carried out his scheduled visits, lingered long enough to get what he came for, awarded Andrew in advance for a job well done with a brisk pat on the back and an envelope with a pre-agreed cash sum. He’d then return to his Brea home for a celebration screw with his girlfriend, to an anticipated publishing deal, movie deal, drug deal, cancelled band rehearsal, whatever his life brought him into doing as long as there was convenience in doing it.

The hell with Andrew, really; whatever Andrew Erlandson chose to do with his allowed earnings was Andrew Erlandson’s choice, in Andrew’s own little erratically reclusive mole-like way.

Besides, it was Andrew’s agreement.

Andrew’s work for him was a constant reminder of this agreement. The reasons behind it all were to Ralston both a shady mystery and a profoundly divine miracle. But he dared not question; questions and answers were not only excluded from the deal....

...they might conjure up horrifying atrocities that were embedded in both their pasts, the sort of things Ralston would far prefer lost within his past, the things which might remain still within Andrew’s secretive present.

There, diagonal from Ralston, mounted and framed in an open space upon the wall between book shelves, hung a single paperback book cover, preserved flat behind thin glass. Upon it, embossed in bold print and flanked by the glimmer of oil-painted silvery daggers were the words

INTO THE GRAVE II

a novel by

Andrew Erlandson
and below this the short scribbles of an autographed signature. Further towards the sliding glass patio doors and after another series of book shelves, hung also a late 1960’s motion picture poster, glaring out from behind the transparent plastic of a poster frame. Sandwiched between the faded colors of crayfish-like costumed men and credits ending in the words FILMED IN TECHNICOLOR splashed across a spread of white-blank backdrop, there read

HIDEOUS MUTATED SEA DEMONS

and below this also, in the book cover’s similarly autographed longhand, looming in careful avoidance of the beginning credits,

To my son,
I in you, and you in me.
Loving timelessly,
-your Dad, A.J.

Ralston brought a hand to his lap and lifted the bulky stack of papers. As Aerosmith’s latest video faded from the T.V. screen, he thumbed through the manuscript, scrutinizing, perusing. The black of his fingerless gloves glimmered slick under the mild lamplight above. Webbed fumes rose from the mount of extinguished cigarettes within the silvery mouth of an ashtray stand at his side, one butt for nearly every three minutes of waiting for Andrew to emerge from showering.

From the view of his ghostwriter’s latest services, Ralston was pleased. He was very pleased.

This was exactly what he told Andrew when the bathroom door opened and the narrow umbra of the clandestine writer halted and rested against the living room’s entrance frame.

“Another guaranteed bestseller,” Andrew said without a hint of enthusiasm. “A sliver of my soul carved to fit medium weight bond paper.”

“Yeah,” Ralston added, nabbing what enthusiasm could have existed in Andrew and making it his own, “I’d say you’d done and shined like a million dollar penny....yeah, another six million figured penny. In a string of such, thanks to your craziness schemes and bloodletting pacts. I don’t fully understand why I’ve been ordained with such a noble existence, and frankly, why I’m the household name that I am scares the piss out of me if I think about it too much. But I’m famous, filthy famous. I have wealth, I have notoriety. And I have you to thank for it. I really must say, I didn’t know you had it in me.”

“You haven’t even read it yet,” Andrew said. “Maybe this’ll be that one downer you’re afraid of that’ll stop your roll....”

Ralston went for his coat, a black London Fog which hung on the rack near the kitchen entrance. He grabbed the bulky manuscript, cradling it within his palm against his side, his thigh toppling over a half-empty beer can which tumbled from the end table edge and emptied onto the carpet.

“Look at it this way,” Ralston told him. “Just as many millions will buy it anyway, and if they don’t like it, well, I know I can count on you to come back with another one the critics will love. I’ve become quite a phenomenon and I’ve just now hit the ‘Big Three-Oh’, and I’m free and I have a say-so.”

It had always been important for Ralston Cooper to have a say-so. Before all of this, before he had a life, before Andrew and Andrew’s pact of taciturn lunacy, Ralston never did quite have a say-so of anything, with the exception of the renegade delinquents of his youth. Back then, he had truly been a delinquent authority, a Lost Boys Leader, a pot-smoking, shit-talking teen thing that was much to be feared among rebel-tough-guy slacker chick-magnets too good for varsity football.

Even then, however, say-so’s were few and far between. Far between fights and after-school detention, far between flights of fancy and wannabe rock-star dreams.

Say-so’s had to be won.

Until Andrew Erlandson came along.

Andrew Erlandson made say-so’s easy as pie.
Easy as a pact.
Easy as forgetting how that pact came to be.
Easier than dealing with

(*nightmare memories, memories of nightmare*)

He’d convinced himself that it was merely Andrew who confronted him one day with the reasonless offer to pen his own works and to submit them under Ralston’s name, for Ralston to receive credit and money as long as Andrew received a certain reasonable sum in return.

As though Andrew couldn’t receive credit himself.
As though Andrew was somehow

(*forced into it*)

hiding something, running from something, yet he had to write, had to publish.

But it was the (*nightmare memories, memories of nightmare*) desperation, the offer Ralston couldn’t refuse, which passed the torch of *having say*—so ultimately to Ralston, and ultimately to Ralston’s fate.

And by now, Ralston was pretty much used to it.
And Andrew seemed pretty much the sap.

“You’ve worked your ass off, Andy-man,” Ralston told Andrew. “Go, get yourself a beer at *The Crow Job*, check out my new band. I got a seat toward the front just for you. Had to, knowing it’s gonna be hella packed, everyone there to see the big book writer rockin’ and all. But this is really *me* doin’ this, Andy. *I can do* this. Watch me. And watch the fans see me kick ass. By the way, nice title. I can’t wait to read *The Everborn* myself.”

With that, Ralston slipped a hand into his overcoat and withdrew a white envelope, presented it sealed and slipped it into Andrew’s front shirt pocket.

With a brief snicker and hurried anticipation, Ralston turned and departed across the darkened living room, past the flickering music television, out the front door and down the apartment complex’s inner hallway, leaving Andrew standing snug and silent and alone.

And if it wasn’t for the distraction of the deep and disorienting sleep he’d awakened from, Andrew would have wondered what Ralston meant by *The Everborn*, which wasn’t the title of the novel he believed he’d written.

***

Andrew remained still for a moment’s time until he softly padded across the living room carpet and closed the front door. Turning, he stepped to the recliner, reached for the TV remote, and paused as he viewed an MTV news report about the trampling of several teenagers at a metal concert mosh pit. Kurt Loder signed off with the image of an electrode-studded globe and station logo. Andrew signed off with depression, both from his thumb and his sigh.

There were times like these when Ralston and Ralston’s cack of flamboyant cockiness would indeed get to him, get his goat and leave him fucked like one on a witches’ sabbat, but times few and far between in recent years.

He’d learned to accept what needed to be, what (he was convinced) was *meant to be*, and in truth this ghostwriting racket remained an ongoing sacrifice Andrew would just as soon sign off as drink goat piss.

This conviction made Andrew clench his teeth and bite his tongue whenever his father came to mind, the great B-movie director father he never knew, the father he wished were alive somewhere but doubted was anywhere but six feet under.

A.J. Erlandson was declared missing sometime before Andrew was born, and had been missing since, yet remained an inspiration and an icon to Andrew, yeah even a legend to not only he but many, and what many who knew of him remained to this day as thinking of the heralded director as one would fancy the likes of Elvis....not so much as a *king* of things but nevertheless working in some obscure Burger King in Utah. Anything but being *dead*. For some concealed, undercover reason. Though even more so for A.J., since his body was never found, no body at all.

Nobody except for maybe the Weekly World News.

And when someone was missing from someone’s life for so long, as long as Andrew had been alive, which had been twenty-eight years so far, in similar circumstances, one might as well declare them dead. Andrew had done so, quite a while back, and so had Andrew’s mother, who’d refused to so much as date anyone let alone marry until a little under a decade after the disappearance. Deep down, it was all due to wishful thinking. After thinking of the impossible-become-probable for so long, thinking can really become quite dominated by wishes.

“Wish you may, wish you might, what is it you wish tonight, dearest Andrew?” whispered the hallway darkness which led to the bathroom and single bedroom. “Tell me of your wishes.”

It was the distant echo of a voice, calling, speaking, a woman’s spoken caress, smooth and hushed and provocative, beckoning into close intimacy. Within the apartment, within the single bedroom, in the hallway.
Somewhere, yet everywhere.
As it always had been.
Andrew took several steps backwards, leaned likewise into the hallway.
“I don’t wish anymore, if I can help it, and I don’t wish to talk to you tonight as well, Bari,” Andrew grumbled with bridled contempt. “You know how I get when I let go of another work like that, to that conceited drug geek. You made it so I have no choice...you’re responsible for this goddamn arrangement, you made it happen. And each time I write him another book, I’m stuck wondering what Dad would think of all this.”
“And just what would he think of all this?” An obscure figure accompanied the voice now, a mere silhouette, a shady sketch of blackness, seen yet unseen.
“You know what he would think, and you know he would be insulted,” Andrew spat, then added quite reversely serene, “Unless he knew about you.”
Andrew turned and headed for the coat rack, situated between the recliner and the space between the front door, reaching for a black and grey blazer.
The darkness was silent for a moment, until it asked, “Where are you going?”
“You heard the ass wipe,” came Andrew’s determined reply. “I hear a beer calling me.”
“Are you so sure you should drink tonight?”
“Tonight I drink, Bari. Tonight I hear the music of Ralston Cooper, if you can call it music, and I don’t usually do that either. In fact, I never do that if I can help it. Dammit...I just need to get out, get away....” Marching towards the front door, Andrew paused, turned to the darkness, hesitated, then continued, “Bari...did my father know about you?”
“You’ve asked me that before, I gave you my answer.”
“What good is an answer you’ve made me forget? Everything I want to know about my father and who I am, you tell me it’s all been already answered by you, and that you’ll bring it back to my memory in due time, when the moment is meant to be. Fuck meant to be, fuck Ralston Cooper, and fuck you!”
“Yes, you must go,” Bari sighed. “Tonight is not the night for dwelling in this confusion of yours. Go, have a blast at this boozer emporium of yours. And for heaven’s sake and all the saints, meet someone.”
Andrew was at the front door, on his way out the front door, was about to slam the front door: when someone gives you what for and ends it with a fuck you, you wouldn’t expect him to say very much more before he heads out, even if he was an innocent, clean-cut vessel of a twenty-something kid personality like Andrew Erlandson.
“You can’t be serious,” he wheezed. “You don’t want me to be with anyone besides you. What do you mean, meet someone? Bari...what are you saying?”
Bari was unmoving and quiet as her companion lightly closed the front door, stepped close, closer and then closer still until she could smell the eternal aroma of his breath penetrating the gentle expanse of her presence.
Like a son.
Like a lover.
And Andrew could feel her understanding, her compassion, even in the midst of the chill of the apartment’s inner hallway. He heard himself utter, tenderly, “Bari...show me your eyes again, show me your beautiful eyes.”
Just as the orange streams of the bathroom nightlight reflected from his pupils in the cloudiness of the bathroom mirror, the dual glows appeared. There, before him, hovered the lambent orbs of the presence...a presence not unlike his own, but at the same time a presence alien to him.
A welcomed, familiar presence.
“Go now,” whispered this presence, so sweet, so soothing, “for tonight may very well be a night of nights, young one. A night of destiny. Soon, you shall become as new. Soon, yes, in time.”
The eyes disappeared then into empty darkness, leaving only the wispy remnants of a swirling breeze of warmth.
Wondering, as usual, what Bari had meant, Andrew clenched his blazer tight against him and commenced his departure out the front door, this time his spirits free of forgotten hostility.
The being within the hallway retreated into the bedroom, for but to catch sight of her young one as he would minutes later stroll across the sidewalk three stories below and disappear down the darkness of the nighttime street towards The Crow Job.
Empty shades of night idled upon the tenebrous presence within Andrew Erlandson’s apartment’s hallway. The Watchmaid remained there, unmoving. She enjoyed the stillness of the apartment, hushed with the exception of the systematic ticking of the living room wall clock. Often, she considered this solitary sound welcomed and even necessary.

It reminded her of her whereabouts.
It reminded her of her duties.
It reminded her of time.

And time always reminded her of the days when she was human, when she had been but a young woman Andrew’s age, many ages past, when she and he were once lovers, and she became pregnant with his child.

That was when things changed. That was when she was first made aware of what her lover truly was, what he became before the rebirth, reborn through her into another succession of lives.

That was when she became the creature she was destined to be.

She decided to move. Hovering, she made her way from the mouth of the hallway and through the living room. As she went, a mild current of air brushed across a ceramic vase containing outstretched peacock feathers, fluttering and flipping the covers and pages of several nearby magazines. In a similar way, her mind’s eye browsed through pages of the past.

Memories of the past, echoing prophecies of the future. Sensual, yes. But also horrific. Also cataclysmic.

Time always tended to play those games, flip through those pages.

The Watchmaid arrived at the patio doors. Drapes parted, no longer obstructing her third-story view of the night and the quieted street below.

An occasional vehicle drove by.

At first, Bari silently regarded the scene, regarded the surrounding apartments, the mid-evening’s overhanging stars.

The stars.

Her thoughts shifted again, retreated inward, into herself, resuming inward thoughts, again into distant memories. How very soon things were going to change again, as they always did before.

But as destiny was about to unfold another time around, Bari had the strangest feeling that another time was beginning to unfold over the present. Perhaps this feeling, this foreboding aura encompassing both young man and
guardian, was merely generated by the apartment’s claustrophobic setting.

Or perhaps this feeling dealt with Ralston Cooper’s latest novel, ghostwritten by Andrew, ghostwritten in turn by the hands of the very near future, the very hands responsible for Bari’s insistence of Andrew’s anonymity, his freedom to create and to continue creating under the guise of secrecy and behind the name of a very real and unsuspecting identity. Perhaps this was why Andrew worked so relentlessly before his typewriter and for so long to meet Ralston’s deadline.

Perhaps it wasn’t for Ralston’s deadline at all....but for another deadline entirely which Bari had foreseen years ago, but had little idea until now when it would be and how, or of the magnitude of its significance upon herself and so many others.
8.

Melony Polito at the Crowjob

It was not supposed to happen this way, not any of it. And certainly not to Melony Polito. Yet she was a part of it, immersed in it, immersed into every sort of chaotic and intriguing encounter a private investigator could ever dream of cramming into his or her career, even for the wife of a UFO researcher.

And she never thought she would end up here, in a two-bit dive of a bar, as a result of a joint effort between her and her famous UFO-freak husband. It made her miss the days when the only real joint effort worth enjoying was when she and a few close college friends would pass around joints and get high off grass and pure speculation. Just because a cloud resembled Steve Reeves to her and whoever tripped out with her lying across a dandelion patch in the good ol’ days a decade ago, didn’t mean she wanted to enlist at NASA so she could one day space-shuttle up to see if she could fuck the damn thing.

Yet here she was, fucking the damn thing right now.
Waiting to see if it would fuck her right back.
She hoped it didn’t.
Partly because she was afraid.
Partly because she was afraid it was fucking her back already, all along.

It never used to be this way; she never thought it would be this way, always thought differently, all along, and already things seemed to have changed and not only so...things suddenly seemed to have been changing for a long, long time.

All along.

Private Investigator. When all she ever wanted to be was to be creative. To paint. To mold pictures. Not to mold pieces of pictures into real—life scenarios of criminal injustices and mysteries for a fee. And despite each and every effort on her part to revive and nurture her personal passions, it was beginning to seem that most of her time had been spent in pursuit of other people’s passions, other people’s obsessions and desperations, with little or no time for her to privately investigate herself.

Around about a decade ago, Melony Lambert’s works of art could have been found displayed on consignment within several privately-owned art gallery chains located throughout Southern and coastal California. And she had not yet had her fill of twenty-something frolic and friction.

Until the friction came when both of her younger brothers went cruising into a broadside collision between their Chevy Nova and an RTD bus on a drunken en route to nowhere smack dab in the center of the Orange and Hollywood Boulevard intersection, in front of tourists, before Mann’s Chinese, splashed and splattered glass and stifled lifelessness on the third page of the Los Angeles Times.

And Melony became an only child from there on out, a free-spirited being with a soul stunned and stunted from a loss she could never prepare for. Her inexperience with a grief of this magnitude left her vulnerable to the clueless black uncertainty of chance and change, the very same uncertainty which finds and seizes us all as its flailing playthings, spinning our blindfolded intentions like tops and then stopping us, leaving us naked and grasping a pinned tail for the donkey’s ass life’s pointed us towards.

At first, all of a sudden, a donkey’s ass was what life seemed to be taking her for. Almost directly after her brothers’ deaths, Melony’s believably faithful boyfriend of two strong years weakened under the pressure of her newfound stress, about-facing the couple on a Valentine’s Day emotional ka-boom when he wouldn’t give in and she wouldn’t put out. Fleshing the matter out, her insistence on canceling his expensively reserved plans for a calm, quiet evening home crowned Melony as Queen of the Stubborn “I’m Spending The Rest of My Life Feeling Sorry For Myself-ers.” Just when Melony had thought she’d won the understanding support of her lover, two bottles of red rosé and straight liqueur became enough to convince his frustrations that a decent lay would at least settle his Valentine’s score.

Relationships which end up looking like that were usually enough to fracture anyone’s abilities to stir up trust in the dustbowl of needing someone, wanting, finding someone. Keeping someone. The whole of Melony’s life, so it
was lived, was done so with little depravity and an abundance of openness and acceptance. Then, all at once, as it
was with her lover and her relationship with him, every ounce of bliss and meaning and giving collapsed like a straw
house under a wolf’s breath.

And all which had come so easily for so long became to her a lie.

The passing of the week of Valentine’s Day was climaxed with the joint funeral of Melony’s two brothers and
the high school buddy who shared their fate.

And it was at that funeral where Melony met a man.

Who, by coincidence, albeit far more mercifully so, was an only child, too.

Officially, there within and about the small Long Beach cathedral, Melony Lambert met Maxwell Polito for the
first time. Since then, they came to prefer the less detailed story of having met one another on a March day of that
year, their match made by Melony’s younger brothers, both of which attended the same university and the same
Ancient History class taught by Max, one a student of Max’s the previous semester and the other a student from last
Spring. The elder brother had become a favorite of Maxwell’s, and this semester had enrolled afresh into Max’s
Human Psyche and Behavior, simply due to Max conveniently being the teacher in a minor curriculum course.

It was the brother’s deaths that brought Max to the funeral, that brought Max to meet Melony, that led Max to
eventually exchange sympathies and then phone numbers, that finally coaxed Max to phone Melony for a coffee
date on that often-reminisced March day.

And it was from then, when Melony began to learn that though life may at times seem like a lie, what really
matters is not to live it like one, but to live it in truth right the hell back.

Like she had been doing before, all along.

And like she learned to do all over again.

If only she’d left it that way, instead of signing up for a shuttle mission to the clouds for a sky-high straddle
with a truth that’d most likely prefer her to lie.

Down.

Below it.

And simply watch and wonder.

And perhaps paint.

***

Melony Polito had to remind herself of the reasons for her arrival at a pit-stop corner bar known insipidly as
The Crow Job. The black painted wood cut-out of a sickly, red neon-laced crow intermittently tipped a yellow neon
straw hat beside the heralding rooftop Crow Job sign, bringing to Melony’s mind the flock of crows in Disney’s
Dumbo singing a twisted variation of seeing an elephant die in there, rather than fly. And by the look of things, more
than that.

And the handful of rent-a-pusses dispersed amongst the overflow of parking lot slum mobiles appeared like
extras in a John Waters movie lost in the used car lot of a third-world country. But trailing along the rickety wooden
railway leading from the outer sidewalk and encasing the double front entrance doors opposite the lively Friday
night motor traffic of Stewart Avenue stood a spirited and sizeable line of above-average bar patrons. Above-
average, much like Melony herself visiting this dive, or at least above-average looking.

And just like Melony, most likely, a good many of these anxious party-mongers would not dare to risk their
necks and wallets around such a place on any night, if not for the wow and the newsworthy spectacle of one of
modern day’s most celebrated novelists jammin’ with his own rock n’ roll band at a premiere gig. What hit the
public even more was how Ralston Cooper negotiated temporary ownership of the bar just to ensure his own total
control over the entire venture.

And contrary to press jargon, this writer’s venture was in Mr. Cooper’s eyes anything but experimental.

This band was going to fly.

And yes, even fly like the Disney crows’ Dumbo.

But Melony was here for more than this. Sure, she had read more than a Cooper book or two. Even still, her
interest in Ralston Cooper went to anything truly but his frighteningly entertaining works. Frankly, she was more
into King, like the other remaining half of the world.

Here, at The Crow Job, Melony Polito was a private investigator doing her job, not for anyone else this time but
for the ambitious investigative efforts of herself and her husband, for blowing the lid wide open on a case shrouded
in secrecy and years of pursuit.

Here, at The Crow Job.

Melony hoped she hadn’t gone nuts. She continued towards the entrance, towards the two door attendants, one
big and chunky, one big and tall, and they looked like professional wrestling equivalents of Abbott & Costello keeping alert stances at the head of the line. They checked the opened flaps of wallets drooping like leather and velcro tongues before them and beneath the scrutiny of each of their flashlight beams, each of them nodding, allowing a few to enter, halting the next few with outstretched hands, waiting for the next unconcerned bar regular to escape to a less distressing waterhole, then checking the I.D.’s of the next in the herd.

Melony stifled any exhibition of nervousness and lifted her purse from her side. Still approaching the entrance, she unsnapped the purse and withdrew a glossy I.D. badge almost instantly, confidently prepared for the impending confrontation she was stepping into. Behind her, the sonorous blasts and pulses of a familiar car alarm rang suddenly and disturbingly from the street.

"Excuse me, lady," Costello stopped her.
"Press," Melony declared, her badge as her shield to the duo’s dual flashlight glare.
"Diverse Arcanum Newsletter, huh?" Costello minutely examined the pass. "Polito Press."
"You from a newspaper, lady?" Abbott spoke up.
"I’m from the news, all right...."
"Okay okay lady, I got a lot goin’ on here. Press is to the right of the stage. We have a special place for ‘em. Otherwise, by now, you’ll find yourself in standing room only."

With that hassle-free entrance, Melony found herself the next second immersed within The Crow Job’s night world. Inside, it was difficult not to exhibit nervousness for one usually as carefully self-guarded as her. It had been quite a season since she’d found herself within an environment so loose and so...so free. It was almost like being single again, particularly so without Max’s presence beside her as in countless stuffy business parties. Here, it was less difficult to stifle nervousness once one took the chance to unwind. And God, did Melony need unwinding.

She had to show her press pass once more, a legitimate one as she and Max indeed published their own Diverse Arcanum Newsletter to worldwide UFO enthusiasts, and the cashier at a wooden cubbyhole counter motioned her on past a clinkety turnstile.

Melony clasped her purse shut and refit its strap over her shoulder. At first, she could move no further than the dawdling Cooper fans before her, the heads of each turning about and eyes roaming, scanning for unoccupied seats and tables without realizing they’d do better conducting their search while moving themselves onward. Some were more enthusiastic than others, Cooper books both hardcover and soft clasped within hands sweaty for celebrity signature. Some bopped their heads and bobbed their bodies to the rhythmic pulsations of rock ballads and top forty riffs of present and yesteryear jukebox jamming. Others crowded about the stage front, beckoning and conversing with the hired hands busying to double-check amps and instruments for the impending spectacle. A few bouncers dispersed periodically to clear the stage front until one of them thought it best to position himself there until the show began. An event clearly unorganized, Melony noted.

She now was allowed room enough to approach a handful of carpeted downward steps until an embracing, necking couple barred her from completing her descent, pitting her momentarily against a polished brass handrail. Turning into it, she found herself face to face with her own full-length image in a wall mirror stretched across the expanse of the sloping side wall.

She had admittedly dressed for the club scene as though she were single, purposely undertaking the outing alone for a low profile’s sake despite the risk of danger. And alone as she was, her chances of intimate chats with those questionably human were undoubtedly at their greatest.

Her Central American heritage graced her with skin naturally dark, yet unobvious enough to be mistaken by some for a tan. Grapevine swirls of black held at bay the lighter and brighter splash of sunset yellow/orange and peach of a summer pullover dress, which clung limply from shoulder strap strings and folded scantily outward above medium breasts which appeared braless. The outfit displayed her figure nearly to the point of flaunting it, yet it was a figure to be flaunted, all the way down to the black nylons stretching downward and into low-heeled shoes. Shoes, which supported the stance of a mid-thirties black-haired professional who carried herself well but scarcely found time enough to be aware of her own beauty.

And sadly, Max scarcely reminded her.
Rarely, anymore.
These days.

Melony Polito was stunned with a self-admiration such as this and so suddenly, and here, in such a public place. Perhaps a big piece of the nervousness pie which plagued and grappled with her will to stifle it found its blame within her own timid self-consciousness in the very way she presented herself tonight.

Or perhaps it was something more, something she was growing all the more recently dissatisfied with, a yearning, a void to be filled, a piece of her soul that once was but now lay flooded with marital and occupational duty, and the desire to find something more.
Something out there.
Something perhaps as close as somewhere in this crowd.

Moving right along and released from the stall of smoochers, Melony made her way onto the Crow Job’s main floor. People with drinks pushed past her, table chairs dodged her path as their occupants rose up or sat down or arched forwards or tipped backwards on rear chair legs. She rounded a lengthy stool-studded bar and overcame the darting trays of barhop traffic, her attentions struggling between the human obstacle course about her, the urgency of her mission to locate the faces of those she’d come for, and to find her own table and sit down.

Press is to the right of the stage....

The stage was opposite the bar. She followed the capillary flow of one-at-a-time commuters until she was in the area to the stage’s confined right, where the round wooden club tables narrowed into two rows back to back. In the center of the back row, she found her empty table. A grey card propped against the bubbly red glass of a candleholder displayed her name above DIVERSE ARCANUM NEWSLETTER, MALIBU, CA. The table was small, surrounded by two lonely chairs of padded wood. She at last sat down and slid her purse onto the tabletop, then relocated her purse to her lap upon seeing how the table space doubled without it.

Every table around her was chocked-full with assumed press agents, or perhaps music industry moguls, each one in every aspect looking no more or less important or enthusiastic or even reckless than anyone else she observed. A short distance away, two barhops separated, one in Melony’s direction. As much as she needed a drink by then, she couldn’t forsake the need to focus on faces. To search for secret souls.

Maxwell had been on a personal assignment in a village on the southwestern border of Brazil two mornings ago when his wife/secretary had contacted him with the news. He was busily researching a case where half the village’s population of children vanished overnight with barely a trace, to emerge twelve days later from the forest unharmed but for surgical punctures on their ankles and behind their left ears.

Children.
Vanishing....

Much like the six-year-old black child whose body was found freshly mutilated last weekend in the alley between The Crow Job and the neighboring apartment complex, the news of which reached Melony through close law enforcement peers who kept in touch with issues of the insolvably unspoken. It was news enough to contact Max, for Max to wash his hands quickly of third-world close encounters struts and to hurry his way back to Southern Cal, for Mel herself to jot down orders and to prepare and plan pinpoint spur-of-the-moment itineraries and urgent strategies.

No ordinary homicide could cause such a secretive stir as to involve the likes of Max and Mel, and although Melony herself had made ordinary investigations including homicide her occupational forte, Maxwell’s unwilling involvement in this particular matter had become the backbone in his search for the unknown years ago, when it all started.

For the body of young Nigel had been declared missing and assumed dead since his own encounter with the unknown within the bowels of a condemned building in 1968. Maxwell had been there. And so had someone else. And something else.

That someone and something were alive to this day, and had left a trail by which Max himself and later Melony followed, a history of incident and mishap which led to Nigel’s discovery, the discovery of a boy still six years old after three decades, murdered as he was thought to have been, but found as though he’d been murdered that very same day.

And after three decades, three of the beings which came to be involved were now together, whether or not either one knew it, and were now together here. At a two-bit dive called The Crow Job.

And Melony Polito was right there with them.

Not really knowing what she was getting herself into, or how high into the clouds she had flown.
Andrew Erlandson had ceased wondering what Bari had meant by the time he'd completed his journey to the end of the block and made his way past the flock of Cooper fans and followers and through the front entrance of The Crow Job. He ceased wondering because wondering wouldn't do him any good and he knew it, when it came to Bari matters. But he also ceased wondering because Bari tended to be right with those trivial prophesies of hers, right on the nail, and he knew that, too.

He'd rather not deal with that right now.

Besides, he had enough to wonder about with the Ralston show and all; if Ralston’s band sucked, Andrew would never hear the end of it, simply because (like it or not) he and the mega-ego mock horror writer were so damn close. There was another matter, too, regarding the completion of Andrew’s latest ghostwritten novel for Ralston....

Now that the manuscript for the latest and brand newest of Ralston books was presented to his majesty hot off the typewriter key-stroked assembly line, Andrew wondered how high the book would fly.

Not how high it will fly with the public, the millions of fans returning time and again to flip their millions of coins into the addicting story-snack machine that was Ralston Cooper. That was a given.

Andrew wondered how high it will fly with Ralston himself.

More often than not, Andrew found himself anticipating Ralston’s own appreciation for the latest written work rather than the public’s. Ralston’s appreciation was personal, considering how he was the one Andrew was truly writing for. That, and considering how Ralston was the only person besides Andrew who knew of their joint little secret, how he was the only one from whom the true author could directly receive credit as well as praise.

At least, the only human being.

Ralston always seemed to lack any true appreciation, which by now was just as dandy as a lost cause, almost as much of a lost cause as true respect.

For some reason, however, Andrew wondered how high the book will fly with Ralston, this latest book, more than ever, more than he had ever wondered with any previous work.

Something else concerning this particular book bore a wonder, too:

Andrew could not at all recollect even a fragment of memory as to how he finished the damn thing.

Nor could he remember anything at all about last night, about today, about where he was, what he was doing throughout that missing time. The only reassurance he had was in how he’d so readily accepted his circumstances when he awoke early that evening.

And how he at last completed another blood-tingling chiller for Ralston.

Yet still, there was something not quite right.....

***

Andrew made his way past the swarming obstacles of Ralston-mongers and bar maggots, past Abbott and Costello at the front entrance, past the cashier and turnstile and the dawdling line of Crow Job integrators flowing at their painstaking leisure down the carpeted steps along the lengthy wall mirror. It was a strange and familiar task to make his way inside, strange with the crowd, familiar, as he’d made himself a semi-frequent bar maggot there, though usually he did not drink anything harder than a Coke and a smile, over the couple of years he’d been residing at the apartment complex down the street. The club workers knew him fairly well, and more importantly knew he was with Ralston, knew he had a table.

The Crow Job was always a dive, and as dives go, it was uncommonly frequented with the likes of such a crowd, not to mention a crowd to any extent; it was always simply a corner neighborhood drunkard hangout, with
cheesy live wanna-be bands every weekend and jukebox jingle jive every other day. God knew why Ralston chose such an atmosphere. Perhaps it was those counterverses times he and Andrew visited the bar after countless visits Ralston made to Andrew’s to check up on Ralston’s very reason for being. Perhaps it was due to Ralston’s half-drunken vows to Andrew at the bar that someday I’ll turn this hell-dive into a goddamn premier landmark.

Andrew seated himself at the table reserved for him. It was a table off-center from the forefront of tables, resting at the edge of a wizened dance floor and across from the band’s stage. He shared this table with two others, two others who he neither despised nor was fond of, circumstantially, with respect to his mood and to their attitudes.

To Andrew’s right sat Jessica, Ralston’s druggy/groupie/intellectual-wanna-be girlfriend of three some-odd years, and to her right and across from Andrew sat William Behn, Ralston’s rather stocky agent of many years, who would just as soon fuck Jessica as solicit one of his client’s works despite his melancholy long-term marriage, and despite his forty-seven years of age to Jessica’s twenty-two.

Andrew’s life and experiences with life had turned him from an oddball introverted outcast and into a mildly unsociable misfit. Dealing intimately with a companion as surreal as Bari since childhood tended to foster such an impact on one’s personality. Needless to say, Andrew was in many ways uncomfortable with this sort of overwhelming environment. He couldn’t help it; he reacted to the spotlight like a vampire to the sun. Where attentions were drawn, Andrew liked being out of the picture, at the back of the class, behind the scenes.

This was the story of his life. And here he was at a front table, in the line of attention’s fire, and behind the fire of everyone’s attentions.

Yet, still, the man behind the scenes.

Jessica had immediately greeted Andrew with a hi and a hug as he sat down. William Behn stretched his hand across the table for a quick deathgrip handshake before Andrew had the chance to remember how Behn’s off-target grip always fucked up his fingers.

“Jesus...” Andrew yelped. Somehow, he always yelped Jesus afterwards.


“How do you have it?” Jessica perked.

“I have it being photocopied, in the back office.”

“Where’s my photocopy?” she wined. “He never lets me read anything ‘til it’s finished, and even then you get it first. And I’m the one who fucks him!”

“I’m the one who gets him the money....”

“Which book?” Andrew replied soullessly in question, half absently, half purposely, wholly in languished disinterest. Whether Behn or Jessica ever picked up on these vibes Andrew never could really tell, nor did he ever really care; he watched the two of them sip their drinks and laugh and return the greetings of acquaintances pausing to chat or kiss ass.

They were interrupted by a young college woman attempting to solicit a manuscript treatment to Behn right on the spot, who was clearly aware of who she was. The agent barked a shrewd wrong place, wrong time, in response, then quaked his belt-swallowing beer belly in a chuckle which gave him the appearance of a don’t-give-a-shit pencil pusher in a wife-bought sports suit and tie.

“Gets me hard just to think a young love-dove like that’d ride me like a water ski to get in print,” he remarked to Andrew, coolly tilting in a half-lean against Jessica’s bare shoulders. Then, leaning further, he whispered to Jessica, “Ralston’s not the only one you put out to, if you count dreams...”

“Fuck you.” Jessica told him half absently, used to this sort of thing from him.

Jessica sniffed and motioned for a barhop, her right knee bobbing with the spasmodic energy of a bucking bronco in anticipation of her love-God’s performance, a troublesome reaction for any wishing to conceal a nasty crystal meth habit.

Andrew’s first drink arrived as the first band member emerged from an open doorway hidden behind a mega amp to the stage’s side, another following, then another, a sweaty stoner quartet unfazed or at least unresponsive to the growing fevered applause. Andrew could almost hear the curses mouthed by the remaining bar regulars slouched over in their stools as they studied the bar table surface beneath lowered scowls.

Sound checks, cymbal tapping, tinkering pecks on string and keyboard provided the soundtrack for Andrew’s last chance to leisurely observe the crowd before the house lights dimmed and the stage lights beamed. His bias disposition to anything feeding Ralston’s ego melted against the ease of carefree contagion, and he relaxed and even chuckled to the tasteless sexism of William Behn’s insistence that all women writers wanted his cock for a contract, and that writers’ girlfriends such as Jessica particularly longed for a hunk o’ he-man hose.

This time Jess paid him no attention. She fussed to reposition a white bra strap exposed by the cut-away collar gap of her sweatshirt.
The house lights dimmed, the stage lit up.
The show was about to begin.

***

“And here they are, the band you’ve all been waiting for, Ralston Cooper and Squid Friction!!!”
“Funny, all my life I’ve thought everyone was watching me, and here I am, looking out, and finding it’s true, that everyone is watching me....”
And with that, a gen-u-ine original sparkling Ralston Cooper novel quote, Ralston began his gig.
And he was bad.
At least, to Andrew, he was awful.
But the crowd cheered nonetheless, because he was their hero. Their patron saint of literary horrodom. A pop-cult figure a la carte, served piping hot right before their eyes. And Ralston Cooper carried the role with all the swiftness and ease of the countless cells carrying fresh intakes of varying uppers and downers through his beer-diluted bloodstream.

Andrew had never known Ralston to be any good at anything, let alone music. Except of course making himself look good. But Ralston always held high the dream of being a talented and popular musician one day. Tonight came to prove that the only reality spawned by that dream was that he was popular; he could never ever be a successful musician nor harbor any true talent beneath his mock-writer mask.

All this appeared easy to tell with this sort of crowd, for among the exuberant fans were those ho-hummers here and there who seemed neither impressed nor amused. Andrew was certainly one of them. So were the crowd misfits whose dates insisted they’d come with, the ones who never cared to read a Cooper novel or scarcely any novel at all, the ones only remotely acquainted with the author’s works by lack of interest.

And then there were the journalists and media what-nots to the right of the stage; they seemed to be the least impressed with the budding rock star wannabee.

Except for one particular woman seated alone among them in the back row.
She seemed to be watching Andrew....a quick glance here, another glance, then a quick dart elsewhere, another glance....
Her knee was bobbing, much like Jessica’s knee energy spasms, only with her it was to the rhythm of Ralston’s band’s high energy rock beat ones. She sat upright, almost dancing there in her seat, almost dancing like the dozen or so dancers congregating to the minuscule dance floor before the stage, right in front of Andrew’s front table. Andrew thought minutely of how the several table-and-chair settings including his were added over the dance floor space to accommodate the club’s maximum capacity.

An Autumn aura swirled about her, this media-woman, from her deep dark-toned features and down to her very attire, which together with her gaze cried out notice me, notice me Andrew.

And Andrew noticed.
But then, as he noticed, her table and seat were at once vacant, and she appeared suddenly before him, and asked him to dance.
No one had ever asked Andrew to dance.

Needless to say, William Behn and Ralston-girlfriend Jessica were cheering him on.
So he stood up, clasped her hand, and went into the throng of dance-floor bop-meisters.

***

More than anything, even more than awful, Ralston’s music was loud. His band, Squid Friction, a group comprised of a drummer, a keyboardist, lead and rhythm guitars, was a typical house band ensemble and so much so, it was cliché.

And there stood Ralston, front and center and caressing a mike stand, having just before emerged from the side stage entrance enthusiastically and leaping in mad theatrics to where he stood now. The songs he sung were for the greater part original and expressly for himself and Squid Friction, with the exception of a few old rock favorites and a Doors classic.

It didn’t mix well, a band clearly of first-rate studio musicians and a lead singer who could barely carry a tune. And the lyrics Ralston often forgot made matters worse all the more.
Though few fans seemed to care.
And neither did this woman who danced before him, as Andrew tried to follow.,
Andrew could never seem to find within himself the courage to walk up to a woman and ask her to dance, particularly in places like this. Knowing this, it was of course inconceivable for a woman, any woman, to walk up and ask him to. Let alone a luscious dreamscape like this woman.

They danced to some hypertensive number apparently entitled *Chocolate Chimp Nipples*. They didn’t talk while they were dancing; they simply danced as the others danced around them, around and about within the confined space of the dance floor, Andrew striving to contain the bothersome if not painfully evident tendency to pore over the remarkable vision before him. He could not escape the lure of her beauty nor the reality of her pervading presence there, the sexual heat of the way she moved and swayed and rode the air with her hips, the way he found himself craving to touch her and to follow the range of black print swirls down across her autumn dress and over her breasts and down to the hem of her skirt, to bury those hands beneath the material and around the elastic of imagined black nylon straps.

Within an instant he found himself all too aware of the embarrassing bulge behind the fly of his trousers, and a burst of eruption in turn drew his attentions to the suggestive cheers of William Behn at the table a few dancers beyond. He caught a glance of the empty seat where Jessica had been, and his eyes darted momentarily away from the dark-skinned stranger to scan the dance floor for Jessica’s face. His fear of attention made him unsuccessfully avoid the gazes of table-dwellers and festive on-lookers, but as his stance shifted he could not avoid their spectative vista.

This was a welcomed distraction; it diverted his nervousness and tamed his hard-on. For the time being.

He wondered if he should speak, should say something to her. He wondered if she would say anything to him. He worried over how long the newness and excitement would last, if it would extend past the dance, if it would die as would the music of the song which drew this woman to him.

It occurred to Andrew that perhaps his situation was nothing more or less than a lucky gesture from a woman whose lack of a companion for the evening wasn’t about to confound her prepossessing urges to dance. If this was the case, there was no denying the delightful compliment in the lady’s choosing Andrew and by venturing halfway across the room in order to do so.

Yet there was something about her, about her choosing him, about the way she looked at him, how she drew herself closer to him and even closer still. Andrew looked upwards, casting his gaze towards the stage and upon the spotlight-bathed celebrity showcase of Ralston, and discovered the mock singer/writer staring in attentive amusement right back at him, at him and then at the attractive morsel of a partner sharing Andrew’s dance space.

There was something about her, something curious and familiar, and as the threat of the song’s ending reared its prospective head, Andrew forced a stutter of dialogue for fear of never again having the opportunity.

“I see you’re with the press over there. You’re here by yourself?”

She seemed pleasantly set aback by the sudden question and widened her smile. “What?” she tossed her voice above the music, then, “I’m here with the press. I’m with a magazine. Actually, it’s a newsletter. But I’m here to have a good time more than anything. Even if I have to let loose by myself.”

“I hardly ever dance,” Andrew admitted.

“You gotta speak louder,” his partner shouted.

“I don’t dance very much.”

“I haven’t danced in ages. I hardly get the chance anymore. How’d you hear about this?”

“The concert? I knew about it probably before most anyone else did. “I see Ralston all the time. More often than I’d like....”

“You’re friends with him? Can I throw a few questions at you?”

Andrew resisted the freshly dreadful web of insight seeping into his restless self-confidence upon the notion of Ralston-mania being responsible for this woman’s actual intentions. A repeated glance towards the portly beast of Ralston’s agent gave Andrew the suspicion that this dance was indebted to the agent’s company at Andrew’s table; Behn turned away any and all who approached the table with the unnerving recognition of who he was. This gossip-sleuth was probably the smarter of the litter, hitting on Andrew instead.

He’d rather shun those thoughts, he admitted to himself.

There was something about this woman, and for all he knew she was hitting on him for simpler reasons. For all he hoped.

The music stopped, the number was over. And so was the dance, so were his expectations.

Until she pointed out her lonely press table and how she could sure use a dose of company, if only he’d excuse himself from his friends and join her for a little while.

Fuck her intentions, Andrew rested the issue with the immediate clasp of her hand amidst the thunderous applause for *Squid Friction*’s chimp nipple song. Any diversion from his “friends”’ company was a slice of paradise.

And, by the suggestive stew of wanton lust stirred by the slice of paradise diverting him away from the dance
floor and into the direction of press tables, Andrew could care less what she wanted him for.

For heaven's sake and all the saints, meet someone....
....tonight may very well be a night of nights....
It bothered Andrew: Bari and those trivial prophecies of hers.

***

A shabby grey shape shifted, watched in patient surveillance and with such tamed anticipation as can only be found among the damned baring a scheme to redeem themselves.
Such schemes were among the damned tonight.
And such schemes made them patient.
They learned to be so, and it was a lesson as twisted and as unbearably torturous as the very lives they had come to lead, as was the manner in which they destroyed other lives in turn.
The shabby grey shape drew no attention to himself, sat still and silent except to calmly scratch his brillo pad beard and the razor blade wounds healing and irritated beneath it. Draped in the overcoat of a street pauper and perched atop a bar stool at the far corner of the bar, against the wall and opposite the stage, he sat and gazed out alertly into the Crow Job night crowd like a jackal deliberating the advent of a kill.
There was a lovely couple, an unsuspecting couple, sharing a table together somewhere midway between the bar end and the brass rails of the entranceway steps.
He watched them. They were important to him.
Two individuals, after their dance, sat down at the center of the last row of tables in the press section. He knew who they were, knew of them, and they seemed interested in each other.
He was interested in them. He watched them, too, though not as keenly as he did the lovely couple.
And then there was the singer, the stage misfit, shining brighter than all of them at the moment, for the time being, not realizing that some day, for him, there would be no more stories to tell except for his own.
The shabby grey shape watched him also, marveling at how here....in this room, amidst this fanfare....there was gathered the most important influences of his life.
As far as people, for the most part.
And as far as the living, for the dead could not attend this reunion, particularly the young one whose blood still dried in gravel-caked splashes against the moonlight of the Crow Job alley.
Though the dead could not join the reunion, the reunion could always step outside and join the dead, any time.
And the shabby grey shape would be their escort for the evening.
If Melony had been more decided upon the extent of the disclosure of her identity to Andrew Erlandson, she would not have been so careless as to invite him to her table...and would not have left her press table card displaying her name and publication so openly obvious to wandering eyes.

Melony was subtly made aware...oh so subtly at first...of several things which disturbed her at the touch of the hand she now clasped, of the young man whose hand she held behind her as she led him through the dispersal of dancers for a self-arranged liaison at her night club table. She kept these things, these feelings, these thoughts, at bay for the fear of any or all of them getting the best of her, subduing her until she’d find herself sulking in the regret of a mismanaged and wasteful evening.

She’d taken advantage of the opportunity to watch and observe, a task which oddly reminded her of her husband and the security guard stories of his early college years. To observe Ralston Cooper, one of the most imperative objects of her interest, was impossible not to do. She was attentive to the table at which roosted Cooper’s agent, Cooper’s hokey, party-happy girlfriend, and specifically to the son of A.J. Erlandson, the son who managed not to disappear without a trace as did his father, as did initially his elusive twin brother also. The other imperative focus of the evening could not as readily be attended to, for the probability of this elusive other Erlandson’s presence, the presence of Andrew’s twin, was very much looking like a lost cause.

Even though, unlike A.J., who never to anyone’s knowledge ever reappeared, never yet at any rate, Andrew’s sordid and spectral twin had made dozens of profound special guest appearances over the years in the Erlandson saga. Reappearing, disappearing, reappearing, like the ink from the pen of a practical jokester who doesn’t quite want anyone to catch more than a hint of his message on paper.

Max and Mel had hoped for another appearance here, at the *Crow Job* Family Reunion, particularly since it was this twin who was most likely responsible for the death of Nigel in the adjoining alley outside.

After all, it was this twin who’d been behind Nigel’s disappearance and assumed death the first time around. The fabled *Wraith-child*.

Presumably. According to Max and Mel.

Melony’s husband was specific in covering a plan of action at the news of the discovery of little Nigel’s body; though he’d be truly disappointed at the absence of the twin or Melony’s failure to spot him, as Melony was as well. Max made clear that the assignment for Mel was to pay primary attention to Andrew and to go in for the informative kill on that angle. Max imposed upon his own self the task of going after the twin and as soon as his plane arrived from his short-lived Brazil excursion he would right away set to work on that end.

What disturbed Melony had little to do with any of this.

Or, said again, what disturbed Melony was that these feelings and thoughts had little to do with any of what she’d planned.

She knew she had to formally meet Andrew, to get to know him for as long as she needed him, somehow, and she had every intention of veiling her true identity and interest in him as efficiently and as coolly as the situation allowed.

And with plenty of room to back out should things get too surreal or too dangerous.

In watching his table, she knew she’d get farther with him if only she’d draw him away from William Behn’s rude snubbing of any zealous Cooper fan who approached him.

Luring him away to dance had been the first step and she scored high and heavy with his interest wholly captured. She was thankful for the frivolous urges and intuition behind her choice of dress, for the rare but refreshing ease by which she unleashed her compulsion to let loose. Together these fancies played no small part in making things work for her.

When she invited him to join her and took his hand, it was like taking the hand of a historic figure arisen from the stagnant memories of the past. She had so many questions for him, so many secrets to unravel, and it disturbed her to feel so intimidated. And on the other hand, he seemed so awkwardly timid, like a gentle young boy wrestling
with a sexual tension that clearly made him come off as inexperienced with a woman’s attentions, pitting him against his own politeness.

Her presuppositions had never allowed for such humanness. She found herself ashamed of scarcely having considered this a trait for him; for if he be anything other than human, living as one all his life should certainly make him human at heart.

As they sat down together, Melony hoped her new insight proved true.

She could only hope so, because as soon as Andrew was seated he was regarding her press table card and any new insight on his part toward her could prove far more disturbing than any thought or feeling obtained just by holding his hand.

And it was much too late to turn things around, or to turn back.

***

“A newsletter, huh? What’s Diverse Arcanum?”

Melony took a sip of her half-downed fuzzy navel. “It means many strange things. A collection of many strange, ancient things, actually. You want a drink? What were you drinking?”

“Damn, I left my beer....” Andrew realized.

“Don’t go back,” Mel turned, motioned for a barhop. “I’ll buy us a round. Stay, keep me company a bit. I hate being alone here, not seeing anyone I know and you seem like good enough company....”

“No, believe me, uh....” Andrew glanced at the name printed in cursive boldness upon the folded card, “Melony? Melony, believe me, you’ve rescued me from a table full of assholes. I hate being up at the front like that, anyway, it’s like sitting at the front row of a crowded movie theatre, the screen in your face and all these idiots blocking your view and pushing past you regardless of it being the front row.”

A barhop approached the next moment; Mel ordered another fuzzy navel, with an added Foster’s for her guest. The barhop scribbled in jotted pen pecks upon her tray, then departed.

“Want a sip in the meantime?” Mel offered him her drink and he obliged coyly.

He returned it with a thank you and relaxed further into his seat. He then leaned forward, offered his hand to her. “Well...Melony, I’m Andrew. Thanks for the dance, by the way. That’s never happened before. To me.”

Mel took his hand and they shook. “It’ll happen again if I can help it. Andrew. I bet you love to dance, even when it’s to a band of less-than-impressive cheap nobodies trying to make a first-rate writer look good while he sings bad.”

Andrew laughed in amused agreement and she joined in the chuckle. Soon enough, the barhop returned with the drinks, adding them to a running tab exclusive only to each party within the reserved press section. Andrew lifted his Foster’s for a toast and they did so to Mel’s appreciated band comment.

They drank. Andrew was careful to harness his own roaming eyes away from the excitement of sleek shoulders bare and slender, cascading into revealing cleavage which at once fluttered loosely as black nylons crossed and rested, hands cupped and settled around the cocktail glass now placed within her lap.

Mel found herself with no choice but to notice these self-conscious subtleties. Embarrassingly enough, she wished he would admire her more daringly, for she was aware of her own beauty and of how it turned him on so and just about any male attention of this kind was welcomed and even longed for God only knew the last time Maxy had ever taken time out to toss even a compliment her way. Hell, he was all so caught up in his obsessive gallivants that the only attention she’d get aside from hurried lovemaking or occasional banks of approval over clothes shopping choices was in how well she’d compile material for his latest project or book. It never used to be this way, but for what seemed like a long, long while, it amounted to nothing more.

And now, someone was actually turned on by her, someone else and although for her to sense a lust of this nature from just any strange and drooling male was a common and indifferent annoyance generally, this instance could have come at no better time. As for it coming from Andrew Erlandson of all characters, with whom she at last just now had formally met....

....well, she suddenly discovered the odd reality of being profoundly turned on herself. And it frightened her. Though she hid it expertly, so she thought.

So far, so very good, Mel. Keep it up, and perhaps you yourself may become a historic figure of the future’s past, to arise one day from another generation’s stagnant memories.

***
They danced once more, this time to a rampant metal beat with lyrics that could never be misunderstood, only because not one word could be understood as anything anyway.

When they returned to the table and received their sixth round, Andrew, in repositioning himself in his seat, slammed a kneecap into the table’s underside with a start. Melony was quick to rescue her cocktail from a toppled descent, though the glass escaped her grip with a splash and a pirouette until it rested upright and half empty before her.

And the two of them broke into laughter.
“Wé’re not bombed,” Mel jested.
“Who’s bombed?” came Andrew’s reply.

And, for the greater part, neither one of them really were. Andrew had limited his sizeable Foster’s to two, in favor of the less demanding Coors twelve ounce longnecks, while Mel had stuck to fuzzy navels, with a zombie shared between the two of them.

Melony had come for reasons of professional pursuit and intense curiosity, Andrew because he was expected to and because he didn’t know what to do with himself otherwise. Yet there they were, as fantastically unreal as it seemed to the both of them but for fantastically different reasons, each having a surprisingly fantastic time.

“Is your knee okay?”
“Didn’t feel it,” said Andrew. Then, with a blunt calmness, he said to her following another beer swig, “So...wouldn’t they allow you to at least bring a friend?”
Melony looked at him. “Who?”

“Your newsletter people. You know, you’re probably the only one here who came alone, which is nuts, what with the dirtbags who normally hang out here and all. And with that kid they found in the alley
“I heard about that. And how inappropriate to have a raging party event like this right next door, with not even a mention of caution or of what happened at all. All these people and with a maniac out running around....”

“They don’t care,” Andrew moaned. “They don’t care because Ralston doesn’t care. Ralston probably gets off on it, probably sees an angle of novelty in a murder so recent and so close to the premier gig of a horror geek.”

“For a personal assistant, you sound like you hate the guy.”

Andrew cast a questioning gaze at her, reminded himself that his services to Ralston, at least on the surface, were no great secret. He toyed with his beer bottle label as he replied, “Personal slave. Doing everything for him is all I ever do. And he’s a pompous rat bastard, except for when he’s passed out.”

“Sounds familiar,” Melony admitted. “I’m a personal slave and you might say for the same kind of rat bastard, except for my rat bastard isn’t pompous and he doesn’t pass out. He’s always on the go and for what he’s known for, you might say that between him and Ralston the celebrity status is equal. I know what you go through now and I never knew you went through that....”

“What are you talking about...?”

Melony caught herself. She could not believe the height of witless idiocy she had just displayed to herself.

She had never considered the notion that Andrew Erlandson could be anything but disturbingly mysterious and alien to her; contrary to any expectations, she found him intensely enjoyable, personable, intelligent, and shy, and not to mention, increasingly handsome. She began to sense that he quite possibly had no knowledge of what he was and sensing this in turn lead to a new and foreboding impression that she might be wrong about him, that he may be human after all.

And what an upset that would be! She would quit this queer career for sure if that were the case, go back to painting. Maybe she should have been painting all along....

These were the things which now made her careless, that Andrew’s company actually was making her forget what she was there for. This was indeed a headache, for Andrew himself was what she was there for.

Andrew was waiting for an answer, his puzzled expression growing all the more intense while she was growing all the more distressed.

She needed an instant escape route, a trap door tunnel to the fun they shared moments before. Perhaps she should give it up, come clean, reveal everything. Perhaps she should knee-smack the table, should spill her drink again.

*Squid Friction* erupted into a boisterous bastardization of *Highway To Hell* just then.

Melony bolted from her seat.

*For what it’s worth, thank God...*

And she took Andrew by the hand, once again leading him to the dance floor. And they danced.
The lovely couple rose from their center table. The young man assisted the girl, with her coat and downed the remainder of his drink simultaneously. The girl grabbed her purse.

They were leaving.

The shabby grey shape waited patiently as they found their way to the exit. His heart then began to race. His fingers shook. He brought them to his face along with round-rimmed spectacles and pushed his spectacles into place.

It was just...about...time.

He abandoned his table, taking with him a red plastic cocktail straw from a nearby empty glass. He began to take his first steps toward the exit the moment the lovely couple disappeared into the outside air. Swiftly now...even more swiftly....

When he reached the outer walkway, pushing restlessly past a handful of others exiting and a handful of others entering, he spotted the lovely couple as they strolled arm-in-arm across the parking lot, down the sidewalk, beneath the bright lamplight of the solemn street.

He kept his pace steady and slow, careful to turn the other way or sidestep into the shadows should one or both of them take a glance behind and his way. As they crossed the adjoining intersection, he waited for a moment’s time before he did the same.

Halfway across and from between the faded yellow crosswalk lines, he paused to gaze back himself, back to The Crow Job, back to the gaping black mouth of The Crow Job’s rearside alley. He thought recent memories.

For a moment.

Then he continued onward, chewing the tip of his cocktail straw nervously and discarding it to the street curb.

At first, he thought the lovely couple were returning to their grey Mercedes, the Mercedes the young man had borrowed earlier from his church choir leader on the half-lie that his date with the pastor’s daughter would be an innocent dinner-and-movie one. The shabby grey shape was prepared to follow, prepared to go in turn for his own shabby-shaped vehicle across the street, until the lovely couple strode past the Mercedes and continued further over the crabgrass cracks of severed sidewalk, down the street and further away from the happening nightclub.

He stood still the next moment, resting against the riddled graffiti of a garbage dumpster, placing his fingers, now trembling and anxious, into his trench coat pockets. Two raggedy young men approached him from behind, mooching for a cigarette or three. He replied coldly that he didn’t smoke. They offered him unseen other things that they insisted would mellow his harsh disposition, with only a small price to pay in return. He replied, again coldly, that the only unseen things controlling his disposition would be resolved by himself very soon, adding that the young men had better get lost should they find themselves involved personally in that resolution. With a high price to pay.

He abandoned the young men and the dumpster to continue his endeavor on the lovely couple, who were now much further down the street, their sojourn interrupted by a kissful embrace. They vanished soon into the distant dark of a building’s sharp corner. He knew where they were headed. Together.

Up and across he went past the mouth of a narrow alley, splish-splashing shoe soles up and across drainage water, dodging a car’s gleaming headlights, over and onto the continuing walkway and patches of wet grass. In a
careful rush he scurried past the stubble-white stucco of an old building and rounded the sharp turn in pursuit. Steering subtly through the thick shaded hues of the other side and its parking lot, he followed the lovely couple past the front entrance of a weathered motel.

***

Alice Bradshaw led her boyfriend down the walkway, past the quieted, gated swimming pool and a series of juniper bushes stretching out like a multitude of hands, mossy and splintery from digging upwards and out from the ground. They arrived at the lightless front doorstep of room 06.

She turned to her boyfriend and beckoned a pleasant second kiss and he obliged her, pinning her sleek-figured body gently but firmly against the door. The pressure loosened the number “6” plate from the metal “06”, knocking it onto the padded doormat below and making it room number 0.

“This is your bright, bargain motel room?” her boyfriend laughed.

“Ben,” she sighed, “it’s better on the inside. Besides, no churchy parents to hide from...you’re with a pastor’s daughter for Pete’s sake...and we don’t have to go all the way to your place now, do we?”

“No,” he said to her slyly, tilting them both into the failed front lighting. “But we can still go all the way....”

Alice playfully nudged him backwards. “Wait a sec, Ben, what if he’s watching?”

He pulled away smirking. Then, “Can you believe him? You think your dad sent him, you know, to watch us? You know how paranoid he gets over you....”

“He’s not my dad’s right-hand man, Ben. He’s only a handy-man. And he’s a cool friend.”

“A cool friend that follows us???”

“He helped us be able to come out here,” Alice told him. “He covered our asses...hell, he even told us about this thing tonight.”

“He told us about the concert, yeah, and he showed up to catch the show, which I think is great. But he’s following us!”

“Maybe out here, in this neighborhood, he’s looking out for us. And if he sees us go into the room, he won’t tell. He’ll maybe lecture us later....”

“I don’t think he’s there anymore.”

“You sure...?” Alice turned, looked past Ben.

“Don’t turn! Don’t look past me!”

Alice whipped her gaze back to him.

“Just close your eyes....” Ben said to her and kissed her once more. She relaxed and accepted his passion and returned it.

A purse rose between them, breaking them apart. She dug into the purse, retrieved her room key. She had to jiggle the lock; she turned the knob and opened the door.

In an instant, an abrupt flash, a spectral blur and Ben had no time to react. Alice could not contain her senses long enough to scream. Something collided with her and she found herself crashing down into and past the opened door, through the shabby carpeted entranceway, against the table in the nearby kitchen abyss. There was a distant distortion of light cut to the quick and in it she caught a vague glimpse of the door as it slammed shut behind dancing blackness.

She reached in a desperate but feeble attempt to grasp for some stable support, her mind just as desperate to grasp reality. Blindness overtook that reality... she fought against it as though it took prominence over fighting for her life... and her hand fell onto the entranceway carpet. In abhorrent confusion she mistook the carpet for a heavy dampness...

...her own blood....

...but it was then, that her eyes came into focus with the twisting, contorted mass of what she knew to be her boyfriend, his throat severed and gaping, spewing a black formlessness.

Still, Alice could not scream.

Though she knew she was about to die.

A gripping force overtook her from behind, lifting her from the kitchenette tile floor suddenly, her vision clearing further as the gripping hands flung her around to a full view of her assailant’s figure.

She caught the gleam of a knife, a razor and the sight of the lurid shape behind it, the shabby grey shape shrouded in silhouette by the moonlight streaming through the curtains beyond.

She could not move.
She could not struggle.
And there came a whisper... harsh, sunken....
“I need you. I need you reeeeeeal bad.”
It lowered the blade closer, almost until it reached the skin below her line of vision.
“Not for love, not for sex, not for death. My needs are beyond these trivialities. My needs are for a more important cause...a more noble cause.”
He lowered his face and the rugged bristles of his beard brushed against Alice’s nostrils and across the smoothness of her cheek.
“I’ve been watching you for...oh, I’d say for some time now. Ever since your father took me in and gave me a job, which was very nice of him, by the way, I don’t think I ever showed the gratitude he deserved. I’ve been wanting you, Alice Bradshaw. But things are different now. Now, I need you. Reeeeeeal bad....”
And that was when she noticed, in the midst of horrid disarray...

...the scars.
His words fell into place upon the nightmare bed of her conscious understanding. Her eyes widened in gradual realization.
“Good girl,” he breathed. “It’s Simon. It’s me, Simon. Simon BoLeve. That bearded behemoth you see seated in the back left row of each one of your daddy’s Sunday social services. The one who jerks off toilet plunger handles and scrubs graffiti-smeared pussie drawings from the parking lot brick walls. The one who scares away the pussies that put them there. The one who roosts up in the church attic. Not that I’m complaining; it’s comfortable up there. Comfortable...but also lonely. So lonely. But not anymore. Something better has come along. Something special is going to happen. Something reeeeeeal special. Reeeeally special. Soon, lovely Alice Bradshaw. Soon. And until then, I’m not Simon anymore. Until then, you can call me....

...a flicker, a radiant gleam and the razor sliced cleanly into her right cheek. Blood seeped outwards and trailed beneath the inside crevice of her earlobe, downward, beading across her flailed hair....

“....until then, you can call me Scratch.”

Slowly, his free hand skimmed down the length of her side and found the base of her blouse.
As she felt the distant numbness of his fingers fumbling with the top button fly of her jeans, one and then the next and then the next, as her panties soon slid with the jeans to her ankles and his coldness pressed hard against the exposed skin of her inner thighs, she allowed the evening’s realities to slip into a detestable emptiness where, compared to reality, she found a better and brighter place in which to hide....
12.

A Departing Exchange

Andrew hadn’t been forced to pay as much attention to Ralston’s music nor the worshipping Ralston fans as he had first dreaded. Instead, he payed far more attention to the woman who asked him to dance and who offered him a seat at her table.

Who would ever think.

Melony hadn’t forced herself to pay as much attention to the investigative business of unknown truth-seeking as she had planned. Instead, she ended up clubbing and drinking and dancing with the investigation’s priority subject of the evening.

Who would ever think that, either.

They both ducked out from the show just beyond one a.m., allowing enough time for themselves to avoid the exiting onrush at the advent of the show’s climax and the last call for alcohol.

Squid Friction had been well received and neither Andrew nor Melony could imagine the band’s debut as taking a turn for the worse this late in the evening, or any time before the gig ended. They both agreed, however, that the show’s success was largely due to the novelty and nothing that night could possibly herald a smashing debut album.

The two made their way across the car-littered parking lot, up and over an infestation of weeds and cracks of broken sidewalk. As they crossed the adjoining intersection, Andrew paused to gaze back at the mouth of the Crow Job’s rear alley as the reminder of its hidden crime scene briefly struck his memory. Melony turned too, noting as her eyes caught sight of Andrew and then of his distraction that she should interject a regard for the evening’s professional mission while there was still time...

...before she found herself driving home without so much as a promise from Andrew that she will meet with him again.

For investigative reasons, of course.

I’m walking her to her car, Andrew thought, and he could not believe where the evening had taken him thus far, holy gee-zus.

“Andrew...?”

Andrew looked at Melony. “Yes?”

“I had a great time tonight. Thank you.”

“You didn’t expect to, without me?” He meant to say, you didn’t expect to, unless you met someone, but the instant before he said it, he thought it too rude. Or too blunt.

Melony laughed a short laugh. Then, rather straightforward, she replied, “I didn’t expect to really meet anyone tonight, unless it was....” (unless it was you in particular) “...unless it was Ralston or someone in the band.”

“I was meaning to ask you about that,” Andrew said, “and now’s as gooda time as any. So, Diverse Arcanum covers entertainment as well, as, say, Noah’s Ark and vampires and Santa Claus? What’s a girl like you and a magazine about the unknown doing in a place like The Crow Job?”

The two half-passed a lone and lowly motel before Melony began to cross the street to her vehicle with Andrew following. Approaching a sleek cherry-red custom-made convertible ‘68 Mustang, she withdrew from her purse a black box-shaped gadget and flicked its center button and the car responded with an abrupt chirp chirp! Already, she found herself relieved upon casual inspection that no rat-bastard hoodlum had attempted to tamper with it. She exchanged the black box with a set of keys.

Behind her, across the street at the motel, a door slam startled her, made her turn. She found Andrew before her, jotting something down with a pen to a jagged paper within his palm.

“This is my home phone,” he said, and coyly handed to her the jagged piece. “I...I was hoping tonight wasn’t just a really good night and nothing more....”

She took the paper and it disappeared into her purse after a quick glance at it. Her keys clinked and jiggled in her hand. She didn’t know what to do with them, for it seemed that to turn and open her car door was to call her
encounter with Andrew quits for the night. And she didn’t want to do that. But yet, she had to. For herself, for Max, for business.

At the same time, she knew she had to meet Andrew Erlandson again.

If but only for business.

For one sweeping second, Melony found time to wonder whether the way she was achieving this task of getting to know Andrew was right or wrong. Was she coming on to him like some relentless diva willing to go as far as to sleep with a guy to get what she wanted from him? Was she a spy sent by Maxy to befriend Andrew, to be Andrew’s buddy-ol’-pal until she knew him good enough to exploit him? Was she genuinely attracted to him as she would be attracted to any intriguing young man, as though he actually was a man and not the secretive Being From Beyond she’d convinced herself of him to be?

Was she finding him to be more of a man than anything she expected?

Was she so incredibly turned off and tired of Max that any prospects of fooling around or falling in love again turned on and tempted her?

Surely she wouldn’t cheat on her husband.

Not under these circumstances, especially.

It was okay to be attracted to Andrew. It made her comfortable with him and she had to be comfortable with him, or the aspects of what he was would make him far too intimidating to tap for unseen wonders.

She was doing what she wanted.

She was doing the right thing.

And if Andrew found out who she was....by the time he found out, she was sure she could make him understand.

“Call me, I’d like to hear from you,” she said to him. “Soon. Like maybe tomorrow. You got my number. Let’s get together this weekend.”

“Or you call me, you now have my number, too,” said Andrew. “Or how about this, the first person to call the other wins.”

“Wins what?”

“Wins a full course Chinese dinner for two, courtesy of yours truly, on the house. Or should I say, at my place. It’s a cozy little apartment and I make great Chinese. We could do something afterwards, maybe, like go catch a movie....”

“Sounds nice,” Melony replied, and smiled.

As Andrew watched Melony pull into the street and speed into the distant lamp-lit black, his thoughts sped also, thoughts about the weekend, thoughts about dinner and beyond.

...and thoughts about what Bari would think of all of this.

He was left in wonder and wondering these things when he proceeded back to the opposite side of the street to make his way to the apartment, casually observing the flow of nightclubbers exiting The Crow Job and swarming between the parking lot’s vehicles and it crossed his mind that Melony had never quite answered his question about why a magazine concerned with the unknown would concern itself with a horror writer’s rock n’ roll gig.

Then again, it didn’t matter.

He went home with these thoughts and with them he went home to Bari.
13.
A Few Fringe Benefits of the Gods

When Andrew returned to his third floor apartment, he expected Bari to be somewhere about and waiting for him to come home.

Bari herself was more than amused at this. She’d given up reminding her dear one years ago that she was always with him, always and in many ways. What was he thinking, that Bari slummed around the place like a bored housewife, that protecting him with her very soul meant macrame and Days Of Our Lives and hoping he’d return to her safely for chicken and dumplings and a piping pot pie?

Andrew knew better than that; he simply wasn’t as conscious of things as he could be. And whenever Bari would appear to him, she would appear mostly at home and very rarely elsewhere, almost never in the presence of others or under the potential of being seen by others, except in a few past cases of protecting Andrew from harm. Aside from any exceptions when Andrew was out and about, Bari remained undetectable and observant and totally nonexistent to the physical realm of Andrew’s world.

Oftentimes to Andrew, Bari’s absence grew so convincing and certain, stretching over the course of hours or even days or weeks that it became all but impossible to accept her claim of always being there.

But hell...people generally take God that way.

Whatever sort of creature or being Bari was or used to be, she was actively a Watchmaid, like it or not and she had been for quite a while now. Oftentimes, she dared to confront what few vague glimpses of memory she carried of her human self, of the mortal woman she once was, but in many ways it became a natural instinct not to dwell on these memories too much. Her duties were embedded within her from the single burst of moment it took for her to be transformed and the sudden enlightenment, which accompanied this transformation left her with no choice but to accept it and to remain true. It was like dying and embracing the inevitable afterlife, and then assuming the role of guardian angel to the very one responsible for her death.

The only thing was, Bari never truly died. She was too physical and material to be a literal angel; she was also too spiritual and intangible to be limited to the physical world. Bari possessed the power to materialize into the physical world, to touch and to feel and to be touched, but she could also upon her own will manipulate her state of mind and body to disappear and reappear, to see the unseen spectacles which surround us all in spirit and limitless dimension and to take part in them as well. For her, there was no place on Earth she could not travel and nothing on Earth to keep her from traveling there, from walls of iron to the Gates of Hell.

If the average Joe or Judy Human were to possess even a few of these fringe benefits of the gods, things would lead to nothing less than cataclysmic mayhem for the only species to ever walk the earth who could never quite seem to keep their feet on the ground.

There was one thing keeping Bari from her own potential brew of cataclysmic mayhem, from exploiting such powers as Man could...

...and this was her allegiance to her Everborn, upon which these abilities were built. Everything about her was dependent upon a solid guardianship of Andrew, for if any harm should come to him, the price for her would be banishment, banishment from the physical realm altogether, to forever walk the earth while merely viewing the physical realm but hopelessly unable to take part in it. Such is the realm of spirits, but she would not be spirit. She would no longer be a Watchmaid should Andrew die, die for reason.

She would become what came to be called a Magdalene, a term coined by the many Watchmaids who had suffered this fate over the ages and centuries past.

Andrew may not have been aware of Bari’s presence with him at The Crow Job that night, but she had nevertheless been with him, watching him, studying the wife of Maxwell Polito with amusement and intense interest and with increasing approval. She had been waiting for Andrew to make this sort of destined connection with another and it was seeming as if Melony would be the one. Of all women.

But there had been something else present at The Crow Job that night, something lurking about near the dark and deserted alleyway at the nightclub’s rear, something aware of Bari’s presence also, of the presences of all
involved.

Something waiting and watching, pinpointing the movements and schemes of the man in shabby grey, savoring the lingering death smell of the black boy it had revived to keep tabs on the shabby grey man when he himself had been an infant; the boy whose second and final death had drawn the being to this alley so many years later.

This *something* was one of the Magdalene.

And Bari knew what it was waiting *for*.
Max and Melony

Max had trampled through the front door of his Malibu estate late that Saturday morning, a briefcase in one hand and notebooks and piles of papers in the other. He trotted upstairs, clad in blue jeans and a grey Los Angeles Kings sweatshirt (which was all he cared to wear on his plane trip up) and went directly to his office.

Melony sat at her desk with a cup of coffee. His emergence startled her; she swiveled in her chair to face him as he sped past her to his own desk, dumped his armful of important this-and-thats before an array of keyboarded PC hardware.

“Any calls?” he asked her in a hurry.
“I missed you, too,” came her reply.
“Did Matt McGregor call?”
“How was your trip?”
“Did Matt call? Did anyone call?”

“Phil Hubert of the...” Melony sighed, gazed at her notes. “…the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Susan called from Fairway. Mark Deltmore wants a lunch date, soon, and Ruben Whitfield’s agent called about a booking at the Fall convention. The Cleggs down the street want to know if we can attend their dinner party on the night of the eighth....”
“We don’t have time. Any faxes?”
“They’re on your desk. Oh...Matt sent an acknowledgement that he received your two faxes....”
“Any mail? Packages? E-mail when I was gone?”
“Would you stop?” she said with a calm sort of irritability and she took another sip from her coffee.

Max found his mail, shuffled through an assortment of manila envelopes and subscribed periodicals and junk mail. He turned momentarily to her, absently. “Would I stop what?”

“Interrogating me.”

For Max, the curious disposition of his wife sparked a fleeting display of concern, stifled the next moment by the distracting urgency of a busy schedule and the matters at hand. He was interested only long enough to ask, “What are you talking about?”

Mel lowered her coffee mug onto her lap slowly, swiveled within her desk chair to face her husband, leaned forward and gazed squarely across the short stretch of office area and directly into his eyes. “You never used to treat me like this, you know, bark at me like this. Without you even asking, you’ve always been able to count on me to let you know what’s going on. I’m your wife, for chrissake. Show a little affection, a little appreciation once in a while. I missed you when you were gone. I always do.”

Melony had barely begun to speak when Max was already reverting to the task of sorting papers and files into a stack, after which he gathered them up and approached Mel with them.

Melony turned her attentions away in an instant effort of restraint from growing anger, then just as instantly lifted her head to face him again; he was right before her now, arching downwards for a kiss to make things better. For a moment the kiss seemed to erase the friction between them, make things right again.

“You know I love you,” he told her and he said it in such a way that Melony could have mistaken these words for an offering of warm sincerity...if it wasn’t for how he hurried them so. And if it wasn’t for the stack of papers he then planted upon the desktop space beside her. “Now, you’ve got to understand, Mel, the profound and likely importance of what we’re getting ourselves into here, with this Erlandson project. We’re gonna blow the lid wide open on something that you and I have been working extremely hard on and we’ll lose it like we’ve lost it before...only this time we’ve never been so goddamn close to it.”

He continued, “I know it’s difficult, but we have to wait, our relationship pales in the light of what we’re about to uncover. You should know that. We’ll have a nice dinner tonight, you and I...how about that? But we must get to work and I’d like you to take care of these papers I’ve brought you, you know what to do with them. And in a little while, I’d like to know everything about Ralston Cooper’s gig last night and about your investigations there.
Meanwhile, there are a few things waiting for me to do. I love you, dear...you’re wonderful.”

***

Over the course of the afternoon, Max had gone about his business feverishly, with Melony obeying his instructions without another word.

Max phoned Matt McGregor and spoke to Matt’s wife, after which he paged Matt two or three times before his calls were returned. McGregor was an L.A. County law enforcement official of many years and advancements of rank and even for much longer, a personal friend of Max. More importantly, McGregor was the primary informant to Max in the Erlandson saga and in particular was the very man who contacted Melony regarding the discovery of young Nigel’s body behind The Crow Job.

While researching the fascinating child abductees by UFO’s in a remote village bordering a vastness of rain forest, Max was first notified of the Nigel discovery by his wife, followed expectedly by a call from Matt. Nevertheless, upon Matt’s returned call that afternoon, Max made certain to give his friend a thorough interview about the subject; Max questioned Mel about the previous evening and Ralston’s celebrated gig, though Mel chose to exclude certain details concerning her personal feelings about Andrew, about her attractions to him, about how her accumulating despair over the condition of her marriage helped conjure up those attractions.

Melony did, however, explain to her husband her impressions of Andrew, how he came across as far more of an average guy than she had ever expected.

She told Max about the date she’d planned with Andrew that weekend and Max was thrilled whereas others would in the least prove jealous by some degree. But a date tonight was out of the question, there were other things to be done, preparations to make.

Melony phoned Andrew not long after Max’s questioning her (or rather, his interrogating her, as she was tempted to put it a second time). Her date was therefore set with Andrew for tomorrow evening, Sunday. Andrew sounded amusingly giddy and excited to her through the course of the call, like a schoolboy struck with the sweet thrill of victory upon asking a knockout babe to the prom.

With that done, Mel tended to other related matters while Max took a trip to The Crow Job’s backside. He returned with nothing he didn’t already know, with the exception of a general knowledge of the area and a visual familiarity with the scene. He’d requested to view Nigel’s body with McGregor; there were no funeral plans, needless to say, due to a confounding absence of family or friends in any way linked to him, and due to understandable reasons of secrecy....

...the matter instantly proved to be perplexing enough to inspire the local P.D. into buttoning their lips permanently.

The only problem they had in doing that was in the way the discovery gained media attention throughout the stunted pursuit for the child’s identity. Matt McGregor’s experienced insight was largely responsible for the cover-up and the Fed’s intervention.

In other words, Max’s request to view the corpse was going to take a little while to be granted.

Max made good of his promise to Mel that they would have dinner together that night, although when they spoke to each other and Melony managed to share a few thoughts, Max simply interrogated her.

***

Later still that evening, Melony caught her husband red-handed (and much to her non-expectations) smoking a cigarette on the front porch, standing candidly beside decorative marble pottery which was empty but for a dozen or so expired butts.

***

The mid-to-late morning of Sunday was uneventful with the exception of an enlivening telephone call from Matt McGregor, proclaiming news of another grisly discovery, made from within the room of a motel down the street from The Crow Job, and of the related disappearance of a certain reverend’s daughter.
Ralston and Jessica

15.

Ralston sat under the dim light in the corner chair, nude, beads of sweat like blisters spread upon a muscular body neglected by laziness and time, his hairless chest rising and then slowly falling from the drags of the redolent fumes of a half-spent Thai joint. The pot was good. It was very good. And very abundant. Its vaporous streams accumulated at the ceiling and drifted languidly out the open window.

He sat there, his shadow casting a distorted framework of blackness across the carpet, trailing toward the queen-sized waterbed and over the side of a black-and-white-checkered comforter until it arrived at Jessica’s own sleek nudeness resting, almost posing, spread-eagle atop several bed pillows. In a way, she was tantalizing him, but in a way, she didn’t care. She was just as comfortably numb as her celebrity boyfriend was, feeling pretty goddamn good about herself, about the past day, about the night, about the early morning hours as those hours crept upon the two of them since the concert of the night before.

Right then, time was slowly creeping upon the early morning hour of two a.m., Sunday morning. They had been partying since they returned from The Crow Job concert to their two-story home in the upper-class section of Brea the morning before. The afternoon after the concert, band members and swarms of friends and friends of friends had flooded their home in celebration of the gig’s success, highlighted by a half-hearted but promising little review of the gig in the Show section of the Orange County Register’s early edition, presented to Ralston’s guests by the band’s bass player and courtesy of the paper boy.

The party had dwindled considerably soon afterwards, though it had officially ended later that evening. Such was Ralston’s parties...all-nighters and all-dayers...and if it wasn’t for Jessica’s fatigue and Ralston’s own growing yearnings for a peace-and-quiet kick-back time of solitude, the celebration would have lasted the weekend.

Another reason for Ralston to call it quits this time, the most important reason, was that he was ever so anxious to soak up some time with his new beloved book...

...so when others would read it, he would at least know what the hell they were reading and would be able to handle their responses like an experienced bestselling author should.

As usual, Jessica was the first of the others aside from his agent to read his latest work, though she often complained otherwise in an irate and wining sort of fashion.

And of course, Ralston had to deal with it, which meant letting Jessica read the novel before he did.

In Andrew’s apartment, Ralston had a chance of sorts to browse through the book: from what he read of it, it was good. Damn good.

But he never truly caught the gist of it, in what little time he had then.

And neither did Jessica, though within the past few hours, the silent, quiet, post-party hours, she tried.

But she didn’t quite make it.

If she had, everything would be a different story from there on out.

And from here on out.

***

“I saw you with my new book,” Ralston said slyly as he sat there.

Jessica stirred, turned on the bed to her side. “Ohhh. Yes. Yeah. When was that?”

“Must’ve been a few hours ago.”

“Must’ve.” She sat up, propping herself with her hands.

Ralston had caught Jessica browsing through the manuscript’s pages just before the last of the guests had bade them both farewell; almost immediately the two of them engaged in a sexual frenzy that had been mounting throughout the evening.

Ralston had never been one for modesty and had been known from time to time to out-and-out go for his girlfriend regardless of who was with them in the same room...although a great deal of the time whoever was
watching was so incredibly strung out they didn’t seem to notice or care, which made the two lovers all the more consenting and comfortable. Hell, they themselves were usually so strung out they never seemed to care either, even if two other uncaring couples went into frantic screwing not far away.

And whenever Jessica wasn’t paying attention or passed out, one or the other, Ralston had been known to join in.

Under such drugged conditions, such a celebrity was indeed obliged.

“So waddaya think so far?”

“What, about the book?” Jessica asked. She reached behind her, fetched the thick pages of the manuscript and brought them before her. Her glasses, put into use strictly for reading purposes, rested atop a nightstand. She retrieved them also and situated them over her eyes.

“No,” Ralston replied rather sarcastically, “Waddaya think about my cock....”

“Fucker,” came her reply in turn, lazily, yet playfully. Then, “It’s great, honey. Of course. As usual. Like this Max character. You never wrote a book about U.F.O’s before. I think it’s cool, the part you wrote about how he goes to Carbon Canyon because of that letter. I’ll read more later. Or...I’ll read more now. Ya got some more cheese....?”

“Yeh, babe,” Ralston said and stood up, went for the dresser, went for the sizeable hand mirror on which rested two likewise sizeable lengthy lines of the best goddamn crank this end of California. Another hand went for a two-inch-long crazy straw. Next, he offered the mirror and the crazy straw over into Jessica’s waiting hands. She sucked up the sugar-white granules through one nostril in a single snort, cringed for a moment, then, handed the straw and the hand mirror back to her man. She resumed her spread-eagle position atop the bed, then sat right back up again, ready for action.

Before Ralston commenced with his turn, he shot his girlfriend a quick glance. “So....waddaya think of my book? Or my cock...?”

***

Less than three years ago, Jessica had been nothing more than a mere librarian’s assistant, of all things, periodically engaging in various odd part-time jobs alongside. She had finished night school just previous to this, finally achieving the high school diploma she fell short of years before. She’d dropped out of Kingsborough High after a final semester of truancy and an aborted pregnancy and at the age of eighteen screwed her pre-destined goals and abandoned her Utah home altogether.

Stepping from the Greyhound bus terminal in Los Angeles, she found herself spending the first handful of months in this new world of sorts in a no-tell motel with cash stolen from her bastard stepfather. Meeting people and then some, she eventually graduated to apartment life with an occasional roommate, an occasional boyfriend and soon after, landed a job at a local library, living paycheck to paycheck.

Then one day, certain employees of the library were cordially invited to a writer’s convention at L.A.’s Bonaventure Hotel.

The day Jessica went to the convention was the day she met Ralston Cooper.

It was just like meeting an idol, a rock star idol.

Throughout most of Jessica’s life, she had envisioned writers (ignorantly enough) as whimsical introverts or housewives with bottle glasses sporting turtleneck sweaters or stodgy blouses or stressed newsroom types with frenetically loosened ties, heralding from upper/middleclass preppie families in American Suburbia, or as wealthy drunkard yacht cruisers of the Mediterranean, or for that matter demented hermits from Maine.

Ralston Cooper left this vision in downright, pitiful desolation. He was reckless, handsome, occasionally innovative, kickback and sly, and utterly cool. He dressed well, the way (in Jessica’s eyes) a successful mid-twenties celebrity should. He was a show-off, which at times had its downfalls, but he was definitely not reclusive or nerdy or eccentric and he was never immersed in his work. He knew how to show a woman a good time. And his woman... hell, as far as good times could go, Ralston knew who he was with and how to treat her, which was more than any man she ever knew.

Except for a few unspoken, questionable episodes. At parties, during get-togethers, whenever.

So what: women wanted him. Jessica had a right to be jealous. But Ralston would always have the last word, the concluding explanation.

The fact of the matter was, Ralston Cooper was her solitude, her shoulder to lean on, her sanctuary. He had money, he had love, he had status, and he was the man.

That’s right, girl.

And he was interesting, provocative, mysterious.
He had people working for him, under him.

Like his agent, William Behn, that slob sonofabitch of a man who bore a hard-on for her the size of Alaska. Like that genuinely introverted recluse-of-a-misfit Andrew, who edited and did who-knows-what with whatever project Ralston was working on. Like the movie-makers and production teams who produced and created the mega-movie-made-for-TV-mini-series off-shoots of his famous novels.

Ralston was standing now, having ingested the Rock Island Line of speed from the hand mirror he’d just then set back down upon the dresser. He approached the bed where Jessica lay and she raised her gaze toward him, expectantly, almost, almost beckoningly except for the newfound energy and temptation to rise from the bed and meet him midway.

He towered over her, lowered himself onto her. Skin against skin, pushing, retracting. Her legs wound about his.

Pushing....

Pushing the manuscript of *The Everborn* aside, pages sliding, falling across the bed, onto the carpet.

Pushing...pumping....

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### 16.

*The UFO Detective*

---August 28th, 1994---

The forthcoming of rain heralded across the late morning skies and the heavens were like a vast celestial canopy tainted with a mirk and gloom which stretched across the atmosphere in a limitless barrier between unseen endless universe and the world below. It was a foreboding forecast in itself, this display of mounting storm, though in much the same manner its shifting menace paralleled an even more profound and impending destiny for Maxwell Polito. It was an omen, a foreshadowing which, like the sky, could only be seen as a massive grey area of the unpredictable certainties of things to come.

An alien grey area.

Max had eased his pale-brown Mustang over the blistered erosion of parking space asphalt only minutes ago, had silenced his car’s engine and stepped out, emerging to fully face the dormant neon structure of *The Crow Job* sign below the stormy vista. There he now stood, and as he did so he reached into the inner pocket of his beige leather jacket and withdrew a hard pack of Marlboros. He cast a guilty surveillance about him, as though fearful he’d spy his wife’s disapproving observance, slid a smoke from the pack, and lit up. He breathed in its vapors, exhaled, inhaled the frosty chill of early morning air.

He locked and shut the car door, activated the car alarm, zipped up his jacket, and enjoyed another drag. He took in the scene around him and the eerie strangeness he associated with it all, until the passing moments afterwards brought him away and across the corner intersection and into the direction of the curious streetside motel, which beckoned his arrival.

Max was scarcely afforded no more than a rapid rundown of reasons for the urgent summons...a murder...a missing reverend’s daughter, an unexplained link to Ralston’s *Crow Job* gig...each reason as insightful as a pocketful of posies tattooed upon the rubbery-white ass cheek of an alcoholic social worker. But the very fact that his police lieutenant informant and long-time friend had never been known to cry wolf with these matters was enough in itself to get Max out of bed and come running.

Just as he came running long ago, almost three decades ago, when a young Matthew’s desperate screams echoed from within the bowels of a ramshackle building condemned by both the imminent wrecking ball and the widespread rumors of a ghost child inhabiting its treacherous inner sanctum. A handful of roving children knew Max only as the s’curity man back then, but on that fateful day he became a belated savior. He was enough of a savior to come running when he did, driving away the wicked monsters young Matthew claimed to have seen...
moments before Max’s arrival; he was belated long enough for those same elusive terrors to seize the opportunity and steal away an even younger Nigel who lay dying in Matthew’s arms, taking him with them into a dark and timeless realm far beyond the material reaches of Max and their decadent lair.

The fate folks upstairs, as Max often later referred to them (if there were any), had initiated a web of impact and influence upon both Matthew and Max which sparked a unique closeness between the two and each of the years which followed found Max increasingly aware of the boundlessly epic saga taking place in secret all around him, a secret he found himself able to reveal in part to an older and more prepared Matthew in later years, to later still share and discover together with him.

This was an ancient saga straight from the storybook of God, who, if we all behave ourselves, may likely come down to tuck us in our beds and read it to us just before He bids the earth good night. Max was of the restlessly curious breed who simply could never stand to wait that long and who made it their quest to get their hands on an advanced copy. Even if they had to obtain it page by page. What transpired from the events that came down that day in the Fall of ‘68 was to Max, like a succession of pages from that secret saga falling from the sky, Max’s lap being the lucky recipient time and again from that day forward.

Matt McGregor, on the other hand, hadn’t quite been able to face, nor develop, an appreciation for this sort of thing until his teens, which to him was no less boring than the meaning of life...and no less feared...even though the “God’s storybook” metaphor was originally his. For awhile, what he had experienced with Nigel and the monsters that took him was a nightmare, was something he did not want answers to, had no desire to rediscover. In those days, Maxwell was like a father figure or big brother who often dropped by for family dinners or for outings with himself and Matt. In consideration for Matthew, Max managed to keep any details of his struggles for the truth surrounding Nigel to himself until later years when Matt wanted to know. Otherwise, Max shared with him as often as he could the comparatively down-to-earth exploits of a ufologist’s efforts to make a living and a claim to fame.

The decision made by Matt’s parents to move out of state arrived with the summer of Matt’s junior high graduation, their idea of a safer and more affordable home in Nevada taking a heat-stricken toll and a plunge into regret, which returned them to their L.A. hometown three years later.

Matt returned wanting to be a cop.
He wanted Max to visit him again.
And he was just about ready to search for monsters.

A two-year college endeavor began soon after high school was conquered and the need for income brought him an unarmed surveillance position at Captain Security in Norwalk. Three days after receiving his guard card, he was enticed from his night post when Max showed up with a tailored job offer with his cable documentary production crew effective at once. During this short time, Max disclosed certain remarkable case discoveries, information, and insights into his continuing escapades concerning what came to be the Erlandson case. By the time he turned twenty, Matt McGregor had earned an associate degree in Criminology and was well on his way through police academy training, heading at breakneck speed towards his prized role in life, towards tremendous change and achievement, towards a loving wife and the three sons she would bear for him.

As far as Max Polito was concerned, Matt was no longer the brilliant mischievous youth to look down to, but an adult to look up to with mutual respect, a hard-nosed expert in the arts of interrogation and investigation who, after all this time, was still stubborn enough to intrude into the dark treacherous passageways of the curious and the dangerous in a high-wire dare-walk between truth and lies.

And Matt McGregor had been there more often than not, calling Max’s attention each time a page of God’s storybook would fall and then positioning him directly below it, just like the way it all began.

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Since the call a little more than an hour before, Max inwardly anticipated this urgent meeting, though outwardly he contained his hopes with speculation and trained sensibility; he couldn’t deny that this excursion could promise exciting revelation for all he knew, whispered hints of unearthly clues which could back the Erlandson/Nigel saga further into the corner where the show-and-tell spotlight would keep them there, would keep them there for Max to show and tell all.

He journeyed down the uneven sidewalk, past an alleyway and rounding the corner of a small building, discarding his spent cigarette as he went.

At once his objective materialized before him, a less-than-average spiritless stretch of one-story refuge, a likely haven of indulgences and wanton deeds, of abusive domestic brawls and stained bed sheets. And, by the looks of things, of murder as well. Now and again. Max shrugged off an impulsive sneer of disregard as he continued his approach towards what now seemed to be a routine drama for this section of neighborhood and he stifled the
unwelcomed notion that today’s episode was disappointingly common. He clung to the wish of a connection between this discovery and the recent discovery of Nigel, being that the locations were so close to each other.

He sidestepped into a driveway, onto the motel property, and towards his first view of yellow crime scene ribbon adorning a hedged walkway near the head of the parking lot. A young uniformed officer emerged without warning into Max’s path from seemingly nowhere, his upraised palm commanding a halt. In a voice dry and monotone, the officer instructed him to keep away from the center area of the building, to keep off the property unless he currently occupied a room, and asked him if he occupied one.

The officer was interrupted by a more animate voice from behind him. “Now does this gentleman look to you like the type of sorry, snot-ragged, bottom-of-the-barrel-scraper you’re used to seeing in a room here, officer?”

The officer turned towards the voice, then back towards Max and to the voice again, then apologized and walked away.

Lieutenant Matt McGregor approached, stopped and faced Maxwell Polito cheerfully, and the two exchanged eager handshakes several times before and after a cordial embrace. “Maxy, you marauding, Martian-chasing son-of-a-bitch! Howya doin’? How, was Brazil?”

“Well...you know,” replied Max. “When you see one abductee bitching about a bizarre chunk of metal surgically implanted in an armpit or ankle, you see dozens of them, then you see hundreds over the years and you wonder how much would all this shit be worth at a recycling center if they could turn ‘em all into soda can tabs?”

They both shared a hearty laugh.

McGregor’s jolliness diminished into an odd moment of silence as he lapsed into a studious gaze upon his friend, a gaze, which vanished as he dug into the inner pocket of his rain-speckled sports jacket and pulled out a pack of Camels. This was a good idea to Max and he retrieved one himself. Matt offered him a light hidden and cupped against the weather.

McGregor returned the pack to his pocket, unmindfully disclosing the butt of a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum cradled into a leather shoulder holster just past his reach deep beyond the jacket’s inners. Matt buttoned the jacket, which tightened into broad athletic shoulders and hung loosely, almost unevenly, over a narrowing torso and tightly-fit slacks. He was an adult now, but to Max his appearance remained the same in many ways, although his wispy straight brown hair now drooped over a brow surprisingly wrinkled for a man a decade younger than he. The look of roughness in his complexion mismatched a narrow mouth which virtually turned lipless when shut, a trait redeemed by a full, deep brown moustache, which worked well in making him handsome.

They shared a moment of quietude as they smoked and prepared to get down to matters at hand.

It was Max who spoke next. “So...it was Nigel, it was his body, after all this time...?”

“No shit, it was Nigel....”

“Aft... after all this time, I can’t believe it. Those sightings were true, then, and it was him.”

“But ghosts don’t get cut the hell up and sent to the morgue,” McGregor told him. “I saw him, I saw him after they brought him in on a stretcher. I’ve seen bodies where even dental records went into wishy-washy borderline I.D.’s. This was him. And we let the media get his story...that is, the story on the surface, the discovery of a dead kid. We had to, for positive I.D. reasons, to see if anyone could claim him. In the wait, I dug for the right evidence to persuade the department to close the case to the public and to pursue it further behind closed doors, with the right people. I mentioned your name, but the higher-ups kept quiet and the lower-downs just laughed. When no one claimed the body after only a few days, the Feds came in and closed the case themselves.”

“Is it closed?” Max asked.

“The bar may not serve booze after two a.m., but that doesn’t mean the owner can’t party with a few personal friends after closing up shop. They closed up shop all right, but I wasn’t one of the personal friends. My big mouth just drew attention to the interested bastards who took it from there and shut the door in my face.”

“You think they know more than us?” Max questioned.

“It’s government now, like all this sorta bullshit usually gets to be...excuses and coverups...you should know that. You’ve always been civilian and in the public norm to them. But they’re digging up sh*t from ‘68 and related files that’ve been confidential even to me. I’m telling you, the bastards don’t know black from white. They know enough but can’t translate it, don’t know after all these years where it’s taking them. They won’t cooperate with me and someone higher won’t cooperate with them without a good enough blow job. Now...follow me, there’s something further I’d like to show you....”

They ditched their smokes, Max motioning an obedient Rod and the two proceeded to venture across to the cement walkway of the motel corridor, bending beneath crime scene tape and furthering their approach towards the crime scene itself, where a half-dozen uniformed officers awaited them before an opened doorway.

Max shot an observing gaze about him and to the array of on-lookers gathered along the parking lot outskirts. A doleful, dark-toned gentleman nervously fondled a beaded necklace adorning bell-bottomed attire found only in
thrift stores and the late seventies, as he beheld his own dismal fortunes reflected from beneath the rainswept skies and come to pass around him. A display of several city and county squad cars littered the lot, mingling amongst the parked vehicles of leftover motel patrons who spied from the discreetly parted curtains of their rooms. An ambulance rested not far from the corridor’s hedged cobblestone walkway leading in from the lot, its rear double doors gaping while a medic team patiently awaited the go-ahead to unload a gurney.

The uniformed officers, one at a time, caught sight of the lieutenant and the accompanying stranger until the two halted in their midst.

“Gentlemen,” McGregor commenced a hurried introduction, “this is Maxwell Polito, a one-of-a-kind private wonder-dick who’ll be joining me at this point of the investigation. Max, these guys are top-notch motherfucking street centurions. But even after a hard day of criminal kick-ass, they’re just like the sweethearts they bring flowers home to every goddamn night. Ain’t that right, guys?”

They snickered as though they had to.

Max nodded a greeting, after which he added, “Officers.” He then followed Matt through the doorway of room number “0”, according to the “0” hanging loosely upon the front of the door. He eyed a fallen, cast iron “6” at his feet as he then entered and stepped upon carpet, his next steps treading past a massive terrain of thick stagnant blood flow, dried and black and rank beneath the staleness of the room’s confining quarters. A square wooden table near the kitchenette beyond rested overturned upon its side facing the wall, flanked by two toppled chairs; its outstretched table legs reached toward and above a body bag stuffed and sealed and sprawled limply like a black plastic Hefty bag readied for the garbage man to haul away on Monday.

A woman gripping a clipboard stumbled into Max’s elbow on her way to exit, nearly losing her glasses. Two men in yellow rain jackets knelt and measured and conversed beside the body bag, their backs turned, a camera case dangling over the shoulder of one of them. Past an undisturbed queen-sized bed. In front of a sink counter and wall mirror in the rear portion of the room stood two other men in business suits, whispering to themselves below the crackling static of holstered radios. Max and McGregor caught their adverse attentions, just as the clipboard woman re-entered the room and brushed past Max on her way to the far end, joining the suited officials in their whispered banter.

“Listen, Max,” McGregor turned and spoke sternly but softly, “I need your insight on this.”

“That makes it ditto,” Max said. McGregor’s urgent summons had brought him here with unanswered questions and Max had been calm and observant so far. But any accumulated speculations were just as equally doubtful and hopeful as before he’d arrived, though of this new apparent homicide he entertained certain notions...after all, Matt would never have brought him here unless there were certain notions....

McGregor continued, unexpectedly sentimental, although ever so slightly this way as if to avoid an embarrassing bonding moment between them, “Maxy, you know we were destined to know each other....”

“You sound like my wife,” Max said.

“...because you’ve been on this thing for so many years now, this thing that happened to me so long ago, this thing you walked in on because of me and despite a career taking you through more demanding affairs, you’ve been on this thing all your life since.”

Max shook his head as if to shake free a confusion which suddenly came at him from all of this and when he looked back up and into Matt’s observing features, he responded by asking, “What happened here?”

They both were interrupted by one of the men in business suits, who now appeared at McGregor’s side. He plainly had more than ten years on Matt, yet answered to him with a respect underscored with a mildly irritable hostility. . . the kind of guy who always seemed pissed off at something unspoken and over everyone’s heads, a cop who still called bodies stiffs. “Lieutenant, let’s wrap this up at the office. We’re ready to bail, throw this to the other bloodhounds. It’s Forensics’ show now.” Then, looking at Max, “Who’s this, the goddamn media already?”

McGregor made a prompt introduction. “Hugh, this is Maxwell Polito, a private detective and close friend of mine for many years. So for chrissake, be nice to him.”

The man gripped Maxwell’s hand cordially but skeptically. “Hugh Updike, Detective of Homicide.”

McGregor continued, “Mister Polito has been involved in a private case for quite a while now and in effort to further his investigations he sent a shadow to observe the subjects of his case at The Crow Job last Friday night. Hugh, please tell Mister Polito what Friday night has in common with the unholy shithole gore-fest we’re standing in today. The condensed version, if you will. Please.”

Max pulled out a micro recorder from his outside jacket pocket, clicked it on and returned his attention to Detective Updike with an apologetic nod.

Hugh sighed impatiently, undid the front button of his suit coat and anchored his hands about his waist. He began, “Two young adults we were eventually able to identify attended the event at the club Friday night and were seen leaving before the place closed. They proceeded to this motel and to their prepaid room, this room, to go fuck
or whatever. At some point after or during their arrival inside this room, they were assaulted by an unidentified male Caucasian. There was a struggle, brief but as you can see violent....” A quick finger snap brought the clipboard woman to his side and he seized her clipboard.

Scanning the first of an orderly assortment of forms and papers, he continued, “...resulting in the slaying of Benjamin Norquist, age twenty-two, victim of multiple lacerations and stab wounds and a fatal cut across the jugular. It is assumed that the unidentified intruder then had his way with Benjamin’s gal-pal before making off with her at some point soon afterwards, locking up before leaving, and no one saw nothing. A few low-lifes thought they heard loud voices, things being thrown, but nothing substantial in a dive like this. We got cream-o-the-crop evidence here, hair follicles, torn clothing, semen traces, shoe and finger prints.

“Maid service skipped the room yesterday. The weekend night attendant wrote it as a stayover to insure himself a free room in case he sold out, to sneak in a little private romance with some chubby chick after he finished his reports. Their plans got screwed early this morning when they walked in on this mess. We got a positive on the girl...Alice Bradshaw of Lawndale. You heard of Jacob Bradshaw, the reverend guy?”

“Yeah,” Matt nodded. “I’ve already been informed. He’s with the Church on or of The Rock in Lawndale, the one with the homeless program that actually works.” Matt turned to Max, “Alice is the reverend’s daughter I mentioned over the phone.”

The homicide detective glanced at his watch, then at Max and McGregor, “I trust your good friend won’t fuck this case up, Lieutenant. Anyone with the same name as that wacko UFO science guy I hear about and who takes down what you say is just like goddamn media to me.”

And together with Mrs. Clipboard, he stepped past them and out the doorway.

“Nice guy.” Max shut off the recorder and returned it to his pocket. “I still don’t get it, Matt. I get some of it, but where’s it leading to?”

“Let’s step outside.”

Max followed his friend once again and emerged from the room, greatly wondering, thinking, and brewing over Hugh Updike’s parting words.

....wacko UFO science guy...

***

“Simon BoLeve.”

“Of course.” Max knew this name. He found himself stunned with his own absent anticipation of the mention of it. Simon was by far the most elusive and dangerous of all the suspected non-humans Max focused on; it made sense to expect he played a role here. Scenarios and possibilities of where this was all leading to began to surface within Max’s mind. But he desperately needed to understand more, even more desperately than before.

Max and McGregor both faced one another at the perimeter of the parking lot, both enjoying a new smoke. The amount of spectators around them had dwindled considerably. The paramedic crew lifted the Hefty-bagged body and its gurney into the ambulance, signaling a random chorus of motor-hum from police vehicles readying to leave.

“Does Mel know you’ve taken up the habit again?” Matt remarked.

Max shrugged and flicked his ashes.

McGregor said next, “The nature of this morning’s slaying, the condition of the victim...is identical in every relevant way to the condition exhibited by Nigel’s body when it was found, excluding of course the supernatural elements. And this time we have a missing young female. With that said, there’re a few things I need to be sure of. You sent Melony to Ralston Cooper’s gig at The Crow Job to stake it out for familiar faces; Bradshaw and her boy-toy happened to be there, but Mel didn’t know them from Adam and Eve. Someone else knew them though...and knew what he wanted to do with them. Max, did Melony see Simon BoLeve that night? I’m sure he still looks just as handsome as ever....”

Max cleared his throat. “Simon BoLeve has unfailingly proven to be the most crucial link between Erlandson and the outstanding phenomena surrounding his life and Cooper’s, and played a role in a majority of unexplained murder cases involving the bizarre sightings of beings like the one you saw when we met. But I’ve been nothing but shit-out-of-luck in trailing him, everyone who tried has, and he would pop up when you’d least expect it.”

“Like Mr. McGee with The Incredible Hulk and David Banner.”

“Yeah, which made Melony’s assignment a golden opportunity, because I was certain BoLeve would be there.”
“She saw nothing then.”
“Nothing at all. But she and Erlandson....”

An officer interrupted them and McGregor excused himself and accompanied the cop back to the building, telling Max he’d only be but a minute.

*Melony didn’t see him*, Max whispered to himself, turned to face the direction of where he parked and then back again. But *they were all supposed to have been there. All three of them.*

An added thought:
*BoLeve had been there.*
*Max had been right.*

And then: *Church On The Rock, Lawndale. Homeless program....*

By the time it occurred to Matt McGregor that Max had up and left him, he had yet to realize the urgency which sent the UFO detective away, nor what Max had set out alone to do before anyone could dissuade him.

“Awe shit, Maxy....”
17.  

Scratch and the Church on the Rock

If one were to drive west from Andrew’s neighborhood, preferably down the Redondo Beach Freeway until it narrows to form Artesia Boulevard, he would soon find himself on the borders of the cities of Hawthorne and Redondo Beach. Taking the Inglewood off ramp and hanging a right towards LAX through a sliver of the city of Lawndale, one would eventually come across a chalky-white stucco building that could inadvertently be mistaken for an auto service center with its oblong characteristics. In fact, the building at one time had been just that. These days, one would not expect to find grease monkey mechanics laboring under the hoods of indisposed Fords. Instead, the mechanics here were feverishly laboring under the hoods of lost and ailing souls.

The Church on the Rock was founded five years ago by the Reverend Jacob W. Bradshaw under the authority of the Assemblies of Christ Foundation. Not more than several months afterwards, the church broke away from the Foundation unexpectedly due to major disagreements concerning Bible philosophy and the needs of the poor, thus becoming non-denominational. The Church on the Rock, consequently, grew to become a renown haven where the needy and homeless could seek spiritual solace and material support. Eventually, additional rooms were constructed to the auto center building’s rear and the sanctuary was extended from one side. Congregational funding and contributions abroad made possible the purchase of a handful of surrounding homes previously evacuated for demolition; run-down homes hence reconstructed as Bible classrooms and temporary homeless shelters.

Jacob Bradshaw resided with his wife Ellen and three sons, not including one particular daughter, across the church parking lot diagonally from the sanctuary, sharing a duplex with his fourth and eldest son, Jacob Bradshaw Jr., whose wife had recently given birth to twins.

If one were to venture deep within the hearts of each member of the Bradshaw clan, saunter straight right smack forward past their pasty-white English Anglo-Saxon identities and along the straight-and-narrow ramparts of their souls, one would come across an inspiringly wide breadth of space in which dwelled the simple yet earnest philosophies of their hearts. These were good people, the Bradshaws. And unlike the lords of the stereotypic evangelical world, a world, which they loved and prayed for but could not respect, the clan never bit off more than their fair share of offerings and contributions. To make a full and honest living, the Bradshaws owned a reputable landscaping business which also provided a place of employment for homeless bodies willing to work.

If homeless bodies were not willing to work but proven nevertheless capable of doing so, they would soon find themselves to be homeless bodies back on the streets and it would be their own damn fault. The Bradshaw philosophy was both simplistic and unclouded: they shared the deeply pervasive responsibility of tending to the needs of the poor, and as long as they reached out in doing so, their ambitions were appeased. But in accepting the Bradshaws’ helping hands, the poor shared a responsibility also, the responsibility of catching a firm grip and lifting themselves up and into new and stable lives. It went beyond the old saying that God helps those who help themselves. It went more on the lines of God helps those who need His help, but limits help for those who abuse it.

The Church on the Rock’s example of servanthood and devotion to God and to neighbor had spawned an aura of foremost reputation, drawing members from as far as Burbank and the San Fernando Valley. Food and shelter was abundant and in heightened spirituality there was even more profound a wealth. Through experience and conviction, the Bradshaws were convinced that a relationship with God proved a deterrent against irresponsibility, homelessness, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and even illness. There was something about the power in the goodness that hid behind the traditional scheme of things and although the Bible was by all means a source of explanation, the power itself was admittedly a mystery not entirely solved.

Then again, a good thing going should not be questioned too much, once it gets going. As for bad things....

...they are another story.

***

The last several years had seen the wretch of a man who now called himself Scratch as a mere street vagrant, a vagabond of sorts, a fellow American who’s down on his luck and would like to borrow a few quarters for a cup o’
coffee. Everything before this, even to himself, was nestled under the umbrella of enigma and uncertainty. This past was something he cared to share with no one; he was not the kind of person loose-lipped over what kind of a person he was and the past had a great deal to do with all that. He was introverted and secretive. He always had been.

There was a certain section of the sanctuary building, an extension of what had been the auto center, constructed along the flank opposite the parking lot and facing the street. This extension was composed of two floors and a storage attic. The first floor served merely as an expansion for the sanctuary, a necessity evoked by a thriving service attendance rate. The floor above occasionally provided sufficient space for choir practice, particularly when the sanctuary was occupied by other interests, such as rental space for Korean Baptist services. This room was otherwise used as storage space.

The attic was structured by the same basic dimensions as its lower predecessors, with the exception of the fact that it was half the size. The inner stairway situated at the sanctuary’s rear led clear through to the second floor and then ended at the door of the third. The only other access to the third floor attic was from the outside, a white-rock backyard of rooftop terrain, of aluminum air vents and a caucus of telephone cable hookups, laid flat between the deactivated rear emergency exit door and an opposing steel fire escape ladder scaling the building’s side.

Hazy afternoon sunlight filtered into the bowels of what had been once the church storeroom, beams stretching to join with the brownish tile floor like the ground ropes of a carnival tent. Each of the four solitary window panes hung at the side wall facing the street, projecting rain-speckled images at oblong angles. Outside, the morning showers had ceased; inside, showers of a dismal nature, a dark and silent nature, issued incessantly into the dreary ambience.

Scratch, nude and slumped, contorted by shadow, welcomed the ambience, thrived in it...had fashioned it, tamed it, bathed in it. The dim lucidity of an overhead light bulb dangled in the open air between him and the rectangular mirror. Strands of spider web clung from the bulb and neighboring chain, casting a shady network of disjointed lines across the grim features of his face, and upon his neck and shoulders.

There was a spider there and it caught Scratch’s attention. It had caught his attention a while ago and he was still trapped within its awe and spectacle, as though it were nestled there just for him.

_That spider...he thought...I’m like that spider. That spider...a black widow...I’m like it...I’m a black widow. Only in reverse. I’m the male, not the female. The king, not the queen. For me, there is no queen. There never has been. There never will be. Bradshaw’s daughter is my whore. She’s using herself for me. And I’m using myself for her. I have to, because I’m a black widow...it’s in my nature...it’s in my destiny, my right to live...my right to live free again, my right to live whole again. And her right has been given to me, because I am special._

_Because I can be reborn...._

***

Each Sunday, the former auto center garage was filled to maximum capacity with more varieties of humanity than the varieties of vegetables in a victory garden and _The Crow Job_ combined. The music...the _music_ of the Rock...was like every soul was in harmony and together with the vibrant preaching, the passionate preaching, the loud and radiant verbs and commands, the rich organ and vibrant soul of the piano, and even the saxophone...the scene was almost like a backwoods gospel extravaganza.

In the farthest row to the rear on the left side facing the pulpit, where the padded plastic seats dwindled to metal multi-colored folding chairs, the hunched and bearded figure of Scratch had wedged himself between a young black woman miserably attempting to hush her Power Rangers-studded infant to sleep and a leather-clad pimply-faced teen. In joining the congregation in a jazzy rendition of _When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder_, Scratch found himself wishing to hear more of the infant rather than the music, completely contrary to the other fellow souls around him. Whereas other people became profoundly annoyed, Scratch took a certain delight in the infant’s screams.

_At least someone else is in misery besides me, being here_, he thought.

And oh, how he loved the screams.

But the infant had ceased as the woman began to sway the child to the beat of the music, slowly to its rhythm, slowly to its rhythm, slowly to the music’s own mesmerism. The child was soon busily sucking the tips of its fingers, amused eyes directed towards a threesome of skinheads over and beyond his mother’s shoulders, passers-by pausing to take a lengthy peek at the scene.

Scratch then reverted his attentions back to the front.

At the front of the church, several chairs sat in a half circle to provide seats for the clergy Jacob. Behind these chairs were two dozen more, taken by choir members clad in gowns of tan and red, hand-me-down gowns donated by a church in a neighboring city.
In the midst of praise and worship, Scratch suddenly spied one of the ushers, an older black man garbed in a rather tacky thin yellow jacket, hastening through a crowded aisle towards the front, where the clergy sat facing the congregation. Scratch swung his view towards the rear, in the direction where the man had emerged, at the far left entrance. A uniformed policeman stood momentarily in the center of the opened doorway before he disappeared outside. Curious heads darted from the doorway to the usher as Mr. Yellowjacket quickened his anxious speed, conscious of the attention drawn and slowing awkwardly because of this, fearful to alarm anyone. Clearly, he was doing a bad job of that. He arrived at the chair of Pastor Jacob, knelt and whispered into his ear.

The whispered words of Mr. Yellowjacket were few and to Scratch it seemed as if the pastor was spared the gory details of the news itself of the apparent discovery that morning. Pastor Jacob was escorted towards the rear church entrance, where the awaiting officer reappeared and then disappeared with Mr. Yellowjacket and the pastor out into the cloudy Sunday morning air.

How nice, how delightful, Scratch mused, and like Mr. Yellowjacket, the congregation turned to one another, whispered into the ears of one and then the other. How reeeally delightful that events should all come down this morning, right smack in the middle of Sunday morning service. They could’ve come down yesterday, but they didn’t. They came down today. They came down now.

Scratch knew what was coming down.
And he smiled a razor-scared, bearded smile.

***

Later in the service, the assemblage of taciturn worshippers listened with distress and disbelief as their associate pastor, a pasty white man with a tacky thin black jacket, released the news of the calamity: Pastor Bradshaw’s daughter, twenty-one-year-old Alice, had left for an evening out with her boyfriend Friday night and hadn’t returned since. She was by now officially declared missing, leaving only her boyfriend’s blood-ragged body behind in a motel room several cities away.

The thing that Mr. Blackjacket failed to mention, or rather, what the authorities had failed to mention to him, apparently, was that the boyfriend’s eyes were missing. Scratch had hoped in the announcement that he would include the eyes. He longed to hear about the eyes. He craved to feed the anticipation of the congregation’s reaction to the eyes.

Oh, well. No goddamn big surprise.

***

After the service, alone in the church attic...
...well, almost alone....

He continued to stare in the rectangular wall mirror at his rough nakedness beneath the dim web of light, into his own eyes and beyond. His self-inflicted scars trailing his face and brow, creating blackened furrows beneath his growth of beard, were now absent in his mind’s eye. In his mind’s eye, he was a newborn baby, readying to emerge into the world once more, to emerge anew. His ambitions, his dreams, his realities of what was meant to be swelled from within his soul and they had done so since he was revealed the mysterious secret of who he was and what he was supposed to do to be who he was. Ever since a handful of days ago...
...when he woke from a deep sleep and his typewriter spoke to him.

He never had been much of a writer at all, although the desire to write had swept over him time and time again; he was always into other things, his typewriter had been old and dusty, had been that way for a very long time.

But that all changed not long after the little black boy had come along for the last time, for the last of several dozen times, had come to haunt him, to taunt him, and about a week ago he had haunted and haunted his last. Scratch never dreamed he would catch him, would put him out of his own wretched misery, but he had. And it was not long afterward when his typewriter came to life, after never having been used for so many years...it came to life, it spoke to him, and gave him the gift of a script, a guideline for the present, the past, and the future, however inconsistent and incomplete.

Yet it was complete, in a way, despite its many missing pages and deletions. It was complete, because after he managed the black boy’s death, finally the boy’s death, it arrived not long afterwards. It was like the boy’s death was the end of a long haul and the script was a magical trophy, a revelation on paper, in black and white.

And it told him what was going to happen. It made him know what he was supposed to do. It opened his eyes to things meant to be. To the rebirth.
He was going to be reborn. And he was going to make it happen.
Right there. Within the church attic.
Of all places.
He had always been a disillusioned madman of sorts, confused in a bitter world, never knowing his real father, barely knowing his real mother, unless infancy counted for anything, with the exception of a later nocturnal visit or two....
It was a nocturnal visit that changed his life when, long ago in his infancy, the Unhuman Thing took him away from his mother, out into the dead of night, out into an identity that never was supposed to be.
*Oh, but it was supposed to be, now, wasn’t it? When I killed the little ghost-boy, and the typewriter spoke, that proves it was supposed to be, young Alice proves it was supposed to be, after all.*
Despite the sins the Unknown Thing imposed upon him throughout his life, despite the burdens and agonies of broken realities and self-inflicted wounds, self-inflicted both on others and on his own person, on his body...
...and on his face. It was this self-infliction in particular, which relieved him, made things seem all better afterwards, cleansed him of all sin, made the world a brighter place after all...the sweetness of the blood, the beauty of the sharpness piercing the surface of his skin, producing a clean crease, which bulged droplets of crimson that flowed to the beckoning of gravity. All for blissful penitence. All for rapture, for forgiveness.
All for *shit*, now.

Now, he was to be reborn and nothing of what he used to do or be mattered anymore. He was purchasing a second life, a chance to erase everything and start over, becoming *born again* without having to accept any other Lord and Savior but for his own self.

Alice Bradshaw’s body was motionless, naked, spreadeagled across the disproportioned and sunken mattress of the corner bed. The rain-speckled beams of light avoided the body but reached the brownish tiles of the floor beyond, producing a turpid glow over pale skin. Her ankles and wrists were bound almost enough to cut short blood circulation, with electric extension cords wrapped around the wooden headboard and the tarnished brass posts at her feet. Her chest rose and fell at dilatory intervals beneath apple-sized breasts. Manifold beads of sweat glistened across the surface of her body, spread like transparent pigmentation of disease.

In a silhouette, Scratch emerged from the curtained enclosure, which contained the mirror, wash basin, toilet and makeshift shower receptacle, abandoning the glow of the light bulb behind him. His shadowing nakedness straggled forward, past a cluttered dining table, past a two-door wooden clothes closet, past a white refrigerator and stacks of navy-blue milk crates. There was a shabby maroon sofa facing a Zenith color TV, and amidst a piled array of videotapes on the lower shelf of the television stand sat an older-modeled video recorder, built before knobs were replaced with buttons. There was a minikin table situated under one of the windows that held a four-burner hotplate, beside which was a dismal green metal stand supporting a microwave oven. To the left of the refrigerator was a medium-sized cabinet full of various knick-knacks flanking jelly jars containing thick, gelatinous grey shapes afloat in transparent liquid.

_Eyes. Dismembered. In jars displayed for the moment to beckon a certain reminder of the recent past, sealed shut to hide the smell. Animal eyes, for the most part._

To the right of the television, past rows of steel-grey shelving replete with books and other objects, past a freshly-dusted metal manual typewriter resting upon a crooked stand, stood a ramshackle recliner baring a color to nearly match the tile floor. There Scratch seated himself, the silent young woman stretched upon the bed before him.

He scratched his beard.

He reached over to the metal shelf beside him, leaning, fingers fumbling through the clutter of paperbacks and unwashed drinking cups and the morning’s breakfast remnants, until he withdrew a plastic sandwich bag. He raised it and peered into it, his hands opened it, entered it, pulled out a square paper object. On this square were dotted creases bordering more than a few dozen tinier squares, tan squares, blotter acid. LSD tabs. Carefully, he folded two of these tiny squares until they tore loose. He returned the bulk of the paper to the sandwich bag, returned the bag to the metal shelf.

He stood, a move preceding a silent approach to the edge of the bed, knelt against the mattress, before the side of Alice’s lovely head. He brought the fingers of one hand to her mouth, separated her lips delicately, the pink-red glistening of her tongue rolling, seeming to gag her. Her eyes flickered open, then shut; Scratch did not know whether she saw him, in her drug-induced hallucinatory *Reap-the-Wild-Wind*, nor did he care. He slipped the tan paper squares beyond her teeth and moved his fingers to close tight her mouth.

“I am not here.” His words stroked the air like vapors of hush vanishing as they gently met with her ear and caressed it slyly. “You do not know me. I do not exist. This is a dream. Hmmmm? Yes, you’re doing reeeal good. This is a dream. I am a dream. Hear me, young Alice. A dream. I am a dream. When you awaken...*that’s* the real world. And in the real world, you must bare the child, Alice. *Your* child. *Your* child, and the child of the dream. I am
the dream. You must bare our child for me...so that everything that is pure in the dream can enter into the real world and be born again, can live again and be pure...."

As he repeated these words over and once more, he arose, stepped back; he crept, avoiding the recliner, further back, until he arrived at a darkened, pillow-laden corner near the farthest window, beyond the dim light streaming in from the outside afternoon haze. There, his gaze drifted around the expanse of the attic, bathing in the shady, surreal atmosphere, so dark...how he cherished the pleasant dark....

When he sat, he leaned back, and when he did so the palm of his hand met with an uneven stack of typewritten pages embedded between two pillows beside him. He fumbled for a firm grip, then, lifted the stack into his line of vision, into the dim light.

The title page of the manuscript faced him, typewritten and centered, and it read:

THE EVERBORN
A Novel
By
Ralston Cooper

Scratch knew who Ralston Cooper was. And he had read every single title the acclaimed horror author wrote, and loved it. He had waited in long, long lines leading into bookstores, for book signings of Ralston Cooper books signed by Mr. Ralston Cooper himself. He had mail-ordered Ralston Cooper books, purchased Ralston Cooper video movie releases without waiting for them to go down in price.

But never ever had he acquired any Ralston Cooper work this way, by it typing its own self out both magically and prophetically through Scratch’s personal Corona typewriter.

Conventional people, normal people, would have freaked over such a seemingly paranormal experience. But Scratch and Scratch’s circumstances were far far faaaaar from conventional and normal.

So he took it differently from the rest of us.
He took it as a Godsend.
He took it as something special.
He took it to heart.
And, reading it, he took it as destiny.
He was doing what he had to do.
To save himself.
Max Goes To Church

Max sped past this vehicle and that, as the mild flow of Sunday traffic eased his Mustang further down the stretch of Artesia Freeway. Another cigarette expired from between fingers wrought in twitchy anxiousness and was jettisoned from the opened gap in the car window; he'd barely renewed the habit and was already finding himself needing to cut down. He reached for a cell phone from a slot beneath the dash and thumbed across its numbered keypad for a second try to contact his wife. If he caught her machine again this time, she'd have to catch the entire update later...

...and settle for his first message: Melony? Mel, you know that Matt McGregor has never been one to waste any
of our time when it comes to business, and just now, more than ever he carried on this tradition. I’m calling from the
cell phone. I need you at your phone, in the next hour, the next minute, right now. Thirty minutes and I’ll be
unreachable. I’m going to church.

Events were beginning to unfold all too rapidly for Max now, intoxicating him with a reckless anxiousness
which he fought against for the sake of a mental sobriety in handling the events to come. Times like these often
evoked a high-strung tension with Max at the outset, and he would soon enough get over it as he was always sure to.
But where he now headed was certainly not the average “gotta-investigate-this-one” site of juicy paranormal
intrigue. He was headed to the haven of a twisted killer who in literal terms wasn’t altogether human, wasn’t human
to Max’s convictions, and Max could stake his career on that.

He felt a sense of guilt in ditching Matt McGregor like he did, but apologies had to wait.

Max himself couldn’t wait.

And he couldn’t have waited for Matt. Not this time, not for this. He knew Matt had caught on by now, was
likely on his way in pursuit somewhere far behind, probably cursing and raving about that goddamn crazy
sonofabitch Maxy. But Matt was well aware that a spontaneous insight or gut feeling required an equally
spontaneous response in both their fields...maybe not for other UFO experts, but for most cops...and particularly for
anyone who made it his business to read between the lines of Man’s existence in effort to expose enough fine print
to change the way Man exists forever.

Matthew simply wouldn’t be able to realize that, in this case, it was because he was a cop that Max had up and
went running on his own. Sure, a purposeful encounter with Simon BoLeve was crazy to attempt alone, especially to
attempt without Matt and above all with the protection Matt possessed in being a cop. And Matt shared an intimate
involvement with the bizarre nature of the whole thing. For Matt, it must not have seemed right for someone like
Maxy to hightail-it the way he did and without him.

Max felt like a goddamn crazy sonofabitch.

And maybe he was.

The truth about this was that Matt’s joining him to meet BoLeve was inevitable.

Max was simply determined to meet BoLeve first.

Casually.

In some respects, like the way Melony handled Andrew.

But unlike the efforts with Andrew, should it be that a mentally unbalanced Simon carelessly unleash a hellish
secret that gave away his alleged inhuman nature, regardless of this risk being Max’s objective, Max could only
hope that Matt McGregor would come running to save Max Polito’s ass for a change.

The freeway lanes were narrowing now, and the blinking yellow beacons of END OF FREEWAY signs
commanded the slowing of sandwiched vehicles in their approach towards intersection traffic lights.

Max seized the Thomas Guide from the passenger seat and plotted the remainder of his course, and likewise
plotted his first moves for when he’d arrive at The Rock and the fate which awaited him there.

***

So far, so seemingly good.

He’d found his destination and drove past it, noting the dual police cars conspicuously double-parked at the
streetside shoulder of its overflowing parking lot. Making a right at the neighboring intersection and nestling his
Mustang stubbornly into a curb space between two tattered pick-ups, he methodically retrieved a change of clothes
from his trunk.

He emerged from the back seat minutes later in grey slacks and a collared white dress shirt with a preppy slate
pullover, paused to straighten his attire, then reached into a pouch behind the driver’s seat for an old pair of reading
glasses and placed them over his eyes. He stuffed an armful of the clothes he changed out of into his trunk,
rummaged briefly, and found himself a hardcover Ethics textbook; its dust jacket discarded, it would pass
reasonably well for a Bible. Before he continued, he rummaged again for one final cigarette and smoked it
hurryingly, shoved the pack into a trouser pocket, seized his notebook and micro recorder and locked up his car.

He’d hoped that Matt hadn’t radioed ahead a description of Max in an effort to stunt his plans, but he was
prepared for such obstacles. If Matt had done this, it would be right to assume that he’d also radio ahead a
description of BoLeve, along with enough orders and warnings to make the shit hit the fan...and to make it
impossible for Max to get to BoLeve first.

But there was a slight chance...ever so slight a chance...that McGregor would handle things on his own, was on
his way to meet up with Max alone, that he understood what this was all about...that he understood the way Max
wanted him to understand...and he’d allow the law to enter the picture as soon as they both wanted it to.
Max was riding on that chance.
He prayed to God for that chance.
He reached the corner, gazed across the street and towards the church and he thought, what better place is there to pray for that chance...?

***

Contemplating...speculating...observing.

A lot like his ages-past security job, to watch and observe. This time, for a short while, then, from the street corner.

But that was a little over an hour ago and after toying with his own mental chemistry, he found himself and his convenient quick-change of clothes stepping across the street, down the sidewalk, and in through the double entrance doors. He found himself relieved to have gotten past a pair of officers as he made his way inward, found himself then beside a couple of colorfully-mohawked juveniles who moments later lost interest and abandoned his company for the outside. He set his gaze beyond a sea of peopled pews and metal folding chairs to the front pulpit and beyond. He clutched his Ethics book/Bible and remained calm.

And he scanned the congregation for any familiar sign of BoLeve.
The congregation was praying.
There was a black gentleman in a yellow sports jacket clutching a microphone before the pulpit, head bowed, leading the prayer.
The prayer was for Pastor Bradshaw, and particularly for his daughter Alice.
The word had gotten out.

There were a handful of seats strung along the choir loft outskirts and a prominent seat closest to the pulpit remained empty. Max couldn’t recall any fragment of what Bradshaw looked like; perhaps he’d never even seen the pastor before at all, although he was familiar with his well-publicized ministry. It didn’t look like the pastor was there. And likewise neither was BoLeve.
He glanced at his watch. It was 11:15 a.m.
He would wait awhile, as time permitted. Either he would find BoLeve, or find the ill-fortuned pastor.
Unless Matt found him first.

***

When Max ran into Jacob Bradshaw no more than several minutes later while snooping around the sides of the church building, not knowing who he was, he asked him, “Excuse me, I’m looking for Pastor Bradshaw. Is he inside?”

He had every intention of actually snooping around inside, situating himself next to those in prayer and politely asking if he or she could point out the beloved pastor, but he thought he’d check around outside first. Regardless of his own beliefs, he always held a respect for those in prayer. So far, whatever conspicuously dressed law official there was hadn’t paid him so much as a glance, and the squad cars outside had dwindled in number to only one.

That was a good thing, even with the change of Max’s attire, for if Matt had alerted anyone, Matt would’ve remembered that Max on occasion had been known to change clothes, and he would’ve stressed this caution to those concerned.

Bradshaw had been exiting his rear office with Mr. Yellowjacket and two other homely-looking individuals when Max crossed their paths, and when the pastor identified himself, Max flashed his own I.D. in a showcase of walleted clear plastic in turn, announcing he was a private detective and had just visited the motel crime scene.

Which, for the record, wasn’t exactly a lie.

Although in Bradshaw’s distracted worry and Max’s distracting official demure, it was an opportune moment for Max to get information while there was still time enough to get it.

And while there was still time enough for this information to get him to Simon Boleve.
Fate would take it from there. After that.
After Bradshaw’s concerned entourage had departed to Max’s insistence, the two were alone at last.

***
The transpired fumes of Max’s Marlboro crept and expanded along the surface of the office ceiling. The bathroom-sized window and series of overhead air vents failed to provide the smoke with a route of escape, and it drifted freely through the air like clouds on film in elapsed time. The pastor was on the brink of asking the private detective to please show some courtesy ‘til we’re through, and he normally would have, but things were so overwhelming this morning that rude manners were excusable for any man who could help him.

The pastor’s office had clearly once been an automotive service office now straining for reverential respectability but falling far short. Max half expected to see remaining calendar photos of half-nude super models straddling sleek custom Trans Am’s. Books upon books neatly lined the walls on mounted shelves. A pushbutton phone rested beside a green blotter and tarnished desk lamp situated upon a mahogany desk. A traditional bearded Jesus hung smugly from behind framed glass over a tall metal file cabinet and was flanked by framed artless countrysides. A poster to Max’s right depicted a swirling mixture of electric guitars and crucifixes around words of bright white…ROCK SOLID WITH THE SOLID ROCK!

Pastor Bradshaw had the appearance of a resolute man, a man in charge of things, a man in his mid-fifties with greying hair who, when he looked at you, appeared as if he was sizing you up to either make a judgmental remark or to sell you something. But his eyes exhibited a mixture of sincerity and remorse and Max assumed that this was partly due to the worries of his missing daughter and her wrongfully departed boyfriend, but Max could not dismiss the feeling that those heartfelt eyes were somehow always that way.

“My wife and my eldest son are waiting to meet me to pray,” he told Max. “But any insight I can give you that I haven’t already shared with the other detectives...well, you understand. For the sake of any insight that you could give me, I am at your disposal. Who did you say you were?”

“Max Polito,” Max said, and together their hands met for a shake across the desk. “I’m very sorry about your daughter’s boyfriend, Pastor. I’m sure Alice will be back with you soon.”

“We’re trusting in the Lord,” the pastor said, and was about to continue, but lapsed into silence.

After a moment, the pastor went on, “Ben was a bright young man, however he faltered in his walk with the Lord. I believe utterly that he’s with Jesus right now. He and Alice had been seeing each other for...oh, a little while now. Alice always had trouble with authority.” He caught himself, “Has trouble. I mean, nothing illegal, although my wife caught her smoking marijuana in the backyard once and then there was the half-empty bottle of whiskey in her bottom dresser drawer. But this isn’t a generation gap kind of thing. I understand young people and these things are just learning experiences that young people go through. We tried to raise her right and these later years have found her making her own decisions with only herself to answer to and not really to my wife and me anymore, except of course what happens under my own roof. You know what I mean?”

“Of course,” Max said. His cigarette was out and he rose from his seat and cracked open the door, tossed it outside, and apologized with respect, finally.

“And Alice has been into this...” The pastor scooted his chair back, fumbled through a desk drawer, and withdrew a paperback novel. “…take a look.” He slapped the book face up upon the front of the desk beneath Max’s scrutiny.

Max blinked.

“God gave us His Word as an impeccable map to guide us through life’s highways and biways. This book and those like it steer us astray into the paths which lead us to destruction. I hate to sound all ‘fire and brimstone’, but evidently books like this led Ben and Alice to that godforsaken club Friday night and to that damnable motel. Look at that...this was the author I was told they both went to see...I found this in Alice’s closet a few weeks ago, part of her collection...” He pounded his fingertips upon the book cover above the author’s name.

Max picked the book up and scanned its dark, glossy cover. The artwork depicted a voluptuous woman with greenish skin garbed in a scarlet robe, reptilian tentacles protruding from her sides before outstretched wings risen high with scaly claws. Below the artwork were the words VENOM OF THE GODS - A NOVEL BY RALSTON COOPER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF DARKHOUSE.

Max politely but absently flipped through the book’s pages, as though he didn’t expect this familiar little presentation. Then he said, “Uh...Pastor, what do you know about Simon Boleve?”

Max had been almost hesitant to ask, had been patient and polite so far (in his eyes, give or take the cigarette), and when the anticipated question at last emerged from his lips, he nearly felt as though he might as well have been asking the pastor if he’d been masturbating lately. Perhaps it was his own fear of the question, which he would never admit.

“Simon?” the pastor said, as though this was a change of subject. “Why do you ask?”

Max shrugged with a sly innocence.

Bradshaw continued, “Yes, of course. Well, for starters, he’s been with us...it seems for a long time. A couple years. He’s a good man. Lonely, I guess reclusive, yes, but devout. He’s kind of a mystery, that one. But I’ve
learned to trust him. Sparing you any speeches about the homeless...I may be sympathetic, but I’m no fool. They can take and take from you, and you give at first, but you know when you’re being used and you’re doing no good that way. No matter how low one’s gotten, it’s gotta be give and take. Any human being who’s lost all but his or her life has something to give back to himself once there’s a helping hand. Some people just don’t take the initiative once there’s someone to help them to their feet. Where would we be, if once we took our first steps as babies and we needed someone to keep us walking for the rest of our lives? The homeless are like that, learning to walk again. That’s when the give and take comes in. For all of us.”

“So,” Max said, sparing the interrogation, yeah, like the pastor did the speech, “you’re saying that Simon’s different. He’s a give and take kinda homeless person. You also say he’s a mystery. He’s a mystery to me too, by the way.” Max was purposely straightforward this time, and in his growing impatience he was becoming all the more sarcastic, albeit trying hard to be subtle.

“Simon has made himself an asset to our cause,” Bradshaw told him. His mind was a flare of bias questions. “We’ve been meeting his needs and he’s been meeting ours. He helps us around, tends to our gardening, fixes what needs fixing, repaints over occasional graffiti on our walls, unclogs our toilets. Yes, he is a give and take kind of person. And he’s no longer homeless. Now what do you really want of our poor Simon?”

“I know his history,” Max told him plainly. “And I’d like to catch up on his recent life and times.” He allowed a casual smile. “Just to set things straight and to go on to the real individuals responsible for your missing daughter and her boyfriend’s death. He might give us a clue, is all I’m saying. I just need to ask about him.”

“Why don’t you talk to him yourself,” the pastor said. “Until he finds a more suitable place, he lives upstairs. Above the sanctuary.”
19.

Knocking On Scratch’s Door

Matt McGregor had at first taken Max’s disconcerting dismissal from their meeting with a neutral curiosity. It was neutral in regards to his putting two-and-two-together, his dormant awareness, and it made him curious as to where in the hell Max went. He was also distracted by the matters-at-hand kind of things which always demanded the attention of the people in charge and today he was the person in charge.

When Max’s motives were first suspected by McGregor, he was immersed in Mrs. Clipboard’s show-and-tell flip-book of reports. He didn’t quite catch the tail-end of her presentation but instead found himself overwhelmed with insight and wondering what to do. His first impulse was to get Max on his cell phone, which was the safest option he had; he’d always respected Max’s instincts, as well as Max’s impulses and ingenuity. Before Matt dove into any extremes which would wound Max’s cause, contacting him first proved to be the best measure possible. But Matt had seen many a man proclaim to know what he was doing and soon afterwards end life or limb in an ill—foreseen demise.

Matt didn’t want that to happen to Max.

Not to mention the often times when Matt would ask him if he knew what he was doing, and Max would answer that he didn’t know, that he was making it up as he went along.

Well, that would be fine and swell for Indiana Jones to say, but Max didn’t have the happenstance charm of a screen character, and Max worried Matthew.

He went to his car at the end of the motel parking lot, a ‘91 Chevy Caprice of weathered white and misty chrome, went for his own cell phone and dialed Max’s number. There was a busy signal. This confounded him, and he swore harshly and dialed again. Busy. He dialed Max’s home number, on a whim. Busy also. Max must be speaking to Melony, was what came to mind.

And he swore harshly again.

For a moment he reasoned. It never occurred to him to radio in Max’s description to the guys at the church, for Max to be held at bay until Matt arrived. If it had occurred to him, there would’ve been a number of reasons—a number of good reasons—for enforcing the idea.

But this was Max. He had faith in Max and he had to have legitimate reasons for the officers at the church to detain him. Reportable reasons, and he didn’t want to deal with that bullshit. He decided to keep it mum and he would handle it himself.

Immediately.

Just in case.

He returned to the motel room crime scene, caught the homicide detective Hugh Updike on his way ou, and confided that he was on his way to the Church on the Rock to continue his investigation. It was kind of like a child informing his parents where he was going to be and he felt that way.

If these were normal circumstances, he would’ve let other officials know just the same. Almost the same.

But this wasn’t normal and under the circumstances, he nevertheless had to be ready for anything.

As was usual, immediately.

As was now, just in case.

He set out, alone, for The Rock.

***

Max followed the pastor up the rear stairwell within the church after a brief jaunt past the consoling glances of a handful of church attendees, up past the second-story choir room, until the two arrived at a door at the stairwell’s head.

“I though I saw Simon earlier at the service,” Bradshaw said to Max. “He usually sits toward the back. He’s so self-conscious of his looks...”
“He must be,” Max commented.
“You’ve seen him before, I take it.”
“On occasion,” Max said. “But it’s been quite some time since I last did.”
“Well, if he’s here, you’ll be seeing him again.”

Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of, Max thought to himself, and yes, he was afraid, a little afraid, even more so than he cared to admit, but he had company, he wasn’t going to meet Simon alone, he was going to meet this prized enigma with someone whom Simon apparently respected. This gave him a subtle comfort, although his anticipations were as high as his adrenalin. If only the pastor knew what he knew.

Or what he was convinced he knew.

Hell, if Simon was simply a murderer, he was grateful to have respectable company to hide behind. With Max’s convictions swirling, he was beginning to hope he was about to meet just that ---a murderer, or a suspected one. Not someone more, someone unhuman.

But that was his goal, his dream, the essence of his pursuits.

Wasn’t it?

They reached the head of the stairs, arrived at the attic door.

The pastor seemed to have a wariness about him just then, as if his rational self was beginning to actually doubt his own evolved opinions about Simon, was beginning to reflect upon this private detective’s investigative queries concerning his beloved handyman. The man was indeed bizarre, that Simon. He was mysterious and he was reclusive. The man had secrets and the pastor always carried the conviction that the facial scars which highlighted Simon’s features bore witness to a deep dark past.

But then there was the issue of repentance, that Simon was born again, that with repentance there was forgiveness and an erasing of the past, no questions asked.

Time would tell for sure, as simple as a knock on the door.

Without a word, the pastor knocked. And then a word, a few words, to Max, ‘I’d expect him to be here, as he’s only usually here or around the property. He’s never really any place else. One of us even delivers his groceries and he has a car for Pete’s sake. He’s not for being out and about....’

The pastor dug into his pockets the next moment, began to fumble with a small key chain. He sorted keys until he came to the precise one, then, inserted it into the doorknob. He knocked once more, knocked twice more, called out Simon’s name.

Max became aware of his own sweat.

The door unlocked.

It creaked open into the decadent dark.

***

Bradshaw took one step forward, eased further into and against the attic door until it rested half way open. The hesitancy with which he did so was an intentional result of polite respect, much like the careful intrusion into a bathroom one fears may be occupied by an embarrassing moment and a do you mind!??

Max’s hesitancy was far more primal. To him, this was yet another door open unto mystery pervading and ageless, which was nothing new for an experienced explorer of the unknown, but this particular mystery was to Max both threatening and deadly. Max held his breath, clenched his knuckles, and peered fearfully inside past the threshold, maintaining an immediate closeness to the pastor in front of him. If only Bradshaw shared in his suspenseful dread.

The pastor was about to call out again, but something stopped him. He stood still and motionless suddenly. There was an unmistakable rancidity which swept through the attic bowels and assaulted Max’s senses, humid as stale sweat. A dim lucidity invaded the attic space and revealed an atmosphere relatively spacious if not for the massively cluttered arrangement of dusty furniture; it gave Max the impression of having discovered a garage sale waiting to happen. He saw nothing but this at first, and it appeared as if no one was home.

If one could call it a home.

Max was certainly more relieved than disappointed at this, and the coast seemed clear enough to provide Max with the courage to enter the room fully and have a quick look around. With Bradshaw’s permission, of course.

But Bradshaw remained frozen before him, blocking greater portion of Max’s view and barring him from entering further.

“Pastor...?”

He was at once aware that Bradshaw was trembling, but when he reached for his arm in effort to gain his attention, the pastor made an unexpected move forward abruptly, quickly, and as he did so he cried out, “Alice?
Alice, oh my God...Alice...?!”

And that was when Max came into full view of the surreal scene directly ahead and beneath the dismal daylight filtering down upon it, of a ramshackled bed and of the young woman sprawled naked and bound and motionless upon it like some wretched archaic portrayal of an innocent maiden accused and exorcised for demonic alliance, exhausted, having suffered shamefully and oh so miserably, waiting for death’s euphoric salvation to claim her and take her away.

The realization of what he was seeing swept through Max like a turbulent bitter chill, which numbed his senses and found him at odds with how to react. He didn’t expect the sight displayed raw and blatant before him, he’d expected a great deal of things but not that, and though it now made perfect sense given his suspicions and instincts, he didn’t know what to do.

Simon Boleve was responsible for what happened at the motel.

But for one thing Max had been wrong. Dead wrong.

He should’ve brought Matt McGregor with him.

He found himself hurrying forward into the room then, just steps behind the distraught pastor, when something grabbed at him, something caught a firm hold of his jacket with such sudden surprise and with such force that it propelled him forward and into the pastor, sending them both toppling headlong one on top of the other and onto the hardwood floor, flailing and stunned and several feet short of the brass-knobbed corner of the bed.

The door behind them slammed shut unto pale damp darkness.

And something attacked them. The same confounding grip, which sent them falling now dug into Max’s shoulder blades and wrenched him from atop the pastor and spilled him to his side. He felt someone’s foot press dead center into his abdomen and he cried out as the back of his neck collided against something hard and painful, like the blunt corner of a low wooden table. His vision was a blur of incoherent helplessness.

And then he began to see.

His eyes focused, and what he beheld was a dismal figure, abhorrent and nude, bearded, wretched, stick-like fleshy thin and crouched over an impossibly bent-backwards silhouette of Pastor Bradshaw, who to no avail kicked and writhed and flung his arms in a contorted effort to free himself of the horrid oppression which pinned him down against his backside and which seemed to hold him fast by his neck with one attenuated hand until....

...until a swift series of see-saw strokes sent liquid gushes of thick black outwards from his throat in a grisly spew spanning for what appeared to Max to be several feet ahead of the two, rippling and splashing across the floor and upon the side of the bed, and within the next moment afterwards the figure abandoned the pastor and went for Max.

Max impulsively thrust one foot forward to fend the figure away, successfully, locking his foot onto the figure’s midsection and the pushing against it with every ounce of strength and agility any one man could summon in a bout of chaotic confusion, and it sent the figure plummeting backwards across the gasping and weakening mass sprawled out below him.

The figure spared no time in managing himself to his feet and he lunged towards Max once more, and alertly Max flung his body forward and into him, seizing his grip upon his assailant’s left arm. But to his outright dismay, the figure’s right came down upon him briskly, and something searing and sharp cut into his side beneath his jacket and dug easily below the right portion of his rib cage, releasing a debilitating abundance of agony and wetness as his elbow braced against it and he slid into a deadlock embrace against a towering piece of furniture immediately behind him.

Max wailed.

The figure’s right arm came down on him again. Pain roared across his upper chest and underneath his left collar bone. Across his chest again, in the opposite direction. The misshapen tower of dark furniture which braced his upper torso gave way and went crashing backwards onto the floor with a tremendous *thud* and the back of Max’s head fell with it into what now seemed to be the base of a short wooden bookcase riddled with hardcover books nestled snug between three rows of shelves.

A short handful of minutes from the onset of the ambush had seen Max catapulted into a state of sheer terror and dismay until then, until the realization of what was happening came together like a magnet to his senses and he became capable of commanding his body to fend for its very life. Yet in his struggle, his foe was confounding his frenetic efforts to the point of madness and this pissed him off just enough to disregard any slightly mounting awareness as to who or what his foe actually was. If he allowed himself to give into the fears of the knowledge of what brought him here, he would’ve been defeated just as easily as the poor, pitiful pastor.

He wasn’t going down without a fight.

In his frustrated anger, he rose from the toppled bookcase quickly with one elbow as his support and one hand raised and curled into a fist ready to strike, and he struck hard and sure straight square into the madman’s bearded
upper jaw. The figure’s lethal weapon sliced once across thin air merely inches beyond Max’s throat, flying upwards above both their heads, and Max caught its wrist with his opposite hand in a deathgrip as the figure sailed past his line of sight for a moment towards the closed attic door.

Max maintained his grip upon the figure’s wrist and thrust his body weight upon the dark shape, rolling over and plunging his fist through the air and down upon the figure’s arm just inches above the wrist, again and then once more, in desperate effort to free the weapon in the assailant’s hand. An arm rapidly ascended from the figure’s opposite side and met with Max’s chest in an excruciating wallop, returning Max’s back to the floor, heaving, loosening and then freeing his grip from around the figure’s wrist.

Max struggled to breathe, as though his lungs were severely punctured and his chest cavity split open and whatever oxygen he inhaled escaped effortlessly between his ribs. He clenched his chest, his fingers seeping into a sponge-like wetness, giving him the feeling that he was not only bare-chested but bare-skinned as well and his hands were clinging to his blood-drenched muscle tissues. Reality abandoned him once more, if only for a moment, though his adrenalin was pumping at a decathlon rate and the subconscious suspicions that he might be dying were surfacing just enough for him to scoff them away with a sideswipe of insistence that he was still alive and that he would live to see through this.

The figure arose and darted again beyond his line of sight. Max pivoted into the direction he believed the figure went, but the piercing agony in his upper belly and chest crippled the process, causing him to double over. The urgent necessity to know where the figure was subdued him, to know where the next blow would come from and to be prepared when it would happen. With persistent effort he managed to locate the figure’s presence directly behind him; it was arched forward and towards the ground, its knees bent, and it appeared to be rabidly exploring the floor’s thick coat of shadow around and beyond him, in search of perhaps its dispossessed weapon.

The following moment, the figure abandoned Max and the surface of the floor completely.

Max conjured up another degree of strength to lift himself upwards and over until his body flopped onto his chest with a debilitating painfulness which he hadn’t intended. This stunt rendered him motionless until he regained his strength and began to crawl, inch upon excruciating inch at a time in a dilatory endeavor to reach the foot of the bed.

When he arrived there, a light switched on from somewhere past the bed, on the other side.

He again could not see the figure. He could only hear movement, the sounds of rustling of odds and ends being scattered and swished about the surface of a desk or table, clicks and clangs and drawers both metallic and wooden opening and closing. A few of those odds and ends fell, and Max heard their vibrations echo against the hardwood floor.

With one outstretched hand he made an effort to reach above himself, upwards and through the rank air, until he caught hold of the dense fabric of the bedcovers at the bed’s edge. He fought for a firm grip, then lifted himself slowly.

It hurt like a sonofabitch.

Just to move, just to breathe.

He succeeded, supplanting his climb, let go of his grip and reached for another clump of fabric to situate himself into a sitting position. The palm of his hand came down over something knobby and fleshy and round. It was the young woman’s ankle. He abandoned his grip immediately, offended at this, found a new and more compliable portion of bedspread, and continued in his effort to sit up. He succeeded further, his wounded chest in insufferable protest. He looked around, blinked, and gazed toward the light.

It was the light of a retractable desk lamp, clamped and extended over a desk-like brown wooden table with a duo of two-drawer grey file cabinets beneath. The drawer of one of the file cabinets was pushed out and open. The figure had dropped to the floor and was now rising, pulling up and over his waistline a pair of cut-off faded blue raggedy jeans, and he was facing the opened file drawer and reaching for it at the same time, hurried.

Max’s gaze darted in a dazed surveillance of his surroundings. It was a miserable place, miserable considering his state of mind but miserable in itself, poorly but efficiently kept for any miserable soul choosing to dwell in it, and it gave Max the feeling that this particular wretch remained at heart a homeless person still, only his cardboard box possessed furniture and a certain sadistic bit of ambiance.

The figure reached into the file cabinet drawer, seized something and drew it out, paused for a moment with his bony back halfway towards Max, and then he rotated slowly, both hands gripping a threateningly sizeable handgun, centering and then centered, clicked cocked dead straight into Max’s direction.

“I know who you are,” Max found himself saying. It was a spontaneous remark, but with the light of the desk lamp and an awakened sobriety Max truly recognized the figure; aside from its gaunt and misshapen characteristics, the man presented with himself a ghostly mirror image of Andrew Erlandson. But Max knew better, had expected this, had known better for quite some time.
Simon BoLeve lowered the gun. Just a little. Enough to still mortally wound Max should he choose to indulge his intentions. But the words Max uttered brought a quizzical semblance to Simon’s gaze, and he peered upon Max coldly, questioningly.

And then, “Oh do you?” Simon told him. Even more quizzically, “What do you mean? Where do you know me from? I want to know this, you see, because as you can see, you are about to die. Whether you tell me or not. You may be stalling your death by saying this, but these are not a typical man’s last words. You have my interest. Then you die.”

“Simon,” Max had no time to think things carefully, rationally. But he didn’t want to die and his stakes for surviving were at this point far better than the pastor’s. At this point, his knowledge was all he had, his best defense. “Simon BoLeve is who you are. And you are not a human being like me. You have a special purpose, you haven’t lived a life like I or anyone else has. You have a chance to understand yourself more, from what I have seen of you, since you were an infant. Your heritage is of a different kind. I know who you are.”

Even if Max didn’t know completely, it was enough to openly confound Simon, and the gun he held lowered considerably then and the figure that gripped it darted his gaze around the room until it rested upon a pillowed corner to Max’s far left, where a stack of papers lay sorted and stacked and partially scattered upon a spread bed sheet like a spectral picnic of homework across the corner floor.

At that very same minute, something startled the both of them. It was the exit door, a door centered at the far end of the attic room, the door to the outside roof area.

It was opening.

Max began to cough, violently. A liquid flem escaped from his mouth and he placed a hand over his lips, withdrew the hand, and he realized in horror that he was coughing up blood. The arm with which for the most part held his chest together was drenched with it. His clothing was saturated as though he’d been swimming in a pool of his own blood.

The last thing Max saw was the vision of the new presence enveloped within the opening exit doorway. Whatever it was, it was clearly female, with skin of tarnished silver, its face resistant to emotion and its hair flowing straight and thick and black, its torso diminishing into a fading transparency, which turned invisible from the lower waist down into a fuming current of air like a fabled genie.

It hovered into the attic room and surveyed the territory.
It looked upon Simon firstly, then upon Max.
Even from across the room, those eyes seemed to glisten like glossy windows to an eternity past.
And this was all Max saw until he himself faded into a deep dark abyss, the final seconds of delirium.
And peaceful, euphoric death.
20.

Matt McGregor Goes To Church

Matt McGregor had found his way to the Church on the Rock in much the same manner as Max had. When he spotted Max’s Mustang vacant and parked against the curb at the church’s adjoining intersection, he knew that Maxy had made it inside and was well into his investigative endeavors. Matt parked his Chevy Caprice a few vehicles away from Max and made his way towards the church, crossing at the intersection and heading towards the sanctuary’s front double doors.

Inside, the first handful of pews remained packed with prayerful worshippers, the worrisome recipients of the heartbreaking news of young Alice and her very late boyfriend Ben, or at least the ones concerned enough to hold themselves after service hours in diligence to the Lord.

Matt vaguely recalled what Bradshaw looked like from diverse television spotlights on the news and on Christian Broadcasting while flipping through late night channels and it appeared as if Max and the pastor were both elsewhere. Matt wondered if Max had even located the pastor at all.

He went outside. No sign of the officers he’d sent there earlier to ask questions and to inform the immediate family and to look around. He assumed their task was short as it was simple and the last of them had vanished while he’d been cruising their way down the freeway.

He stepped around the building and made his way leisurely down the sidewalk until he spied an open door to his right. He went up to it and as he did so his eyes caught sight of a spent cigarette butt at his feet just outside the door. In a fleeting thought he figured it odd that someone had been smoking just inches away from a church; two thoughts then…either it had been discarded by a homeless person, and there were many who attended here, though they didn’t appear as such with thanks to the pastor and with double thanks as to how they were no longer exactly homeless (the church was by no means a soup kitchen, no raggedy derelicts pushing shopping carts here), or it was discarded by Max. And there didn’t at this point seem to be any people around.

Then again, no big deal. It was only a cigarette butt.

He peered inside through the open doorway and into an empty office.

“Excuse me, my brother,” a voice startled him from behind. “You lookin’ for Pastor Jacob? He ain’t back yet.”

Matt spun around to find himself facing a black gentleman staring resolutely back upon him, garbed in a slick yellow sports jacket and tie, slick for the seventies to say the least, the seventies painstakingly itching to catch up to the nineties.

“Yes,” Matt responded. “When will he be back? Did you see him with anyone?”

“I saw him with some guy. He your partner?”

“Yes, in a way he is. Hair kinda slick, dark—skinned, Italian-looking, in his forties, maybe dressed nice? Where did they go, do you know?”

Mr. Yellowjacket nodded. “Yeah, that’s him. I think I saw them go back inside. I think they went up to see Simon.”

With anticipation, Matt followed the man up the sidewalk and away from the office, around to the front of the church, and together they re-entered the front double doors to the sanctuary. Sidestepping several underdressed and homely-faced church-goers sojourning towards the outside world, Mr. Yellowjacket stopped short and pointed a narrow finger towards the world that lay ahead for Matt, the foot of a stairway to their almost immediate right, adorned by a metal rack of pamphlets and tracts situated against the wall.

“You go up,” Mr. Yellowjacket instructed. “I gotta stay down here and tend to things. Just go up the stairs past the choir room until you reach the door at the top. That’s Simon’s place. That’s where they should all be doin’ their
thing.”

“Thanks very much,” Matt told him and proceeded forward to begin his ascent.

“God bless you, brother,” Yellowjacket said, he himself proceeding down the center aisle of church-pews and towards the remaining worshippers before the pulpit.

Matt wasn’t as wary as perhaps he should’ve been. Yet with Max having long gone before him and in the good company of the pastor, Matt suspected he would walk into nothing more than halfway into an interview between Max and Simon with the pastor in their midst, the pastor more than likely perplexed with the contents of Max’s questionings. But Matt was sure that Max would keep his cool in the company of Pastor Bradshaw, at least partway sure. Given the nature of Simon BoLeve’s past and its seriously bizarre relevance to Matt’s own past, its profound and chilling relevance, Matt faced a certain deep, foreboding fear. To top this off, he was faced with his mounting suspicions of Simon’s involvement at the motel. Given the instincts and experiences of a cop, his journey upwards to the head of the stairs was plainly reminiscent to his attempts to locate and apprehend the suspected felons of escapades past.

Given the evidence, he wondered whether his visits would end with Simon’s arrest.

And given who Simon supposedly was, he wondered what would become of that.

These contemplations were by no means any comfort to him as he approached the closed door at the end of the miniscule walkway he came across at the top of the stairs. If there was any comfort at all, it was in the Smith & Wesson holstered between his breast and the inside lining of his jacket.

He halted at the door. Listened. There were no voices, no noise. It was abnormally quiet. Deathly so.

He leaned forward against the door. He raised a hand, and with his knuckles, he knocked softly.

He waited.

No answer. Nothing.

He was about to speak, but instead willed his opposite hand to rise to grip the doorknob. It turned in his grip; the door was unlocked.

He opened the door unto the decadent dark.

***

Matt McGregor did not expect the onrush of stale sweatshop pungency to welcome him as he opened the door, as if he’d opened the door to a men’s locker room after a sweaty day in the summer heat.

Darkness broke into the lamplight of the far center of the room and fell upon the Stygian surprise party that awaited him. His vision canvassed the morbid exhibition uninhibited and ghastly underneath the vista of frolicking particles of light-washed dust and discolored dimness. These were the first things he saw, three bodies, one nude and bound and stretched upon a queen-sized bed like an unconsenting victim to a ghoulish game of bondage and masochism, another contorted and lifeless and drained of the blood now a bloodbath still drawn from a gaping black slit across his neck, the other slumped at the foot of the bed and equally bloody, equally lifeless...

...Max....

Reality at once collided with the seconds-long inability to focus upon it and upon such an unexpected scene, but it was only within seconds that Matt acted and a cop’s instincts kicked in, instincts blurred with emotion and dislocation and the awareness of the identities of the other two, of Bradshaw and of Bradshaw’s young daughter upon the bed. Matt was quick to rush towards them and towards Max, insanely distraught as he did so but alert enough to reach into his jacket and pull his Smith & Wesson from its holster, to stop short of Max and to cock his gun and take aim, both hands clutching and stretched and readied, in one direction and then another and another....

...towards no one.

The room appeared to be empty. A door hung open and wide at the opposite wall, somehow barring the murky late morning daylight from merging with the yellowing lamp-lit room, as if an invisible field prevented its entrance. It was beginning again to rain outside, the steady drizzle pat-patting against what chalky stretch of rooftop Matt could see.

There was no sign of anyone else in the room and by the sight of the opened exitway Matt assumed Simon BoLeve had fled. If it was BoLeve.

He gazed around the attic room. He couldn’t believe someone was allowed to live in this space, could hold residence here and beyond the reach of the comforts and the laws of adequate housing, of sensible living. His attentions then riveted to Max.

He knelt down before Max, quickly. He lowered his gun, rested his grip and tossed it from one hand to the other. His free hand fell upon his dead friend’s shoulder. His touch went to Max’s neck, and where the pulse should be, felt for it. There was no pulse. He felt and felt again, his fingers pressing, still no pulse. Nothing. Matt
slumped onto the hardwood floor before his longtime mentor. He didn’t give any thought to how Maxwell Polito’s own blood now seeped into his pant legs and around his shoes and through his socks. Matt was overwhelmed with loss at that moment as he would be for a long time afterwards, with his inept foresight and inability to have done something, anything, to have prevented this inexplicable tragedy. His sitting before Max was dreamlike, no, nightmarish, as though this entire episode was wrong and that Max was in truth truly still alive and should be rushed to the nearest hospital and that he would recover and that everything would be all right....

Everything.

Would be all right.

He wanted to hold him, but the very act of an embrace seemed as distant as the fact that his dear friend was gone, was murdered by something horrid, was attacked and slain only within the past hour and that Matt himself could’ve arrived a great deal sooner if only he’d realized the immediacy of the situation, if only he’d known a lot sooner where Max had disappeared to, or had been there when Max left to know that Max had left at all.

He removed his hand from Max and reached below the rim of his jacket for the CB hidden and holstered and noiseless upon his belt. He would radio in, call for backup pronto, get the goddamn Marines to get in on this if he had to.

Simon BoLeve would be found.

No matter who or what the fuck that bastard was.

“Maxy......oh, Maxy....”

Matt unbuttoned the thin black strap which overlooped the base of the CB’s fat black antenna, slid the radio from its holster and clicked a switch at its top. As he did so he noticed how it shook by the jittery nervousness of his hand. The radio came alive with static.

Suddenly there came a voice, from his right, from his immediate left, from behind him, from anywhere, from everywhere at once, “He is not dead, but sleepeth....”

He surmounted his gun in an extended arm’s grip, his gaze darted and fell in every direction. The voice was clearly female, and his first notion was that it originated from young Alice upon the bed. Yet the girl remained unconscious and silent and the voice to him held the distinct impressions of an older woman, almost an elderly woman, yet it hadn’t been a weak voice but a voice of cold authority.

The next moment afterwards, from behind a dusty row of furniture to the extreme right of the room and at the misty borders of the desk lamp’s radiance sprung the half-nude and bearded figure of a man, making a mad dash from hidden cover towards the opened exit door to the roof...but the door to the roof was not his destination as he avoided it completely and instead made for the pillowed corner of the room.

This took only a millisecond as Matt spun, his gun quick to take dead aim. “Freeze!”

In the instant he did so and dropping his radio to the floor to steady his tightening grip, the weapon was wrenched easily and suddenly out of his hands by an unseen force which rendered Matt into such unexpected and overwhelming dismay it left the officer with a senseless disbelief. He fought powerlessly to comprehend the fact that his weapon was no longer in his hands.

His vision blurred and in a torpid degree of terror he was certain he was losing his sight. But as his eyes looked about and around him he became more aware that the blur remained contained within the space directly before and above him.

Until the blur which occupied that space rapidly became more and more solid, more expansive, materializing into tangible nightmare far more real and more terrifyingly familiar than anything else he’d encountered within the room, even above finding Max’s body, above anything else he could have ever imagined or experienced in his own lifetime up until then, and back...way back since that one dreadful episode of his childhood which occurred deep within the shadows of a condemned building in an industrial area of the neighborhood of his youth.

Back since the days of the Wraithchild.

Back since the days of little Nigel and when the teenage s’curity man saved him from his own relentless shock and from the beast that stole Nigel away into the fathomless dark of forever.

He knew the beast had been real.

And he had seen her again only in the pit of restless slumber.

Again and again.

And his most suppressing fears had offered him a golden platter of promise that the beast would one day return for him, in his waking hours, would disrupt the daily routines of his sober and rational way of life with the disorienting intoxiciations of inept horror.

Yet, ironically, with Max’s obsessive pursuits, he’d for the past dozen or so years had learned to face his fears and aided Max in the search for any signs of its existence and for the existence of beings like it.

And there it was, before him now, colossal and towering, facing him and into his soul, and its existence
was as real as his own.
After all these years, he still hadn’t found it and it hadn’t found him.
They had found each other.

***

Once again, it happened.

A second time, for perhaps the last.
His good, good friend was taken.
By the beast.
And Matt was left alone, but not unharmed.

As he watched, this thing of shady silver, this ancient beast, this darkly-breasted legless being abandoned her attentions to him and moved towards the blood-drenched inanimate Max, took him up into her arms, and disappeared with him out the exit door to the roof.
And she’d given Matt scarcely more than a minute’s notice or care.
By that short time, Matt was becoming slowly and languidly aware that the figure that had been Simon was gone, too, as was whatever Simon had come to collect in the room’s pillowed corner.

It was a good hour or two before anyone else gave him attention, before Mr. Yellowjacket came upon him with speculative curiosity as to how their meeting was coming along, before the officers arrived to find the pastor’s body and young Alice barely alive, and to find Lieutenant Matthew McGregor like a child again, like a child who had witnessed something so unspeakable that the stupor, which so encompassed him for a long time afterwards, left him incapable of speaking.

For a long time afterwards.
21.
A Refresher Course Brush-up at the Office

Melony had arisen that Sunday morning not long after her husband sprung alive and awake from beside her and responded to Matt McGregor’s telephoned summons away from her and to a crime scene investigation at a motel down the street from The Crow Job.

She had been more than curious about that, curious like an obsessive gossip-hound tabloid reporter in the midst of a news breaking Hollywood story she was personally involved in, but powerless to do anything about but sit and wait.

And then she realized one thing:
Today was the day she would engage in her first date with Andrew Erlandson.

Andrew Erlandson.

Well, not today, but tonight. Today, she must prepare for it, while waiting to hear the outcome of Max’s own engagement with Matt.

An hour after she awoke, she showered, all the while thinking to herself how she would prepare, how she would handle it when it happened, this date with Andrew, at Andrew’s own apartment.

It didn’t seem like a professional interview with a suspected nonhuman being. And then it did. But then again, it felt oddly titillating in a butterflies-in-the-stomach kind of way, as though she were a high-schooler on the threshold of a first date, a first and nearly intimate date, with a young man she’d had a crush on since her pubescent focus on a desire for men began to blossom.

She was confused as to how to feel emotionally, yet something told her there was nothing to be confused about. She wasn’t sure if that something came from her professional side or her romantic one.

She thought she heard the phone ring while showering, but her first instincts were to let Max deal with it later. She’d been feeling that way lately and was so engrossed in her thoughts as she showered, until she realized, hey, that probably is Max calling.

When she emerged and dried herself, she didn’t think at first to check the answering machine but instead checked her pager. She was so used to being paged by numerous people including Max that it was a force of habit, although Max himself rarely carried a pager and thought it to be trendy, which was what he thought of her allegiance to it. She’d afterwards listened to the answering machine’s recordings of his two messages to her while at his desk in the upstairs office, but by the time she returned his call to his cell phone there was no answer. He’d said to call her immediately or she’d miss the boat and would have to wait.

So setting that matter aside on the backburner of anticipation, Melony proceeded to spend that afternoon in preparation for the imminent evening with Andrew.

She sat in shorts and an oversized white t-shirt parading the words “I (heart) My Attitude Problem” engulfed by Maxwell’s U-shaped desk. There was a series of file cabinets to the far right of her and she rolled her husband’s
wheeled desk chair over to them and opened one of the drawers. Each drawer was comprised of a portion of historically sequenced, documented information of the events and misadventures of Maxwell Polito’s industrious career, each tidbit in pale, plain folders indexed by year and then alphabetically by subject. The revised and condensed versions were available via Max’s computer CD ROM files, but Melony preferred the physically tangible old-fashioned way.

She let her fingers walk to 1980.

She withdrew a file captioned with the words ERLANDSON, ANDREW (COOPER, RALSTON). The file was an inch thick, the second file in the system’s year-by-year sequence to mention the name Erlandson, the first to mention Cooper. She knew what it contained, but she was in need of a refresher course brush-up.

When she opened it and studied the separated the pages, she got more than that.

It was almost like reviewing outdated police files. If there ever was such a thing as outdated police files. Maxwell Polito files, nonetheless, were never outdated. Melony’s husband always collected and stored information and historical data relevant to his personal interests to the point of obsession. This file was not an inch thick for nothing. Maxwell-authored reports and second-page newspaper clippings with paper-clipped notes stamped with Post-its like leeches containing nearly illegible scribblings. All pertaining to a remarkable occurrence at an elementary school playground in Southern California’s Anaheim, home of the Happiest Place On Earth, home of the location of Andrew Erlandson’s and Ralston Cooper’s initial confrontation together, on a night when Ralston himself witnessed the deaths of his closest eleventh-grade buddies by a creature described as a “woman-like thing with arms and a chest but no legs, with golden skin, like a genie that kid Erlandson conjured up to defend him when we were giving him a hard time.”

They were giving him more than just a hard time.

A young Ralston Cooper had given that quote to Maxwell, who was immediately drawn to investigate after simply coming across a report of the incident on the second page of the “A” section of the Orange County Register, when he swiped the paper from his doorstep and read it with toast and coffee. Ralston had given a similar quote to the Register, and to several other local papers, discredited as being hallucinatory while under the influence of marijuana and alcohol, and the official police investigation had never been conclusive since.

What the papers and police reports failed to mention, however, was that a young Simon BoLeve had been involved, too and that there was a sighting of another creature, similar to that of the golden legless one, though this other creature was silvery and ghostlike and faded into nothingness whenever it strayed more than several yards away from Simon.

As Melony continued to peruse this and other files, files of related mysterious and unsolved deaths and occurrences, she further grew re-acquainted with the links and patterns, which made the Erlandson case what it was today.

She couldn’t deny the fears she had in tonight’s date with Andrew and in the sketchy possibilities of its outcome.

She reverted back to the file on the elementary school incident.

There were marks and notations and phone numbers of law enforcement officials Melony had never been acquainted with and references to other files.

These references sparked memories and they in turn sparked references to other files stored within memories.

Memories of somehow having seen Erlandson before back then, memories as vague and as elusive as dreams.

Melony had been exposed to much information concerning UFOs and cover-up theories and things concerning the Great Beyond of the unknown since her personal and professional alliance with Max, a great deal of which dealt with matters not necessarily related to the “aliens-among-us” Erlandson case, but on the other hand the Erlandson case affected not only Max’s personal obsessions with the unknown but Melony’s as well, in a way she failed to completely understand. The accumulative data and experiences of Max was to Mel nothing short of the truth and she was just as determined to expose the answers that would turn all those theories into downright fact.

And there was nothing like a good one-on-one with the very man in the central eye-of-the-hurricane focus of it all to make fact those theories.

Now, of course, there was an added complication to the one-on-one.

One was attracted to the other one. And the other way around.

Which led to an enlightening and alarming approach to this evening’s investigative plan of action:

Be open, Mel. Tell him who you are, and deal with the consequences. If he can deal with them also, you can ask him anything you want to. Directly. If you are honest with him, then he will be honest with you.

The question was: would that approach work?

And what would happen if it didn’t?

It almost sounded insane.
Ultimately undecided, she eventually got dressed and prepared to depart for the important and inevitable meeting, maintaining in her mind, her attraction to the man, avoiding the overwhelming other aspects which would otherwise make her very much afraid.
The Interview at Andrew’s Apartment

The polished silver of the candelabra reflected the incandescent glow of candlelight from the center of a dining room table set for two. The tablecloth’s decorative ocean of glitter scintillated around and below the candles in a majestic presentation of rich-and-famous etiquette like an elegant woman’s evening dress falling short of its modest surroundings.

The somber hush of the apartment moments before was now disrupted as Fleetwood Mac began to spread “Rumors” from the living room compact disk player.

Adjacent to the dining room and sharing the same pale, white-tiled floor space was the kitchen. On the stove top, a kettle of water and oriental vegetables boiled, emitting vapors of steam rising to the noiseless vents directly above. A mixture of succulent mushrooms and onions, pea pods and tri-tip steak slices simmered upon a sizeable wok over a low fire. Nearby, a tray, full of delicate wontons and plump egg rolls, was partially covered with aluminum foil, pulled open from one side and dug into by the golden-skinned, slender fingers of a spectral woman.

Bari simplyLealiad Andrew’s Chinese wontons.

“What are you doing? Bari, stop that!” Andrew entered the kitchen and halted before the sight. He was wearing a black, thick-cotton dress shirt, black Levi’s and a slim white tie. “Those aren’t for you.”

Bari was caught, startled, vanished immediately into whatever dimension she next occupied. The consumed food, of course, material as it was, plopped onto the tile floor in a semi-digested, disgusting pile from where her midsection once was. She then reappeared a few feet away, the lower torso of her slender golden body wispy torrents of air, which blew and swirled against the hem of the tablecloth in rippling waves, much in the same fashion as the tips of her waist-length flowing black hair.

She looked upon Andrew apologetically, like a sorrowful puppy dog. She could no longer find nourishment nor sustenance in food, but she could sure as hell taste it.

To Andrew, it was almost like living in Bewitched.

Andrew entered the kitchen, made his way to the stove. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Bari said. “I’m just so used to it being me and you. I know better.”

“How many did you eat anyway?” He sidestepped the messy glob on the floor.

“Only a few. They’re for you and your monumental date, I know. I just couldn’t help myself. I was once human too, you understand.”

“So you’ve always told me.” He checked and rewrapped the aluminum foil, lowered the flame on the kettle and covered it. He then turned to face her, could not avoid the serene glare of those orange glowing eyes, how they never failed to mesmerize him, even after all those years. “You set me up with her, didn’t you?”

Bari was silent, watched him.

Andrew continued, “You don’t have to tell me. I know. You’ve never allowed me to see anyone so easily, so...coincidentally. I’ve thought about this and it didn’t take me long. You’re not as much a mystery to me as you think you are.”

“Oh, but I am,” Bari told him truthfully. “You just perceive me on a human level. And you’ve become quite used to my presence in your life. My intervention. But as I’ve told you oftentimes before, you still don’t know exactly what I am. You only know me as who I am. As the mystical Bari that no one else has but you. And you don’t even know who exactly it is that are. You’ve just lived in your awareness of me long enough to accept me and to keep me a secret.”

“Yeah, like The Ghost and Mrs. Muir.”

“I am not a television show.”

“Well, you sure make it seem like I’m in one. No Other guy I’ve ever met or heard of has what I have with you. And no one would ever believe me.”

“No one ever has.”

“Thanks to you.”
“But that doesn’t mean no one ever will.”

Andrew let out a sigh, reentered the living room and seated his anxious self into the black leather recliner under the bookshelf lamplight. He glanced at the wall clock, which returned a 7:05 glare. In the kitchen behind him, Bari swept her scrumptious residue into a dustpan with her hands, as he knew she would.

Then came the sudden, awaited door chime.

His date had arrived. This was a given, since he scarcely had visitors and the time was right. He catapulted from the recliner, re-checked the kitchen and dining room area. Bari had vanished from sight.

Very good.

Now, hopefully, he could commence with the evening at hand.

Without interruption.

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The directions Andrew had given Mel during the prior day’s brief phone conversation proved simple enough to follow, but it was only until she was en route early that Sunday evening when it began to strike her as curiously odd that the place Andrew called home lay right smack in the armpit of The Crow Job’s nefarious backyard. It didn’t seem to make much sense that Andrew would choose such an unlikely dive of a region to reside in. Working under Ralston Cooper’s wing should have elevated his living standards alone, unless Andrew’s income was grossly unjust or unless there was a premeditated purpose to it all.

Melony arrived at the address, pulled up and parked along the street’s curb directly in front of Andrew’s three-story apartment complex. She hoped she hadn’t underdressed, but the date was informal and her goal wasn’t to seduce him but to get to know him. And maybe she would allow him a bit of insight on herself, too. Maybe more than a bit. She gathered a Nikon and its shoulder strap from the passenger seat into her purse and emerged with the purse, from her vehicle, locked the door and set the alarm. She wore blue jeans and an almost silky thin orange tank top.

The apartment complex was plain, but maintained noticeably well for its hum-drum and run-down surroundings. Entering through the building’s towering wrought-iron security gate after finding it unlocked, she made her way past a battalion of mail boxes beneath a curved archway, and across a concrete floor which split into separate directions leading through an arena of green grass and hedges and a spacious, lawn-chaired gazebo.

The setting appeared remarkably quiet and restful, and perhaps catered to a select clientele of respectful, low-income and low-profile adult types with no children and habitually tedious lives. There were no signs of the tenants which lived there but for a dozen or two lights within windowed and curtained front rooms.

Melony made an immediate right and proceeded up three flights of stairs and across the top floor walkway, while she rationalized how Andrew’s choosing to live here seemed more and more fitting, as fittingly low-profile as he was.

At the corner of the walkway she made a right into an enclosed hallway, which reached in the direction of the street and sheltered the doorways of three separate apartments. She approached the only door at the inner hallway’s left. She took a deep breath to calm herself from the constricting assault of tension that threatened to make her flake out at the last minute. A polite series of knocks to announce her arrival and the finality of crossing over the threshold between consistent reality and persistent curious abandon and it would be behind her.

It’d better be.

Because when she knocked and then waited a minute and then a few seconds more, raising her curled knuckles to try again, the door opened and what she saw on the other side was a reality as consistent and as unimpressive as her own.

Then again, what did she expect, anyway?

The next moment found Melony crossing the threshold without so much as a second thought to it, forsaking her expectations, but for the simple rule of thumb to expect the unexpected.

As she entered and greeted the shy young man, dressed modestly in a black dress shirt and white tie as he was and clearly delighted by his date’s arrival, it came to her that consistent reality was what she’d expected all along. After all, she wasn’t boarding a crystal ship to the stars. It was all down here on Earth, in a down-to-earth apartment; Melony was simply beginning to fear that perhaps everything about Andrew had a down-to-earth explanation.

But that just couldn’t be.

“Melony, welcome,” Andrew said cordially. He was in the gladdest of spirits, free and easy and lighthearted. If she had a coat, he would’ve offered to take it for her. He was indeed no ordinary gentleman. “I’m ecstatic that you’ve made it! Dinner is pretty well done, Chinese like I promised. But in French, je vis de bonne soupe et non de beau langage, it’s good food and not fine words that keeps me alive. First, though, let me give you the grand tour.
It’s not very often I get to show off.”

“Really,” Mel said with a smile, enchanted. She set her purse down upon the black recliner. “So show off.”

“Would you like anything to drink?”

“What do you have?”

Andrew listed several beverages in almost rehearsed order, and Mel surprised herself in agreeing to a brandy against her own projected intentions.

His grand tour was a thorough presentation but determinedly hurried, as Andrew interjected more than once that they’d better sit down to dine before he’d be resigned to microwave the finger foods. His attitude and the way he carried himself was like a humble rich kid host on an excursion through a luxurious mansion that wasn’t a mansion nor was it luxurious. Andrew maintained the same innocence and boyish charm which had so attracted her to him at the club. She found herself fascinated by the littlest things, all the while alert to those little things which might present a small portion of insight or clues to what may be hidden behind his innocent persona.

But then, she also found herself forgetting what she was truly there for, caught up as she was in the intriguing normalcy of it all.

His bedroom tour went first, after the introduction of where the bathroom was and she would’ve taken this as a sly insinuation if it wasn’t for his preoccupation with a closeted toy collection, something he was quite proud of. Melony distracted him with minor questions concerning his workspace, a lengthy wooden desk flanked by file cabinets and enthroned by shelves of books and a typewriter surrounded by piles of papers and office accessories, all a few feet from his Niagra adjustable bed.

He didn’t seem at all interested in his writing or of his affiliations with Cooper. This was all his forum, with his interests and flamboyant showmanship, until they could both get comfy and settle down in the kitchen. Mel could wait for that.

The living room was the final and only frontier as eccentric but otherwise cozy as it was, with its atmospheric black-and-green-clovered wallpaper and legions of books, and its prominent large-screened television. Melony was drawn to the exhibited relics of yesteryear, the framed book cover of *Into The Grave II*, penned by Andrew himself in his late teens and of his once-famous director father’s signed and framed poster of a sixties B-horror flic....

*To my son,*

*I in you, and you in me.*

*Loving timelessly,*

*-your Dad, A.J.*

A.J. was just as much a mystery as Melony was convinced Andrew was, maybe more so in consideration of his sudden and still yet unsolved disappearance, though Mel seemed certain that the matter was unsolved in Andrew’s mind as well. Or was it? Only dinner conversation would tell.

Then it would be her forum.

The Chinese food was splendid. Every last morsel of it. Andrew’s conversation was tedious, talk-of-the-weather, but Melony made sure to turn that around as subtly and as mannerly as she could. But it was important to listen to Andrew regardless of what he said, for each word was an insight into a personality somewhat foreign to her, somewhat familiar, somewhat universal in the underlying human loneliness of it all. And she couldn’t help but notice how handsome he was, how attractive he was to her, though regardless of everything else she had at least ten years on him. And she was married. To an asshole.

A half an hour had passed, give or take some minutes. Fleetwood Mac were repeating their rundown of song selection from the living room stereo. Mel discussed her safe drive to Andrew’s, commented on the wonderful food, reiterated over her likes and dislikes of Ralston’s gig the other night.

Andrew took it from there, “So tell me more about what you do, Mel. This *Diverse Arcanum* newsletter. It’s a newsletter, and yet you got yourself a table for Ralston’s big night when more reputable publications were knocked back to corner barstools.”

“I’ve got connections,” Mel told him. She sipped her second glass of Brandy. “Besides, I got lucky. There was only so much space in that dive to begin with. Is there a reason why you happen to live down the street from such a place, a place which eventually happened to be the showcase for such a night?”

“There’s no coincidence. I’ve lived here for a while. Ralston and I hung out together to discuss projects at that club. It’s his kind of place. He’ll go on to bigger and better places, whether or not he did well there. It was an
experiment, to see if he could do well with his dream......which was music, not really writing at all.”

“Oh yeah,” Melony said, “but your dream is writing, isn’t it? And surely writing must be part of Ralston’s own dream. How could it not be? He’s an international bestselling author, for Godsake. No one put a gun to his head. He must love his work.”

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Andrew told her. “I don’t like working for him. He uses me and that’s all I do now. It pays the bills and I’m just fine living here. Until I can....”

“Until you can write something for yourself again...?”

Andrew felt suddenly restless, squirmish, uneasy and wary with this. Was she hinting at his personal life just then, his personal track record, could she know his intimate history, had brushed up on these things since their introduction to one another Friday? Or had he disclosed to her some disconcerting bit of information that Friday night that since then memory could not summon?

“I can’t write for myself anymore,” he found himself saying. “I just do what I do, and I live my life here. It’s a good life, actually.”

“Something’s not right here,” Mel told him in response, agitated, pressing further to the point. “Back up a minute. Tell me again, how exactly do you make a living?”

Numerous questions sprung from the inner wells of Andrew’s suspicions. Didn’t he make that clear to her? Surely he couldn’t have hinted of the truth during their discussion the other night! And why is she concerning herself so, over his income? Is her business hurting for a buck, is she sying around for the next great score with a good-looking guy and a notable meal ticket? Like Jessica, Ralston’s girlfriend, perhaps? Or is she behaving like the journalist, asking questions for media, while not really maintaining a personal interest in him at all?

Say it isn’t so!

“I’m sorry,” Melony told him and reached a hand out to his across the corner of the table that they shared. Andrew was quite oblivious in his momentary lapse of frustration. “I’m just asking. I’m curious. Maybe it’s the journalist in me. I wanna know more about you. It’s plain to see how working for Ralston Cooper upsets you so. You want to be a writer in your own right, and he just gets in the way. Doesn’t he? I’m sorry.”

Mel said nothing more than what she’d meant to and she knew nothing of the deep secrets kept between Andrew and Ralston. She was only too aware of other secrets even more unsaid and she would find her way towards them, regardless of how wrong or unfair it was beginning to seem. The interview was proceeding rather well, and she was confident enough to request another brandy. Yet she had obviously struck a nerve in Andrew and it felt good to know she could ease whatever upset him outright and re-establish a bit of friendly trust between them both, as a good interviewer should.

But there was an element of mutual understanding growing here, haunting her with the realization of the obvious things they together held in common, of how the two of them had burrowed their careers into the unsatisfying comforts of two opposing mock-mentors, who each separately dictated the lives of Andrew and Melony to their highly successful demands, all the while denying the two of any success of their own. And to top it all off, one mock-mentor had virtually built a career upon pursuing the mysteries of the other.

And here was Andrew and Melony, on a date in Andrew’s apartment, the servile followers of two celebrity icons who wouldn’t be what they were today if it weren’t for what Andrew and Melony had done for them.

Andrew appeared to understand her, to accept her apology. Melony was beginning to understand all too well. She tamed herself from being so outwardly nosey. She had another forkful of wonton.

Andrew was absently busying himself with his chop sticks, toying with his soy-sauce-saturated chow mein. He was trying to read her, wondering what she was all about, but by now it was curiosity and not suspicion, which drove him to it. Mel was comforted to pick up on this, trying to read him as well but with fragmented triumph.

Andrew was the first to speak after the considerable unease of silence. “So, we both have questions about what the other does. Nothing wrong with that. We’re both starving for harmless answers about one another. You must like me, or you wouldn’t be here, and I’m sure you’re not here to win the Pulitzer Prize on my humble life. Tell me about yourself, or ask me anything you want. I’m sorry too, for that passing bit of awkwardness.”

Mel raised her brandy glass in a toast and Andrew raised his in turn. “Here’s to informal introductions,” she proposed. Glasses clinked, and spirits lifted. “Now, if you want to, ask me a question about myself.”

Andrew sipped his drink. It was brandy also, and more of it, diluted with Coke in a tall glass. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Orange. It used to be black, but black is too common.”

“Like your hair,” Andrew noted. “But your hair is far too beautiful to be common. Come on, black is supposed to be beautiful. That’s my favorite color.”

“Okay, let me ask a question,” Mel said. “What turns you on?”

“Well...orange, now.” Andrew found himself less comfortable now than with the previous subject, though
he tried his best not to show it. He hoped this was working. “And you?”
“What turns me on is how we have so much in common.”
“We do?” A sip of brandy-Coke, a mouthful of vegetables.
“Ask me more about myself.”
“All right,” Andrew swallowed. “What do we both have in common?”
“We both serve two masters: ourselves and the one we’re servants to. We hate one, and despise the other. It doesn’t matter which. We hate ourselves for clinging to the other as much as we do and we hate our other for having us be that way.”
“Yet we don’t completely despise the other, do we?” Andrew replied, delighted by the depth of conversation the evening had submerged into and barely even an hour had passed since it began. “I mean, there’s something we appreciate in them still, isn’t there, important things that we have learned from them, throughout what they’ve turned into?”
“What I’ve learned is to not appreciate my master so much anymore,” Mel said, almost bitterly, mesmerized as she was by the utter honesty of it all, how she so desperately needed a release to her deep tremulous burdens like this. “I used to love him and part of me still does, but all I find lately is that I try too hard to keep that love going and he simply keeps defeating the purpose. All I ever wanted to do was paint, to be an artist, and to explore myself, not someone else’s obsessions, as intriguing as they always were,” and then, “…are.”
Perhaps it was the brandy talking. She only had three, or was it four? It was at least four when she asked Andrew for another. How many bottles of that shit did he hold there within his kitchen cupboards, anyway? This was not the direction the interview was supposed to have gone. Who was interviewing whom, here?
“So, Melony,” Andrew asked his date, curious and unaware of her struggle to maintain her preplanned interrogative approach to talking to him, “Who is this master you despise?”
A short distance behind Melony and from Andrew’s point of view, somewhere in the direction of the refrigerator’s car-shaped Zat’s Auto & Body promo magnet, a blurry distortion appeared. It was the left side of Bari’s head, displaying an attentive ear up and listening.
Bari was merely humoring him; Andrew knew she could hear just as well unseen. This was also an attempt to remind Andrew that she was listening and if there was anything else she was doing, she was annoying him.
What Bari was doing was more than that, Andrew realized. She was feeding Melony thoughts and ideas. This was not a manipulation, but an...influence. Bari was known to do this sort of thing.
He was going to have to talk to her about that.
He focused onto Melony, deliberately, despite Bari. To Melony, his expression suddenly hinted of determined concentration.
Thus her answer: He was interviewing her.
And her answer to Andrew’s last question: “Max Polito. You’re right, though, I don’t completely despise him and I’ve learned a great deal of good through him, a lot of insight in many areas. Maybe some insight into you.”
She was saying too much and she wasn’t sure why. Yet she was truly speaking her mind and it felt so intensely good to do so. This was a rare opportunity indeed and she instinctively longed for it. She’d wrestled with the notion of spilling her guts earlier that afternoon, but she didn’t expect this.
Yet, alas, there it was. Out there smack dab in the naked open spaces.
Andrew’s reply, after an expressionless stare and then a contemplative pause: “Who is Max Polito?”
Bari’s distorted image disappeared. Most likely, Andrew would not detect any sign of Bari for the remainder of the date. Whatever Bari had done, she had obviously gotten away with it. And that was all it would take.
Melony looked at him as though she’d just said something obscene, as though she’d caught herself after the fact.
Now, it was her turn to answer.
Who was Max Polito? Didn’t he know? Countless people Melony never even mer knew the celebrity’s name, at least, even if they mistook it for a sports announcer’s.
Surely Andrew must know who Max was, must know it was Max who had been trailing him and his antics throughout the past decade and earlier, dispersing tidbits of his research concerning Andrew’s “kind” in his PBS series and nearly every Polito publication that made the Book-of-the-Month Club’s alternate selection. Of course, Max took care to never mention specific names or references, but rather made use of general theories and a few unspecific facts. He knew how to watch his ass.
Except with his own wife.
Apparently, now, she couldn’t watch hers, either, and she was still on the spot to give a reply.
She gave one the way Max would. “I know who you are.”
To Andrew, Melony again appeared as if she just let something obscene escape her lips and he recalled how
she’d asked him what turns him on. The Max Polito name sounded somewhat familiar to him with Melony’s odd and perplexing reply, and he could easily detect her uncertainty and regret in mentioning his name.

She was hiding something and attempting to force it out; it seemed as if Bari hadn’t fed her any ideas after all...she seemed to have released Melony’s inhibited temptations, to make her cough out the thoughts that were choking her after she had chewed on them for awhile.

*I know who you are.*

He’d been told that before.

He’d been told that in his dreams, by his own self, or by someone who looked like him, by someone that maybe wasn’t him at all but someone else entirely, a mirror image of himself that dwelt independently and that returned his glare from a world parallel but opposite to his own. It was more than a reflective image before his bathroom mirror that told him *I know who you are.*

It was an image sullen and scarred, angry and full of pain, burdened with remorse.

*I know who you are.*

And whenever it spoke those words, it spoke with the voice of A.J. Erlandson, his father...

...confounding Andrew’s own certainty that he had never known the sound of that voice in his own lifetime.

Intently disturbed, he broke away from her eye contact and methodically impaled a diced bamboo shoot upon his plate with a single chop stick. He hoped she would continue on a lighter subject, with enough dialogue to earn a passing grade in Normalcy 101, with a Graduate Degree in What Were We Talking About Before.

Melony recognized the advantages of the soap box limelight Andrew had placed above her, with or without his intentions and it seemed so suddenly opportune that he would reveal more of himself the further she went into revealing more of hers.

How ironic that the same principle applied to average first dates.

“Max is my husband and my boss,” she told him outright and boldly. “Although I’m not expecting him to last much longer as either one. He’s what we have in common, besides how similar my relationship to him can be to yours and Ralston’s. He sent me to meet you. You, and/or a few others he’s interested in. Max is famous for dealing with unexplained supernatural phenomenon, namely extraterrestrials and UFOs in our past and present culture. He...he believes you fall in line with the present kind.

“He’s been observing you and others like you for a few decades, seems like. I just happened along the bandwagon, and he got me fascinated. I know who you are, at least I’m betting on it, and unless I’m sounding like a complete asshole and you don’t know what the hell I’m talking about, you know who you are, too.”
23.

**A Strange Brew of Personality**

...you know who you are, too.

In scenarios such as this one, there isn’t usually only one reason why one excuses himself so suddenly and awkwardly to go to the bathroom. If Melony knew what to think of this, she wasn’t so sure if she would’ve attained more firm of a grip of the situation.

The truth was, she didn’t know what to think of this and she was downright frightened to even wonder.

But what kind of a person would take such a wildly presumptuous statement from a woman he barely knew with a *would you excuse me for a moment, I gotta take a wizz?*?

After all, she had just told him outright that she believed him to be a UFO alien, and that a portion of her career was based on that belief, inspired by the larger helping of belief from her husband’s career’s main course.

How would somebody take that?

Especially if he was some sort of alien?

She had also just revealed to him that she had been sent to meet him; that her purpose of meeting him was due to the fact that he was the subject of journalistic inquiry, a serious research project, of a story.

And that he was one of the main characters in a thickening plot.

How ironic.

Perhaps he was in the bathroom right now, hating her for it.

She was genuinely scared of wondering, but nevertheless she found herself wondering anyway. It was inevitable, this damnable wondering, and the more she lapsed into it the more it consumed her.

She assumed dinner was over. She was finished and full, a remarkable thing when weighing the dinner conversation against the eating of the dinner itself.

She pulled the chair from the table. The gritty screech-scratch of four wooden chair leg bottoms against the no-wax floor could have unnerved her had *Fleetwood Mac*’s merry-go-round of stereo symphony slipped into that still small void in between songs.

She forced herself slowly to her feet. She wasn’t sure whether to move or stay put, and part of her even worried about whether she should gather her purse and leave for fear of what would happen next.

But that was precisely what kept her there. She wanted to see what would happen next. That, outside of the abruptly inconsiderate rudeness Andrew might gather from her actually leaving.

*This was supposed to be considered a date, after all was said and done, no matter what else it was.* This she felt sincerely, because no matter else he was, she liked him.

Perhaps he didn’t know what she had been talking about, after all. If this was the case, he must be by now perceiving her as a certified wacko cosmonaut and he’d probably want her to leave. If she was utterly wrong about him, she might as well hang her hat and flush everything that was thrilling about Max’s research down the way of the Tidy Bowl Man.

She grabbed the half-empty brandy bottle from the table and took a few swigs.

She crept around the table, slowly, towards the hallway entrance. She caught sight of the bathroom door, which remained shut, and of the thin horizontal line of soft light at the slit between the carpet and the bottom of the door.

She listened.

There was talking; he was talking to himself.

She couldn’t quite hear what he was saying, so closer she crept.

She entered the hallway.

Carefully....

His talking ceased. Somehow, within the following few moments, the music coming from the living room silenced abruptly as well, as though someone had cancelled the CD selections and switched the power off.
The apartment was calm, almost tomblike. The light clicked off in the bathroom as the door opened and Andrew emerged.

By then, Melony had managed several backwards paces into the kitchen and was standing, swallowing another mouthful of brandy from the bottle when Andrew returned.

He returned serene and sober and amused at the sight of her drinking. He took his seat at the table once again, pushed aside his half-finished plateful of grub, seized his grub-stained chop sticks and proceeded to play with them, making them dance like puppets across the place mat.

Melony swallowed and simply looked at him, amused herself and inquisitive.

“So,” Andrew began with mannered distraction, “where would you like to take the evening from here? Wanna watch a movie? Have you seen War of the Worlds? Strange Invaders? Communion with Christopher Walken? I got Invaders From Mars, the original and the remake. I’ve always been drawn to movies like those. You think you can tell me why?”

Melony didn’t know what to say. At first, to her, Andrew sounded as though he was purposely allowing the subject that sent him from the kitchen to drift over his head and the next minute he sounded downright sarcastic. Then she answered, “I enjoy those kinds of movies, too. You think you can tell me why?”

Andrew set the chop sticks down upon the table, coolly, crossed his arms, leaned into the table, and gazed at her. “Two possibilities here: either you know things about me that I’m not aware of or you don’t know shit. That’s not to offend you and I’m not angry. I figure the only way to carry on this evening is to discuss this topic frankly or to not discuss this at all. We could watch a movie and carry on with the date portion of this…, unless you wish to leave right now, in which case I will be convinced that there really is no date portion of this.”

“So…” Melony responded after little thought, “…if we speak frankly about this topic, and I remained here, would that mean there still is a date portion of this evening?”

“There is,” Melony said. “You don’t have to believe me. I’ve said enough to make you believe otherwise, so if I leave, it will be because you want me to. I admit there are numerous questions I have for you, some to satisfy personal curiosities and some questions preplanned for literal years. I take it that by now it’s occurred to you who my husband is.”

“Now that we’re choosing to speak frankly, I prefer you’d do most of the speaking. The more insight you can give me on my life, the more I’ll be able to try to relate to what you know. You tell me something about myself and I’ll be able to see where you get that I’m a UFO alien out of all of it. A ridiculous assumption, but my life has been so abnormally bizarre that it merits some insight from an outside observer such as yourself. Such insight has always been a rare thing for me. Truth is, I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this. And I’ve been waiting to sit down to dinner with a beautiful woman in my own apartment and I’m glad it turned out to be you. It sucks that you’re married, though, which decreases my chances with you dramatically, I’m sure. But, hey, I still gotta try. I’m open to affairs. Hell, I should be open to anything, considering my pathetic social life.”

He was a strange brew of personality, Andrew was, that was certain. But he sure talked a great deal for someone insisting that she’d do all the speaking. Somehow, it was eerie that Andrew seemed to pick up on how she was attracted to him against all the odds of the situation. Either that, or he was hard up enough for a woman to tolerate it.

Somehow, suddenly, it appeared quite clear that Andrew was capable of reading her with a keen accuracy. Was it simply due to the fact that he was a writer, or…

She found herself overwhelmed with the same uncomfortable sensation as one would have being scoped out by undercover security in a department store.

She waited for him to speak again and he remained silent. It came to her that he was waiting for her to begin the most of the talking rule he’d just laid out for her.

She began with the incident at the school playground, when Andrew met Ralston Cooper for the first time more than a dozen years ago and with the grisly murders which followed afterwards and again and again throughout the years to follow.

Then she would ask him about the very things which drew her husband into the eye of this enigmatic hurricane, of the things that attracted him so and into his obsessive pursuit of its answers, of luminous female beasts and of a little boy named Nigel lost within the void of circumstance and time.
24.

A Rude Awakening for William Behn

Drifting...
...drifting.
Sleeping.....
You see bright lights, said the glossy-eyed man with the tick-tocking pendulum, staring straight through the
eyes of the man who now sleeps...
...of the man who now dreams; the man who now dreams of repressions stripped naked, exposed and
uninhibited by the pendulum’s spell and the commands of the glossy-eyed man.
Numerous sessions went this way, for William...and some times, even now, he dreams of them as he lies
drifting to sleep.
He dreams of the
bright...
...lights.
Bright lights from the lacey-thin fabric of curtains midway drawn; bright lights from the sliding glass doors slid
open in a foot-length yawn to the welcomed cool breeze from the broken showers of post-sunset.
Drifting...
It was a rotation of lights, bright as they were but in intervals of brightness, which blinded and then became
tolerable again in the outer abyss of nighttime sky. It was as if something from above and beyond the second-story
outer balcony of the Behn residence descended and dangled and swung by an umbilical cord to the heavens, like a
massive and curious spider with luminous eyes teeter-tottering from a strand of starlit web, like an aerial militia in
spotlit pursuit of a dodging renegade.
Sleeping...
The bright lights played upon the statue garden of the balcony patio, its canvassing radiance calling gargoyles
forth from shadow, war-ready knights and trolls and toadstool elves from their unlighted sanctuaries. They caressed
a stone maiden whose frozen gaze backwards always reminded William Behn of the pillar of salt Lot’s wife turned
into, when she looked back upon the world she left behind.
William Behn’s world remained mute, and he viewed the spectacle from the confines of his bedroom as though
viewing with a tense numbness a silent movie he was about to step into and over through the rectangular movie
screen of the balcony’s glass double doors.
The lights called out to him within this silence, rendered him vulnerable to his own primal fears yet at the same
time helpless against the lights’ irrepressible summons.
If he were indeed dreaming this, it occurred to him that this was one of those dreams, which deprived the
dreamer of control, the kind of dream in which you have no choice but to let it take you out to its sea like a tide’s
powerful undertow, to make you drift in its currents until it runs its course and until you awaken.
He had told the glossy-eyed man this once, maybe more than once, during a questionable number of sessions of
drifting and sleeping to a pendulum’s lullaby.
Perhaps this wasn’t a dream at all, but in fact was one of those sessions....
William Behn sat alone at his bedside, alone but for his slumbering wife nestled beneath the bedcovers they
shared. But Agatha was unaware of all this, wasn’t even a part of it really, and in their isolated positions there was a
plainly ironic symbolism to the isolated positions they held within their marriage. In fact, they both were aware of
the other’s unspoken yearning to separate from nine years of their decaying union. They would get around to
discussing it if only there were enough words spoken between them to strike a conversation in the first place. They
each had developed daily routines and held separate occupations, one avoiding a bitter confrontation with the other
by staying out of the other’s way, uniting only as glorified roommates for the routine responsibilities of bill
payments and sugar-coated family gatherings.
William had two sons from a previous marriage, Agatha one son and two daughters, all of them married
successfully and faithfully, all of them ignorant to their parents’ unmentionable turmoil. Perhaps William and Agatha would have had children together, if they hadn’t been so busy early on seeing their own teenagers through junior high and high school, and if only Agatha hadn’t had her tubes tied before they met.

William had become to his wife quite detestable and, if she dwelt on the issue long enough, quite insulting. She knew of his secrets, of his carousing perversions and betraying liaisons with the bar sluts and the tight-assed party caterers and the occasional whores-for-hire his paychecks attracted. And her husband wasn’t exactly pleasant to look at, particularly lately. He must’ve gained sixty pounds in the past year alone.

He hadn’t always been this way. He evolved into it. In fact, he’d just begun to evolve into it around the time he’d first signed on Ralston Cooper as a client. He’d been Editor of a regional subsidiary publishing company and part time literary agent to small time writers with a few good stories and deals under their belts, and when he took on Ralston no one had a clue as to the skyrocketing success it would bring to all.

And no one had a clue to the way William would come to react to such a success. Sure, it was as predictable as a generic horoscope when regarding Ralston; Ralston had always been the Asshole Of Ego. But William was once focused and personable, though he’d been raised amidst the trauma of abusive parents living hand-to-mouth and in denial of their allegiance to sour mash and cheap wine. He grew to be a man determined to lead a life in opposition to his dismal upbringing, and now....well, now his own ideals were shot to shit.

If he was aware of this at all, he sure as all hell didn’t care.

Agatha learned not to care, either.

And by now, she possessed a few good infidelities of her own.

For William, whatever charades they wielded for secrets’ sake or suspicions they harbored, there were no closet skeletons profound enough to succeed in importance over the sessions.

The sessions brought with them the bright lights. The glossy-eyed man had said that the lights were an implanted diversion from deeply repressed memory. A goal of the sessions was to induce a confrontation with those lights in hopes of liberating the demons imprisoned within them. Fervent attacks of anxiety and depression had plagued William’s recent years for hours or even days at a time with no explanation but for a vitamin deficiency or chemical imbalance. But it was the glossy-eyed man who knew better, who disclosed to him those periods of time unaccounted for, episodes dispersed throughout his youthful years like black-outs, concealing the unimaginable origins of a scared psyche.

Lately, the bright lights were coming to him on their own and apart from the sessions. They revealed themselves only to him, for certainly their presence would evoke the attention of the entire coastal community around them.

They were the very same lights that had come to him before, long ago.

Whatever it was, it was happening again.

He lifted himself from the bed and tied his bathrobe tight about him. He stepped towards the lights, becoming one with the silent movie presentation of his outside balcony.

They took him away, only to borrow him for awhile.

He’d be returned in no time.

Drifting....

***

They stole him away and into a dream far more fathomless, a dream where he found himself somewhere not many miles away, somewhere northeast, upwards from his Balboa Beach-front domicile and into the backwoods hill country beyond the town of Brea and behind the neighborhood of Ralston’s home.

The lights carried him to a place that existed or did not exist, he would never be sure, but it was a place he remembered visiting on occasions long ago.

It was a lone diner roosted upon the gravel roadside of fleeting consciousness like a way station checkpoint between two dimensions, an ultimate landmark for the cosmic chasm of netherworld manifested in the hidden terrain beyond it.

From this point, there came a period of dense oblivion, a hollow blank fog, which drifted numbly through events and experiences, constructing a vacuous emptiness that would remain so, never to be recalled into waking memory, not even by the glossy-eyed man’s suggestive sorceries.

Drifting, drifting backward...

...returning...
William Behn awoke from the dream.

Upwards and with a start he awoke, his alertness fine-tuning itself like an FM receiver to the waking world’s proper frequencies, adjusting with every thump of heartbeat. He was drenched within an icy bitter perspiration, which soaked his pajama top and the thick collar portion of his robe.

He was home again, home and amidst the serene late-night darkness of the bedroom and in the company of his restful and inanimate wife curled in deliberate isolation upon her side of the bed they shared still.

The statue garden balcony had surrendered to a now-peaceful dormancy, undisturbed by its recent affair with the luminous intrusion from above.

His senses were seized almost as suddenly as he’d arrived to them, by a single consuming thought which claimed him suddenly next.

It was of the new Ralston Cooper novel.

It was of *The Everborn*.

The diminishing weekend had delivered a comfortable wealth of demands, the foremost being the urgent necessity of reviewing his most valued client’s anticipated new project. Up until the final hour before bedtime, William had managed his way through the fifth chapter of the book. What he read proved masterful and provocative and captivating enough to generate a major publishing event.

Nothing astonishing for Mr. Cooper, of course.

Nor for William as well.

And yet, William now faced a wildly uncontrollable dread about the book, about the queer familiarities of its contents and its eerie flirtations with real people and events and crossbreedings of factual history. It contained subject matter, which hit too close to home, so close that it characterized the nature of William’s own bright lights to a chillingly descriptive “T.” His review of the book had been such a compelling experience and his dream had rendered him utterly displaced. It was plain to see how influential the book had been on the evening, and it was increasingly frightening to consider how difficult it was to separate one from the other.

To position a factual and renown personality into the role of a major character in a work of fiction was unorthodox in the least. Ufologist Maxwell Polito was no recent sensation to William’s prized industry of print-for-profit...a man indebted to his own unorthodox ideas for *his* claim to fame. But to join forces with a master of mainstream macabre would be a reputation risk if not prepared and marketed properly.

Damn Ralston’s insistence to keep a literary project under wraps until the day of its completion. It dug mercilessly into William’s nerves, especially when besieged by deadlines and multiple book contracts and deals in negotiation. Oftentimes, this sort of thing rendered the worrisome agent speculative, and scarcely sure that a given project was being written at all; Ralston always had so much time on his hands for other things.

What William had read of the book so far had generated enough mental mayhem to stimulate another debilitating anxiety attack, and this time it would not originate from repressed childhood horrors. Not only did the tale involve factual characters with potentially ugly libel suits had Ralston irresponsibly neglected to secure proper legalities, and not only did the story flaunt similar if not identical references to William’s blatantly obvious alien abduction-like episodes, but the time frame of the plot itself overlapped *this present* time.

What he had read was enough to make him call it a night, and he had retreated to the bedroom as though to avoid having to admit to himself that he’d unwittingly set himself up to be raped of all rationality. And that was before the night made it all the more worse.

Overcome by immediacy and the panic of bleak premonition, William fled the bedroom. He made his way down the lightless half-spiral of staircase and hurried through the stretch of downstairs corridor. He emerged into his business office/study and arrived at a far corner desk.

There, below his gaze, *The Everborn* lay centered and divided into two uneven stacks beside an open notebook containing review notes. Stepping aside, he gathered his reclining leather desk chair from beneath the desktop work space, positioned it, and seated himself. He lifted a hand to wipe the sweaty droplets from his face and receding brow and from the saturation of wet sweat about his neck and upper chest. He wished he had a handkerchief for times like these, like the one the balding Nazi officer in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* always seemed to have handy.
It was then when he noticed his pajama leg bottoms and the hem of his bathrobe, and his feet. They were soaked with a dewy wetness and soiled with streaks and clumps of mud and yellowed grass-confetti as though he had taken a sleep-induced stroll across the outside grounds of his home.

He remembered the bright lights once again.

He remembered stepping into them.

He remembered dreaming of a journey, though not of the journey itself, but of its purposeful and imposed destination...a snapshot of memory, as it was, of a canyon much like the one described within the...

...described, within the book.

Something was happening, something not quite right.

Something very, horribly wrong.

He caught sight of the digital desk clock. It was 12:37 a.m..

It was time for a few answers, a hefty dosage of comforting explanation.

Before he could possibly get himself to read further.

It was time to telephone that most valued client of his, and pronto.

One rude awakening deserved another.

25.

A Telephone Call for Ralston Cooper

Out of the chrysalis of late evening came forth emergence of the new day upon the stroke of twelve. Ralston Cooper was wide-eyed and wired inside the recreation room of his Brea home, lounging restlessly amidst weight sets and exercise machines and intermittently drawn towards the enclosed spa he spied from time to time from the opposing side of a spacious window of glass.

He had disrobed fully from whatever he’d been wearing, if anything at all, in the hours before. He was stretched nude upon his back across a padded benchpress, his eyes glazed and his attentions darting from the spa to the ceiling to Jessica saddled atop a thin stretch of bar surface protruding past the dart area and towards the pool.
table. In turn, Jessica’s view shifted from Ralston to the bar she straddled, then to the overhanging glassware secured and suspended upside-down and inches from her now-habitually bobbing head. She would have been nude also if not for the XXX-tra large tank top of Tweety-bird logos shrouding her body down to her upper thighs.

Her gaze returned to her boyfriend across the room. Whew! What a goddamn whirlwind weekend, she awed.

When Ralston chose to party with her, he chose to party, and he did so ten-fold when he had good enough reason to. They had been alone together for seemingly numerous hours in the aftermath of full-fledged indulgent celebration and would not wind down for at least another day. Ralston wanted to be rested and coherent by the time William Behn had absorbed the new novel and summoned his presence for the all-important business luncheon and propositional chit-chat. More green bud would take care of the come-down, and that would start by dawn. That was a promise. Or the intention.

Jessica enjoyed the considerably free lifestyle Ralston had provided for her from the get-go, though emotionally rocky and unstable as it was. But she had witnessed the lives of girlfriends past and present devoted to a wide variety of men who used them for financial crutches and as scapegoats for their abusive temperaments; Ralston could very well have been one of those bastards, but he was secure in his own rights and he didn’t give a shit how Jessica was to a certain degree using him for a financial crutch.

She had grown to care for him and to love him even more so than she had in the beginning, though emotionally rocky and unstable as it was. But she had witnessed the lives of girlfriends past and present devoted to a wide variety of men who used them for financial crutches and as scapegoats for their abusive temperaments; Ralston could very well have been one of those bastards, but he was secure in his own rights and he didn’t give a shit how Jessica was to a certain degree using him for a financial crutch.

She had grown to care for him and to love him even more so than she had in the beginning, and her only two cares in the world boiled down to keeping a safe distance on bad days and through violently moody mind trips, which rarely included her if she wasn’t conveniently around to take the rap, and to the threat of Ralston tiring of her company and getting himself hooked on fresh meat. He did have more than his share of passing escapades. God forbid he ever found out about the three-some-odd men over the past year she’d been callously intimate with to spite him. And two had been close friends of his. No one could ever compare to her Ralston, however, over all. And she found no desire to be this close to anyone else.

She studied him with alert amusement as his erection rose to hardened attention, stretched upwards at an incline towards the ceiling and reaching the space above his naval. He appeared unresponsive to this.

She’d given his new novel another try after their passionate last screw within the steamy shower cubicle to the right of the backyard poolside. She’d ventured upstairs to dry off and to succumb to another white line of instant wakefulness, but she was way too spun to pay reasonable attention.

She’d soon given up and ventured downstairs, to discover him here among the weight sets. She’d fixed herself a drink at the fully stocked private bar, and had climbed upon the bar itself to engage in a fanciful mental sideshow and for deep thought. All the while, she had the nagging tendency to engage herself in crossword puzzles.

And then the phone rang.

The broken silence startled the both of them.

Jessica dropped to her feet from the bar while Ralston watched unmoving, as she scampered to the cordless wall phone near the room’s entrance. She straightened her tank top and answered eagerly.

“Hello?” She waited, listened. “Who is this?”

“Who is it?” Ralston arched himself upwards in a mildly irritable curiosity to study her responses.

Jessica snickered into the receiver and proceeded around the pool table and towards her boyfriend. “Hold on,” she spoke to the caller, “I’m bringing him the phone as I speak, okay, so mellow out. No, I haven’t read much of it, I’ve been...kinda distracted...here he is...”

“Who is it?” repeated Ralston as he accepted the phone and muffled its lower half briefly to privately question her. “They better not burst my happy bubble, better be a broad hot for a threesome, ‘cause I ain’t...hello?”

Happy bubble, Jess mused.

“It’s Billy Behn,” Ralston then said to her, partially less stressed. “You shoulda said...”

Then, Ralston spoke into the phone, “Hey, William, ol’ pal ol’ pal. It’s past the witching hour. What’s up? You couldn’t put my new wonder of modern-fucking-imagination down, could you? Ask me about my latest project, go ahead. It’s about a threesome on a bench press with weed and wire and woody wood like a lubricated Lincoln log to a couple of tinker toy twist-lock holes.”

Ralston then shut up as he began to listen, his feisty sense of humor retreating into the somber shades of undivided attention and then into mounting alarm.

Jessica watched with increasing concern as her boyfriend’s happy bubble burst. He became stern and then defensive as he bellowed into the phone.

“Of course I know my own fucking novel...no, it wasn’t co-authored...it’s about UFO aliens, whaddya think and it’s supposed to fuck with you. It fucked with you, apparently. How do you know that...? Listen, I wrote the goddamn book. You been talkin’ to Erlandson? We’ll discuss that later. Goddammit, Bill, what are you on? All because of a dream, for chrissake? Mellow out, take a valium. Get some sleep and finish the book in daylight hours, when the boogie man can’t get to you. Whaddya say, Uncle Bill, huh? Geeezus.”
Ralston angrily switched off the connection and rather than return the phone to Jessica, he hurled it across the room. It landed intact between two treadmill bars.

“Just like my goddamn uncle,” Ralston breathed bitterly, “a paranoid know-it-all spaz case. They’re all my uncles, those manic depressive assholes who get delusional over their own professions.....they make it big with their dreams, and when they make it, they’re afraid they’re going to lose it all overnight. Now he’s got me thinkin’ it!”

Jessica stood over him, motionless. Ralston was clearly trembling, his hands fidgety as he did not know what to do with them. “What happened?” she asked before she could take the option of not speaking at all.

“I should’ve gone through the book, I should’ve gone through the goddamn book before I delivered it!” Ralston spoke in muffled whispers.

“I thought you had Andrew go through it for you,” Jess said. “Did he slip his own stuff into the manuscript again without your knowledge? You told me he does that....”

Ralston couldn’t look at her. He was upset and vulnerable to his own betraying mouth and prey to the drugs that besieged his system. “Bill said some freaky shit and it didn’t make any sense. You know what? If Andrew rewrote the storyline and wants to take credit for book, I’ll stretch out his scrotum for my living room drapery and use his balls for drawstring ends.”

Andrew rewrote the storyline and wants to take credit for the book. Brilliant top-of-the-head banter, though it made no sense as the actual truth. Andrew’s proven insistence on anonymity had always been Ralston’s guarantee that a potentially disastrous success secret would be taken to their graves. That, and a few deep dark secrets that Ralston kept even from himself, regarding memories of nightmare from more than a decade past. Even the people closest to the both of them had no idea that Ralston never wrote shit.

Andrew was up to something, being that it was his novel after all, and whatever he’d written in it had to be responsible for William’s panic attack.

Ralston rose from the bench and marched past Jess.

“What are you doing?” Jessica said.

“Stay put. It’s time I pay little Andy—man a cameo appearance to his rat hole dive. I’ll whip his ass to settle this, for goddamn sure. If there’s still a problem by the time I’m through with him, it’ll only be in where to hide the body before sunrise.”
26.

An Odd Distortion for Bari

I know who you are....

Much to Bari's knowledge, Melony did know who Andrew was. At least, to an impressive degree she did. Why, she was Maxwell Polito's wife, for one thing, among many other things, which apparently displeased her lately. Bari had given careful attention to all that was said over Andrew's Chinese feast, and there grew the increasing danger that Andrew was going to up and confirm just about every little morsel of information that Melony had on him.

Max Polito had always been to Bari a source of amusement and a nuisance and it would be unlikely for her to admit to Andrew that she admired Max's perseverance. But she always steered Andrew clear of him, whenever she sensed that Max was on the heels of all those strange occurrences involving Andrew and Ralston in the past. Max was aware of way too much information lately more than ever, and had himself witnessed many things incredible to human eyes, but hadn't collected even one shred of substantial proof to open the eyes of the world he was so passionate to convince.

There were many just like him, and they all fell short of convincing the masses due to their inabilities to produce anything concrete. And they all had to deal with it, too.

Bari knew that Max anticipated the day when his message in a bottle would fall from the sky and into his lap, just so he could uncork it and exploit the whole damn thing.

This was a big no-no in Bari's book. She and her kind could not tolerate such exposure to a natural, physical, mortal Earth; human society was simply not yet ready for such a worldwide network premiere from beyond. Though it was well on its way to getting there.

Bari wasn't going to be the one to allow that to happen.

Whatever Mr. Loose-lipped, Bleeding-heart Andrew felt he had to spill his guts over to Melony, it wasn't going to be the truth.

There wasn't time for the truth. Not yet, of course, for the truth never fails to be revealed in time. Neither Bari nor even the Sacred Ones who started this whole Everborn-among-mankind thing at the dawn of civilized man could do anything about that.

Maxwell Polito's wife was treacherous territory and an alarming risk for the role which Bari had red-carpeted for her, to be a mate for her Andrew. But in that also, was she perfect for him, for she would have no trouble in dealing with all those nasty repercussions her Andrew was guaranteed to eventually give. Almost no trouble.

Matching Andrew with Melony was poetically ironic. They had learned to like each other on their own, but since this was Max's marital spouse Bari was dealing with, the whole romantic interlude had to be approached with extreme caution...Chinese feast, the inevitable interview, and all the brow-raising possibilities afterwards.

All in all, it was all meant to be. Anyway.

By the way, while on the subject of things meant to be....

Up to this present time and for a while now, Ban had been acutely sensing an odd distortion from within her being, something instinctive, as tremendous instinct was after all one of her more exuberant qualities.

Time had been somehow unfolding and lately overlapping itself. Time was being manipulated, this present time and over the last day or so...in fact, ever since Andrew had awakened before his typewriter to that curiously disturbing finished manuscript he had labored in a marathon to complete on time for good buddy Ralston. Bari hadn’t exactly forseen this happening, but she was beginning to understand. She’d become increasingly convinced that whatever it was that was happening, that manuscript was the tootsie roll center in the sucker of a grander scale.

Bari was also certain that if indeed it was time being screwed with here, there was a Watcher behind it all. If she could bet, she would bet her copper-toned transparent butt cheeks on it. She was relatively young in this business of being a Watchmaid, possessing less experience than the larger lot of Watchmaids scattered abroad, and her enhanced awareness of the time continuum was nothing more than knowledge at best. Here on Earth, the Watchers were the ones who did the Time Warp again and again with controlled access to its password.

Time was being manipulated from a point in the future, in a benevolent effort it seemed, to obstruct the efforts
of a sinister nature from imposing potentially climactic introductions between the secrets of the ‘born and billions of unsuspecting Homo Sapien folk.

Clearly her Andrew was an instrumental pawn in this, which was all the more reason for Bari to deprive Melony the courtesy of the truth, at least through Andrew’s lips. It was also all the more reason to jettison Andrew from this mayhem, and quickly, into the next chapter of existence, into the next life. Before the creature of the Magdalene and her dreg Simon BoLeve could get to him.

Before the evening began, Bari had decided to leave things concerning the interview up to Andrew, with Bari on her guard to regulate things if they got too hairy. She’d hoped that Andrew would give Melony the pre-rehearsed verbal view-master view of the answers Melony sought, developed for just such an occasion.

Bari’s good old-fashioned bathroom chat with Andrew didn’t seem to go over well. He failed contemptibly to understand her insistence to waste Mel’s time with bullshit; he thought Mel was worth more than that, and it made no sense that Bari should pair him and Mel together and expect him to lie to her after all.

And after Mel had been so honest with him about herself.

When Andrew reseated himself at the kitchen table, he was reserved, yet refreshingly guarded, obviously testing the waters for the absolute surety that his own climactic introductions to the tales of his young-man life wouldn’t explode in his face.

Just as introductions to tales this climactic, could oh so easily do.

He was succumbing more to his own honesty. Melony was drawing him in.

She began with the long ago climactic incident at the school playground, when Andrew first met Ralston.

And then she rose, stepped into the living room, only to return with a microcassette recorder which she set down upon the table, play/record buttons depressed and readied with red indicator light beaming.

That was enough to ruin things personally for Andrew, then and there.

Bari had been right again, as always.

And Andrew, regretfully, decided to do what he did best:
The obscure configuration of a slender shadow stood still before Andrew Erlandson’s bathroom mirror. It was confoundingly obscure, to Melony, as it would be to anybody after downing over two medium-sized bottles of E&J brandy with a new drinking buddy.

*Drinking buddy.*

She couldn’t believe she’d been allowing herself to drink. Like this and during an occasion such as this one, when her intentions behind the evening’s date were to remain inquisitive and aware and unbiased. For that matter, she’d gotten rather sloshed at *The Crow Job* Friday night, when she was first personally introduced into all of this, under the assumption that Andrew Erlandson was an alien.

Yet, apparently, Andrew wasn’t an alien after all.

Did that make it okay to be drinking?

The things Andrew had told her were nothing like she’d anticipated. They were neither incredible or fantastic, at least compared to the norm of earthly things, and they didn’t reveal any ultimate hidden secrets hidden beneath the guise of humankind’s superficial awareness. They brought Melony down to Earth with a mixture of disappointment and relief but with a lingering skepticism somehow. Andrew had stripped himself of the fanciful awe surrounding his nonhuman mysteries, made himself into an average guy with a past of outlandish but explainable circumstances, and lowered her professional expectations just enough to make him far more accessible to her romantic curiosities. It was a dangerous and frightening concoction, but so was brandy and coke.

Somehow, though, what Andrew had told her didn’t entirely ring true. But perhaps this was due to the utter let-down of how he was supposed to have been otherworldly and all.

She could hear Andrew out in the kitchen. He was talking to himself again.

Melony dowsed her face with cold water over the bathroom sink, resurfacing to meet her own glare within the wall mirror in front of her. She would go to great lengths to sober up about now, if only she could think of how to go about it. Anything for a comfortable frame of mind.

A little while before, *anything* could have happened.

Now, *anything* of a different sort could happen still, anything more down to Earth than she’d feared.

She wasn’t afraid anymore of that *anything,* but as she gave her face one last tidal wave splash of water, she found herself fearing all over again, fearing that certain *anything of a different sort,* and what it could ever be.

***

Melony had remained quiet and studious throughout the greater portion of the time Andrew shared with her the sugar-coated and carefully condensed tales of his life’s extraordinary highlights. He told her of the father he never knew and of the way he knew *about* him. Of his mother waiting in excess of several years, before she was engaged to be remarried to an inevitable stepfather for Andrew, after the pain of unexplained loss drifted into a celibate dormancy until the day arrived for her to accept the fact that her husband would never resurface from beyond stagnant yesteryear.

Andrew told Melony of an imaginary friend named Bari, and how Bari would spend time with him whenever he needed her to be there, whenever he closed his eyes and wished really hard for her to appear to him when he was all alone. No one ever saw Bari but him, regardless of the numerous episodes of his attempting to prove her existence.

No one ever saw, that is to say, but those unfortunate ones who blatantly threatened bodily harm to Andrew. And in the aftermath of such instances, nobody believed what Andrew’s assailants saw, anyway. And those were just *human* threats.
This most interesting friend had supposedly protected Andrew from threats of another nature also; by Andrew’s testimony, one had to assume that for every imaginary friend there were evidently imaginary enemies.

He slyly avoided giving Melony the courtesy of specifics. He bore a methodical rationality to his accounts, which swayed Melony towards believing that Bari existed solely within the mind of a fatherless child withdrawn into an irrational Walter Mitty way of daydream living. It distracted her from all those theoretical versions of the truth that Max had compiled so convincingly for so long. She had slowly become unaware of forsaking even the more concrete examples of Andrew’s alleged nonhuman involvements. Whenever he made mention of an elusive twin, for example, whose existence could never be confirmed nor denied for the longest time, not even by Andrew’s own mother, Melony began to suspect that the elusive twin he spoke of was Simon BoLeve. Simon’s enigmatic origins and history were scattered throughout Max’s research but always remained inconclusive. It was by accident that Max even learned of his name to begin with and death had always surrounded him.

Certainly the consideration of Simon’s dark deeds and manipulations was more sound by far than any conjured depictions of ghost—like women beasts and aliens.

Weren’t they?

Max claimed to know for sure, beyond the shadow of a doubt. And he held all the convincing data to back him up. Could he be wrong? If he was, he was wrong despicably. And because of him, Melony was wrong despicably, too.

It made Melony wonder what Matt McGregor actually saw of Nigel’s death as a boy so long ago, an event which Max’s pursuits were clearly indebted to, indeed.

It made her wonder about a great many things.

It also made it all the more easier to distance herself from the husband who dispirited her so.

Enough was shared by Andrew to erase Melony’s fears of the otherworldly unknown and to replace them with an unknown of a different kind...the sort of unknown, which attaches itself like a parasitic leech to the evening of a first date in the home of a man Melony increasingly found herself wanting.

Wanting?

Yes, it was okay to admit that she wanted him by the conclusion of their conversation, just as long as she could impose most of the blame upon the brandy and nothing or no one else.

Anything to smother the guilt, which such feelings often tended to resurrect, burdening any married woman upon the verge of infidelity.

***

Andrew had taken Melony’s bathroom break as his cue to begin to clear the table, and Bari appeared to him fully as soon as it was safe. He couldn’t believe how close to the truth Melony and her husband’s findings actually were about him, and he couldn’t believe how dishonest he was in defending that truth behind preplanned lies and half-truths. He had done very well with the bullshit and Bari commended him on a bullshit job well done. Though she didn’t put it that way, Bari understood his feelings and attempted to console him by reminding him of the implications of telling Mel the truth...of how the truth could lead into a potentially harmful new frame of mind for Melony, and how it could upset Andrew’s anonymity in society, which Bari insisted was a necessity kept sacred.

Bari was quite the bullshit artist herself, wasn’t she? Andrew truly wished he could have told Mel everything, for Andrew himself never totally understood what his life was all about. Bari had been forever elusive towards the more painfully enlightening subjects, the specific subjects, which would ultimately disclose to Andrew the nature of who or what he was.

And it would have been nice to gather insight from an outside observer.

Bari disappeared again, leaving Andrew to his dishes and frustrations and the kitchen sink.

Andrew didn’t know it yet, but the truth was about to reveal itself fully for the first time soon, very soon. And to more than just Andrew.

***

Melony emerged from the bathroom to find Andrew at the kitchen sink washing the dinner dishes. He appeared to be tilting at an awkward angle to the left, but then she realized that it was in fact she herself that was leaning a little too much over to one side. She didn’t say a thing. At first. Except a raspy achem to clear her throat.

Andrew turned and saw her, his hands immersed in water and Dove dishwashing liquid and a sponge.
“Hi,” he said to her, then, continued with his preoccupation.

Melony approached him in a mismanaged stride and met him at the kitchen counter, on the way, retrieving the microcassette recorder she’d absently left, since the course of the interview, still recording upon the table surface. She depressed its tiny black flip button, then, lazily brought it into the living room as Andrew turned off the kitchen faucet and dried his hands, abandoning the dinner dishes to soak as he followed after her.

Reaching into her purse on the black leather recliner she exchanged the recorder for her Nikkon. Andrew halted momentarily as she raised the camera, situated the flash, and snapped his photograph.

Andrew stood back and flinched from the bright light.

Melony took a few snapshots of his living room, turning this way and that. She was such the journalist, but then again her imposing was rather rude. It brought Andrew back to why he lied to her in the first place.

He studied her for a moment, edgy and uncomfortable with this. He slumped against the archway between the kitchen and the living room, wiped his hands free of dish soap and scratched the back of his neck. “So...um...you know, my home is not a tourist attraction,” he said to her calmly. Irritability was, with few exceptions, the closest Andrew had ever been able to come to anger or outrage. He was simply much too passive. “I got the feeling that your recording the interview and all was enough, Mel. I can see it all now: your husband’s going to scrutinize those pictures and discredit everything I’ve told you because of my father’s movie poster. And you know, I have way too many Playboys for an Earthling....”

Melony stopped and turned to face him, so suddenly apologetic that it was almost enough to discredit her. “I’m sorry, Andrew, I didn’t mean to take advantage. Oh, God this is difficult, because I still have an obligation to my husband for tonight. I’m ashamed of it, but then again my imposing was rather rude. It brought Andrew back to why he lied to her in the first place.

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“From what you’ve told me, it is his life’s work,” Andrew replied, “and it’s okay, I guess. I still have a hard time swallowing why anyone would be obsessed with my life like that, but I understand....”

I understand a lot more than you know, he found himself thinking.

Mel was approaching him casually, arriving directly before him, her gaze inches away from his, too close for comfort, unexpectedly and enough to make him nervous. Her eyes looked into his, but it was difficult for Andrew to read her. Then she blinked once, twice, and he began to notice how much her head was tilting further and further backwards until she caught herself and regained her footing before she could stumble on her ass

“Are you all right?” Andrew stepped forward, reached out in effort to assist her lest she managed to successfully fall the next time. She was obviously way more intoxicated than he’d first suspected. It was comical, in a way and Andrew was at once amused and concerned. “Want to sit for awhile, watch a movie? Want any aspirin?”

“You got me drunk....” She couldn’t believe she said that, it simply came out that way.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to....”

“It’s not your fault, I just don’t know how to handle you.” She couldn’t believe she said that, either. And she hoped he didn’t understand. It was time to gather her senses together and go, get. Before something serious happened. But as soon as she knew it, she toppled over to him. Well, it wasn’t exactly toppled, and she was certainly sure she didn’t want to do it, that it must’ve been because she was drunk, but somehow the, next moment she found herself in his arms.

And she was still gripping her Nikkon.

That brought her back to reality, the realization of how she better not drop that camera. A silly excuse to distract oneself, but nevertheless, it worked.

More than a little embarrassed, she lifted herself from her view atop Andrew’s shoulder only to discover the delightful embarrassment she beheld from within his own eyes as she faced him yet again, yet again merely inches away. Before he felt safe to release her, she detected that he was trembling. She’d always found this sort of vulnerability attractive in a man. It was an honest reaction to the suggestions of intimacy, it showed that true feelings stirred from within, for when has anyone ever heard of a man who purposely trembled in the arms of a woman to impress her?

On second thought, maybe it was she who was doing the trembling.

Remember your Nikkon, Mel. Politely put it in your purse, compose yourself, bid him farewell, and leave.

Andrew prepared himself for a kiss, for they together were in the position to do so, their predicament calling for it, the sudden closeness, the mutual attraction, the unspoken fascination for one another, and in downright spiteful defiance of the unwonted conditions of how all this came to be. Though from the unexpected immediacy of it all, he’d be damned if he was to be the first to act upon it. And he’d be damned to be the one to take advantage.

Just in case he was reading her wrong.
He had no desire to be the one to dare and he did not want to be the one to be said ‘no’ to if he did dare.
He felt himself trembling.
And he was embarrassed and nervous and....
Melony withdrew, took a deep breath to calm herself, stood reserved upon her feet, and in a millisecond it was as though nothing between them had happened at all. She went for her purse upon the black leather recliner and inserted her camera inside. She lifted her purse, readying to bid Andrew farewell.
“You should really stay for just a little while longer, let me fix you some coffee. You shouldn’t go like this. You don’t have to up and go right away...Mel...,” Andrew told her, concerned, though self-conscious of his pleas.
Melony set her purse down upon the recliner and sighed, indecisive if but for the moment. Then she lifted her purse once again, shouldering it. This time, Andrew sighed.
“It’s getting late, I’m sorry,” Melony told him, summoning the sort of blind determination the intoxicated often get when they truly want to ditch the scene but know damn well it’s inadvisable to drive. And part of her didn’t want to ditch the scene, anyway. “I’m fine, really. And I’ll be seeing you again. Soon. I promise. Thank you for a wonderful evening, Andrew. You were very understanding.”
“Didn’t you just tell me that I got you drunk? Come on, stay just a half hour, at least for some coffee....” Andrew was pleading again, and aware of this as he was suddenly, he began to adjust to the idea that he might as well let her go. Though he sincerely didn’t want to. “Oh, all right. I’m just....”
She was suddenly kissing him.
I’m just...confused..., Andrew was about to say, but Melony cut him off by lunging forward, and at first he prepared to catch her for fear she was falling out of drunkenness.
But instead she kissed him. Upon his lips and fully, savoring the eternity she’d created of it in a moment’s time, feeding the unspoken desire for passion, all the while fueling it by dismissing the dangers of doing so.
How she longed to dismiss those dangers still and keep kissing him.
She let go of him, and he appeared to her as though he hadn’t noticed that he had been held by her at all, just kissed by her; his face was arched forward, his eyes shut...he presented the appearance of being enraptured, until his eyes flickered wide like window shutters snapped open and he did it so convincingly that it was almost not comical.
She backed away from him and observed him curiously, and the fact that she’d actually made the move to kiss him did not overwhelm her until she turned for the front door.
Then she stopped in her tracks. She turned back to him, looked at him bashfully, and after a brief stumble backwards with a reverse recovery afterwards found herself in his arms again.
They both looked at each other in encumbered disbelief.
“I guess you should make me some coffee,” Melony said.
28.

Climactic Introductions

There was an acutely adolescent charm about the way Andrew and Melony initiated sex. They both would be the type who’d insist to each other later that they hadn’t planned on doing that, both knowing full well that they had longed for it in the back of their minds all along.

Little did they know that there was a certain degree of influence involved, also, Bari style.

Yet, as Bari would say, everything was all meant to be.

At one point, Andrew and Melony were together on the living room carpet, lying face to face with the sides of their elevated heads cradled into their palms in attention to the card game of UNO they played between them.

At another point, Melony rose for the kitchen to refill their glasses with just a little more brandy with a cranapple juice chaser, and to telephone her husband with an I’ll be staying later than I expected message for his answering machine and ending with an everything’s going, remarkably fine, I can’t wait ’til I fill you in salutation.

At a further point, one of them commented jokingly to the other about an offhanded reference to kissing, the other slow to get the point. When the point was bashfully realized, Melony made the bold initiative to scoot her body across the sea of UNO cards and to embrace the young man on the other side...

...and then one thing led to another....

Later on, Melony would never admit to have been the instigator of this; she would claim listlessly that she really didn’t know who was.

Melony never would have done any of this if she suspected Andrew was still, indeed, an alien.

***

Not very long after midnight, Andrew lay beside Melony beneath the covers of his bed. They remained nude, the two of them, and Andrew could still feel the warmth of her sleek and flawless skin, still feel the remnants of her own perspiration adhering to his own as she clung to him, as they sweated even despite the chill of the opened bedroom window beyond the security of the bed’s comforter. Andrew was tempted to shut that window --Mel had opened it for fresh air-- but he dared not disturb the beauty at rest within his arms nor break away from the sweet bliss of having her there.

Stunningly sweet bliss.

Andrew was more than astonished at how events had led up to this, and so speedily. He’d been telling himself that Melony had not been totally influenced by Bari when she’d gone for him the way she did. He wanted to believe that Mel would’ve gone for him out of her own conscious will with or without a Watchmaid whispering in her ear. He was positive this was the case, that Mel had truly wanted him regardless. What disturbed him knowing Bari’s ways and all, was that he didn’t really know how much Bari had influenced Mel. Such speculation could pave a roadway into scary territory, for Andrew was beginning to truly care for her, enough perhaps to inevitably love her.

He was pathetically susceptible to love, for he had easily fallen for each of the handful of bimbos that ultimately got him laid courtesy of Ralston and Ralston’s happenin’ parties. And he’d been easily hurt with every promising outlet for love all his life just the same. Bari had told him that he always expected too much too soon from a woman.

Well - he and Melony were now in the too much too soon category, and he never expected that!

Andrew was afraid of what to make of it all.

But his body had loved every minute of it.

(And--it completely slipped his mind that Bari could’ve been watching him, an annoyance to any given past sexual encounter, save for this one. An odd reflection. Hmmm...)

As he lay with her, her legs intertwined with his, her thigh snuggled against his crotch, he was becoming aware that he was getting his second wind of arousal. He was becoming aroused by this, and by the thoughts of what it was like to undress her and to feel her, to slide his hands down her belly and into her panties to discover how wet she was and to cherish his hand there, to indulge in her flesh. He recalled how they first lay across his bed and of how
she undressed him, how she slid his pants from his ankles and worked her way upwards to grasp him, took him into her mouth and ultimately inside her as she straddled him and he held the reality of her touch within his hands.

His desire for her rekindled until its fuse was snipped short by one simple, terminal thought: Bari’s been probably watching him.

Several minutes later, Melony stirred and arose and shut the bedroom window herself. Andrew winked his eyes open and remained relaxed and still as he observed and admired her nude silhouette in the curtained moonlight. She then looked upon him and he shut his eyes just enough to see her through a blurry forest of eyelashes. He regarded her this way while she stretched her arms out and arched her body backwards with an accompanying yawn. She afterwards slumped forward and over Andrew’s desk, until she was scrutinizing the tops of the piles of paperwork and manuscript drafts and the titles of the reference books above.

And then she lost interest and exited the room.

Andrew shut his eyes and repositioned his body comfortably, though his ears were intent on keeping a close listen to any hint of what Melony was up to.

***

Melony was thinking of going home.

Politely, of course.

But she had to go home some time, and she was beginning to experience the do-this-don’t-do-that thing, as though her own devil likeness and her own angel likeness were teetering upon each of her shoulders and debating persistently about what she should do. This was not the time to be plagued by responsibility and marital loyalty, it was a wee bit late for that, but it rendered her torn between guilt and lingering passion.

Yes, perhaps, she should be heading home about now.

Or very, very soon.

She was aware that Andrew might’ve been watching her, but she hoped not, for she would much rather leave him undisturbed and with the courteous favor of a letter rather than having him witness her departure. The attraction she felt for him had been a prelude to feelings, and now that all was said and done, though done more than said, she wanted nothing more than to place a harness on the evening and contain it for a sober review later. Somehow, she wasn’t sure he’d understand, what with her journalistic intentions and all, and how they clearly confused him.

She could rightfully claim to have sobered up by now, and that was a relief.

She crept languidly down the hallway and out into the living room, into the flickering light of the MTV upon the muted projection television, abandoned earlier for her and Andrew’s climactic bedroom excursion.

Her clothes lay in a dispersed heap amongst UNO cards near the sofa at the far wall, but her purse remained upon the black leather recliner and she went for that first.

She knelt down before it and slid it yawning open on its side, and fumbled through it for a notepad and a pen and a breath mint. She recovered one of ten pens within the purse outright, removed her Nikkon and an address book and a pager until her microcassette recorder and a few more pens avalanched down her knees to the carpet. Rather than tending to them, she checked her pager for pages, snickering once in recalling how Max disliked pagers. There were no pages. Then she proceeded to gather her items from the carpet.

When she picked up the microcassette recorder, she gazed at it.

She wasn’t going to leave yet, not that second, she was in no hurry and if Andrew came forth from the hallway before she was fully dressed...then fine. She would gather up the UNO cards, compose for Andrew that letter unless he in fact come out to her, but before all that, she thought, let’s hear a concluding portion of that interview. Just to hear it, just in retrospect.

But when she lowered the volume control, pressed the rewind and waited, depressed the rewind and pressed play, she took it for granted that the pre-recorded words she heard Andrew say were words that she couldn’t recollect because she’d been drinking.

Andrew’s voice on the recorder said, rather softly,

“(something muffled, then)...up with her, so what could make me think that you’re right? You always think you’re right, that you’re perfect, don’t you? (Then, the clatter-clank of dishes being washed, followed by a pause of silence.) I’m gonna tell her whatever I want to tell her. You knew I would. (Pause.) So why have you allowed this to go so far?”

And then, another voice responded. It was a female voice, but Melony instantly recognized that it was a voice not her own. It was different. It vibrated somehow unnaturally, like a dominant soprano synthesized by a rock band’s keyboard to sound more sexy.

And the voice that followed said, “I always think I’m right, but on your behalf. And haven’t I always proven to
steer you course true? I don’t always know what I’m doing, but I always know what you’re doing...so I have ample
time to advise you about things well before you know they’re happening.”

Then, Andrew’s voice: “I’m telling you, Bari...I honestly think I should tell her the truth....”

Then, the other voice: “Andrew...tell her anything but that, for now.”

And then silence, until the familiar sounds of Melony emerging from the bathroom were cut short by a sharp

**click**!

There was nothing left recorded but a vacuous hissing noise...not to mention Melony’s comprehension...and

utter disbelief.

Was Andrew having a discussion not with himself but with this confessed “imaginary childhood friend” he
called Bari?

In the recording, he even called her Bari.

And Bari was talking back...?

She was not stupid.

She was merely profoundly stunned.

So much so that she couldn’t believe it.

Maybe she was tripping.

*Let’s rewind that sucker and hear it again....*

***

There came a pounding at Andrew’s front door, enough to somersault Melony’s heartbeat...

...and the prompt rattle-rattle of keys and doorknob....

***

The door flung open and smacked against the wall to the left of it.

*Thud!*

It was not Ralston’s intention to burst open the door so harshly...it was not simply a result of his temper, though it added considerable effect to his situation, but it was due to his spun-out state of mind; when one is as spun-out as he, everything is amplified even in strength, especially when the one spun-out is desperate. It’s that way all around.

And he burst into Andrew’s apartment.

Melony shrieked in response, and withered backwards behind the black recliner before she could think of
covering her breasts with her arms.

As soon as she was able to acquire a mental focus on Ralston, she recognized who he was...she’d grown
accustomed to Ralston Cooper’s face a great deal longer than she’d become used to Andrew’s.

He looked like a highlighted cast member of an Irwin Allen disaster film, throwing open the door and standing there all beaten and worn. He wore a raggedy gray t-shirt, which appeared shredded at the waist and faded jean shorts and tennis shoes.

He cried out, “*Son of a bitch! Where the fuck are you, Andy-man, and what are you doing to my reputation!!??*”

Melony was the unfortunate first and only prospect for Ralston to verbally assail as soon as his blazen eyes
surveyed the room and caught sight of her. He swung loose the spare key set in his hands into the direction of Mel’s
mound of clothes. Though infuriated as he was, and as panic-stricken as Melony was, Mel was able to detect a faint
disclosure of amusement in his expression, telling her that he not only suddenly acknowledged who she was ---the
girl who danced with Andrew at *The Crow Job* the other night--- but that she was naked.

“You fucking him?” he immediately accused her. Just as immediately afterward, he lapsed into what only could
be described as a mock convulsion before he continued. ‘*Of course you’re fucking him. I mean, what does it look
like? I mean, I’m not barging in here because I’m a jealous lover, if that’s what you’re thinking. Listen...has he told
you about me?! Did he show you his book, his cock, book? Has he shown you book? Or has he told you about me,
that rat bastard....??!!!***

Melony was speechless, but her alertness became far less stunned. All she could do was cower and curl herself
up to shield her embarrassing nakedness. She expected and hoped for Andrew to appear from the hallway any
minute and as she looked in that direction, he did.

He was wearing nothing but his chessboard boxers and his dick was peeking out the fly.

The moment Ralston saw him, Ralston went for him. “You rat bastard!!!”

But instead, Ralston altered his course and went for a quarter of a row of hardbound books inside the oak
bookcase to Andrew’s left, grasped them firmly and removed them, and jettisoned them into Meat Loaf’s face on the projection TV.

Andrew gazed upon Ralston in extreme perplexity. “Ralston...Ralston, what the hell are you doing??” He then shot a questioning glance at Melony, who replied to his glance with a look of distracted humility and puzzlement.

Ralston gave Andrew his anxious reply. “I wanna know what the hell you’re doing! What is this shit, a crafty way of delivering your own vindictive message to my world of fans? We had a deal! William called me, and he sounded like he wanted to kill you himself when he was telling me all about what you said in this....this ‘Everborn’ novel of yours!”

“But...but Ralston,” Andrew said defensively with a note of irritated sarcasm, “don’t you mean ‘that ever-born novel of yours’?”

Andrew instantly wondered what Ralston had meant by ever-born novel. His time-induced ignorance as to what novel he finished for Ralston a few days ago resulted in nothing short of confusion for Andy. To him, Ralston was trapped in a state of mortal hysteria to have hopped in his car for a quick visit like this, drug-related without a doubt at all, and Ralston’s accusations and actions frightened Andrew. And by looking at poor Melony, the timing for such a display angered him.

Andrew’s reply pissed Ralston off enough to prove he was purely raging mad, enough to send Ralston lunging for Andrew’s collar bone. The impact sent both of them in a turbulent jolt into the hallway, smacking Andrew’s back and backside against the half-opened bathroom door and then into the bathroom, both stumbling and falling over the throw rug on the tile floor inside.

Andrew crashed down upon his back, Ralston on top of him and now gripping Andrew’s neck.

Andrew began to fight Ralston off, arms kicking and legs flailing. He could not protest vocally however he tried, did not notice Melony’s unclothed figure rising up in the distant living room beyond the view over Ralston’s shoulders to gaze upon the two in helpless contemplation.

Ralston shouted and swore and cursed, but before he could summon any reasonably audible phrase, Bari summoned herself above them.

Andrew never figured the night would go this way; in Ralston’s violent disregard for explaining himself and for talking things over, he had this one coming.

Melony wasn’t supposed to have had this one coming, however...the effort had been put out to redirect her from it.

But it happened.

Bari saw fit to defend Andrew.

***

From Melony’s viewpoint, the entire scene within the bathroom began to blur. It wasn’t the alcohol this time. Something celestial and massive took shape behind Ralston too rapidly to appear real, though its physical form when it materialized demanded authentic reality.

The next moment found Ralston hurling backwards into the air so quickly his shoes missed the carpeting below by over a foot of space, so fast Melony was barely able to dodge his ragdoll body. Ralston’s left thigh connected with an arm of the leather recliner with a fwop, causing him to double rearward further and to plop ass-first into the recliner’s lap. The impact rolled his ass from the recliner and dumped him onto the carpet at Melony’s retreating feet. He struggled to twist his body upwards for a view of his assailant, witlessly expecting the possessor of such physical force to be Andrew’s naked playmate.

He blinked his rabid eyes into a vision of dillusional terror.

Melony was the first to behold the fantastic being which emerged from the bathroom meticulously to take an assessment of the circumstances, obtaining a fixed stance and facing the scene from the hallway entrance.

Melony beheld the being as though she herself was a defenseless animal placed eye to eye with life’s climactic image of a hypnotic snake, until she found herself drawn into its enrapturing beauty. The subsequent second found her with just enough ease to take a perspective observance.

The being at the hallway entrance was a perfect female humanoid from the waist up. It was adorned with flawless coppery-gold skin which changed a shade or two in color as it reflected images when it moved. It was crowned with a thick black flow of waist-length hair, richly black, far more than Melony’s own, and its hair fell down the sleek slope of its back and draped across perfectly formed and firm adult breasts and dark-toned nipples, calling forth to Melony’s mind an eerily distorted recollection of the golden girl body in Goldfinger. She bore no eyebrows. Her eyes and more precisely her pupils were like orange black-hole whirlpools, aglow with the piercing alertness of an owl. Its expression was that of sober intent and displeasure, but her ambiance emitted a purposeful
serenity which seemed to melt away any dangers of harm.

At least harm towards Mel. Mel completely forgot she herself was naked there, for a short while.
Mel completely forgot everything else also, for a shorter while.
The being’s lower section disintegrated from the waist down into a misty torrent of gaseous translucent streams which altered in its degree of turbulence as the being drifted into the room.

This is Bari, Melony had no chance to epitomize. Max had been right the entire time. The interview with Andrew had been nothing but a cover-up of lies.

Now that the truth was apparent before her, she wanted to get the hell out of there and re-evaluate her experience. If she could only move to do so.

Bari made her way past Mel and towards Ralston, who slid away from Bari and toward the door in a feeble attempt to escape further contact with her. His t-shirt clung to his shaken form as it readily absorbed his sweat; one hand raised against the sight of Bari fluttered uncontrollably.

Andrew re-appeared at the hallway entrance and held his place there, choosing to remain out of Bari’s way. He then shot his gaze at Melony, who scurried past him as soon as she was well clear of Bari. Ralston and Bari were drifting nearer towards the yawning front door.

Andrew wasn’t sure if Mel at least noticed him standing there, but she ignored him and did not give any impression that she noticed him at all. She could not keep her eyes off Bari...and if she could, she circled in on the foot of the sofa and on the spot where she’d left her clothes. But when she did, she ended up squating motionless with her awed attentions immersed into Bari all over again.

Andrew was the gong in the Gong Show of astonishment from his own standpoint of the situation, from the unforeseen guest appearance of a raging Ralston to the spotlight on Bari for Mel. He wasn’t concerned with Ralston’s reaction towards Bari; Ralston’s seen Bari a few inevitable times before.

He just never allowed himself to believe in her.

She saved Ralston’s life once. And Ralston never even knew it.
The arch of the door frame connected with Ralston’s right shoulder blade, cutting short his convulsive retreat from Bari as he slid towards the outside second story walkway. Bari lunged forward and gripped the sides of his chest and hoisted him up from the carpet, and tossed him across the arm of the couch and shut the front door.

“Don’t be so dramatic over me, you laughable vermin,” Bari told Ralston, not so much angrily but with a calm effectiveness, which communicated plainly. “You know full well not to mess with my boy! Look at you, all wretched and drugged-out and miserable. If you only knew your own potential, and who you are...besides, the deal’s still on with the books. There’s just...something happening lately beyond my control. Mine or Andrew’s. He’s not responsible. Go, now....”

Bari backed away and Ralston scrambled to his feet. He didn’t glance at Andrew, or Melony, nor even Bari herself, as he charged the front door, opened it, and fled. He left the door hanging wide open and Bari floated over to it and shut it again.

Then she turned to Melony. “And you,” Bari said to her next in the same manner, “Everything you thought real, as it turns out, isn’t it now? So be it, deal with it. But you have another urgent matter to deal with: your husband. Like it or not, your life has embarked on a new and very different course. Go, deal with your husband....”

Bari reverted into the hallway, causing Andrew to revert even further towards his bedroom. He wanted to bid Mel a heartfelt goodbye, but Bari’s purposeful obstruction suggested it was best for him not to and he did not contest it.

Melony’s weak and debilitating faculties made it quite a chore for her to hurriedly pull her jeans up her legs and gather her remaining clothing to her naked breasts, but she certainly gathered the courage to fetch her fallen microcassette recorder before she snatched her purse and lingering belongings and fled in turn. Likewise as Ralston, she left the door hanging wide open.

Bari hovered from the hallway and moved out into the living room to shut the door again and disappeared, leaving Andrew to emerge alone and remorseful again from the hallway entrance.

He retired soon afterwards with not a word spoken in an effort to re-summon Bari. It all had overwhelmed him, the night and the events it contained. He would discuss the entire catastrophe when Bari saw fit to appear and discuss it, and it probably wouldn’t happen any other way.

He retired in thought.
He wondered why, with Bari’s prophetic foresight and all, did she convince him to lie to Melony though the truth was destined to meet Mel head-on just as soon?
He also thought about what Bari had meant when she spoke to Mel of dealing with her husband, how Bari had sent her away on that note.
It worried Andrew.
And he hoped, though he doubted, that things would be all right.
When sleep did come upon him, many dark dreams arose from his soul to meet him there, to have their ways with him until morning.
Many dark dreams....
29.

A New Recruit for the Magdalene

It happened in the rear alley of a corner retail complex in a seedy sliver of Lawndale.
It happened there, but it began within the attic of The Church On The Rock, when the silvery beast claimed not only Maxwell Polito’s body but took a lease on his own soul.

And what a soul it was.

To the human soul, death had regularly proven to be no big deal at all once one dies, regardless of the manner of death. It’s always curiously peaceful, at least at first, when the shock of emerging into a new and wondrous dimension pacifies it so. To bid farewell to the physical chemistries of the brain becomes quite automatic, just as automatic as one greets the brain and all the workings and workings of its flesh when one is born.

When your soul is separated from your body, you can no longer think with your brain, and the essence left over that is really you is all at once sexless and disoriented and profoundly mystified at what you suddenly face.

And what you face is not merely a great beyond, but a great eternity. When you die, you not only forget the time, but you forget time entirely. Time is informational data stored within a living brain, and since there no living brain, time becomes boundless and the sole remnants of what was the human you turns into feelings of what was.

There was no time for what was with Max. When he died, and he beheld his surroundings with the eyes of a spirit followed by a peculiarly buoyant sensation, the silvery beast was there to greet him.

He knew instinctively that the silvery beast wasn’t an angel, for when one dies, the concepts of angels and demons hold no meaning; those are concepts used to relate to thinking humans. What Max could feel were the feelings of good and evil.

This was evil.

He felt the evil when the silvery beast touched him, drew his soul back into his dead and bloodied physical remains and held him at bay there.

His soul imprisoned again in that body, the beast stole his body out into the drizzling rain and a great beyond the likes of which no one that was human or once human had rarely known.

Except, perhaps, someone who was once human like the little boy Nigel, who against his will got Max Polito into this entire mess in the first place.

***

The late night sky was spackled with various shades of grey cloud, which upon the horizon turned a sooty black. Below, in the retail complex’s rear alleyway and concealed within the beige brick walls of a dumpster, the silvery beast concluded the laborious process of resurrecting Max’s body to suit her imperative will.

It was a bitch to steal away Max’s human remains this far from the attic of the holy place, though the alley was only two blocks from the church. If the silvery beast was human herself, the whole thing would’ve been dramatically easier; she could’ve taken it farther in the trunk of a stolen vehicle of her choosing...hell, she could’ve placed it in the shopping cart she’d spotted upon a sidewalk and bound it inside a soiled sleeping bag and newspapers and carted it many more blocks away like one of those wretched church-going Jesus-freak homeless degenerates at The Rock.

But the silvery beast wasn’t the human being that she once was a few centuries ago, wasn’t even the Watchmaid she’d become in that time of distant past.

She was a Magdalene.

And being a Magdalene wasn’t easy.

Being a Watchmaid hadn’t been easy either, with all its instinctive and inhibiting rules, but it was a hell of a lot easier than what she’d been forced to put up with for the last four hundred year or so.

And being human in comparison was a piece of cake.

That was a fleeting memory.
There was certainly something to be said about an existence as a vulnerable mortal; no fantastic marvel that every being the silvery beast had encountered throughout those numerous years wanted to be one, to either be one again or to know what’s like to be one if they’d never been before. What remained of the human the silvery beast stole away was about to feel that way too, though she had made damn sure he would remember as little of his life as possible. The less he remembered, all the better for her.

He had experienced his own death, which was enough in itself to make him forget what he was. It was her mission to keep him lodged in that forgetfulness.

She’d succeeded with Nigel in that way, for a good portion of his undead service to her.

Pity Simon BoLeve had finally managed to lay that one to ultimate rest. For this reason, the silvery beast required a new recruit.

This one would serve her well, even better, far better than a little boy ever could. The silvery beast would make sure of that.

Little Nigel’s death had been a necessary convenience for his resurrection to do her bidding, but the need for him recently expired and Simon’s intervention, was timely in the matter of expiring the boy-thing’s life fully, at least what was left of it. Which was no great loss. The time was ripe for a fresh resurrection, and the required circumstances had made it possible for the silvery beast to bring a new undead man-thing into the world.

Reawakened, Max would be a half-breed essence of herself, combined with a few of her special attributes and a few of what was once his own.

Indeed, the man-thing would serve a far greater purpose than Nigel did.

There was a storm brewing upon the horizon. The Watchmaids of the world were beginning to sense its advent and likewise the world’s banished Magdalene.

The time for the vengeance of all Magdalene was at hand.

And so was the time to kill an Everborn and to deal with its detestable Watchmaid as well.

The resurrected man-thing would prove vital in its assisting role and in turn, so would Simon BoLeve.

Max Polito had beheld a bright light and turned towards it, almost immediately after his experience of what it was like to die. But a powerful force restrained him, the church attic swirling into a blurry vision of wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling to his own bloodied corpse to an utterly woeful Matt McGregor, to dusty furniture, to his own bloodied corpse again, and, lastly, to the silvery beast who stole his body away.

He looked upon the beast once more, upon its flowing blue-black hair and into her widened orange eyes.

And the beast spoke to him in a grisly whisper, which could have been feminine, could have been eerily soothing, could have been the unnatural substance of the primordial childhood fear of the darkness beyond the bedroom nightlight, “I am Salvatia. Welcome to my will.”

The first and foremost inkling the Max-thing had known afterwards, for perhaps the remnants of Max at any rate, was the obsessive desire for a cigarette.

And Salvatia was determined to oblige him.

Anything for her precious newborn.
INTERLUDE:

Max & The Watcher—

A RETURN TO THE MOTEL UNTOLD
30.

In The Watcher’s Own Words

-January 2nd, 1995-

To Maxwell J. Polito, World-renown
Investigator of UFO Phenomena:

It was a night of a thousand hours, you would’ve written at this point had you continued to write and had you written it. I’ll give you that. Just to get me started.

I expect to provide you with an update when you awaken, re-energized and good to go eight or nine hours from now and this is a record of that update. I write this not only for the sake of the manuscript, which you and I both labor towards completion, but for the sake of your fragile sanity as well.

One wonders what torrid pains afflict you so, knowing how any man of your caliber would possibly feel...I mean, having awoken within your home to my original typewritten letter, which summoned you to this Motel Untold and to this room you and I share now, to meet with a Watcher, to meet with me.

To encounter nothing you would normally never come to expect in a lifetime.

In that initial letter of mine you awoke to in your upstairs office, I laid my cards on the table when I told you, you awoke from death. And I promised you two things: an explanation, and a mission. No one knows where you are, not even you, except you know you’re in an unknown vicinity in the Twilight Zone of Carbon Canyon. And no one knows you’re still alive, sans yourself and I. No mortal human, at any rate.

Sounds like what happened to Jim Morrison.

You were exceptionally overwhelmed by me and still are, which is to be expected and I’m deeply flattered. But at the onset of the conclusion of my explanation of the events leading to your death, you clearly panicked. And you can be so atrociously panicky.

It was my responsibility to put you at ease enough to complete the written account of that bit concerning your death in the church attic, clear through to your resurrection as Salvatia’s Max-thing. Believe me, I myself was obliged to look back face-first into a few events that disconcerted me.

When we ultimately arrived at the present point, the point which we’re at now, I found myself deeply moved into an equal responsibility to see to your human needs. Firstly, you truly needed to eat. I had lured you all this way, driven by my instruction to keep going until you get hungry. I can see why you lost your appetite, but I didn’t at all give you a chance to eat anything before the encounter with Bari in the lobby of the diner rendered you unconscious, only for you to reawaken here in my presence.

After we worked out the finalities of the last chapter we together wrote, I directed you towards the port-a-fridge in our room’s rear vestibule below the clothes rack. I had waiting there for you, a ham and Swiss cheese on rye, and an apple.

What put you to sleep could’ve been the apple and how Snow White it would’ve been. But it was the appropriately stashed Choc-o-diles that did you in. I knew you’d open the crisper to discover and devour them, the snack slave that you are. How poetic that I should’ve left for you tainted M&Ms, come to think of it.

Secondly, you desperately required sleep and how could you under the circumstances? This brings me to the point, why I had to slip you a little lullaby juice for beddie-bye.

You needed it, and I needed it too, because I felt it was my turn to take over for awhile, aside from your taking an eight-some-hour breather, a breather enough for your next turn.

I suspect I owe you an apology…hell, you died, then awoke, then passed out, then awoke to me, then I made you pass out all over again.

Sorry Maxy.

But I have things to tell on my own now.
A night of a thousand hours.

Every Watcher when he first starts off being a Watcher is granted a thousand hours to manipulate time. I didn’t know this until I became a Watcher, and when I became one...well, I experienced a new awareness of things. It’s a lot like when one becomes a Watchmaid for the very first time and is suddenly bestowed with a vast knowledge of the universe and her own fateful role within it, but on a far grander scale than even that.

You, dear Maxy, have found yourself immersed into nearly an equally fateful role, but unlike Watchers or Watchmaids your awareness is totally up to what I make you remember or what I tell you. You’re only human, you understand. So far, I’ve made you remember the events leading to your death and just a dim reflection of what took place afterwards.

You knew at the start that I would reveal a great deal more than simply an explanation about what happened to you. You are a mere spring in the grandfather clock, my UFO detective. You’ve never come to realize, not even yet, the degree and depth of what you are actually dealing with here, with this story, with me, with yourself, and just as importantly, with the other characters involved.

In our painstaking endeavor to write this, we are manipulating the sequence of events that we’re writing about. It’s quite an ironic paradox, isn’t it? What we’re writing now affects everything that we’re writing about. For the ultimate benefit of all.

In the process, we’re revealing my kind and the secrets you so sought to disclose to the world. Or to whomever pays attention, to whoever believes.

We have a thousand hours to do it, but I have no wish to use up my allotted time on this...I have countless other fish to fry...so I’ve halted time in this room enough for us to finish this manuscript by morning, forty-eight hours worth of time. We could use up more time if we need to, but that should be a reasonable perimeter for its completion and submission back through time so Andrew Erlandson can type the entire thing unconsciously and submit it unawares to Ralston, don’tcha think?

This brings another irony to mind....

You never wrote much yourself until now, you’d always have your wife do it for you.
And me...I scarcely wrote anything myself at all.

But my writing got your ass here and it’s going to do a hell of a lot more than that.

It already has.

And who could ever have guessed?

Now that I’ve put you to temporary rest, time’s about due that I indulge myself personally in a much more significant broader portion of the story, the portion that has less to do with you and more to do with the big picture.

Only I can tell this broader portion and it’s better off I’m doing it solo.

Certain facts need to be mentioned concerning our understanding of preceding events, of Everborn and Watchmaids and of one particular Magdalene whose intentions we strive against even in our writing this manuscript.
To confound this Magdalene is our ultimate goal. It is the prize we seek. It is our most urgent mission, our reason for being here and doing what we’re striving to do.

All other factors are both necessary and incidental; in the overall scheme of things, it was all meant to be, if not only to stop short the Magdalene’s efforts to bitterly warp it all.

Don’t worry, Maxy. In time, you too will understand.

Follow me now and stay close.

I’ve something further I’d like to show you....
PART THREE:

THE MAGDALENE SALVATIA

“Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard in ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn...
...in faery lands forlorn.”
- John Keats’ Ode to Psyche
31.

When the Sacred Ones Fell From the Sky

The Magdalene have earned the reputation of being a wretched sort, evil and pitiful and deserving no sympathy from any conscious being dwelling on the face of the earth.

Needless to say, this is my opinion.

But I will show you why.

And perhaps, just perhaps, if you pay close attention, I will reveal the unheard intimate whispers of our names, of the order of beings that we are, and of how we individually came to be who we are now.

It began when the Sacred Ones fell from the sky.

There weren’t any Magdalene back then, they didn’t exist nor could the coin be termed for them as Magdalene until centuries later and the world had not yet seen its first Watchmaid. Humankind was at its infancy.

And as for Watchers, well....

The two hundred Sacred Ones fell from the sky and landed upon the legendary Mount Hermon with a purpose. The most crucial part of this purpose was to incorporate themselves into Man’s genetic gene pool, to leave behind hybrid offspring by picking Man’s choicest women who in turn produced for them numerous immortal sons. These sons inherited the better qualities of both their angelic fathers and their human mothers, and likewise also did they inherit the Sacred Ones’ names. The ancient Chaldeans of Babylonia called them ‘ir and in later days when there became such a thing as the English language ‘ir was translated into Watcher, because the Sacred Ones watched over Mankind. And then so did their sons.

The Book of Enoch, a book which the Holy Bible clearly alludes to but was banned from the Scriptures for silly scholarly reasons names the names of the most prominent of the Watchers. For instance, there was Gadreel, who instructed man in the ways of weaponry. Another taught astrology, another botany, another Watcher taught magic, another arts and crafts; together the Watchers made certain that Man knew all the ins and outs of building civilizations for himself. Another Watcher was Penemue, who taught man how to write with ink and paper.

But this order of Watchers wanted sons of their own, and when their wives conceived, a remarkable process occurred.

The Sacred Ones vanished, only to become the product of folklore within the many races of Man which they directly and indirectly influenced. Some say that when the Sacred Ones fell from the sky, they were the fallen angels of old, fallen from Heaven, followers of whom some refer to as Azazel, of whom others call Lucifer.

There’s no doubt that regardless of origin and intention, the Watchers indeed shaped the consciousness of Man and the fruits of their power remain with Man throughout his history.

One of these days, Mankind will know it.

Soon, but not yet.

When the wives of the Watchers brought forth to them Sons of their own, the Watchers themselves experienced a rapid extinction with every son that was born. With each pregnancy, the individual Watchers underwent a gross deterioration in their physical structures, giving them the appearance of wizened fetal beings with pale grey skin and attenuated limbs and eyes of bulbous black. One by one in this manner, the Watchers disappeared, up to the very last of them.

And all their sons were born.

That was when the Everborn came to be.

Each of the Everborn were the original Watchers, having fathered themselves into their next generation among Man, and their wives and the wives after them would give birth to them over and over again with each new wife and well into each new lifetime. The Watchers would remain embedded within the human race unawares, to be born and reborn likewise and to exist among human society in secret, a secret kept even from themselves lest they blow their own cover and reveal themselves in a cataclysmic defeat of their own incorporated purpose for doing so.

And it must always be this way until the original Sacred Ones, the ones that came down to Earth and inserted them among Mankind, return to take part in the apocalyptic last days.
Sometimes, sometimes, a tragedy occurs in which an Everborn is unable to continue the cycle which enables him to be reborn anew and human once again. These beings retain the fetal-like shape of their final physical appearance before each rebirth, to join others who suffered the same fate and to become Watchers once more and forever. Some of them feverishly attempt to find a way to return to the human genetic gene pool, addictively drawn back towards the emotional satisfaction of being human and living among man as one of them, spiriting away helpless human hopefuls and subjecting them to a myriad of reproductive experiments. Others simply continue the ages-old tradition of watching over the concerns of the earth.

And then there are still others who elect to do their own thing.

Together, they exist in anticipation of the myth of the original Sacred Ones’ return.

And they have learned to exist as long as they remain Everborn under the guardianship of select human female companions, ones who have had bestowed unto them powers and internal attributes necessary to insure their Everborn’s sustainment from human lifetime to lifetime.

These once-human female beings have come to be called Watchmaids, for they are the inter-dimensional protectors of their own assigned Everborn.

And each carries with them a price if they fail to protect them.

This price is banishment from all that they once were, from the confines of their status as Watchmaids, from contact in any substantial shape or form with the physical realm, from their own humanity that once was.

These banished Watchmaids have come to call themselves The Magdalene, in mock reference to the Mary who could’ve been Jesus’ wife but couldn’t possibly be what she longed for because He was so very far beyond what anyone ever fathomed, and that wasn’t her fault.

From within this methodology there arose a certain Magdalene who has grown to not only influence but outright jeopardize the ambitions of the Sacred Ones and the sacred inner intentions of every surviving Everborn and of all the Watchers that as fate would have it, reclaimed their ancient names.
This is a tale that the Watchmaids know. It has been passed down through the centuries since not very long after the events of the tale occurred and became a thing of history...a thing of history undisclosed to a significant majority of mortal Man, stuffed and duct taped inside one of Time’s infinite shoe boxes and the Watchmaids would just as well let it remain that way.

But because for them it cannot be forgotten and has been told for so long, others have been allowed insight into the tale. There are reasons for this beyond coffee table nostalgia, reasons meant to invoke awareness and forewarning and preparedness for impending doom.

This tale has been handed down with a purpose.
The purpose for it being told here; however, is so that others who read it can understand.
And this is the fashion by which it has been told:

Once, long ago, there was a Countess, who to satisfy her appetite for power and by selfish means, eliminated all other successors to the throne of her small impoverished country and proclaimed herself Queen of all she surveyed. She proved her worth to the people by establishing order and economic recovery. She constituted radical changes both politically and socially and appointed across the board a new court of choice figures to suit her will.

Her outward deeds had earned her immense praise throughout the land and devotion by her people unto death. She swiftly executed any opposing radicals within her country’s borders, and raised a mighty army, largely civilian, to protect and defend against the uprise of imperialistic nations which threatened not only her own country but the lands which surrounded it.

In retaliation to those distant threats, which grew ever nearer, she sought to conquer the surrounding lands. Her tactics were mediated at first through simple political negotiation, but the governments beyond her borders did not approve of her insistence that they become one country with hers...they sought for an alliance, whereas she wanted total domination and rule.

They all knew that despite the genius that she was, there was within her an intense fixation for security in ultimate power that her own people could not see.

Her proposals rejected, she publicly began to place blame upon the governments of the surrounding lands, that they were at fault for the conditions of her own country before she came to rule and rectify them all.

This propaganda was to these surrounding governments an outrage, but before they found ample opportunity to act against her, and with the impending oppression of the distant empires growing less distant with every country they conquered, the Queen made the decision to strike against them.

She would have her way.
And, through a short but bitter war, she did.

One by one, the lands submitted to her rule through much bloodshed. The peoples of these lands began to think twice, mostly out of cowardice, discerning that it would be better to submit to her than to the outside conquering empires, thus relinquishing their morale to her whimsical and imposing conditionings.

Her army more than tripled in size and likewise so did her country’s borders. She executed any of those who chose to oppose her still.

But in the land to the west of her, there grew rumors of unyielding defiance.
These rumors spoke of a certain opposing soldier who could not be stopped, could not be killed, but in opposition had killed over two hundred of her men.

By himself.
And further rumor had it that he was not a soldier at all, but a simple peasant. A pauper.
And he used no weapons of any kind.
She made an order to have him captured and brought directly to her, to see for herself his remarkable courage and skill.

Frankly, she scoffed at the rumors, and referred to her soldiers as being incompetent, for any one man can
certainly be killed when pitted against odds far greater than himself. Unless he be a sorcerer.

With extraordinary ease, the soldiers were able to bring him before the Queen.

“I hear you can’t be killed,” she said to him in bold speculation, “but I see you can be captured.”

“I allowed myself to be captured,” he told her, quite sure of himself.

“Is that so?” she mused. “And what do you consider your talents to be, that you are capable of committing such reportedly outrageous acts as to have slain so many of my men?”

“I am uncertain. I can’t quite put a finger on it, but I suspect I’m blessed with a curious charm. Why don’t you indulge me, and we can find out together right now?”

The Queen stared upon him blankly. Then she laughed and laughed. This man appeared to possess no more strength than enough to squash a bug. He was scrawny. He was dressed in rags. And there he was, standing before her, shrugging his shoulders.

“I am a storyteller in my village and a writer as well,” he continued. “I also serve as a political advisor and I use my writing to voice my opinions in letters submitted to my lawmakers and the lawmakers take them as wisdom. I suppose I use the right words to persuade them and I’ve proven myself worthy. I advised them to oppose you.”

“And is that so?” she responded, her amusement turning to insult.

With nothing further spoken but for a purposeful nod, she summoned the soldiers who brought him there to seize him and execute him.

They no sooner had drawn their weapons when a whirlwind force magically materialized, encompassing the man who, within the eye of this force, stood perfectly still and serene. The bronze-colored limbs of a she-demon surfaced from beyond the blurred drapery of transparent void surrounding the man, as though invoked to protect him by an unspoken incantation.

And protect him it did. Not merely that; one by one, the she-demon brought the soldiers down and to their grisly deaths. Upon the final soldier’s demise, the tumultuous vision vanished and the she-demon with it as instantly as it had appeared. The man stood alone and unharmed, lowered his gaze upon the thrashed and flailed carcasses of the soldiers around him, then raised his gaze up at the bewildered Queen.

All that remained in their company, the spectators, the members of the court, the attending guards, were overtaken by silence and gorged with fear.

The man spoke to the Queen, his voice echoing and haunting. “Now you see what happens when my life is suddenly threatened. And I’m still uncertain what that was. You have any idea, Your Highness?”

“Don’t shower me with sarcasm,” the Queen shifted uneasily. “You possess a magnificent power. How did you obtain it, may I ask?”

The man was at once impressed with the manner in which she distanced her fears to maintain her dignity. On the other hand, the pedestal upon which she placed her consuming pursuit of power was high enough to account for her dull reaction to her own soldiers’ deaths, high enough to provoke fascination and awe rather than horror at the macabre theatrics that brought their lives to such an end.

Already she wanted to know the secrets behind the power.

The man smiled. “Maybe, given time, I’ll show you.”

The Queen ordered the man to be imprisoned. The guards, understandably, were reluctant in carrying out this order, fearing for their lives. When the Queen made it clear that no harm would come to them as long as no harm came to him, they escorted him away, albeit retaining a safe distance. With this, the man was quite cooperative.

He could be captured, he could be imprisoned, but he could not be killed. These, observed the Queen, seemed to be the rules.

So far.

The Queen completed her conquest of the surrounding lands and appointed officials to govern those lands and establish her new order. A greater part of her days, however, were spent in contemplation over this mysterious and powerful, sorcerer-like man.

A greater part of her days, and nights.

There were serious risks involved in keeping him there, for the man’s awesome power posed a conceivably hostile threat to all of Her Majesty’s interests. There was no telling what more he was capable of, no telling what the mounting consequences of holding him at bay might be or what he held up his sleeve.

She saw to it that his stay remain comfortable for a prisoner. His confines were referred to as bed quarters and were no where near the cold, rank dungeons where any rat or disease could give cause to another disastrous episode. He was granted a large degree of privacy, though twenty guards were posted at all hours outside the exterior.
perimeters of his room. He was provided three meals a day fit for a queen.

It hardly took any time for the Queen to decide what to do with the man. Her mind was set almost as instantly as she put him away: she would let him live and live well, in both confinement and certain observation. Even if it was found within her the stubborn supposition that he could be killed, the Queen wasn’t going to test her limits. She wasn’t about to conspire with a trusted guard to attempt to shoot an arrow through the man when he wasn’t looking. All hell would erupt if the plan was unsuccessful and the man would lose valuable trust in what he’d come to expect of his captors. Especially when the most prominent of his captors was eager to know his secrets.

So when the Queen made her first visit to him inside his bed quarters, the guards stood fast and sure not to let her in on the rumors going around about her seeing him. The consensus was that she was trying to pamper and seduce him into revealing those all-powerful secrets.

And they were right.
And they were afraid.
They dared not speak of her nightly liaisons with the man, nor of what they supposed the two were doing behind closed doors. This was enough to be afraid of, for the Queen would quite possibly have their heads if she became aware of such gossip.

Truth or not.
The truth was, while all along the Queen was under the assumption that she was having her way with him...he was having his way with her.
How could that not be? As far as the soldiers reasoned, any man with the powers of a god knew what he was doing.
And he was using the Queen even more than the Queen was thinking she was using him.
This was what the soldiers feared most: their queen was being set up.
Then came the rumors that the Queen was with child.

***

It happened very late one night, when the Queen went to visit the stranger for the final time. More than five months had passed since the night she’d made her last visit, but to the watchful sentries she appeared as a woman would appear on the verge of labor.
And, indeed, she was.

When she arrived, she commanded the latches and locks of his vaulted cedar door to be opened, and afterwards entered the bed chambers of the stranger. Disappearing into the room, she left the command that the door be shut behind her, and it was.

It shut behind her with a foreboding thu-ud, and when it did, the Queen found herself at once isolated within the corner cold candlelight of her captive’s room. She held herself close, her bedclothes hemming her evening gown like peasant mantle decor as she clutched her elbows bitterly and gazed out into the bed chamber’s opposite corner.
In this opposite corner was the bed, and upon the bed sat a figure in a likewise flowing evening gown of crimson red which reflected and sparkled amidst the rampant flickering of the several surrounding candles.
The figure rose; when he did fully, his stance was elfin, as though his height had remained the same as when he sat upon the bed.
The Queen hadn’t laid her eyes upon him since during her last visit when he had frightened her enough to close her eyes to him completely for so long a time. It was then when she first came to realize his purpose with her and her utter helplessness to do anything about it... she couldn’t, because it was already too late to avoid it.
And now...
...now, it was too late to do anything but to remain afraid.

“You don’t seem yourself, Your Highness.” The rich baritone of the stranger, smooth and serene, broke the silence and startled the Queen, as though purposely meant to. The voice flooded the room in such a manner that it seemed to come from everywhere and not just the stranger’s lips...but from behind her and before her, above and below her, and the Queen trembled at the unnerving expectation of the she-demon appearing if only to torment her.

Instead, the stranger continued. “Tell me, how does it feel knowing that your way of life is in jeopardy, knowing this but not knowing if it will stay the same from one day to the next, that in your vast power you’ve been rendered powerless to assure control of your own future?”
The Queen would’ve responded in slight defense if not for her hesitation and if not for the sudden painful restlessness from within her womb.

“Tell me of your kingdom,” the stranger probed further. “How are your efforts progressing? What of the surrounding empires in relation to your own?”
“Those empires are at war with each other,” the Queen exerted. “As for my domain, it is in a state of...

“...of stagnation,” cut short the stranger. “You’ve entrusted others in your court to run your country for you and no wonder...you’ve become way too involved in matters that are more inward than they are outward. You’ve become less capable of dealing with the concerns of the big picture and have been forced to focus in on your own private you. Frightening, isn’t it, to live out your aspirations in pursuit of conquest when all along the real conquest would be in whether you could gain control of yourself! I taught you these things from the moment you desired the secrets to my power and how much more can a woman be forced to face her intimate self than to be with child? It is in this that you will not only know my power, as I had promised, but in order to know it you must become it!”

“What do you know of true power without your she-demon to protect you?” said the Queen in icy resent. “Withdraw from her power and you face me powerless. It is only because of her that you speak to your Queen as bold and still live. Do I not speak truth?”

“You speak truth, but if I were capable of standing on my own, I would just as soon give my life to teach you such a lesson in the conquest of power. My Watchmaid, however, always stood in the way of that. You see, it is her duty to protect me. But all that will be in the past, and soon...soon, you will be taking her place.”

The Queen took an apprehensive step forward. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been relieved from the security of my Watchmaid for a little while now,” the stranger said, “and as we speak she is far away. I have released her from her bounden duties to fulfill her longing to become human again, as I have chosen you to succeed her. How does it feel, these final moments as a mortal, to know that you are about to experience the power that I assured would be yours?”

The Queen took another step forward dreadfully. “You lie!”

The stranger inched quietly forward this time in turn, nearer to the Queen but also nearer into the candlelight so as to reveal the clarity of his features. The Queen was swept aghast into a delusional horror upon his sight the moment she beheld him fully, and this horror paralyzed her as soon as it seized her, rendering her unable to take her eyes off him. She had been unmistakably wrong about him...absolutely, terribly wrong...for he not only held the entrusted benefits of a she-demon to work his bidding, but clearly he was a demon himself.

If this was no demon, this was indeed an illusion, a diabolical impression of what the Queen knew to have been a perfectly human outsider, human if not but in appearance alone. He raised the silky thin drapery of the arm of his gown to reveal an attenuated limb and the five pale-grey stringy digits which were fingers protruding outwards from a child-sized hand. They reached into the empty air preceding his face and head, both of which were fleshy and ill-formed and completely absent of hair as they were with wrinkles or any signs of age. The stranger/entity bore no noticeable nose save for two slits of nostrils above a lipless horizontal mouth which parted to speak...but before it spoke, its lifted fingers formed and pointed to draw the Queen’s mesmerized gaze into two enormously widened slants of eyes as black as a nighttime starless sky.

“I speak truth,” the stranger said to her. “And now, the time is ripe for you to know it!”

These words were his last; as soon as he had spoken them to her, impossibly, his flesh began to expand and then collapse into a bony thinness which shrunk into his robe in hastened retreat and disappeared from view. Even his head followed suit, like a turtle retracting into its shell.

And then he was no more.

His robe and gown fell depleted and bodiless to the floor.

Just as suddenly, the bed chamber flooded with the blood-choked outpouring of a woman’s screams.

And an infant’s cries.

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Four of the Queen’s sentries in alert watch directly outside the door heard the screams. Without hesitation, they scrambled to their Queen’s aid, releasing the bolts to the chamber door and opening it; as they did so their diligence slackened in fearful retrospect of what had become of the last soldiers to defy the powers of the mystical stranger. Still, their allegiance to their Queen was to the point of death, so a change of mind and motive at any point was cast to the Shit Heap of No Return in this kingdom.

By the time they stormed into the bed chamber, their weapons drawn and poised as was their goose flesh and very mortalities, the wails of an infant child were all that remained....

...and all that remained within the room was an infant child. It was unthinkably impossible for a newborn infant to have been in the room at all...to have been there, upon its back and upon the stone cold floor, legs and arms up and flailing and slapping against a foot-long umbilical cord still attached to its belly but oozing and slashing through the air like a slit-away high pressure hose line.

Of anyone else in the room there was no sign. There was, however, a discarded and familiar pile of garments,
the Queen’s evening attire, immediately beside the newborn; before the bed, a second set of abandoned robes.

Blinded by a primal panic, the sentries raised their weapons to the child...
...and extinguished its life as suddenly as it lived.

***

After a persistent search within the bed chambers and a vast canvas without, neither the Queen nor the stranger could be found, not a solitary trace, nor would they ever be.

But for a succession of years to come, those who dwelt within the area of that land would tell tales of wispy shrieks of the Queen’s ghost, which became eerily audible the first few moments before each new daybreak, cries of ill attempt to deliver her infant son from death.

One day, after the shrieks grew more faint and more distant, they silenced altogether.

Eventually, the tales silenced as well...
...to be spoken only among those who know what happened afterwards....
This was the unspoken Promised Land of once-in-a-lifetime events, and no matter that it wasn’t exactly promised, it was more or less prophesied, and as far as Salvatia was concerned, prophesied was the ferment in the wine of promises. And no human being with an average lifespan of ninety years or so would ever know the magnitude of a once-in-a-lifetime event for a being whose lifespan was more than six times as long to date.

As far as Salvatia was concerned, she was quite certain of this.

For there was recently born a set of Everborn twins.

And, like the prophecy was told to her, they were going to bring salvation to the one who would bring salvation to all other Magdalene that would come to her.

Not entirely because of both of them, but because of one of them. The soulless one.

The one referred to over the centuries as a Dreg.

In this case, the one who would be known as Simon.

It was known to all involved, Magdalene and Watchmaid and Watcher alike, that when a set of Everborn twins is born, only one can harbor the soul that has been reborn, although the lives were--as fate would have it--split into two.

And Dregs were a very special and rare breed, indeed.

They could do things for a Magdalene, yes, and by far for any Magdalene that knew well enough to search for one, and find him...

...to be, as they say, at the right place and at the right time.

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A white Plymouth Belvedere rested solitary and vacant within the parking lot of the Dr. Jonas E. Salk elementary school. It was blanketed by a coat of weather-worn dirt, which was emphasized by the remains of a finger-scrolled WASH ME upon the rear window, all letters but the WA ME portion wiped away by a single dirty-filmed swipe.

It was eight forty-five in the p.m., and the sun had retired from the pre-evening sky an hour or so ago and for the first time since the time was sprung an hour forward the night before.

A misty torrent of air floated down from the school’s hallway rooftop and settled upon the Plymouth’s hood, lightly denting its metal. This was a first, the first time in a long time the Magdalene had any effect upon the physical world, even if it was that one simple dent. It felt good. It felt great. It felt brand new all over again, as if she’d never crossed the threshold into the physical realm before; it had been a long, long time since she had. The feeling was euphoric, to be able to do that again.

It only meant one thing: it meant she was in close proximity to a Dreg.

The closer she came to one, the easier it would be to manipulate the world of the living, to touch something physical once more.

She was a Magdalene.

She wasn’t a Watchmaid, let alone a human being anymore. And she wasn’t the ghost of her former human self, she had never exactly died, but as a Magdalene she could never have contact with the physical world but for maybe--given chance--a whisper or a rhapsody in the wind to be heard faintly in the early morning breeze.

To the physical world, she was a ghost.

She had never been granted the pleasure of achieving her full potential, not as an empire’s queen of ages past, nor as even a Watchmaid, for the Everborn who’d originally deceived her and tricked her had died as instantly as
she’d given birth to him...and before she realized what she was becoming, she became what she was.
She’d remained that way for so, so very long.
Stagnant. Incapable of communicating with or manipulating the world around her.
It was ruled among Everborn that should its Watchmaid see its own Everborn’s death, that Watchmaid would become banished to roam the earth as nothing more but a ghost. That stranger had released its current Watchmaid to be replaced by her...
...by her....
And then he was killed...by her own soldiers....
And she was banished, like a ghost, to be physical in one dimension only, a dimension beyond anything truly of the normal realm of things, but a dimension in which she could observe the normal realm of things around her as well as things normally unseen.
And it just wasn’t fair.
Not in the least.
Not at all.
She would use the Dreg to change all that.
A certain commotion issued at once from the side yard of the house across the silent boulevard from her. She had been in constant surveillance over the house for over the past day and night, awaiting any opportunity to make a run for the home and seize the twin Dreg child who dwelt inside. It wasn’t an easy accomplishment; Salvatia was subject to waiting impatiently for the moment when the true Everborn twin was separated from its Dreg twin. The greater the distance between them there was, the least likely it was for Salvatia to run into a confrontation with that Everborn’s Watchmaid.
And what was her name, by the way, this Watchmaid...? Oh, yes...it was...
...it was Bari.
Bari was that newcomer Salvatia had heard about.
Magdalene were just as efficient in catching vibes as Watchmaids were, for Magdalene had been Watchmaids, so they both shared the same telepathic internet. But if Salvatia could tap into Bari’s presence, Bari could tap into hers as well. More than likely, Bari was aware of the Magdalene’s presence as somewhere not far away and she would know her name, too.
Which was odd, for when Bari would’ve sensed her presence, Bari would’ve sensed her with her true name...which wasn’t originally Salvatia at all, but the human name she’d been born with...
...but she sensed Bari had known her as Salvatia, and that only meant that Bari held certain knowledge of her reputation, of her celebrity status so to speak, of her infamy.
Perhaps Bari bore insight enough to know how Salvatia got that name, that she was one day meandering around sixteenth century England when, not long after she’d heard the words of her own prophecy, she came upon the ramshackle outpost of a church bearing the words SALVATION TO ALL upon a broken wooden banner, the SALVATION portion split in two. She took that as a sign, far beyond more than literally, and, combined with delusions of grandeur, the name hence evolved.
Perhaps Bari had learned of the prophecy itself.
Bari seemed to be more in touch with things than others, for such a juvenile Watchmaid, so contrastingly new to the job.
She could prove a great deal more of a hassle than Salvatia anticipated, so...Salvatia was forced to wait.
For this moment.
Commotion...in the side yard.
She had to be quick.
Whatever the reason, a teenage babysitter was at that moment engaged in verbal dispute at the side of the house behind the outside wooden gate over a matter of who’s chucking dirt clods at whose window with a teenage neighbor cradling over the partitioning fence...
...and the Everborn twin was with them.
As for Bari, even her attentions were drawn into the feud.
And the twins were separated.
Salvatia waited no more.
As she glided her way from atop the Plymouth and across the school parking lot, crossed the boulevard and approached the house, she gazed down upon herself in awe at how remarkably material her silvery skin tone was, and in the next instant how clearly and rapidly she was developing a transparent signature of own her form breaking into the visible world.
This was indeed a true soulless Dreg twin she was after and this unmistakable physical materialization was the
truest indication; the prophecy clockwork was already ticking its maiden voyage of tocks. Everything from this point on was guaranteed free flying, entirely in the Magdalene’s favor.

It had to be, no question about it.

Inside the house, within the twin infants’ bedroom of blueblack wallpapered stars and shooting stars, a woman’s pair of silver-toned hands, extending outward by likewise matched arms of intertwined muscle, protruded from the solid wall not far below the double window facing the outer front yard. The surreal hands searched and pawed until, lowering and lowering still, they settled past the painted white wooden bars of a crib as if the bars were merely holographic images from some unseen projector’s eye. The lustrous black of vulture-like claws discovered the infant twin Dreg with a harmless prick against the soft flesh of its inner thigh.

The child barely gave notice. It was wide awake and in diapers, tumbling its fingers through the air above itself and towards an overhanging mobile of plastic swirling balls of planets and more stars, which glowed in the semi-dark. The bedroom door was open halfway, the living room light streaming in on a webbing of illuminated dust-swirls. A solitary muffled voice could be heard coming from the kitchen, combined with a distant door slam.

She had very little time to act.

The presence of her hands at last caught the child’s attention, and it ceased all movement as though suddenly stunned, as though it hadn’t noticed them there before nor their touch, its widened gaze now fixed upon the silvery intrusion...and then the intrusion fixed itself upon the child, lifting it, lifting it up within its two sizable yet feminine palms and reaching it nearer to the double window. The hands shifted and transferred the baby to one palm and one hand retracted, disappearing through the wall. The hand then reappeared the next instant, grappling with the screen of the open window until the screen tore loose and the infant was hoisted up and out the window as easy as pie.

Triumphant, the Magdalene stole the Dreg child into the night, making certain what could be seen of her wasn’t seen by anyone...an exercise she hadn’t had to worry about for hundreds of years....

***

Salvatia had established a sort of lair several cities away, a cannery long since abandoned, which proved to be the perfect location from which to meditate upon the location of the Dreg twin. She had made herself home in a multitude of sanctuaries leading up to this one, a haven of serene solitude and vacuous quiet, a place of rest and away from the whole wide world.

It wasn’t that she had to hide from anyone. She just couldn’t bare the distraction of seeing anyone.

She needed to concentrate.

And this was why she carried the infant Dreg twin all the way back. She had been close enough to sense him from there, and now she had him just as she had foreseen from there.

Now, the best thing to do was take him back there, at the risk of being seen...now that she could be seen, albeit partially, and if not her, then a flying and literally bouncing half-naked baby boy.

Back, to the Rothchild Cannery.

Where there were plenty of black widows.

***

The abandoned Rothchild Cannery was a viciously hollow deep labyrinth full of perilous traps should anything physical feel free to sojourn into its dark abyss.

It was ideal enough for Salvatia to carry the Dreg child throughout several city suburbs to return there.

Black widows were to be found anywhere; locating a black widow or two didn’t depend upon a greater success rate at finding them at the cannery, but hanging her hat there was ideal also for what was to take place after she’d locate a few. The prophecy the Magdalene had been told of, entailed a sure-fire sign concerning a final test of the Dreg’s hidden fortunes and capabilities, something further that would prove beyond a doubt that a Dreg could do everything a Dreg was supposed to: aside from the obvious materialization power he invoked in her, a Dreg was promised to exhibit the ability to be impervious to any poison or the bite of the most venomous creeping thing.

In this could he also provide her another service.

***

Salvatia maintained custody of the infant for as long as she could, as long as was necessary. She couldn’t keep him inside for too long, for either he’d eventually be discovered or surely die. And neither would be to her best interests.
A handful of months had passed since the child Dreg’s abduction now, and Salvatia had time and again fancied the repercussions of his disappearance from his home. His cries had been heard throughout the abandoned cannery all the way to the outside world, and those concerned who happened upon them had returned with moderate rescue teams who searched to no avail and departed empty-handed but with the notion that the property was haunted by a Wraith-child that existed only in the whimsical minds of the impressionable who may or may not have actually heard any cries at all. To them, the cries could have been anything. An infant’s footprints could have been anything, too. And no connection was ever made between this and the missing Erlandson child. The miles of separation had suited the scheme and fate was serving Salvatia well.

Until she had to snuff out the lives of those unfortunates who came sniffing about way too close for comfort. That was remarkable, and it felt good to kill. It had been so long since Salvatia could even kill a cockroach. How she cared for her Dreg child. She’d built him an inconspicuous makeshift nest. She changed him, kept him warm when he was in need of warmth, kept him cool in the Summer heat. She brought him food, brought him playthings; at times she’d bring to him other children’s half-broken toys, other times he was at play with living things such as, well, cockroaches. Or rats. They couldn’t infect him with their bites, whenever they did bite, and when their bites caused him to cry he would only play with them in angered roughness. And the silvery beast was always there to take away the pain.

Then, one day, without any effort of her own, the children came. They arrived on their own, their curiosities sealing their fate...and particularly for one, who bore the honor of meeting the Wraith-child face to face, the one who ventured with his childhood chums into the treacherous innards of the dilapidated cannery on a capricious dare, the most innocent of the lot.

A little black boy by the name of Nigel.

The timing was impeccable.

Her Dreg child was at play with one of his most favorite venomous pets.

A black widow.

How quaint.

How climactic.

The time was at hand for Salvatia to release her beloved somehow, anonymously, and when the spider’s bite had been imposed upon the poor mortal boy...

...well, with the Dreg’s power imposed upon herself as it was, the watchful eyes of the dead resurrected through that power would make do and monitor him in her absence from that day forward.

On, until the final hour when she could use that Dreg to re-emerge into the real world fully, finally, and ultimately for all time....
An overgrowth of hibiscus bushes cradled the overhanging metal casing of an electric signboard, a street-side sign situated before a tiny brick wall. The brick wall sprouted from behind the sign on both its left and right, extending and coralling the well-landscaped front lawn of the Church of the Divine Jesus Christ’s worldwide headquarters in Stanton, California. The plastic black replaceable letters of the sign was sequenced to read ALL WELCOME AND ENJOY THE FRUITS.

There was no other sign than that, for the Church of the Divine Jesus Christ was a Christian cult which didn’t believe in publicity, so its presence was ambiguous to the surrounding community. To most passers-by, the look and shape of the homely two-story brown building was like that of an undersized hotel, and many of them took it to be so; some even supposed that ENJOY THE FRUITS referred to a continental breakfast. In fact, ENJOY THE FRUITS meant to enjoy the fruits of the Spirit.

The Church of the Divine Jesus Christ was elusive that way. Particularly the Stanton one. What, with being the worldwide headquarters and all, they felt they had to be elusive. They were the one and only church on the planet who understood what the Holy Bible was really talking about, and all other Christian denominations were Babylon. As for other religions...hell, they were broken vessels damned beyond repair.

Its members were predominantly of Chinese descent, as the church was founded in underground World War II China, its founding fathers evading communist tyranny by exporting themselves by the definition of exporting to California. They hid inside hay-filled cargo crates nailed shut by close friends left behind, and fed on wafers and drank from water jugs and relieved themselves in leather pouches and through holes in the crates until they were recovered at a San Francisco harbor.

Their entire journey and discovery was enough for a newspaper’s front page.

The word of the Lord they brought with them delighted the ears and captured the souls of a growing multitude of followers, mostly those sharing the same heritage as none of the founding fathers spoke English. Even now, the pastor of the Stanton main headquarters had to make use of an interpreter, and to those who spoke English his
sermons were distracting and difficult to follow. But they loved him anyway.

To Eliza and Malmey, the whole Church of the Divine Jesus Christ scene was a way of life. If not for them completely, then it was at least a way of life for both their families. And they were stuck in the middle of it all, two girls of recent high school graduation, doing their best to fit in.

Both of them stood casually against a tall concrete wall behind the camper shell of Malmey’s father’s pick-up truck at the far end of the side parking lot, where no roving eyes could catch sight of the smoke of their cigarettes. They were dressed in proper conservative attire, with ankle-length skirts and cotton-white tops buttoned to the neck. Both were Caucasian, pasty-faced and make-up free and if they were dressed any plainer they’d likely be mistaken as Amish. Unlike the majority of fellow church-mongers, their lives as devotees were increasingly overwrought with social concerns outside the church, though on Sundays one would never know by looking at them. Unless one caught them smoking. They each took a drag of their cigarettes and blew the smoke over the wall.

“Did you know that raccoons rape cats when the cats venture into their territory?” Malmey asked.

“Really,” said Eliza, stricken oddly by the question. “No kidding. What a subject to talk about, when you’re about to teach in Children’s Study.”

Children’s Study was the Church of the Divine Jesus Christ’s version of Sunday School.

It was Sunday and the parking lot was filling with the vehicles of those anticipating another morning of education and worship, Divine J.C. style.

Malmey flicked her ashes. “Yeah, well, the night before last the BoLeves came over for dinner.”

“That’s right,” Eliza said in recollection. “How did that go? They were going to adopt that one boy....”

“They did adopt him. You know, he was found in a homeless shelter four or five years ago and eventually a family took him in. He was thought to be autistic. His first foster parents were robbed and murdered; the police found him cowering in the guest room closet playing Don’t Spill the Beans in the dark. That’s what Brother and Sister BoLeve said. Someone else looked after him not long after that happened. I forgot if it was another couple or a school for boys, but the daughter of a Catholic woman was discovered in bed with electric drill holes in her throat. The boy was close to that family somehow, and the boy was fascinated with the woman’s husband, how he’d undergone an operation which left him with a hole in his throat so he could breath better after years of smoking.”

Eliza tossed down her cigarette and crushed it beneath a heel in disgust “What, they think the boy did it?”

Malmey shifted and took another drag. “It was a mystery to everyone and they couldn’t prove anything anyway. The point is, no one wanted anything to do with the boy after that, until the BoLeves came along. They could’ve adopted any other child, but they were looking for a problem child they could rehabilitate and introduce to the Lord. You know how people in this church are. The spooky thing is, before they adopted him his personality changed. He went through all kinds of tests and by the time the BoLeves decided on taking him he was re-diagnosed as an average kid. His autism was choked out of him somehow. Everyone took it as a miracle and the BoLeves took it as a sign from God that their taking him was meant to be.”

“So how was he, I mean, at dinner the other night?”

“You know the swing set in my backyard? We went out to it and sat for a little while, he wanted to swing and I wanted to get away from the folks, and he bit me.”

“He bit you?”

“He bit me on the arm, left teeth marks. He told me he wanted to be a vampire and he grabbed my arm and bit me so hard it almost bled. Then he cursed and said, “The little black boy won’t let me be a vampire, I’m supposed to be something else,” then he paused and told me that raccoons rape cats when the cats venture into their territory. I didn’t eat much and went to bed before the BoLeves went home. This kid freaks me out. And this is his first day in Children’s Study and he’s in my class.”

“I hope it works out,” Eliza told her, deathly concerned. “What’s his name again?”

“His name’s Simon.”

***

The young boy went through the motions of bidding the mid-forties couple a prompt farewell as he retreated from the outside walkway and through the beige metal double doors of an entranceway leading into the ground floor of the Church of the Divine Jesus Christ. The couple then went their own way together, scanning the building down the walkway in thoughtful concern for their newly adopted son.

Brother and Sister BoLeve had faith in their Simon, a skeptical faith watered down by a methodical conviction that things would work out just fine. More importantly, they had faith in God, and as far as Simon went, any one person with faith as petty as a hole in one’s pants pocket was capable of not only mending the threads but placing in that pocket a rare wallet carrying a gold card with enough credit to move mountains. The BoLeves believed in that,
they believed in God, and they learned to believe in Simon.

The BoLeves were simple and responsible. They mortgaged a clean and proper home for themselves, virtually debt free, meditated on God’s Holy Word and otherwise exclusively on the publishings of the *Church*. Clinging steadfast to the *Church*’s ways, which demanded a strict separation from the ways of the wicked world, they did not watch television, did not celebrate holidays save birthdays, entertained themselves with board games and with music purchased only at the *Church* consisting of cassette tape recordings of hymns sung by the congregation itself at five dollars a pop.

If there was ever a couple to rear a child in a way right and just, it was a couple that served the Lord as devoutly as a *Divine Jesus Christ* couple, for sure. The BoLeves were a mixture of Polish and Irish, converted to the *Church* four years ago after their third miscarriage and after Brother BoLeve’s son from a previous marriage disowned his father to join the road crew for Alice Cooper.

But things were all right now and in retrospect, everything was meant to be.

The *Church* was how *they* handled things meant to be.

***

Simon handled *things meant to be* quite differently from the ways of his new parents, from those who claimed him before, from those even before them who gave him his first name after a nameless and homeless woman who claimed to be his mother expired in her sleep and rendered him at the mercy of State authorities.

He’d been through a tumultuous succession of ordeals for a boy of nine years, and he likewise had positioned others against successions of ordeals to spite his diverse abhorrent traumas. For someone so young, he was aware of the give-and-take of consequence, of *doing unto others as others have done to you*, regardless of who gets it in the end, as long as it wasn’t always *him*.

As of then, Simon did not know who or what he was, nor had any notion of the events of the first few years of his life. His only sense of self-worth lay in the confused selfishness of his endeavors to realize it, to find it and to find himself, and to try his goddamn hardest to mock the world as surely as it seemed very clearly to mock him.

Life for him never appeared to be the way life was for anyone else.

If he only knew how he came to be this way, of the answers to the riddle of his own existence, he might rediscover peace in the knowledge that it wasn’t all his fault. We all make our own decisions, yes, we make our own choices, but in the end we all have inherited countless pieces of somebody else’s pie, which amounts to who we came to be and to why we did the things we’ve done. Simon was merely a complex work-in-progress, a thousand components of an erector set still under construction by a power that was beyond him with a blue print in mind.

And this power *wasn’t* the power of *God*...  

***

Simon BoLeve was escorted down the carpeted corridor by an indomitable Chinese woman five times his age, past *occasional* child or children younger than he scampering about playfully until the Chinese woman barked a command for them to disperse to their classes. She led Simon past several doors both open and shut, the shut ones either silent or permeating with muffled voices, the open ones disclosing a room of children or teens or darkened rooms empty but for shadows of rows of metal folding chairs. Simon was at once curiously aware of how, while in passing, the younger groups of kids required more time for the teachers to tame than the older, for the older teens’ rooms were ordered and quiet as the younger kids were still running around being rounded up. Simon figured that this was because the older kids *knew* what they were there for, and were bored with it, while the younger children didn’t yet know what their parents had gotten them into.

The Chinese woman and Simon rounded a corner to yet another endless corridor, and upon doing so Simon spied a sign baring a white and blue plastic generic imprint of a stick-figure man upon one of the doors. He was led several doors past it, until something caused him to glance back in its direction and halt momentarily. It was as commonly simple as an abrupt, premonitional impulse. But whenever he’d known himself to experience this particular impulse, it would always mean that what he would see when he turned around was...

...was...

...was the little black boy.

For each time this sort of premonition took place in an average nine-year-old’s life, for each time any single child had looked over its shoulder because it was afraid of the dark or fearfully apprehensive that the bully or abusive stepfather or that horrible unknown thing was swiftly gaining ground as he or she fled from it in the waking world or while asleep, Simon always found the little black boy there. Somewhere, there, beyond the efforts of his
reach to find him, to touch him, to discover whether or not that little boy was real.

No one else ever saw him and Simon had grown weary of asking around. No one ever believed him, of how the little black boy would oftentimes come to him in a daydream or at night while in restless slumber and tantalize him with suggestive proposals and dares, mischievous dares, atrocious dares, subliminal manipulations when he was most susceptible and easiest to persuade. If that wasn’t enough, Simon would at times awaken to find manifested at his bedside the tools with which to oblige those dares.

Along with the motivation.

While the Devil made other people do it, to Simon it was the little black boy.

And, over a few years’ time, he realized the necessity to keep it all a secret. It was best that way. Because no one ever believed him.

When Simon glanced back, he found the boy there, down the hall, at the bend where he’d turned the corner with the Chinese woman and was led past the boy’s restroom door. The little black boy was standing still as clear as the outside day, wearing a t-shirt of red and white stripes over a mild brown pair of corduroy-type trousers, both three times over his size, and dirty-white tennis shoes garnished with soiled shoelace loops long enough to evoke a fall if the pant legs didn’t do it first.

The boy stood dead center upon the white-colored shag carpeting of that semi-far section of hallway behind, facing Simon, staring upon him with fixed eyes and eyebrows lifted devilishly about the edges, smiling at him with two rows of impossibly revealed teeth encompassed by windshield-wiper rubber lips. His presence there appeared to be disproportionate and vague, almost plastic, nearly dreamlike, as if the way he appeared was merely an interpretation of another side of him that had once perhaps been physical.

The sight of him vanished when the boy himself turned to the door with the generic stick-man and escaped towards it and into it, rendering the hallway empty and bare where not even the voices of the inner classrooms could be heard.

Another opportunity arose for Simon to confront the little bastard. He made a mad dash for the restroom door where the boy disappeared through, careful firstly to excuse himself from the company of the Chinese woman with a desperate plea to drain his bladder. She in turn directed him to the location of his Children’s Study classroom which lay two more doors further to the left, then she continued onwards without him.

Simon raced back, right straight up to the door of the blue and white man-sign, pushed it open, and moved inside.

At the far end of the boy’s restroom, the metal door of the handicapped stall swung shut and bounced against its frame. Simon went for that door, past a wash basin and two urinals and the only other stall, slamming the stall door’s backside against the tiled wall as he entered.

***

When Simon entered the stall, not a soul was there. He was alone and the quiet within the restroom was tomb-like.

And then came a voice from behind....

Simon did a three-sixty, and still the voice came from behind, though he could not connect with its origin....

...and the voice said, in a childlike frailty with an accentuated sinister hush behind its vain innocence:

“Do you really want to find me, Simon, as I find you? Do you reeeeeeally?”

“Yes,” Simon said to the voice, his gaze darting in rapid surveillance. “Show yourself!”

“I show myself the way I need to. I show myself in dreams, in my whispers, too close for you to see me and to far away to catch when you do. But don’t worry, Simon. Our Beloved One needs your help and she will clear things up personally with you reeeeal soon.”

Simon found himself speaking to the stall’s metal door now; the voice seemed to be coming from behind it.

“Who is ‘Our Beloved One’? What are you talking about?”

“Yes.”

“If you do it for me, Our Beloved will come to you and she will reveal to you face-to-face the answers you seek, herself.”

“I’ll be told everything?” Simon asked, his heart pounding, his impulses throwing him forward to re-open the stall door and when he did, no one was there on the other side. “Will I really?”
“Reeeeeeeally,” said the voice, growing ghostly distant, leaving behind an audible trail of fading retreat towards the restroom door and then silencing.

***

Today’s edition of Children’s Study for all the kids in the (loosely) eight-to-ten age bracket was to take up more than two hours’ time and Simon was informed of this beforehand. On any other day it would have mattered to him, but without realizing it he’d become entangled in the distracting newness of the experience, in sharing the company of so many vibrant children he’d never met before in the strangest of churches. Time didn’t seem to matter. He found himself thrilled to be a part of it all, part of them and he was thrilled by what he intended to do to them. All of them.

None of them would know what hit them until it was too late, and any adults smart enough to catch on to the possible cause of it all would never figure out how they owed everything to Simon, one of four newcomers to the church and a poor little feel-sorry-for-him adopted boy besides, regardless of what anyone had heard concerning his questionable past.

While the adults grew fat in worship and wisdom upstairs, and after the older children had been dismissed from their classrooms to join the adults in the second half of their Sunday service, an hour had passed.

And the children remaining below were beginning to behave differently.

***

Simon’s Children’s Study began twice as large as it turned out to be. When the children were first assembled, the girls outnumbered the boys, a fact which became more apparent as soon as the girls shuffled out the door to regroup elsewhere for their morning lesson. When the girls met with the boys together for the first half of the Study, the children PRAISED AND WORSHIPPED WITH SONG, as it was called. They sang songs of inspiration with the inspiration portion on the slow burner and with kid-fun on high flame...songs about how Father Abraham had many sons and how the children in the room were included in his progeny....

Father Abraham had lots of sons, and I am one of them...as we all go marching on with right arm, right leg, turn around, jump up, stomp your feet, say ‘amen’....

And the kids actually marched in place to the song.

Simon had no idea who in the hell Father Abraham was.

In between songs, everyone in the room was treated to chocolate chip cookies and fruit punch, donated by a few teachers and/or parents, whoever’s turn it was that week.

After the kids PRAISED AND WORSHIPPED WITH SONG, the girls in the room rose from their seats and departed and Simon found himself alone with the group of remaining boys.

By that time, an hour had passed.

And, by the look of it, the drug was beginning to take affect.

***

Everyone was guzzling up the punch. Gulping it, sipping it, dipping the chocolate chip cookies into it, kicking it onto the carpet by accident and then migrating back to the punch bowl for more.

The late-teens male leader had accompanied the girls out the door to teach them separately, for the boys to remain with Malmey, whose family Simon had been introduced to two nights before on a dinner date. Malmey had been quite spunky and amusing, but Simon noticed how her eyes never met with his.

Malmey was the first to experience the effects of the punch.

The sugar cubes Simon had managed to move from his pants pocket and into the punch bowl had a chance to dissolve before anyone could notice, not that he didn’t swish them around and aid the matter with a metal scooper- spoon when nobody paid attention. He was among those who indulged in the punch before the majority of others, actually, but this was by no means a big deal to him: he’d been assured by the little black boy in his dreams that what would take place with the lot of them wouldn’t take place with someone as particularly gifted as he, who was promised immunity from such a drug. Partaking in the punch was also a damn good alibi for accusatory fingers. So when he’d located the sandwich bag of LSD-laced sugar cubes within his slippers that morning, he’d already known that what he was conditioned to do with them wouldn’t affect him.

Malmey was in the process of erasing the multicolored chalk figures from the black board on the wall at the head of the class. Suddenly, the bulky eraser spilled from her hand and plummeted to the floor and she arched...
forward in hunchback style, her back towards all eyes, assuming a position to puke.

Simon was seated in the back row of four rows of metal chairs, still sipping his fruit punch in the corner opposite the door, when this happened. Three chairs beside him, an older boy baring a military haircut and clothes like Howdy Doody began to crawl upon the carpet proclaiming to how he must recover the missing chocolate chips for his cookie.

In no time, one of the other boys raised his hand and demanded that he wasn’t feeling well, that he wished to go home. Another boy proceeded to rock back and forth in his seat, unnoticeably at first, then dramatically faster.

The scene evolved into unorthodox chaos when one of the boys bolted upwards from his seat to revamp hypnotically the Father Abraham song. That was when the shit hit the fan and splattered across the norm of Sunday morning Children’s Study completely.

That was also when Malmey suspected something was not quite right altogether and not just with herself, not quite right as if she’d been slipped something, as if everyone had been slipped something, and she turned to the class glossy-eyed and said something....

When she said it, her eyes were affixed upon Simon, cruelly, vindictively, as though somehow she knew he was to blame....

“I feel sick. Does anyone else feel sick? Oh my God....”

***

The acid-spiked punch was good shit, apparently, and when the effects kicked in, they came on with all the spectacle of a Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade as seen through a kaleidoscope of stills from a Stanley Kubrick production. Simon contained himself upon the corner metal chair, quietly amused at the mayhem he created, and how it far surpassed the mayhem he’d witnessed of the teachers’ attempts to mellow out all the feisty children before.

Their efforts didn’t amount to much.

The tallest of the boys leaned over his hardbound King James and vomited. The girls’ teacher, a bushy-eyebrowed and thick-haired young man with an oversized yellow tie, stormed into the room and ordered Malmey to call for an ambulance, as if he couldn’t do it himself. Malmey was way too busy occupying herself with reaching for a firm grip of the podium to lift herself from her crouch against the wall. More than one of the boys was sobbing.

Simon could have eventually begun to feel a sort of remorse over all this, feeling himself inclined to brood over the heartfelt distress and panic surrounding him, inclined to give in to regret, if it weren’t for the distraction of the apparition which began to materialize in the middle of it all.

No one seemed to notice to it; either the others within the room weren’t able to see it, or they were all witnessing so many diverse oddities at once which didn’t really exist that the apparition sort of blended into their individual trips.

But Simon certainly saw it, and it acquired his full attention. Rather than the vision upsetting him, he felt himself strangely at ease. This isn’t to say he wasn’t frightened, but the numbness of distance he experienced in relation to his surroundings had somehow prepared him for this.

For this...for the promised encounter with the little black boy’s ‘Beloved One.’

Her presence was as familiar to him as a mother’s to her child. He knew this apparition, somehow, and he knew that seeing her there had nothing to do with the effects of the punch, for he was sure the punch had nothing to do with this. Sure, for the greater part. Almost absolutely. This had to be real.

The being appeared at the head of the class and before the chalkboard. What existed below her waist was a mild torrent of air. Above this was a woman of silvery metallic skin whose long black hair covered both her breasts and her backside. Her hands were outstretched as though to exclaim, “Here I am,” her fingers crowned in twisting tar-black fingernails. Her facial features were a roadmap of ancient woes superimposed by an unblemished youthfulness and demanding sobriety. Apart from this, she carried in her actions and speech the definition of black humor, as if she couldn’t possibly take the entire situation she placed herself in seriously.

As if.

Then, upon fully achieving visibility and Simon’s attention, she folded her arms to get down to business and smiled down on him.

“Ah, Simon....it’s so good to finally and formally make your acquaintance,” The being said to him. “I am your mother. I am Salvatia.”

“My mother?” Simon said back to her, bewildered by the very sight of her presence and overwhelmed by the backdrop of frying Divine Jesus Christ kids on both sides of her.

Salvatia shrugged her shoulders in an imitation Jewish oy-vay. “Okay....in a manner-of-speaking, your mother.
Abolish the details. I am your mother, when you abolish the details and think about who has been the most notable influence on your life! Surely you remember me...our time together, when I took you in, when I let you go, when I entered your dreams and realities with little Nigel. Why, if it wasn’t for me, these nice innocent young ones around you wouldn’t be having the time of their very young lives! Simon, don’t you remember me?”

Her voice, to Simon, was like the voice of a narrator for a public broadcasting segment featuring a Safari on wild animals. She was certainly educating, but she resounded with a monotone much like a voice-over reciting a scripted page...as though she was paid to talk, as though she had a motive behind her words....

“Yes,” Simon said bluntly, deliberately, almost bitterly, “I remember you.”

“Good,” Salvatia told him, slowly approaching him, the torrent mist upon which she hovered devouring the metal chairs in her way, “I knew you would. I apologize for my use of the timing with which I chose to show myself, but with all this chaos going on I thought it was perfect timing. You see, I require many distractions to come to you this way, live via satellite, and believe me...you are my satellite...because the closer I get to you, my son, the greater the potential of my being seen by anyone. I figure if I should risk being seen, I may as well make it so that people are distracted by something worse if they should see me. Otherwise, they’d lose they’re fucking minds. I think they’re distracted enough. What do you think?”

Simon transferred his gaze to the room about him, to the screaming children toppling over each other in effort to flee out the door, a frantic Malmey following afterwards, fearfully glancing to see if the creature within the room was coming after her. It was to a profound degree apparent that Salvatia was indeed being seen.

“Oh, well, so they can see me now,” Salvatia responded to all the hullabaloo. “What the hell; they’re tripping!! I suppose, though, I better make this short. Dammit! We never spend much time together, do we? At any rate, I have a proposition for you. You’re a promising young lad and have done every single thing I’ve told you to do so far. Told you to do, however indirectly. I’ve been shaping you, Simon, seasoning you to my ultimate recipe. I need you, my boy, to help me break the barrier and get me back into your world once again.

“You see, Simon, I was a part of your world once, and I was doing very goddamn good in it. You are my only hope to emerge back into your world triumphant, and knowing what I learned over hundreds of years, I can make it so that anyone else like me, trapped within the same inhospitable dimension as I am, can return to your world as I will do, but only through me and me alone. You can make this happen for me, Simon. I, in turn, can give something back to you. If you help me, I can earn you back your right to eternal life. You must help kill someone for me, Simon. You must help me kill your brother.”

“My brother?” Simon said, quite dismayed. His alertness was at its pinnacle with this creature before him, as was his confusion. Perhaps brother was a manner-of-speaking as well as her referring to herself as mother.

“No technicalities, we haven’t the time,” Salvatia waved her hands in dismissal. “Besides, you still have a lot of training to do. You’ll be hearing from me often until then, until the day arrives when you are ready for me, I assure you. It’ll make you get used to me. There’s so much to plan and prepare for. By the way, we don’t have to fret over the consequences of today’s Children’s Study lesson. You’ve got the same stuff in your system as everybody else, so they sure as hell won’t blame you. And as for my proposition: I know you’ve already said yes....”
It took Simon almost five years to say “yes”, actually.

Throughout her life as a human, Salvatia proved herself to be a bonafide leader, a take-charge woman of near-legendary repute who dealt with matters personally when all others’ efforts failed her. When others didn’t or
couldn’t follow through for her, she always found a way to get what she wanted on her own. Humans possess that power to achieve, once they set their priorities straight and strive to abide by the goals they set for themselves without compromise. In life, Salvatia was never exempt from this truth; in fact, though evil in heart as she was, she was head and shoulders over a majority of humankind when it came down to the simple saying if ya wanna get something done ya gotta do it yourself... if you can’t get anywhere by any other means.

With that said...now, after hundreds of years of not having the power to do anything at all to speak of, Salvatia finally and absolutely had no choice but to rely on a wretched fourteen-year-old nobody of a Dreg.

It was a bitch to be a Magdalene.

To get right down to it, Salvatia held no love for Simon BoLeve. He was plainly her meal ticket to regaining the power to do things for herself once more...her meal ticket to regaining that power and with a vengeance. Simon could do whatever he chose to do with his end of the deal; she didn’t give a shit.

Through Simon, she could potentially do whatever she wished, moreso than she ever could do as a human.

Herself.

She never held a greater hope in anyone other than herself. Ever. Until she learned of the existence of a Dreg. Until Simon.

Because this time, everything depended on him, the little rat bastard. Everything depended on whether or not he wanted to help her... and it was all up to him helping her at the right time.

Over the past five years, since her first proposition to Simon during the majestic catastrophe they’d both invoked at the Church of the Divine Jesus Christ, Salvatia manipulated and contrived numerous schemes for Simon to aid her in killing Andrew Erlandson.

The hundreds of years of being able to do nothing more than to observe the physical realm had made her wise, and once she’d learned of the value in finding a Dreg, she knew what must be accomplished in order to walk once again as an interdimensional being, to have the ability to roam where living humans roam, to become physical as often as she wished. It was all cut and dry and good as pie: 1. Locate a Dreg. 2. Manipulate his life so that he could eventually freely choose without conscience to kill his own brother.

Nobody said it would be easy.

The chemistry Salvatia was concerned with dealt partly in the very thing that banished her into her Magdalene status in the first place. To reiterate, a Watchmaid cannot allow its Everborn to die, lest that Watchmaid become a Magdalene....

Well....

If she could manage a downhome Everborn death, yet even by the hands of its own soulless twin, which was a given, that Everborn’s Watchmaid would become banished to a Magdalene status all her own.

And Simon, the Dreg, would conceivably claim his Everborn twin brother’s immortal Everborn soul.

Most importantly, Simon’s brand spanking new immortal self would hold the power to proclaim Salvatia as his brand spanking new Watchmaid, therefore abolishing her Magdalene status and replacing poor, pitiful Bari who in turn would become a Magdalene herself. Of course. In theory.

It made perfect sense.

Also, lest one forget, it was prophesied.

If it worked, no more Andrew, no more Bari. Just think of it: Simon and his Watchmaid, Salvatia instead.

Simon and Salvatia. It had a ring to it.

And, oh boy, it all wouldn’t stop there, not by a long shot.

This sort of thing had never been done before. In all of time, no other Magdalene had made such an accomplishment. Potentially, a Magdalene reinstated as a Watchmaid may not be psycho-genetically bound to the rules of a normal Watchmaid. This would mean that her allegiance to her Everborn may not be instinctual or mandatory and she could roam about as she pleased pursuing her own interests. Hell... if Simon’s life should come to some fateful end, who knows? Maybe she would never become a Magdalene again! Oh, the blessed, unspeakable power!!

If this was the case, the result of such a contrivance, then another factor stood to reason: any other Magdalene could come to her and she could let them in on her little secret. Perhaps she would hold the power to release them to become free and reinstated Watchmaid again, if all they would do was to but come to her and swear their allegiance.

Hey, an army of vengeance-seeking ex-Magdalene now Watchmaids exempt from the traditional rules....

Under Salvatia’s leadership, they could very well rule the physical world.

What a vision. It took centuries to develop.

And it all depended upon whether or not Simon was in the mood to help her. She could only manipulate his life so much....

It took five years for Simon to ultimately give in to a plan and to make an attempt to follow through with
it.

That, and it took five years for his consent to coincide with enough circumstances to make it happen...as usual, at the right place and at the right time....

***

As far as Simon understood it, the plan, on the night of its execution, was supposed to have been this:

He and the creature, which called herself Salvatia were to quietly make an entrance into the Erlandson residence together. Salvatia would simply step through the back door, materialize on the door’s other side, and open it for her cohort. Andrew Erlandson himself was, according to Salvatia’s keen foresight and intuition, guaranteed to be fast asleep beneath his warm and cozy Galactica spaceship squadron bedcovers. His mother and stepfather were to be fast asleep in the master bedroom. Bari, lastly, was suspected to be anywhere.

Salvatia was to subdue Bari in an anticipated confrontation and effort to restrain her long enough for Simon to do Andrew in with a retractable razor...Simon’s weapon of choice; too noisy with a gun...and besides, no one could scream with a slit throat.

The next step in the plan was to do away with Andrew’s mother and stepfather in the same manner, so that for the benefit of the Simon and Salvatia duo no stone was left unturned. There were other reasons, unsaid reasons, why Salvatia insisted on their deaths. Simon presumed that if this was indeed his brother and mother whose lives they were to take, the deaths of everyone in the household would close the door to any emotional curiosities plaguing Simon since day one. Salvatia did not want Simon turning sentimental on her...before, during, or after their dark deed.

Then why did she bother telling Simon that this was his brother and mother in the first place?

Salvatia had always seen to it that Simon would never get close enough to the real truth beforehand and went one step further in making sure his interests were kept to a minimum. This was not to be a family reunion here. It was imperative that Simon retained a physical and emotional distance.

This was all very confusing, even for a young man primed for murder and the supposed unbelievable results to follow. What held Simon in check were those supposed unbelievable results, the unspeakable freedom for both him and the Magdalene afterwards, and they were just enough to numb any embedded desires that a young man would have to uncover the secrets of where he once belonged.

But soon after he entered the house through the rear doorway and emerged quietly into the kitchen, making his way into the nebulous shadows of the expanse of living room, a deep familiarity struck him.

He’d been here before.

He withdrew a penlight from his jacket pocket and clicked the button that turned it on. Its beam was bright but narrow. Simon flashed it upon the fluffy red and green pillows of a couch and a love seat, upon a wooden coffee table he was inches away from knocking against with his knee. There was a television on a stand, its rabbit ears reaching upwards towards an oblong painting of a rocky seashore. To the left of him, there was a bookcase riddled with books, a recliner, a sewing machine on a large end table, a tabletop compact stereo upon a lengthy wooden entertainment center sporting record albums through an opened sliding door below. Behind him, as he turned, was a homely brick fireplace, and upon its mantle sat framed photographs as were likewise hung above upon the wall.

He flashed the thin light across each one, momentarily studying the complete strangers displayed in each frame and portrait, one by one, with an occasional glance beside and behind him in wary alertness for any sign of Salvatia - who disappeared since his entrance-- or for anyone stirred from slumber by his presence or by the urge for a midnight snack.

The immediacy of his situation left him with little time to peruse the way he preferred. He came across a snapshot of a dark-skinned black-haired man sporting a beer belly and a foot-long fish upon a boat at sea. Another was a portrait of a light-toned woman, probably in her early forties, with long brown hair and fleshy cheeks, flashing a stiffened smile and wearing a black evening dress before a generic backdrop of autumn leaves. Another portrait was of the two together, the previous man this time a bit older and more the woman’s age, in a wedding photograph.

The next picture Simon came across was that of a boy, autumn leaves backdrop and everything, smiling whimsically and seated casually upon a stool.

Simon gasped; the boy appeared young, about seven or eight years old. And he looked exactly like Simon did, when he was that age. Same boyish features, same brown hair even cut to nearly the same length and parted to the right, brown eyes and painted-thin eyebrows, rounded face and chin, straight pool-stick tip rounded nose....

Before Simon could turn away, his penlight veered to yet another photograph, a photograph nestled dead center and prominent upon the fireplace mantle.

The photograph was of two infant babes, side by side and against one another, heads touching, in button-up
white bedtime knits decked in blue rocking horses, nested wide-eyed and lying face-up at the camera against an enormous white pillow.

*And they were very nearly a mirror image of each other.*

That was why Salvatia had bothered to tell Simon at the start that this Andrew was his brother, this brother he was to kill.

It was true.

And Simon would have found this to be true, eventually.

He was confronted again by the feeling that he'd been here before, but this time the feeling was more profound, followed by a thought, perhaps, an awareness....

He had lived here before.

If this was the case, that his mother and brother had resided here since he was an infant and ever since...since whatever conflicting circumstances separated him from this house...they had remained here in anticipation of his return.

That was silly. They would've considered him dead by now.

Yet here he was.

He returned.

To kill them.

His attentions were riveted from the fireplace mantle when he heard the screams and he turned to the vast living room darkness before him, his penlight poised. He moved rapidly past the furniture towards the entrance of the hallway. From there, he didn't know which way to turn, for the screams had silenced.

Standing within the hallway, his penlight flashed within the darkness upon an upright metal wall heater and upon one, two, three, four opened doors.

He entered the opened door to his left. As he did, a commotion emitted from the hall behind him from one of the other rooms, followed by a deep bellowing gasp, a brisk *ka-thump* as though something struck against a wall, then the sound of shattering glass abrupt enough to be, perhaps, the toppling of a vase or some other fragile structure.

Simon pivoted from the yawning entranceway of the first room, swung back, then turned back again to the disturbance, which suddenly silenced. He was panicked, unsure of himself or where to go, or, frankly, if he should remain in the house at all.

Simon became at once struck with the possibility that there may have been someone resting within the room he now occupied, someone awakened by the same commotion and by now alert to his presence, someone who may be upon him before he knew it. He turned again anxiously and pressed himself further into this room, the nervousness which overwhelmed him tightening his grip upon the penlight in effort to maintain a steady focus, as well as a grip on his senses. His eyes searched, his penlight canvassed.

There, before him, was an unkempt bed and a vacant room. Simon immediately knew, by the look of things, by the sight of the furniture and the posters and toys that this room belonged to Andrew.

And Andrew was nowhere within.

***

The sharp edge of the retractable razor was efficient enough to slice straight through a sheet of notebook paper as though it was air and the same effect applied to the unblemished skin over Simon's right jawbone. He traced the bone line down from an inch before his earlobe and ceased just below the corner of his lips and short of his chin.

He could feel the blood flow beautifully and rapidly across the lower side of his face and towards his neck, and he felt no pain. It gave him the sensation of shifting his cheek into a running drinking fountain, except that what flowed was warm.

The warmth was good; Andrew's room, in comparison, was cold, as was the rest of the house, as was the empty bed which Simon now sat upon.

Cold, as was the smell of death. Simon could almost inhale the death, see it stream in vapors from his exhaled breath.

Death. Fresh death.

From the master bedroom, the room to the right down the hall past the furnace.

It was *his* fault. He was to blame for this intrusion, for this crime. It all originated from his consent and he had been conditioned for it all along.

Which was why it was a good idea to inscribe such a work of art upon his face, by the way. It gave him a subtly sublime comfort, an outlet for his guilt, a release from inhibited remorse...*if*, by this point in his very young life, he
could feel remorse.

This Salvatia entity, whoever or whatever she was, wherever she came from, was indeed real without a doubt, not a figment of a deranged and lonely child. If such a being could exist whose endeavors were responsible for Simon’s own daily realities, centered expressly on him, together with the munchkin minion of hers, which called himself Nigel, then the promises that brought him here must be true, just as true as she was real. It all stood to reason, the reason for his ultimate consent to take part in tonight’s escapade in the first place.

Salvatia was real, Nigel was real, as real as his own existence. There lay the meaning of his life, the essence of his destiny...what Salvatia proscribed him to attempt with her held a logical purpose, a purpose for her, and a purpose for him. A salvation for both...to kill his own brother was to achieve salvation for him and for her, for all time.

The problem was, he was never utterly convinced this was his own brother, his own family, the family residing in this house.

*Correction.....*
The family who now *once* resided....

Now, after five years of wondering but never having been granted the opportunity to find out for certain, this was his family. *For certain.*

And somehow, for some reason, his brother was nowhere to be found and remained alive. Simon had considered the possibility that Andrew wouldn’t be there, but he never expected to be as relieved over his absence as he was.

He never expected the photographs in the living room, never expected to be pitted against the truth.

He never anticipated the plan to go this way, to bring such enlightenment, to bring such woe.

Salvatia was there, though, in the house, and by now anywhere. Having discovered Andrew’s absence, she took it upon herself to do away with the mother and the stepfather anyway...perhaps in rage toward a plan ultimately failed, perhaps to partially complete a plan already initiated if nothing more. From what Simon had gathered, Salvatia could materialize within a perimeter of twenty meters of him, being that he was special and all that. He was in the house and that was all it took for her to invade their bedroom and to kill them.

Thus generated his first scar. It was *his* fault, for he never even knew the woman who was his own mother.

The scar made him feel better, a little better.

Held in the opposite hand from his razor was a children’s book, a ten-page flip-book depicting a monster upon each page, a cartoon scribbling per page for every childhood nightmarish atrocity a kid could imagine, each one an allegory for a child to understand and overcome. There was a monster in the closet, a monster under the bed, and on another page, even a monster among the dustballs behind the couch. Andrew must’ve enjoyed this book.

Upon the opened page which Simon held within his lap and facing him was sketched simple beast, its contorted green body grimacing and awkward. The caption below its depiction read, plainly typed,

**SCRATCH**

...the monster from outside.

Suddenly Simon was distracted from this, from the blood, from the book, by Salvatia’s distant voice. The voice summoned him to the school park beyond the house across the street, away and into the night. And, reluctantly, he went.
Throughout the accumulated years of the average fourteen-year-old, one can experience many changes. Andrew Erlandson was, overall, no exception to this, but for him there had always been a small handful of constants.

He had always lived within the same one-floor, three-bedroom Gilbert Street house, situated across the street from the Dr. Jonas E. Salk elementary school and the grass field posterior of Magnolia High.

He had never known his father, A.J. Erlandson, the Hollywood B-movie director who disappeared from the world without so much as a fleeting farewell mere months before Andrew was born.

Andrew’s mother was always there for him. She had raised him, bonded with him, took care of him, would’ve died for him. Andy’s mom shared with him the bewildered, empty grief of personal loss, the feelings of being only half a family...the lost other half nothing more than a perished void. That void was filled to a healing extent when his mother succumb to a marriage proposal a handful of years ago making Dan Risselbërgen Andrew’s inevitable stepfather. And he was a good man. Andrew and his mother, however, chose to stick with their own last name.

Bari was always there for him, too. When someone has lived with a presence like Bari since the first day he began to observe the world around him, that presence simply settles into it all and takes its place within the varied mental categories of normalcy. When Andrew was very young, he took it for granted that everyone knew about Bari as well as he did. He soon learned the contrary, that no one else knew about Bari but himself and decidedly his relationship with Bari was best kept secret. In the eyes of those around him, Andrew oftentimes retreated into a reclusive fantasy world, a world where Bari solely existed, and oftentimes Andrew himself questioned his own sanity during the long periods when Bari chose to remain quiet and unseen even by him.

The remaining constant in Andrew’s life was, together with the absence of his father, the likewise mysterious absence of his brother. His brother had played an intimate role in the first two years of Andrew’s life, the only years Andrew could never truly remember at all. The sole remnants of his brother dwelt within his mother’s latent memories, a stagnant police report, and the lingering possibility that he may still be alive.

Then again, the same could be said about A.J. Andy’s mother had suffered for years with that possibility. Others, including her, attributed Andrew’s periodic reclusion into fantasy to the traumas of his lost father and brother. To them, Bari and those related fantasies were invented to replace the loss.

Andrew hadn’t the faintest idea what an Everborn was, nor that he was his own father reborn, nor that his brother was indeed alive...and that his brother was currently involved in a conspiracy to kill him.

Andrew retired to his room early that night, around about nine o’clock. He replaced the clothes he wore all day with sweat pants and a white t-shirt, pulled down his bedcovers, switched off the room light and clicked on the knob of his table lamp. It was the usual routine on a typical Sunday night, but he was unusually tired and bored.

The entire weekend had proven to be uneventful. The small circle of friends in his life had been unavailable, having parent-decree matters to tend to and Andrew himself had been stuck with yard work alongside his stepfather, Dan. The greenhouse he and Dan built together the previous summer next to the backyard patio was growing increasingly depressing, since the weather had grown cold and his Venus fly traps had blackened and withered. Those plants were his prize and how he’d loved feeding them chunks of ground, beef and struggling red ants with tweezers.

His high school homework was completed and rested in folders amidst textbooks beside his table lamp, below shelves of multitudes of read and reread paperbacks. Emerging into high school was easy academically, but the social complications for a newly initiated ninth-grade introvert expanded way too many unwanted horizons.

Andrew wasn’t exactly hating life; he was merely in post-pubescent purgatory.
He sat upon the edge of his bed and sedately surveyed his room. His bedroom presented a curious feast for the eyes, a feast for a boy or girl of any age. Posters of movies and movie monsters matted the otherwise antique-white walls. The overhead ceiling dripped rubber spiders and space figures of various shapes and sizes, held suspended by shoe laces and string. At the corner desk, a typewriter came up for air amidst a sea of typewritten pages and drawings of original stick-figure-like cartoons. A pile of notebooks upon his bedside table near his school textbooks harbored a handwritten collection of completed and half-completed short stories. Earlier in the day, he’d determined to work a few pages of short story scribblings before he went to sleep, but tonight this just wasn’t going to happen.

Tonight, he was tired and bored. He switched on his clock radio, but even Doctor Demento could not give him solace.

This was a weary, lonely night, and Andrew eventually called it one, and fell into a deep sleep.

Even Bari hadn’t shown herself for weeks.

He hadn’t a clue that Bari would show herself tonight, finally, not to mention a few special guest stars that would make him anything but tired and bored for the rest of his life.
The Playground

Andrew awoke from a dreamless void with a start to find himself shivering from the outside frosty air. Yes, he was outside. Disoriented, his senses gathered to absorb the situation. It was difficult to grasp, being that he was freezing his ass off, being that the last thing he knew was the pillow of his warm and comfy bed in the darkness of his room.

Now, not only was he outside, but as he looked down upon himself where he was sitting, he saw that he was naked.

He was naked.

He sprang upwards in an immediate panic upon seeing this, only to knock his head into a vertical metal pole situated beside him, sending him back down again with his head lowered and into his lap, his hand raised towards the now-throbbing pain coursing above his right ear.

What a fine how-do-you-do to reality.

When he raised his gaze to the world around him a second time, his awareness registered, and he knew exactly where he was.

He was at the playground of the elementary school across the street.

He could not fathom how he got there or why, and since he lacked clothes of any sort, he was frightfully apprehensive. Despite the outrageous lack of reason or sanity in it all, it occurred to him that behind this obscene practical joke Bari lurked in the shadows.

The school grounds were still and quiet and graveyard-dead, save for an occasional breeze responsible for a greater part of the chill. Where he found himself was in the center of the first-thru-third-grade playground’s jungle gym, seated with legs outstretched before him and embedded within the inner patch of tall grass impossible to be mowed by the groundskeepers’ mowers. His bare buttocks and legs were drenched with the remaining wetness caused by late evening sprinklers, and in the distance he could view the sprish-sprish of the sprinklers at work past the lengthy asphalt of basketball courts and tetherball poles and foursquare spaces at the grassy opposite end where the fifth and sixth-graders of the daytime world engaged in recess and soccer and kick ball. He could see the distant sprinklers, but for some reason despite the quiet he could not hear them.

To his right there was another field of not only grass but a dozen or so tall evergreen trees, their branches swaying to the rhythm of the wind. Below them were the wooden lunch tables he recalled chasing friends around when he was younger and attending school here, swapping childhood roles from Superman to Star Wars characters to teasing the objects of long-lost crushes. This was all bordered by the rickety fences of the backyards of homes at the rear of the school, their lights now off and dormant to the milieu of the late late night.

To his left and past the obstruction of the water bead-strewed jungle gym bars he could see the extensive plateau of the school building itself, sectioned by rows of hallways and hedges and grass, obscuring the outer stretch of parking lot and Gilbert Street beyond, and the adjacent row of homes where he resided. By the look of things, the time was an hour or two after midnight, or easily perhaps more, for the timer running the exterior lights of the school had clicked to an energy-saving semi-darkness where the moon and the stars generated more illumination to the grounds than the two remaining lights perched around the center main office.

To Andrew’s rear, past the plain metallic merry-go-round and the row of swings, stood the chain-linked fence encompassing the school’s kindergarten playground. Beyond that there was a dry cement river of gutter reaching from the curb of the street in one direction and extending past the homes at the school’s rear; chain-link fenced on either side, it served as a partition between the elementary school and the expanse of field and running track leading to the high school next door.

There was a portion of this section of gutter and fence, which held an opening and a wide wooden plank for the young people of the high school to sojourn across on their trek toward home.

Andrew scanned the area, his thoughts running rampant towards a quick solution to this nightmare. Technically, he was only across the street from his home. If all remained quiet as it was, he might get away with a simple jaunt away from the school, away and to the safety of his house. He merely hoped that when he’d arrive there, he wouldn’t be locked out. Then what would he do?

The answer lay right behind and beside him. Upon the wet grass as he turned to his extreme right were his sweat pants and t-shirt, tossed into an inside-out mound in the middle of the first inner segment of jungle gym bars.

Had he walked here in his sleep and disrobed during some incredibly wet dream? This was unheard of for him, to have done such a thing. Still, it was a relief to discover he hadn’t abandoned his clothes. As he moved to collect them, he called out Bari’s name, softly, in hopes that she’d appear with assistance and insight into all of this.
“Bari?“

His gaze darted about him and into the encompassing darkness as he gathered his sweat pants and proceeded to straighten them out.

Suddenly, as he cast his gaze behind him, his predicament escalated into something much worse. Three...no, four...figures were strolling his way from the grass field of the high school, making their way across the wooden plank of the cement gutter between the two schools.

Andrew called out for Ban again, this time in desperation, albeit just as softly so as not to be heard.

“Bari...Bari!”

The figures were treading along the chain-linked fence of the kindergarten area the next minute, much too close for Andrew to make a sound or to make a run for it without his unclad spectacle giving him away. If he remained perfectly still, perhaps they wouldn’t even notice his presence in passing....

As they closed in, strolling up casually, he could hear their conversing. One of the figures paused to bend down, a hand reaching into the grass. He reverted back up and continued onward with the rest, tossing whatever he’d retrieved, probably rocks, this way and that. Another figure was smoking, another halted to light a smoke for the fourth one.

Andrew slumped his body down to camouflage himself in the shadows as the four figures approached. As he tilted his head to keep a trained eye upon them, he held his breath as it looked as if the entourage were changing their course towards the rear perimeter of the school, past the trees and to the back fences of the neighboring homes.

But the next thing he knew they were doing just the opposite and made their way to the section of swing sets between himself and the kindergarten area, directly behind him, only several yards away.

Slowly, meticulously, he positioned his sweat pants atop his legs and waist; at least, in the event they noticed him, this would give the appearance that he was halfway clothed. He wouldn’t dare risk the movement required to put them on fully, sicne they were so close.

He turned the other way, to catch better sight of them. They were at the swings now, flicking the orange cherries of their cigarette butts to the ground. One of them, the shortest, took hold of a swing and spun it around, afterwards flinging it with a clang into a pole before it hit one of his companions.

“Cuminum, asswipe,” spat the one hit with the swing, the tallest of the lot.

“Man, I am stoned,” exclaimed the swinger. He was clearly Hispanic, Andrew could tell by his accent. The others wore dark, thick jackets except for him. This one was covered in a mere t-shirt baring some indistinct logo, and jeans. He must’ve been freezing almost as much as Andrew, but, hey, he was stoned.

“Everybody must get....” said the tallest, in jovial sing-song.

“Yeah,” admonished another, abandoning his place at the kindergarten’s chain-linked fence and stepping up to the tallest. This one apparently wore glasses, for as he walked they fell from his face and he stooped to retrieve them. After this, he continued towards the tallest, replacing the glasses on his face to clasp hands with his friend.

“Ralston, my man! You are hot hot hot!”

“I’m hot for some tush, Bel Geddes,” an enthusiastic Ralston said to him.

“So where to now?” asked the Hispanic mesmerized with the swings, now seated and twirling about upon the one he’d flung. “Hey, Bel Geddes, what about your sister? She home? Let’s go to your pad, man, see if she’s home.”

“Fuck you,” Bel Geddes responded. “My sister hates you. No offense, she hates all my friends. Hey Ralston, what about you? Let’s hang at your place, strike up another fattie, watch some tube.”

“No way,” Ralston said. “You know my mom. Let’s hang out here.”

“It’s fuckin’ freezin’ here,” said the Hispanic guy, and no wonder, with his mere t-shirt and all.

“Hey Michael,” Ralston said to the fourth, who as of yet had yet to say a word. Andrew was forced to twist his neck to catch sight of him, and when he did, he found the bastard directly behind him, not more than four or five yards away, crouched, his gaze jetting outwards in Andrew’s direction. “Michael. You with us, man? What about your pad?”

But Michael had surely caught sight of Andrew and the following few seconds confirmed it. Andrew began to shiver again, this time not from the cold, but from dreadful alarm.

“Guys,” Michael announced, “there’s a dude over there.”

“Over where?” said Ralston. Already, Michael was sauntering up to the jungle gym. The others took notice and followed, until Andrew was surrounded by the four inquisitive stragglers.

Andrew raised his gaze to each of them in mute salutation and with a quirky half-smile, his ungainly defenses overwrought by the desperate inclination to play the part as if absolutely nothing was wrong. On one hand, he was naked, literally, and vulnerable. Even if he was a fighter, which he wasn’t, it would be no easy task defending himself like this. On the other hand, Bari was sworn to be around to protect him at all times.

Bari. This was likely her fault to begin with.
Now that the four were upon him, their appearances matched the mental sketches Andrew had drawn in his mind during their liaison at the swings, intensely personified now, extremely threatening. They were hoodlum rock n’ rollers, at least two years Andrew’s seniors and undoubtedly high schoolers, or high school dropouts. Each was crowned with short dark hair and various shades of dark skin save for one, the tallest, by far the whitest, the one whom the others called Ralston. The moonlight revealed his long, shoulder-length hair, and at this new angle Andrew could view the black baseball cap he clenched within his right hand.

Ralston knelt down in between the bars directly before Andrew and intrusively closer than his counterparts, who were now leaning against the jungle gym bars but otherwise stood erect.

Ralston took the initiative to be the first to speak at this point. “What’ve we got here?”

“Dude,” remarked Bel Geddes, the one with the glasses, to Andrew, “you look fucked up.”

Andrew took solace in that they were stoned, and that consequently any response should do. After all, for all they knew, was a hoodlum rock n’ roller high schooler, too. He said, “I got in a fight with my folks. Got kicked out on my ass.”

“Bummer,” said Bel Geddes.

“That’s fucked up,” said Ralston. “I’ve been kicked out on my ass, but never like this, at, what, what time is it, anyway? You must be freezin’ your ass off, lookin’ like that.”

“I am,” Andrew said. The illusion was working, his sweat pants draped across him as they were. “It’s okay. No sweat. I’m used to it.”

“Hey,” exclaimed Michael, the bastard who discovered him in the first place, leaning dramatically closer and through the first set of bars, “this dude’s got no clothes on!”

The bastard.

Ralston leaned closer, too, his eyes studying. “What? No shit.”

Andrew was speechless. There was a pause amongst them, and if it was any longer a pause, it would’ve allowed time for him to summon an explanation. But it was too late for that.

Unexpectedly, Ralston commenced what began to seem like a slow, disgusted reversal from Andrew as he withdrew halfway from the mouth of the jungle gym. He lifted his baseball cap and placed it upon his head, adjusted it.

Andrew took advantage of this pause and rather than spend it proclaiming excuses for his nudity he endeavored to hasten his sweat pants over his ankles. He managed to merely bring them up to his kneecaps when Ralston threw himself forward and pounced upon Andrew.


And with that, Ralston went for Andrew’s ankles, took a firm grasp of them, and with spontaneous ease slid Andrew’s body across the wet grass and out of the sanctuary of the jungle gym.

The nameless Hispanic swing-set guy called over to Ralston, “Hey, give him a chance, man...let him put his pants on....”

But the others ignored this and Ralston initiated a swift kick to the side of Andrew’s rib cage, then sent a blow just short of his hip. The other two flanking each side of Ralston followed suit, the nameless one helplessly looking on as his friends shouted and cursed, as Andrew curled into a ball and took it in all its painful humility, longing for Bari, feeling by now she would never come.

As for the ones who proceeded to beat him, they continued to do so, allowing Andrew a merciful pause so he could pull up his sweats, though they wouldn’t let him be just yet.

For now, they’ve settled on a place to hang out at and found something with which to occupy their time.

***

Andrew experienced more humility than pain from the beating. Their blows could have hurt a hell of a lot worse if these weren’t typical high school bullies more apt to cruelly teasing him than to seriously injure him. But with each slam dunk to the head, he felt himself becoming severely dizzy.

Just then, out of the direction of the dark asphalt sea behind them, there cried a loud youthful voice.

“Leave him alone!”

Andrew’s assailants instantly discarded him on the grass and turned to look, all at once, all in the same direction like a group of rogue vultures startled from their writhing quarry. Their rumpus had attracted an on-looking guest. To Andrew, the voice was relievingly similar to Bari’s; when he managed to turn over on his side to catch a glimpse of whatever it was the older youths were seeing, the figure he beheld did not match Bari’s voice.

There, on the edge of the blacktop but shy of the grass, too far into the shadows to be completely recognized, stood a boy of Andrew’s height and age. It was a boy in obscure clothing his hands in his pockets, glaring straight at
them.

Ralston bitterly remarked to Andrew, “Who is this, your twin sister?”

The nameless Hispanic guy, the only one who refused participation in the beating, began to speak, the next to capture the attentions of all. Andrew maneuvered himself upon his back again to see.

No sooner than he’d begun to utter the first few syllables of whatever it was he was trying to say, the Hispanic friend without further warning bellowed in impromptu agony. His left hand grappled for a firm hold of a bar of the jungle gym beside him, as if he was fighting to pull away from an unseen something which held him where he stood. His bellows evolved next to screams. If his friends didn’t know any better, this teenager was spontaneously tripping off a drug far more psychedelic than weed.

On cue with a crescendo of screams there came an immense bloating from beneath the teenager’s shirt, like a balloon inflating between his chest and the clothing, stretching outwards from his ribs with knuckle indentations in the fabric as if he’d withdrawn his arms from his jacket and slipped them inside his t-shirt to exhibit a freakish delirium. But his hands were where they should be, clenched into fists at the mouths of his sleeves, one gripping a bar of the jungle gym and holding on for dear life. His shirt expanded until it spread-eagled his jacket. Tremendously thick black claws tore through the material to reveal bloodied, attenuated silvery hands outstretched and enlivened by a blinding light which arose from behind him and impaled him.

In the next instant, the teenager was split apart evenly by a vision somewhat resembling a monstrous luminescent earthquake crack, ripping apart clothing and reaching down past his groin, separating the boy in two, giving way to a dark and silver creature stepping from between his macabre halves. Each section of the young man flopped limply to the opposite side of the other, innards swelling into two mounds of twisted, seeping red flesh and bulging severed bone.

The being whose presence now filled the space where the nameless teenager stood moments before was not Bari. It held enough characteristics for Andrew to assume that it was another Watchmaid, or at least was related to the sort of creature Bari was. But Bari would’ve come to his rescue in a way where she wouldn’t kill anyone, for one thing, let alone in such a theatrically vile way. This being that now displayed herself before them hovered upon a stream of legless vaporous smoke, much like a genie, much like Bari, but the skin of this being was silver whereas Bari’s was coppertone brass, and her long hair and fingernails and the nipples of her breasts were a glossy thick black where Bari’s were, well, a flat black. Her radiant orange eyes penetrated all she surveyed quite like a Watchmaid’s, with eyes like Bari’s.

Salvatia’s dramatic advent climaxed with a yawning flex of her otherworldly arms in a languid *ta-dah*, emerging into human reality as one would get out of bed and face the new day. The bright light around her faded. She was there, among the physical, in the flesh. She looked upon them all, and proclaimed, “God knows how long I’ve been wanting to do that. I am Salvatia and I’ll be your death for the evening.”

And with that, she hurled herself forward and into Michael and then Bel Geddes, her tenebrous hands seizing both their throats and snipping their necks with a dual swift flick of her wrists. The bodies slumped lifeless to the grass, each alongside the opposing halves of the first friend to go.

Salvatia’s eyes locked onto Andrew’s as she commenced to lurk toward him in a stalking glide, every inch nearer drawing the maniacal grin on her face into a grimace of mounting satisfaction. She spoke again as she closed in to him, speaking not to Andrew but to the boy-stranger at the edge of the blacktop. “Simon...you suppose I stand a chance at taking the young Everborn’s life myself? You have to admit I’ve earned straight A’s in slaying everyone else tonight, yes, in that I’ve excelled with...with flying colors. Impressive, to be capable of doing that with the mere power of a Dreg’s presence. So can I slay an Everborn? Let’s see...”

Andrew, still strewn upon his back, elbowed himself away from the beast in terrified angst. His body slid easily across the grass as he fought for the effort to escape her...until he plowed himself directly into Ralston. Ralston hadn’t fled, but remained a few feet behind him all along. Fear and panic had swept him off his feet and the cap from his head and he was sprawled out upon the grass just as Andrew was. Ralston was numb with shock and could not move...horroried, all he could do was stare.

Suddenly Salvatia’s mad glare faltered as her attentions were drawn to Ralston and her expression lapsed into an intensely quizzical fixation as soon as she laid eyes on him. She abruptly ceased her advance and studied him, dumbfounded.

There came a profound silence like a blanket cast over a flame to smother the mayhem and Andrew took the opportunity to pitch a glance over his shoulder at Ralston, then beyond him.

The figure of the boy at the edge of the blacktop was no longer there.

Then came a new voice, *Bari’s* voice this time, inarguably and clear as a newborn’s first cloudless sunrise, emerging from the silence and from every direction, addressing Salvatia. “You hadn’t expected there to be two of them, did you, you venerable monstrosity. You only expected one. *Mine.* But lo and behold, there is *another*
Everborn, isn’t there? I was waiting for you, Salvatia. Let it be known to you...you can’t fuck with me!”

Andrew turned.

Salvatia turned.

Bari had materialized before the metal merry-go-round, hovering ever closer with all the confidence of a veteran saint confronting an expert sinner, her orange eyes transfixed upon Salvatia. The two mythic beasts now faced each other, Salvatia now poised for mortal combat. Bari’s eyes charged with readiness, as she closed in further, her body and the wispy air currents where her legs should be were cool and relaxed. The breeze of post-witching hour had grown into icy torrents, capturing the long black hair from both their heads and if the beings were any closer to each other Andrew was certain their hairs would interlock.

Without warning and as a fevered last-chance effort, Salvatia reverted to Andrew and lunged at him, her claws slashing the air, jagged stalactites and stalagmites of teeth protruding from the gaping cave of her mouth.

Another being stepped into her path just then, between Salvatia and Andrew, and at first Andrew assumed it was Bari teleporting herself to protect him.

But Bari remained where she was, in the direction of the merry-go-round.

This being was another Watchmaid.

By Andrew’s point of view, the backside of this Watchmaid could’ve been mistaken for Bari’s any day. This Watchmaid was adorned with lengthy, thick black hair as well, the same length as the other two. But skin gleamed and glistened with a brass-like coppertone complexion in an exact likeness to Bari’s, though the body of this one was smaller, more petite.

Salvatia aborted her lunge and Andrew was saved once again. The two Watchmaids faced Salvatia, hovering in on her and Salvatia likewise faced them. She was ready for them, if they were to attack and she stubbornly stood her ground. Her orange eyes glowed like daggers at the unexpected Watchmaid’s intrusion upon the scene. It stood to reason that if there was an unanticipated second Everborn she encountered in tonight’s scheme, there’d be another Watchmaid right along with it. The thing was, Salvatia never saw this plot twist coming, not by a long shot.

Bari had foreseen Salvatia’s plan with her Dreg tonight, the plan to overtake her and to kill Andrew, her Everborn. Andrew was hers, yes, and being so she was in the focal point of the knowledge that he had a Dreg twin. So, she’d orchestrated a solution herself, her own plan, involving another Watchmaid to back her up...a Watchmaid Salvatia would never be able to detect was so near.

“I am Camelia,” announced the second Watchmaid. “To kill an Everborn, any Everborn, you must first go through me. Be gone, Magdalene!”

Andrew could almost faintly grasp what was taking place between the three beasts, much like comprehending a dream he’d dreamt fading with each waking moment into obscurity.

Andrew twisted his gaze against his better instincts towards Ralston. Ralston was in the exact same position as in Andrew’s previous glance, sprawled out and petrified upon the grass.

Could it be that this shameless stoner coward who took pleasure in beating on Andrew in the most vulnerable circumstance of his life...had a Watchmaid, too?

Camelia was Ralston’s Watchmaid. Ralston must therefore be...just like Andrew!

Upon realizing this, Andrew was certain that soon after this was over, Bari would convince him that this was all just a dream. She’d done that sort of now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t thing before, he was sure of it, and this experience was a guaranteed contender for a maturing Everborn to be forced to forget. He realized it now and he’d remember it later...at some point, when Bari would see fit to allow him to.

“So, Camelia,” Salvatia hissed, “you think you can get in the way of me and destiny? How many Magdalene have you encountered, by the way? You haven’t the foggiest notion what odds we have against each other, do you? Maybe, just maybe, I can let this world taste of the human flesh that was once your own, now transformed into what you are now, yet to vanish back into this world, lying as dead carnage for all to see! The Magdalene are only but a myth to you. How can you possibly know how to deal with me? How can you know that to deal with me means death, a disintegration back to the human you once were, in bloody remains?”

It was true, for Bari and Camelia had never encountered a Magdalene. They only knew of their legend. They never even considered the consequences nor the outcome of a confrontation with a Magdalene. They only knew enough to protect their Everborn.

Bari and Camelia had known each other for as long as Andrew and Ralston had lived their lives within shared regions. Though Bari was relatively new to this Watchmaid business, Camelia held the appointment of Watchmaid to Ralston for five times as many lives as Bari had been for Andrew. Camelia had witnessed the accidental death of another Watchmaid long ago, the Watchmaid to whom Bari was successor soon afterwards. That previous Watchmaid had been very old and Camelia’s only friend.

She was now Bari’s only friend and equal as well and she would not let anything happen to her.
Or Bari’s Everborn.

So when the two Magdalene each separately sensed Salvatia’s presence and intentions earlier that day, it was agreed that they’d have no choice but to combine forces and face her together. A detailed strategy was crucial. To take the Magdalene by surprise was essential. As for her Dreg, he proved to be no great threat; his fascination with his roots would sedate him, hold him in deep reflection, keep him soul-searching long enough to think twice about killing anyone.

“But what of Ralston?” Bari had said to Camelia in constructing the plan. “You’d be putting your cherished one on the line, and he hasn’t even a clue you exist...let alone what he is. It’ll certainly toy with his sanity, if Salvatia doesn’t get to him first. If he dies, you would become a Magdalene yourself!”

“Which is precisely what Salvatia has in store for you!” Camelia had reminded her. “The Magdalene is plotting to destroy Andrew and his household and condemn you to eternal misery. Steal Andrew away from his house, at the right moment, to the playground across the street. When the Magdalene is inside the house and confounded, we will cause our Everborn to meet and to clash. Ralston, belligerent as he is, will cause a commotion she will surely sense. She hasn’t caught on to my presence yet, nor Ralston’s. We, Bari, can ambush her, both of us like sisters defending our sons. Regardless of what the Magdalene can do, together we have the advantage. If we prevail, we can manipulate the facts of the aftermath in the minds of our ‘Born and in the law should any human become involved, which is our blessed forte, we will have this encounter with the Magdalene in the bag. Until the next time.”

Bari would’ve done the same thing for Camelia.

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Bari spoke in stern retort to Salvatia’s intimidations. “Don’t underestimate us, Salvatia. We’re prepared for you. Be gone, Magdalene!”

Salvatia withdrew further as she turned from one Watchmaid to the other, her expression stricken more with the efforts to shroud her fear than the pressure to fight both of them at once. She inadvertently backstepped into the jungle gym, then resumed her ground. Her Dreg had vanished, retreating perhaps in cowardice or in anguish by his newfound sentiment, but he wasn’t far enough away yet for Salvatia to dematerialize.

There was still time to get to Erlandson.

In militant readiness for each other, the transparent bed of air currents upon which each hovered blazed as of white-hot fire, as a thumb and forefinger to the knob of a welder’s torch, like manifested adrenaline.

Not to be outdone, Salvatia’s stubborn instincts to have the last word bellowed forth like a war cry, “You will not stand between me and my destiny!”

Salvatia went for Camelia with no further hesitation, diving into her, her piercing black fingernails lashing, her mouth an unnaturally widened apocalypse of misshapen teeth, her hair a legion of poised strands like Medusa’s snakes readied to strike.

Neither Camelia nor Bari considered Salvatia’s own advantage...centuries of the fervent quest for a backdoor exit from a land of purgatory and for revenge. This was Salvatia’s moment to go for the gold.

Salvatia took Camelia down and with astonishing strength.

The two beasts toppled to the grass like giants just short of Andrew. With furious determination Salvatia wrestled her way toward him and a wide-eyed Andrew with fright-white skin squirmed deeper into the frozen-with-fear snapshot still of Ralston.

Salvatia’s claws reached in labored stretches mere inches from Andrew’s sweat pants as Camelia devoted every might of her being into pinning her away. Bari came upon Salvatia from behind, backhanding her own coppery arms beneath Salvatia’s for a deathlock shoulder hold. Together, they forced Salvatia back towards and into the metal bars of the jungle gym.

Salvatia lashed out again, grasped Camelia’s throat, dug with her claws, drew forth black blood gushing like an eruption of hot oil upon Salvatia’s hands. Transparent hands.

Simon was somewhere else now, roaming farther away from the scene, beyond the playground. And Salvatia’s power was diminishing slowly into nothingness.

Camelia tumbled to the grass, fatally injured.

Salvatia, without any utterance nor recognizable gesture, faded and retaliated, beyond their reach, beyond her reach. She had ultimately failed and within seconds her presence was no longer with them, no longer at the school playground, in the opposite direction of her Dreg. She was defeated, this time and retired to lick her wounds some place far away.

To return to a place and time equally far away.

For as long as she existed in this state, she would surely pursue Bari and her Everborn again.
38.

An Assessment of Casualties

The showdown was over almost as soon as it had begun.
So it was, at least, at the Doctor Jonas E. Salk Elementary School playground, in the dead of night.
So it was, though it would one day inevitably commence again.
Salvatia would have succeeded, if it weren’t for two unforeseen facts: one, her Dreg ultimately betrayed her.
His diminishing interest in the night’s plan gave way to his own selfish feelings regarding this pitifully lost family of
his, regarding his brother, spawned by those damnable photographs at the Erlandson fireplace mantle. She thought
she’d conditioned him otherwise, but dammit all, he screwed everything up anyway. She should’ve known better, as
wise as she was. Two...the second fact...the most important fact...was the presence of that cursed Watchmaid
Camelia and her ‘Born. No matter that Simon apparently backed down and disappeared from the playground at the
finest hour, this second Watchmaid proved to be her untimely undoing. If it wasn’t for Camelia, as long as Simon
was in the vicinity and at least twenty meters or so away, she surely would’ve achieved delicious success.
So close, yet....
Salvatia wounded that bitch.
She hoped she killed her.
Fancy *that* chance.

***

For Bari, the casualties were immense; for her own interests, from her own standpoint, they were like unto the
aftermath of war.
Though she succeeded in her most desperate goal -- the safety of Andrew and likewise the safety of Ralston --
there were grievous casualties nonetheless.
Andrew’s mother and stepfather had been abhorrently slaughtered in their beds.
Ralston’s three friends were brutally massacred, though their deaths were inescapable. They were in the way,
and for the sake of Camelia’s surprise, there was nothing Bari could do. Besides, there could be no outside human
witnesses.
Most of all, and most woefully of all, Salvatia had slain Camelia.
At the playground, Bari held the dying Watchmaid within her arms, held her close as Camelia’s metallic flesh
fell into corrosive decay, transforming her back into the human young lady she once was, so delicate and beautiful
and baring the full-legged fully-formed body with which she’d been born into this world. As Bari’s dear friend
passed on, Bari swore to her a solemn promise -- to protect Ralston through to the next life, to keep Andrew and
Ralston in close proximity to each other regardless of the cost save for their very lives, to protect both as though
they were *both* her own.
But Ralston’s identity would be contained, kept in utmost secrecy. The Magdalene was unaware of Ralston’s
name; she was only aware of that wretched nameless Everborn to Camelia. And as far as the Magdalene knew,
Camelia was still *alive*.
There was much to be done in light of the aftermath of the incident at the playground. Much to be done. For
one thing, this called for a profound cover-up. Bari was faced with the task of shrouding the minds of the two
Everborn, an easy endeavor for a Watchmaid at the outset, though Ralston and Andrew were sure to hold *some*
memory of the events, a catalyst to account for missing time and the inevitable outcome of the human deaths
involved.
And if *anyone* needed a catalyst, it was Andrew. Bari vowed to see him through the loss of his family.
When she lifted her gaze from her bosom friend, she saw that Ralston remained to her far left and solitary upon
the grass...
...and Andrew was gone.
Quickly, Bari departed from Ralston and from the bodies of his friends and hers, for the moment, to return to them and to reconstruct the scene for the humans who would most certainly come upon them by morning, before even the first child set foot upon the grounds. School, today, would be canceled, for sure. Bari had to return. But first, there was her own Everborn to deal with.

When Bari found Andrew, she discovered him inside his house, in his parents’ bedroom, in the corner of the room alongside the open door and several feet from the foot of the bed where his parents’ bodies lay. He had curled up and into himself, arms clenched and head tucked between quivering knees, squatting, paralyzed by the impact of the horror of his apprehension.

He heaved suddenly, the arch of his back shook once, twice, in a tumult of despair, and Bari deadened the overhead ceiling lights by a click of the wall switch to eliminate the weeping boy’s view of the grisly spectacle of the room.

There, even in darkness and shadow, the room flaunted the stone cold pungency of death.

Bari moved to the boy, the gentle currents of her hovering body brushing over the remnants of things now embedded forever in the past. She lulled him to sleep. Tenderly.

And she caused him to dream.

Comforting dreams.

Impressionable dreams, dreams of forgetfulness.

Time to move on.
The dismal garage smelled of alcohol and reeked with the tainted odor of stale cigarettes. Ralston strummed gently upon the amplified strings of an electric guitar, the strumming interwoven by the quiet hum of blacklight.

Fluorescent posters poked from the three-dimensional dark like otherworldly intrusions upon Ralston’s somber reality. All he cared about in this world, right about then, was plucking those goddamn electric guitar strings...no matter how badly they resounded against his fingertips. He sang into a microphone situated on a metal stand. His off tone soprano regurgitated the way a deep-sea fish would do its young. He was bad...despite, alas, the confidently tranquil way he carried himself. If he had a great voice and a natural ability to play, he would’ve got it made musically at an early age...just on the merits of his eagerness and stubborn reveries to rock n’ roll and to do nothing else but rock n’ roll for the rest of his life.

This music was sadly enough the wrong professional direction for him, clearly, logically...

...though the same had been said for many a rock n’ roll legend at the beginning.

But Ralston never carried a drive for perfection. He simply carried a drive for fame.

Perhaps he’d be better a writer.

Today, things were about to change.

***

Andrew hadn’t expected to be so thoroughly amused with the sight of Ralston as he rested against the opened frame of the side door of Ralston’s garage. It was from there Andrew stood, cross-legged and cross-armed, straining to give the impression of bold confidence should Ralston catch sight of him; Ralston would, sooner or later. And Andrew had to be ready for him.

Andrew knew that to Ralston his unannounced presence in the doorway would generate quite a shock. Who knows? Ralston might even go into a seizure, right then and there, causing the poor soul to choke on his guitar strap and die just before Andrew had any hope of talking to him.

Well, it wouldn’t be all that, but nevertheless his presence would prove to be quite a shock just the same.

Andrew and Ralston hadn’t sociably seen each other since the night four years ago at the elementary school playground. Sure, they had continued through graduation at the same Magnolia High School, saw each other in unavoidable passing, but one fearfully steered clear of the other. For two years since Ralston’s graduation, he and Andrew hadn’t seen each other at all.

Only in haunted memories, memories of that night. Memories of...

...of a nightmare...

...shady, veiled sketches of memories.

Only Andrew knew all the better than Ralston. Ralston, for one thing, never had been aware of the presence of Camelia in his life...with the exception of dreams and distant influence. Andrew, comparatively, was well acquainted with things out of the norm.

Bari continued to be important to Andrew since the scene at the playground and the deaths of his mother and stepfather, on through the years until now. She’d been with him throughout the aftermath of the events of that day, when the bodies had been discovered, when police concerns and speculations and probings added both to his trauma and to theirs, and eventually to Ralston’s. In the end, if there was ever an end, the occurrences of that night remained unsolved to all.

It was only much later that another witness was attested to have been there with them that night; as far as Andrew had heard, the enigmatic figure he’d seen that night upon the playground blacktop had even been present in
his own home, though the linking evidence to this boy they called Simon BoLeve was beyond him...it was either
through fingerprints dating back from a juvenile record, through bragging to his friends, hell...maybe someone else
saw him that night and had taken a Polaroid. The next and last thing Andrew learned was that this Simon had soon
afterwards vanished without a trace.

Through all of this, Bari had been there for Andrew still, from his adoption into the household of his Uncle
Kenny and Aunt Jamie on until now.

Now, Andrew was ready to live on his own.
And Ralston was the key.
The key to many things.
So Bari insisted.
Bari was the reason for Andrew being there, like he was at the side entrance of Ralston’s garage.
More for Bari and less for Andrew, this meeting was a big deal.
Ralston might likely make a big deal out of it in his own way, but that was okay.
A big deal was to be made.

***

Andrew had many stories to tell, especially by the age of ten and carried enough ambition to actually execute
them onto paper. He nurtured several of these stories, the ones he saw fit to let survive because he believed enough
in them, and with dedication and discipline he perfected them. By his second year in high school, he submitted all of
his perfected stories for publication to a handful of science fiction, fantasy and horror magazines. In a short period of
time, one of those magazines, the Chicago-based Fantastic Escapades, purchased and published The Lure of the
Cauldron for two hundred dollars. Needless to say, the Halloween issue of the mag made Andrew quite a popular
guy with his eleventh grade classmates.

Two more of Andrew’s stories were published and circulated by the beginning of the following year. For a
high-schooler, any writer would have only but to dream of such sweet acceptance and response.
And then...early within that same year, there came a telephone call and an offer for Andrew to pen the
novelization for the sequel to a successful film.
Into The Grave II was released in trade paperback a mere month before Andrew’s high school graduation.
Potentially, it could’ve launched a grand career.
And it did...
...but not for its author.

***

No more than five to ten minutes had passed and Ralston still hadn’t noticed Andrew poised against the opened
side doorway of his garage.
Andrew was in no hurry for his attention; Bari was indeed becoming a nuisance with her coaxing Andrew a
mere few yards away, visible only to him and hovering about along the walkway on the outer side of the garage
wall. She was engaged in ceaseless coaching, very distracting for a young man like Andrew who held no desire to be
there at all. Sometimes she was like this with Andrew...like a bronze, half-transparent female version of Burgess
Meredith harshly instructing Rocky Balboa on the right things to do.

On things meant to be.

Ralston climaxed his vocals in a crescendo of rape against the microphone head when he glanced Andrew’s
way. He recognized Andrew like a trauma patient to a revelation of the end of the world. His happy moment burst in
the way a needle would meet a balloon and his music silenced in mid-twang.

“Holy mother of shit,” Ralston exclaimed, his eyes ablaze and fixed upon Andrew. A tumult of instinctive
fright resembling demonic possession overtook him just then, like a nudist bather suddenly under assault by killer
bees. He frantically wrestled his guitar strap up over his shoulders and stumbled away from the microphone stand.
He flung his guitar onto the ground before him like a spooked soldier relinquishing his weapon in defenseless retreat
at the face of the enemy.

He turned to flee, his palm thrusting onto the wall button of the automated carport door, which couldn’t quite
seem to respond to his demands and cursings. The door managed only to open partway, enough to expose a small
portion of driveway, then clicked in reverse and shut altogether again, confoundedly. Ralston was trapped like an
animal.

Andrew entered the garage fully, was closing in upon him in effort to speak his peace. “Aren’t I the one who’s
supposed to be afraid of you, Ralston?"

“Fuck you,” Ralston barked.

“But then, I guess there’s other things to be afraid of. Don’t worry, I’m afraid of them, too. I know there’s been this fear between us, but I have a deal to make with you. You can take it or leave it.”

“Fuck that,” Ralston said to him, “you were a part of something way too trippy for me, man. How did you know where I live?”

“Listen to me,” Andrew cut to the chase, “I’ve got a proposition for you, a deal that may make you very successful. I’m not promising riches here, but who knows?”

Ralston’s mood swung into a mild but jittery restlessness and he stood there, perplexed. “You tryin’ to sell me something?”

“I’m trying to sell myself.”

“I want to let you know right now, if this is a gay thing....”

“That’s not what I mean. But for the record, guarantee you that I shall never be naked anywhere in your presence ever again.”

The obviousness of Ralston’s panic was diminishing rapidly like the burning wick of a candle in a puddle of liquid wax. It was in his nature to be confrontational, and in spite of his swollen fear it was this nature, which kicked in; he had no choice, for he was backed into a corner with no escape. If he only knew how badly Andrew was intimidated by him and how excruciating it was for Andrew to convey what he’d come to tell him, Ralston would surely have held the upper hand.

Andrew exerted somewhat of an authority nonetheless and had calmed Ralston enough to speak casually. He was confident, but confident in the knowledge that should any mishap occur, Bari would reveal herself to his defense.

Ralston would certainly not appreciate that.

And after all, this meeting was Bari’s idea in the first place. Andrew wouldn’t be here, doing this, if he didn’t have faith in her. Not for any other reason.

Andrew continued, “I’ve been writing...you know, writing stories for a while. I’ve been on a lucky streak, with getting some of my stories published and I did the book to Into the Grave II. You can buy it at any book store or the corner Joe’s Market and find it selling right there at the check-out stands, and I’ve got a lot more to write.”

“You wrote Into the Grave II?” Ralston responded, with no more fear than he’d have remarking to the achievements of an old buddy at a high school reunion, at least for the moment.

As far as Bari perceived of the meeting at this point, things were going to be just fine.

“I didn’t write the story, someone sent me the screenplay with the offer to write the book. What I published before impressed another publisher enough to come to me to do it. Now look,” Andrew said, “...you will never understand this. I’m the one who’s coming to you with this and I don’t understand all of it myself. Let’s just say it has something to do with what you think happened at the school playground the night you and your friends decided to play ‘let’s pick on the naked kid’ and leave it at that. I love to write stories, and for reasons beyond both of us I have to write because something important is supposed to ultimately happen because of it, so I’m told. But I cannot be the one to take credit for it anymore. I can’t achieve public notoriety of any kind, for, because of that night my life is in danger. So, basically, since I’m writing...I need you to take the credit. I’ll write and everything I write will be published under your name. Make no mistake, though...you must understand, if you get famous, I get to make a decent living off of it.”

“A decent, but unnoticed, living off of it,” Ralston considered, at odds with the overwhelming ridiculousness of it all. Yet Andrew’s mention of the playground was sobering enough to take him seriously, if not for a fool.

Regardless of Andrew’s motives, and perhaps regardless of anything sane, Ralston came to be hooked on the deal. He had nothing to lose.

The pact was eventually made, and reached its successful fruition. Ralston Cooper came to be a household name and Andrew continued to write and to make a decent, unnoticed living off it.

As for Bari....

She was able to maintain her promise to Camelia that Ralston would always be protected, would always be under close watch, by keeping him near her beloved Andrew by orchestrating a lifetime career of the two together.

A crucial part of the plan was that Andrew needed to write, for writing was his destiny, but to fall under the limelight of celebrity was not within an Everborn’s best interests, not with a Magdalene lurking about.

This was all the better for Ralston, for as far as Bari figured, what better place to hide an undetected Everborn whose Watchmaid had died than in the taboo of celebrity limelight?

If only the two of them could understand as well as Bari did....
SECOND INTERLUDE:

Max & The Watcher-

THE MOTEL UNTOLD AGAIN
I awoke again, one more time, to rediscover how I remain Maxwell J. Polito, resurrected from the dead, and that whatever dreams I dream from now on will never be as outlandishly surreal as the realities I live in the waking world.

Dreams could never possibly compete.
Not since I awoke from the dead, anyway.

This entire process of meeting with an alien being inside a motel room in Carbon Canyon...to get together in order to write a Ralston Cooper novel upon a magical time-travel typewriter that would whisk away the words onto another typewriter several months in the past...onto Andrew Erlandson’s typewriter...and this novel would consequently effect the chain of events which brought me to where I am now...

....it was like a thousand mirrors facing each other at once and I was a key figure captured in the vast reflective prism of the past several months.

The Watcher had taken it upon himself to slip a potent downer in my cholecodile, causing me to fall into a deep sleep while he himself took over the helm and typed at the motel room desk rather than dictating the story to me. He confessed this to me, and having fully awakened I’ve resumed the helm at the desk to write about it and to press on with the forthcoming conclusions of the story the Watcher and I labor to tell.

The Watcher had permitted me a brief overview of what he’d written during my slumber, a verbal slide-show of condensed stories and explanations and answers presented like a one-sided prime-time interview. Gratifyingly enlightened and educated in little time, I am ready to proceed onward.

I’ve only but to make mention of what I dreamt when the Watcher had taken his turn at the desk. I dreamt of a pizza, for some reason beyond me, and of God kneading and flouring and shaping its dough and spinning it upon acrobatic fingertips in the window of an authentic pizzeria for passers-by to see. Perhaps I dreamt this because inwardly I remained hungry and I love pizza, or maybe the dream dealt with something to do with the process of creation...even if it was creating food.

You ask me what God looked like, flipping pizza in a pizzeria window?
He looked like my wife.

I realized within the dream that God wasn’t actually my wife. What I realized, before I awoke, was how obsessively hurt I was deep down, about what the Watcher revealed to me while I was typing...about my death, about...

...about my wife...

...so much about my wife that even a psychedelic vision of God couldn’t keep me from seeing her face.

Sooner or later this bitter hurt was destined to fall smack into my lap, if even in dreams.

After all, my wife slept with the major subject of a carefully-manuevered research assignment to tap into the hidden truths firsthand of the evidence of an alien race interwoven through the history of human society.

What was a man to do with that sort of knowledge?
“Continue writing about it,” the Watcher himself responded to me when I awoke.

And that shall I do.

With these words and insights conveyed, I shall do it right now.

So follow me farther than this and continue to keep ever close:

What follows are the chronicles of all who remained involved, of Salvatia’s second and final attempt at freeing herself from the shackles of Magdalene-hood by seeking the life of Andrew Erlandson once more, and with a vengeance.

Needless to say, I’ve something further to show you...

...the most important part....
PART FOUR:

THE MASTER MAGICIANS

“...And all the world is wild and strange:

Churel and ghoul and Djinn and sprite
Shall bear us company tonight.

For we have reached the Oldest Land
Wherein the Powers of Darkness range.”

-Kipling, “From the Dusk to Dawn”
41.

Company for Scratch

-September 30, 1994-

Smoke...
...ethereal trails spilling about the space of air within the central rooms of the house....a soundless gambol of cigarette smoke, intrusive as though its origins were not from inside but from out.....

***

Simon BoLeve, who’d come to call himself Scratch as of late, held a unique history of skillfulness in the art of lying low. It came naturally to him like an inherent introversion, and throughout his life he never consciously carried the drive to be as social as anyone around him.

This was a good thing, to remain virtually unnoticed all these years, to maintain a status of unsung nothingness while the busy beehive of society slaved for their dollars and gods and ideals.

It was a good thing for Scratch also, considering the overwhelming mischief he had on his head. Why, his own foster parents, dear Brother and Sister BoLeve, would have been better off adopting some other little auspicious lad, and never would’ve eventually lost their lives to him.

Scratch had been very clever at lying low for that.
Indeed, miraculously, Scratch proved himself a slippery sucker. But, as Jacob Bradshaw often quoted from the Good Book, your sins will surely find you out.
And Scratch’s sins were to find him out in a big way.

***

Smoke....

Scratch could smell it in the living room, could smell it in the kitchen. Someone had been smoking a cigarette; he could still catch sight of its cloud-white traces stretching higher into the air then tumbling downwards as he flicked up the wall switch of the kitchen light.

The kitchen was long and narrow and at its opposite end, the door to the side of the house hung ajar. Odd thing, considering Scratch had locked and bolted the door from the inside, and it had remained that way a month now...a month since he’d set out with the emphatic initiative to pay a house visit on a couple of church acquaintances-turned meth dealers, the idea being to take up latent residence there with his hosts sent on a restful vacation buried beneath the cement of a backyard tetherball pole.

A month that he’d been lying low.

He seized an elongated knife from the pile of utensils and dishes soaking in the stagnant sink dishwater and sprinted for the door. The identity of whoever had intruded was a mortifying mystery. Whoever had intruded, once he found him...Scratch would strike first at his face, thrust him before a mirror to see if the sneaking sonofabitch could stand the inability to identify himself.

Quietly, subtly, he slowed past the door and prowled the outer side walkway, sidestepping the row of garbage cans and cardboard boxes of decomposed lawn trimmings. He scanned the backyard, dusk-lit and vacant save for the tetherball pole and sheltered patio and then doubled back to inspect the padlocked side gate.

His developing conclusion was, whoever violated his sanctity had fled and hopped the fence. Whoever it was, Scratch reasoned, had to have known the previous occupants of the house intimately enough to have in their possession a key, to know their way around. That much was certain.
And they smoked.
On another hand, the uninvited guest could have been nothing more than a vandal, a sketched-out tweeker
tempted into a little burglary by the prolonged absence of his connects, spooked by Scratch’s presence. Surely this
enigma hadn’t caught full sight of Scratch, hadn’t caught sight of him and recognized him by some nonsensical twist
of chance. Of course, Scratch was the man wanted for questioning on the murder of Jacob Bradshaw, the one-
pastor of the previous occupants and the presumed abduction of ufologist Max Polito. After all, both events took
place within his own previous attic home at The Rock. Aside from that, there was the unavoidable ordeal involving
the kidnapping and rape of Bradshaw’s daughter Alice and the slaying of her dear boyfriend Benjamin. It was all
over the papers and the lips of the Eyewitness news team on channel seven.

But however the intrusion or his suspicion of the intruder, nothing could explain to Scratch how anyone
could’ve penetrated the Bondo he’d applied to the side door’s keyholes. And, as he observed, the Bondo was still
intact.

Wary and substantially paranoid, he retreated into the kitchen, closed and rebolted the door. He spun around
with the sud-soaked kitchen knife poised within his left-handed grip. His intuition warned him like an acutely aware
predator that someone might still be remaining within the house.

Hiding.
Contriving.

He resolved to canvass the inside of the house, just to make certain he was again alone. He cautiously entered
the living room, sidestepped towards the shoddy thick wall of curtain concealing the inner house from the outer
patio. He lifted his free hand, parted a corner section of the curtain in ill attempt to inspect the tenebrous shadows of
post-dusk beyond the awning. This was not a good idea; if his visitor indeed escaped but chose to hang around for
awhile in a concealed stake-out, Scratch risked complete visibility peering out as he was.

But his own reflection in the sliding glass window became at once an appalling distraction, and he swiped the
curtain shut before he found himself drawn into the decaying features surrounding his own hollow eyes.

Had his attentiveness lingered upon the outside dark a moment longer, he would have witnessed the evasive
specter of what might’ve been a man racing midway through the depths of the yard from one end to the other, a man
perhaps but for the inhuman speed, which carried him back into obscurity.

Scratch was shirtless, attenuated and pale. His white cotton drawstring sweat pants were ragged and torn and
soiled with stains of inconceivable tumult, of smeared charcoal black and brick-red dried blood and the drippings of
food. With scrawny, vulture-like feet and toe nails curved into unkempt claws he crept slowly across a landscape
cluttered with newspaper pages and crumpled discardings of trash and debris. His deteriorating countenance further
suffered from an excessive loss of hair. Portions of his beard and scalp were barren in malformed patches as though
randomly shaven for a dyslexic punk-cult group initiation. Scratch would have otherwise preferred that to have been
the case; the truth was, he was losing his hair quite naturally or unnaturally, and he’d discovered it could be peeled
off in clumps and portions much like removing prosthetic make-up. Aside from this, his stature had been decreased
by at least a couple of inches, he was sure of it, and if he’d lost any more weight he’d be ghastly skeletal.

But no matter.
Alice Bradshaw was with child, that’s what it was.
With his child.
With him.

In no time, he would diminish completely until he was no more, to be reborn anew and sinless and perfect with
a nice clean slate. He would emerge into a new life, Born Again into Christian upbringing even, and that frightening
she-bitch Salvatia would never know what became of her stooge-of-a-Dreg named Simon BoLeve should she be
seeking him out.

It’d been years now and Salvatia had never again caught up with him since the days of his youth. Neither would
the law, neither would anyone or anything. Not even his sins.

Yes, he was damn good at lying low.

That, and given another month he’d be a hell of a scare come Halloween.

An island of cherrywood coffee table surfaced before him at the foot of the crimson sofa and matching love
seat. It was here where Scratch spent a majority of his hours, where he slept, ate, viewed TV, held vigil day in and
day out to watch for potential trespassers lurking beyond the front and side doors and windows; he expected such
annoyances at a drug dealer’s pad.

The opposing 19-inch color television perched atop a wheeled cart of molded plastic relayed its hourly
Headline News updates, sporadically spewing the latest goings-on in between five-minute commercial sponsoring
Irish Spring and super absorbent tampons. The volume was purposely low enough to maintain a dismal silence
before and after Scratch had cleared the premises of the living room, and as he sidestepped his way down the
corridor of the gaping hallway the television volume faded as did the memory of being able to hear it.
Upon brief inspection of the remainder of the house, Scratch was satisfied that all was clear. He made his way from the end of the hallway and the opposing mouths of the two bedrooms, casually relaxed and relieved, to return to the entrance of the living room, to return to the normalcy, the placid doldrum, to a front-and-center earshot once again to the Headline News.

He didn’t so much as emerge past the arm of the sofa when he halted, when the advent of the latest news update captured and contained his attention enough to extinguish the worries of a vigilant house search for good. His grip on the kitchen knife loosened to the point that the blade slid to the tips of his fingers as he held it lethal-side up, but the sting from its incidental incision did not prevent its fall onto the carpet by his feet. In fact, he paid this no mind. Instead, without the slightest forewarning, the television news itself demonstrated that Scratch didn’t need an intruder to fuck up his day.

The Headline News, right before him andplain as peach pie, was reporting for the first time in three weeks a recap of the atrocities of the Church on the Rock’s secret attic abode. Added now to the saga was a segment centered upon Scratch’s own little dear Alice and her untimely pregnancy.

With a plastic sobriety, the screen’s bushy blonde anchorwoman spoke of an escalating religious controversy between sympathetic mourners of the late pastor and Right to Life activists. A cut to the scene of a crowded special Rock service was met with an articulate male voice-over narrative, preceding an announcement made by a woebegone Alice herself as she approached the main podium and leaned nervously into the mike.

“I...I’d like to express on behalf of myself and my family how blessed and grateful we are to have the prayers and support of so many loving friends through this horrible tribulation...in light of what has happened I made the only choice I could to separate myself from the pain. The abortion was performed on Tuesday afternoon. Please forgive me.”

***

Please forgive me?!

What did that mean, for goddamn’s sake? Was she speaking directly to him? To Scratch? To a wicked Dreg in search of a hope for redemption...and when at last he found it, it kicked him right the fuck back in the ass?!

Damn, Scratch thought the second before his heart froze, that’s just like a woman!

And then his heart did freeze, only to be revived in the instant of the sudden distraction of The Beverly Hillbillies.

And smoke....

Scratch turned his gaze towards the corner of the living room to his right, towards the loveseat about-facing the patio’s sliding doors, towards the presence responsible for changing the TV channels, the presence responsible for the smoke, the intruder....

“Just think,” spoke the presence, “you would’ve had a seizure right where your scrawny pathetic ass stands if it weren’t for The Beverly Hillbillies...and me, of course. So before you move to retrieve that knife, you’d best remember that. Especially after what you did to poor Nigel and all. I wouldn’t want you to go doing that to me. But, alas, now that Nigel is gone, you’re going to have me to deal with!”

The presence was crouched, squatting, demon-like, upon one half of the loveseat arm and the corner table, bobbing in his balance into the table lamp lampshade and altering the shadows of the room light. In one hand, he bore a channel clicker. Hung from between his lips was a half-spent cigarette, the vapors of its smoke somersaulting into the air like a circus of steam. Clenched in the grip of the opposite hand and sloped over bended knee was a short stack of papers, the papers of a very recognizable manuscript.

But the presence himself was even more recognizable and the most dominant and lingering impression Scratch had of him was his first impression, which came to him as soon as the cataclysm of evening news gave way to the perplexity of Max Polito actually being there...of how he’d taken the life of the reverend and championed this other geek who turned out to be some UFO crusader named Max Polito, leaving him mangled and bleeding and behind with dear Alice and his sweet abandoned abode, and the sonofabitch still lived....

Only to impose yet another, solo, visit...

And this time, under tableturned quandary.

The news of Alice’s abortion rendered Scratch vulnerable and defenseless, and the intruder he’d been searching for had chosen this of all times to make himself known. Hell, even the immediate acknowledgment of the presence’s identity was enough for Scratch to regress into a motionless statue of awe.

“Do I have your attention?” The visitor puffed upon his cigarette bent at one side of his mouth in a wince like Burgess Meredith. He raised the manuscript from atop his knee and waved it in the air as if to proclaim an acquired victory. “I now have what you have, as much as the knowledge of this...fragmented...book. It’s extremely
interesting, this...book. It aides us in our cause. Pity it misled you. But even though you must be devastated how your efforts to impregnate Alice went to shit just now, I know what’s written beyond the pages of this book, and I can set you free."

The resurrected Max then outstretched his legs, one after the other, until he found footing upon the carpet and stood fully.

There was something disturbingly familiar and otherworldly about him, Scratch noted next; the hair of this Max-thing was flailed as though slept upon and was of a dyed gothic blueblack. His eyes were as inkpools of equal color and absent of pupils. His skin was bloodlessly pale. The clothes he wore were the same as on the moment of his death, yet their color appeared to blend and become one with the color of his beige leather jacket, his trousers, even the socks on his feet were of a shade of beige.

And there was a subtle transparency begirding him, the suggestion of a distorted aura, as though this presence was a bluescreened impersonation of Polito superimposed upon the realm of physical reality...

...all the post-death attributes of little Nigel, augmented and somehow superior.

Another click of the channel changer and the Headline News commenced. Polito discarded the clicker onto the loveseat, took his cigarette and extinguished it beneath his beige shoe at the coffee table’s corner leg.

“Yes, I’m indeed the same sort of creature Nigel became.” Polito confirmed Scratch’s suspicions, “But only because of the age I died I am far more useful than him. You see, my Beloved One can only create one of us at a time and we can only be conformed to her image when we are freshly killed by you. I am my Beloved One’s eyes and ears. My lips speak her words. One of the many purposes of mine is to keep tabs on you, yes, like Nigel did, but I am here to give assurance to my Magdalene that the coast is clear for her to reveal herself and to prepare you for a brand-spanking new deal, to set you free. Tell me, for my sake, how did you ever manage to catch poor Nigel, after all these years?”

“The same way I can catch you,” Scratch said, determined yet plainly.

“How can you catch a ghost?” Polito scoffed.

“You are not a mere ghost! Whatever you are, you’re physical enough to be killed again and for good when I get my hands on you!”

Scratch went forward in a bold fit to make Max an example of his point, but before he knew it Polito was no longer there. Instead, the vision of him vanished, reappearing to Scratch’s left at a corner by the front door. Between his lips was a newly-lit cigarette; the manuscript remained in his grip.

“I guess you mustn’t blink,” Polito summarized. “But you’d have to put a greater effort into me. With me, it’s not as simple as the discipline of not blinking. You’d have to abolish the fact that you still can be reborn with my help, if we can make a deal. Kill me and kiss your sorry-ass existence good-bye.”

“What kind of a deal?” Scratch insisted.

“Oh, you know the sort, Simon,” tempted the being.

“My name is no longer Simon,” he responded with a degree of spite.

“Yes, yes, you call yourself Scratch these days, but what with Alice’s abortion and all...it doesn’t seem to matter what you call yourself does it? However am truly no longer Maxwell J. Polito. I think I shall take the liberty to call myself something else. So you...why don’t you just call me Uncle....”

“You mock me!” Scratch retrosed away, backwards and towards the inner sanctum of the hallway, quite distressed and lightheaded. “My entire life mocks me! Look at me...what am I becoming? And look at who I am! Why did my life lead me this way? And who the hell are you people?!”

“Come on,” the Max-thing cajoled, “let it all out. You can tell Uncle....“

“Fuck you,” Scratch spat in defiance. “So where is Salvatia? Why does she send the dead to torment me...and why hasn’t she made herself known all these years? I know she’s been watching me. That’s why Nigel is six feet under. I learned I can kill whatever you are, if I don’t blink.”

“Nigel is not six feet under. In fact, his body is frozen under the lock and key of a very secretive order of the U.S. government. Thanks to you. I do not wish to fill those shoes. Nigel, like I, was a mere puppet for Salvatia to monitor you yet keep a distance herself until the time was right to emerge again. You see, she’s been rather busy. Being the prophesied one and all to her kind. She’s gathering up a rather sizable rally of pissed-off Magdalene and now she’s ready again to cut you a deal...oh, and many thanks to the advent of this magnificent manuscript of yours. The Master Magicians have not seen the last of the Magdalene!”

This confounded Scratch’s jolted comprehension all the more intensely and he broke down in anguish. “Nigel haunted me. You talk. I don’t know which I’d prefer. But if there’s a deal to be made, I’m at your disposal, goddamn you, but depending on what your deal can do for me. Nothing remains of me and I resemble a dog-mauled doll thrown beside a Goodwill depository in the dead of night. So what the hell is the deal this time?”

“Let Salvatia tell you herself, then....”
“I want you to kill your brother...” spoke a third voice from somewhere, yet out of nowhere, identical to the commanding voice of his youth, all too familiar, all too enticing, a voice of dominance and an almost playful wickedness, and its words asserted the same fundamental plea....

An arm’s stretch into the hallway and to Scratch’s rear towered Salvatia, Simon BoLeve’s self-proclaimed anti-Watchmaid, the genie of darkness who could only be freed of her unjust banishment through this Dreg, her hair a sea-witch black and gliding at the tips along currents of air enveloping her invisible lower half and draping her upper silvery majesty. As Scratch found himself facing her, she advanced upon him, backing him into the television set.

But Scratch retreated with a degree more of astonishment rather than fear. “Where have you been?”
“Did you miss me that much?” Salvatia emitted a disarming scowl.
“I’ve wanted to kill you.”
“Yes, I suppose you must’ve, considering how you blame me for making you the prodigal son that you are. Your deeds are your own. In fact, you would never have lived this anomalous life of yours if you’d only followed through with the first deal....”

“Fuck you. I couldn’t do it! You can’t blame me. He’s my brother and he’s connected to me...fuck if he doesn’t know it. Besides, since all that I’ve tried to better myself.

“Better yourself?? Until the stars aligned, of course, and the...book...came along.”

Uncle Maxy came up beside them and flaunted the manuscript he possessed in a maddening melodrama. Scratch was intensely dismayed.

“That book is the Watchers’ work,” Salvatia said, her eyes an abysmal gyroscope of spellbound orange. “The work of the Master Magicians it speaks of. They’re manipulating you, my precious. That is why being born-again doesn’t quite make the fat lady sing. Not according to her anyway. And look; ah...your lady had you aborted. How sad.”

“I did not know it would turn out like this,” Scratch said. “Alice was supposed to have been my way out.”

“You were supposed to have been my way out!” Salvatia snarled. “Before this mystifying book of yours came to your attention, I had a solution to the way out for both of us. You should have believed in me. You could’ve resolved everything for us long ago and you flaked at what could’ve been our finest hour. Now, don’t you see, after all this time...the answer has always been my way?”

“Damn you, creature!” Scratch unleashed a very daring exhibition of spite and advanced a step; Salvatia backed off. “You must be some warped spitball God blew at me from His celestial pea-shooter! Why does nothing in my life ever happen to normal people? If other people’s lives held any resemblance to my own, at least I’d feel slightly better. Look at you, you’re a creature for godssakes. Who, other than me, is aware of creatures like you on a personal basis? You made me evil!”

“And look at you,” Salvatia countermanded, “you’re becoming a creature yourself.”

“I believe he’s losing it,” observed Uncle Maxy, which irritated Scratch’s dementia all the more.

“Besides,” Salvatia reasoned, “I wouldn’t call it evil. I’d call it an indulgence in primal hobbies. I simply aided you along on your quest to find what you really are, and what you are is a Dreg.”

“I was an innocent child when you stole me away from my family.”

Salvatia abandoned interest in the debate. Immediately, she withdrew into a meditative trance and the room fell silent.

“Come to me all ye who are weak and heavy-laden and I will give you rest,” spoke Salvatia next in heightened plea, as Jacob Bradshaw would in calling his flock to penitence. “Can you hear them? Can’t you hear the insatiable whispers of my sisters? The Magdalene cry for release, as do you, my Dreg child. I can set you free. I can set you all free. Camelia is dead. There is only Bari now between us and our prize and the book the Watchers sent to suppress and confuse us can be exploited to suit our cause. Join us, and this time we will be complete in both our mutual efforts and in revenge!”

And in the silence which followed, Scratch listened, and he could almost hear the undertones of thousands of whispers merging with the distant torrents of outside wind.

He knew he had nothing remaining, nothing left to lose.

So, unless his situation resolved itself somewhere along the way, somehow, he at last elected to give in to Salvatia’s latest proposal.

And Uncle Maxy knew just where to take it from there....
42.  

Company for Melony

-October 31st, 1994-

-Happy Halloween-

“Each of us carries a measured burden of misfortune, of loss, and of goodbyes...of a specific breed of goodbyes, not the see-ya-later goodbyes but the goodbyes in which seeing you later is just not the case. These goodbyes are absolute and nonnegotiable, they make us sad, and they render us craving for a therapy impossibly beyond our reach.”

These were Matt McGregor’s words, the first words he’d spoken to Melony Polito since that fateful period of post-August, since Melony and Ralston Cooper each fled separately yet with equal panic from Andrew’s apartment when Ban revealed herself to defend her Everborn, since Matt and then other police officers discovered BoLeve’s lair...blood and grisly mayhem, Jacob Bradshaw’s limp remains, his daughter drugged and dog-tied to a bed frame and all....

These were the same words as were quoted by a fellow law enforcement official at Bradshaw’s funeral while McGregor underwent a forced leave of absence for the sake of professional therapy. Above all of this, Matt dared not make mention to anyone a single word concerning the silvery woman-creature he’d beheld within the church attic and previously once before in childhood, the one-and-the-same creature who’d stolen Max Polito’s body away.

If Melony was to name any one single most determined son-of-a-bitch aside from her husband, it would be Matt McGregor, hands down. Way down. Next to Max, he demonstrated the soundest and strongest-willed of minds. Yet the rock he’d crawled under since the church attic drama weighed him down so painfully that his only recourse was to burrow in denial.

Melony found a discussion over their late traumas to be pointless with him, let alone any hopes of support or encouragement. Matt’s own family and career clearly suffered from his chronic declination of spirit, but Melony completely understood.

Mel acquired a related affliction.

And besides, the only rationality among the insane was to not discuss it, for what was one to do? What action could be taken? Alert the FBI? Expose their dilemma to unempathetic ears only inevitably headlining the Weekly World News and not getting anywhere anyway?

Before, with her husband’s research, her own personal ‘big picture’ of the way the world worked seemed real enough with only the facts and theories to cling to. Nowadays, the fruition of his research now simply hit too close to home for her to know what to do.

When Melony’s visit to her physician unveiled a pregnancy where the inception should have taken place a couple months prior to her night with Andrew...it was enough cause for anyone to think twice about speaking at all.

When Matt’s comforting words concerning loss and goodbyes fell upon the ears of Maxwell’s distressed wife, her inner convictions evoked an immediate (if not rudely immediate) response:

“My husband’s alive. He’s out, there somewhere, existing under the control of his captors I suppose, existing beyond my ability to reach him and to let him know my regrets about our shortcomings and how much I really love him. He’s out there, wherever he is, and here am, wherever I am. Don’t dish me a rehearsed speech about goodbyes and the loss of loved ones. It may have done good for the poor unfortunate Bradshaws, but it’s just not the case with me and my husband.”

***
My husband is still alive.

His body wasn’t found.

***

“I am my greatest mystery,” Melony spoke aloud somberly as she awoke from a deep sleep of mysteries. She heard herself say it, understood what she said, but didn’t understand what she meant by it. She was certain she’d woken herself by saying it.

She lifted her head nestled by cradled arms to discover she was seated slumped forward upon a chair...

...before her own outdated electronic typewriter...and found the words typed upon the inserted and otherwise blank page:

MY HUSBAND IS STILL ALIVE.

HIS BODY WASN’T FOUND.

She couldn’t recall typing those words. She couldn’t remember what she’d been doing upstairs to begin with, let alone how she’d fallen fast asleep in her office workspace.

She couldn’t have been asleep for more than a half hour.

And then the doorbell rang.

***

Trick-or-treaters.

Melony stood from the typewriter as abruptly as if to salute an officer, attentive and wide awake with the exception of a lingering post-dream-state haze, and bustled herself out of the upstairs office and down the stairs to instinctually greet tonight’s first group of Halloween trick-or-treaters.

On her way down, the weariness of her body forced herself to a slow stroll; she’d momentarily forgotten that she was with Andrew’s child, most certainly with somebody’s child (that was for damn sure), her memory jarred by an uncomfortable nausea and she clenched her belly.

At the foot of the stairs, she avoided the front door, sidestepping into the living room and meeting her own reflection on the work of mirror-art upon the wall opposite her and above the couch.

Her reflection never quite seemed real anymore, not to Melony, not to someone so relentlessly bombarded lately by legions of this kind of out-of-the-ordinary welcome-to-Neverland bullshit.

To Melony, nothing seemed real since her night with Andrew.

But it was Halloween, she knew that much was real, and perhaps only the time of year and the days on the calendar held within them the sole hope she had on retaining some form of sanity. It may be that the television kept her in line as well; it proved an amusing distraction and was these days rarely silent. Right now, it projected a broadcast of Halloween IV from its corner perch.

About and around Melony’s shoulders a $19.99 witch’s gown spilled down her arms, splashing across her hips with daggers of frills after overcoming the obvious stretch of black fabric over the terrain of her obtrusive belly. Swaying to and fro above her head and with her was a pair of Playboy bunny ears, harnessed by an elastic pink cotton band fastened beneath her chin.

She entered the kitchen and passed the French double pantry doors.

Digging both hands into a plastic bowl of mini M&M packages resting upon the kitchen counter completed half her mission, but through the process of delivering these treats to the children who’d come for them, she felt herself increasingly on the verge of emotional collapse.

Another doorbell ring was her salvation for the moment; she wasn’t about to allow the M&Ms she carried to trigger a breakdown anyway, even though they were Max and Melony’s favorite plain chocolate and goddamn
sentimental candies.

As she unlatched, unbolted and opened the front door, she wondered if a handful of treats would be enough. She wondered how many children were at the door. She wondered if they’d already departed impatiently. In the next instant, she didn’t care. As she beheld them, the children outside her door beneath the moth-magnet porch light were dressed as Watchers with black hoods and full greyish latex head masks with pasty black oblong alien eyes. By some stunned reflex, her candies fell from her hand, bouncing off the doorway’s metal threshold and skidding just short of the unnerving band of all six of them.

Eerily and simultaneously, the alien children knelt to fetch their treats, stooping, then placing the candies into each of their own UFO alien plastic Halloween bags.

All but one of them then departed down the walkway to collect the next free hand-out without saying a word. The single remaining trick-or-treater rose up straight to face her and the kid’s alien guise began to speak as it lifted a free hand in a hesitant effort to remove its mask.

“Oh, by the way,” it was a timid male voice, deliberative, apologetic, “trick or treat...”

He grasped his mask’s latex underchin and pulled it up and over his face and head until it flopped backwards freely and hung down his back, hood and all. What appeared at first to be a second mask beneath, began once again to speak, but the near-lipless horizontal slits of its mouth were much too animated for Melony to remain unwitting of its innocent masquerade. Its eyes were bulbous diagonal teardrops, still human enough to embody dilated black/brown pupils so immense that its bony sockets were twice the normal size to accommodate them. Its face was pale and gave an effect of having been stretched somewhat from chin to forehead silly putty-style, sloping up top into a hairline of fleshy flat tree branch shapes with remnant clusters of hair strands still falling like autumn leaves.

It fell short of the mainstream image Melony had grown used to in what she’d expected of a Watcher, but she knew as sure as the paralysis of reality gripped her that this half-breed creature clenching a bag of candy upon her doorstep was not quite yet a Watcher.

And as it spoke with a voice still familiar and far, far too familiar to her, she knew that this being was the same being she carried inside her, the dying half of her child awaiting rebirth, the other half of a one-night-stand with the Devil.

This was Andrew Erlandson: “Sorry. Take a deep breath. I know you’ve been waiting to hear from me. I know of your sudden fear-flooded attempts to return to the apartment, if for no other reason but to disprove what happened between us that night. You couldn’t quite bring yourself to make it into the complex though, but had you conquered your panic you’d have only come across the very ‘apartment-for-rent’ referred to by the streetside sign you were never able to pass. It was Bari’s idea to clear out immediately, what with you and then Ralston and the threat of exposure lingering long after you left.”

Melony exerted a response with muttered success. “Y...you...y...you...y...And...d...drew...”

“Deep breath, poor Melony. Come on....” He relinquished his hold on the bag of treats and went forward, one small black boot meeting the doorway to gain entrance, one hand reaching for the front door’s outside knob. His human/alien expression was a display of concern; it would’ve been far easier to have remained shrouded in the mask for Mel’s sake, but this approach would certainly promise the risk of Melony yanking it off boldly herself like Christine to a hideous Erik in Phantom of the Opera and Andrew didn’t want that. He’d argued the point with Bari shortly before.

“Andrew, s..stay back....” Melony uttered in weakened breaths, backing away yet allowing him in.

“I’m so sorry, Mel. Its better it be this way, I mean, the timing and all. How else can I get around this way, out in the open, looking the way I do, except on Halloween? Besides, it’s become imperative I see you. Your life is in great danger. You must leave this place immediately and only Bari and I can help you.”

Surrendering to Andrew’s intrusion, Mel felt herself aware that the further she was drawn into his words alone, the further her feelings slipped from atop that mountain of alarm built by the unavoidable sight of him.

The front door closed after them, and the porch light died just in time to discourage the noisy sidewalk shuffle of another half dozen or so oddities demanding something out of Melony tonight.

***

Andrew Erlandson felt a common bond with Melony as he faced her for the first time since Bari and Ralston Cooper both had taken part in completely eradicating his chances of developing a relationship with a decent woman.

He somehow knew of his unlikely chances all along, with any decent woman, the same way he knew ultimately that Bari was in control of his destiny moreso than he. Even still, there was a master plan in the works, as if the book had already been written....

The common bond he felt was by no means related to his current deteriorating condition, nor was it the
increasingly accumulated insight to the overall situation. It took little effort on Bari to impart to Andrew who he truly was; all his life, any given insight had been up to Bari herself. Not this time. Since his regression into his new life had begun, it was all starting to come back to him on its own.

It wasn’t anything obvious, this common bond. At least not to Melony, Andrew was certain. But as he moved into the living room and depressed the TV cable box’s power button, the room fell silent and they faced each other alone. The silence spoke well on its own. This experience was frightening and awkward to the two of them equally, for opposing reasons, and for mutual reasons it equally damaged their realities.

Andrew made his way to the sofa and stood upon it, so as to inspect his image in the wall mirror-art. He scratched his head, withdrew from between his fingers strands of loosened hair which he habitually discarded into a pants pocket beneath his costume. “We haven’t much time, Mel. The forces responsible for the deaths of many including your husband’s are on the prowl as we speak, searching to destroy us both in order to destroy so much more.”

“My husband’s dead?” Melony was strangled by anguish.

“And I will be, too,” Andrew responded, “and many will die after me, I assure you, if we don’t move together to defeat this thing....”

“What thing?”

“We haven’t time now. I must get you out of here. You know enough. Simon BoLeve...you know of him...surely you noticed him at The Crow Job when you sought to hook up with me, you know of him from your husband’s research, and I’m sure you watch the news. Tonight, as surely as Bari and I are here, he’s coming too. And he’s coming for you.”

Melony dropped backwards upon the opposite end of the couch, distressed, her eyes still never leaving him.

“Bari is with you?”

A crash came forth from the direction of the kitchen just then, startling them to attention.

***

When Andrew rose and went for the kitchen to investigate, he requested that Melony stay put there upon the sofa.

He did not hear the doorbell ring.

Instead, he entered the kitchen until his shoes met with a toppled plastic bowl and its spillage of empty candy wrappers spewn across the kitchen floor. There, in the midst, was an inches-wide portion of gooey *splotch* heaped quaintly like a goat tird upon the no-wax linoleum: partially digested Watchmaid refuse.

Bari had been into the M&Ms.

She’d made it clear to Andrew that she intended to place herself out of the scene, of the trick-or-treat confrontation between her ‘Born and Melony, for fear her outright presence would be too much for Melony to handle all at once, what with Andrew’s oh-so-alien *Vogue* new look and all.

Hell, Bari was too much for Melony to handle the last time. And *Bari* had to ruin it all by causing this kitchen calamity, for the minute reason of her fondness towards the ability to still taste and enjoy food.

“Son of a bitch,” Andrew cursed to himself as he stood.

But.....where was Bari?

A tremendous shadow encompassed the very dim backyard porch light at the sliding glass doors in the rear corner of the kitchen just then, which did little to prepare Andrew for the sudden crescendo of surprise and cascade of thick flying glass shards that followed instantly thereafter.

Andrew side-stepped in a heartbeat past the section of cabinets behind him to his left to avoid the spectacle, stumbling to his knees in the process, the palms of his wizened hands seeking stable support to raise himself up again from the obstacle course of the floor.

Lifting his gaze, he instantly caught sight of none other than the coppery-skinned personage of Bari, flailed and having been flung back-first into the floor tile, sliding to a halt before the rear living room entrance.

“Bari...!”

“Aweeeend,” came Bari’s fervent command, “get Melony. Take her away from here! *Now*!”

Andrew managed himself to his feet and darted over her and past her for the living room, the flowing black gown of his costume virtually taking flight as he went and he did not look back.

The disorienting shove through the glass held Bari at a disadvantage, though only momentarily. When Andrew was clear of her, she lifted her hands and parted the thicket of long black hair from her blazing orange eyes, and bounced forward in a manner not unlike a *Weeble* that wobbled after *falling* down.
Her senses rejuvenated with a keen prowess, Bari readied herself for another assault from the outer pitch night of the patio’s rear yard; she couldn’t resist a taste of the M&M candy treats, no doubt about that, but suddenly Salvatia’s presence was detected outside and in the yard and she did not hesitate to defend. In fervent abandon she’d sped from the kitchen and through the reaches of the back porch to engage in sixty second Championship Wrestling with the Magdalene Queen.

Bari heard the silence as she regained her posture and surveyed, and the longer this silence went, the further went the possibility of a second assault from beyond the glass shards still stuck in the encompassing threshold of the door’s metal frame like a jagged mouthful of teeth.

Her wit slow to respond, it came to Bari now after the toss through the glass that Salvatia could have made herself a decoy and she spun around swiftly to follow after Andrew.

She whisked herself past the living room, only to meet her Everborn who faced her dismayed and confounded just inside the wide-open front doorway.

Hung from a piece of orange and black Halloween decor Scotch tape was a partially torn scratch pad page, with a black Magic Marker message:

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WE HAVE HER NOW
AND SOON SO MUCH MORE
TO THE SWEET HORIZON OF SUCCESS,
ON TO THE NEXT,
AND HAPPY
```

The *Halloween* portion was mangled off, perhaps even bitten off. All Andrew could mutter was....

“She’s gone.”

*On to the next.*

It was time to visit Ralston.
Ralston Cooper had always been the chip on the shoulder of his own ego, always immersed in his own fabrications of personal importance and glory, never pausing for even one admitted moment to discern the meaning of his own life, to find himself.

Until, that Fall, *himself* found *him*.

Funny, this time period, this season called *Fall*.

For just about everything *did* fall...and, for Ralston, things even fell from the sky.

***

The inside of the Cooper residence seemed as lifeless and abysmal as the bowels of an empty church sanctuary in the dead of night.

Bari had materialized in the downstairs weight room after making sure the coast was clear from antagonistic elements, to unlock the sliding glass door and allow Andrew to enter from the outside pool court.

There was something about Bari and sliding glass doors lately.

Andrew emerged from the early morning air as cautiously as a cat burglar, but feeling himself looking like a gargoyle returning late from a masquerade party disguised as a gargoyle. He hadn’t been fully used to the entire experience of this whole transformation gig since he first began losing his hair and by this point in time he’d practically sworn off his own human mentality. His enigmatic self-identity was pretty damn well crystal clear about now, and though Bari had maintained the *entire* truth well beyond arm’s reach until now, she recently pointed out it should’ve been clear to him all along. In retrospect, everything was to Andrew as much of a Catch-22 as it was existing as a human being anyway, this ignorance to foreknowledge, and that was the excuse he gave.

Of course, Bari understood that. For Andrew, she had meant for it to be that way. *Any* Everborn carrying the privilege of a conscious relationship with his Watchmaid throughout any given lifetime held more than a clue to the answers to his own existence, but one of the many specialties of a Watchmaid’s power was a profound influence over the *mind*. That was the excuse *Bari* gave.

Andrew’s sneakers hit carpet, and he clicked the switch of a dollar store plastic flashlight in one hand to reveal the time on the other hand’s wrist. He assumed the time was around one a.m., give or take. He still wore his costume, sans the mask, and even with his *real* hands he found it difficult to lift his sleeve to check. It took long enough to arrive here in Brea all the way from the Politos’ in Malibu, long enough for Salvatia to have already struck. The outlook to Andrew thus far was that Salvatia already had. The only way to know for sure was to investigate.

Bari then moved toward him, pressing him backwards and outside, shushing him before he could utter an offended objection. She gazed into him with a sobering stringency, which never failed to win over Andrew’s undivided attention, each pupil a blazing orange sun mirrored by the dual black holes of Andrew’s own as he reacted to her.

“Don’t be too hasty and listen to me,” Bari decreed. “I’ve been through the house, inside and out. Ralston is alone in the upstairs bedroom and all the lights are off as if he purposely wishes for people to *think* no one’s home. Even the phone’s answering machine’s outgoing message is Ralston’s voice insisting he is away in Bermuda sipping
Coronas beneath a bamboo umbrella and living out the Chris Isaak video Wicked Game.”

“Tell me what you sense, and what you think we should do....” Andrew’s impatience was mounting, “Goddammit, Mel’s life is on the line and there’s no time to lose. Has Salvatia been here, Bari?”

“There’s no indication, but that means little,” Bari reported, then turned solemn. “Andrew, you need to confront Ralston, now, one on one. I’ll leave you two alone until you summon me. Ralston isn’t himself anymore, and....”

Andrew beckoned her as Bari paused to think, “And what? We don’t have time for this....”

“The Watchers have been here. Twice they have, since you completed Ralston’s last book and gave him his manuscript copy.”

“The Watchers. I’m a Watcher, until all is said and done and I forget what I know all over again between the two legs of a new mother.”

“Andrew, my beloved, you must talk to Ralston. We can resolve this turmoil. You asked me what I sense and this is what I think you should do. You’ll understand why, shortly. Hopefully, soon afterwards, we’ll all come to an understanding together. As you know, I’ll be around when you need me.”

Bari’s physical coppery flesh became translucent before disappearing altogether, leaving Andrew by himself. Her words well conveyed, Andrew took in a sigh and exhaled a vaporous stream of frosty air before reentering the house, mindful to secure the sliding glass door behind him as he went.

Alone and with flashlight in hand, Andrew again commenced his venture inside.

***

So Bari insists Ralston and I have a little chat together. Maybe smoke a blunt and confess secrets old and new. Andrew’s mind wandered as he steered his course through the weight room, past the bar and into the hallway. Curious, he flicked on a light switch on the nearby wall before thinking it best not to, and for a second the fluorescent bar lights flickered then died; his entrance had been unannounced and he knew he must not startle Ralston prematurely. What with Andrew’s dramatically tweaked physical appearance as of late, darkness was a good idea.

The Watchers have been here. Twice they have....

As soon as Andrew found himself contemplating what Bari had said to him, he suddenly realized a new truth: yes, he must talk to Ralston. And, with a sense of urgency, he understood exactly why.

Spontaneous revelations were becoming to Andrew more and more common these days.

He killed his flashlight and carried on through the downstairs corridor past framed obscurities dotting the walls, square structures of what Andrew knew to be preserved front covers of each published Ralston Cooper novel.

He was no stranger to this house though he’d always felt himself one, especially now, and he easily navigated out of the corridor and into the shadowy vestibule of the main entranceway, a spiraling staircase uncoiling to his left.

He approached the first step of the staircase, set one hand upon the metal railing, and boldly made his ascent, all the while cautious and inquisitive of what was in store for him at the top.

He reached the upstairs corridor. The bathroom door he immediately faced yawned open into an abysmal rectangular hole. Tempted for the moment to pause for a quick flashlight scan, a soft light from a source all its own succeeded his impulse. It trailed until expiring into the dark just in front of him, out from the direction of a room down the hall to his right. The hemmed border of his costume’s black cape caught a snag along the foliage of a potted synthetic plant as he rounded the hall corner and he wrenched it free with a carelessly firm tug which could have given him away.

It was a dim illumination, as like from a shaded bedside lamp; Andrew could see where he was and where he was going more clearly now, could see that the light came from the opened doorway of Ralston and Jessica’s bedroom a few yards ahead. He went forward another step, and as if by the very act of taking that step there came the somber strum of acoustical six-string guitar chords, lazy chords. Andrew slowed as soon as he heard them before he found himself standing still in the bedroom’s doorway.

And then there came a voice singing in melancholy blues, almost as if in half-ass parody:

“I don’t care if it rains or freezeus
‘long as I got my plastic geezus glued onto the dashboard of my car.....”

And then the music silenced.
“Andy-man,” Ralston said. “You secretly despised me calling you that. If I were you I would’ve hated me, ever since we first met at the school playground when I thought you were a pervert...quite frankly. Considering the changes lately in all those involved in this...this saga, you won’t ever have to worry about writing a single word beneath the guise of my name again. You see...that last book, the one you don’t remember typing, was about us. I sense Bari hasn’t fully let you in on it, but I doubt Bari’s been aware of no more than a few pieces of the total pie herself. The point is, anyway...well, I read most of the book. Until a band of Watchers paid me a visit and slapped my hand as they took it away.”

Andrew crept closer a pace or two, in silent disbelief of the sight displayed before him. He had an idea what to expect as the reality dawned on him, but then again he hadn’t a clue it would be like this.

Ralston had removed all furniture from the room and covered the section of carpet in the far corner with bed sheets, a section squared off in a corral of perhaps every damn pillow in the house. A sea shell statuette table lamp sat table-less upon a blanket in the corner, its light a ricocheted image off the room’s low-set windows, shades pulled up revealing Brea’s vast starry nighttime. Flickering globules of fire swelled from several candles dispersed on teacup saucers on the outskirts of the lamp, like a shrine.

Ralston was nestled facing the window, lounging propped against the pillowed border, legs crossed and a six-string in his lap.

It was apparent by his appearance that he was well on his way into that Ol’ Time Regression each Everborn’s life was supposed to amount to. His stature was stunted like one of the undead Jawa creatures out of the film Phantasm, and the London Fog black trenchcoat he wore was so disproportioned and oversized that it added to the effect of this not being Ralston at all, but a hairless and alien facsimile of Ralston. Andrew perceived that the start of Ralston’s regression may have preceded his own.

But how could that be?

“Ralston, have you gone mad?” Andrew took an assertive march toward the window and yanked the dangling string that released a succession of vinyl blinds downwards, ensuring their privacy.

“Hey, my view!”

“People might see us,” Andrew rebuked him.

“Indeed, if people were twice as tall and dwelt in exaggerated houses to accommodate their height,” Ralston replied. “Chill out and pull up a pillow. We’re safe here and there’s much to discuss.”

Andrew stood where he was. Ralston’s facial features were not unlike Andrew’s, exhibiting the same broadening of bone and structure and elasticity of skin, of eyes a cavernous black and teardrop-shaped, lips and nose tightened, plain, as if retreating into his face. His countenance echoed a greater percentage of all the attributes uniquely Ralston, relieved of most of the intolerable qualities such as the cockiness which always made him a bastard. Granted, a subtle sarcastic quality revealed he was still a know-it-all, but Andrew suspected that maybe this time Ralston practically did.

“We don’t have time to pull up pillows,” Andrew said, hurried and anxious. Then, “What happened to Jessica?”

“Jessica’s pregnant, but then we both know that. I gotta tell you, I nearly pissed my pants at your old pad when Bari came to your rescue. At the time, I felt I had every right to kick your ass. I thought you were selling me out. William Behn had me convinced and paranoid and I went off on a mission not entirely aware of the facts.”

“I understand that,” Andrew replied.

“If I knew what I know now and was still completely human, I would tell all the Watchers have been...well, watching my agent for a long time. They knew he would be one of the recipients of a typewritten message from the future. They knew about the book, Andrew. This particular group of Watchers knew about the book because they’re from the future and they’re aware of what it takes to send messages back in time. Some of them had done it themselves and apparently in the future they taught me. They have a keen grasp of the ins and outs of linear time...sending messages, traveling themselves...yet I don’t believe anyone’s sent an entire novel before, and I don’t believe I was allowed to do it in the first place.”

“So what of your agent William Behn?” Andrew asked. “He did receive a manuscript?”

“I suppose the Watchers are having their way with him,” was Ralston’s response. He leaned forward, with a serious look about him. “Andrew, if I knew what I know now and was still completely human, I would tell all the...
Damn it all, why couldn’t your mother just stick to one child at a time? But even though this phenomena is a rarity Dreg twin brother Simon intercepted portions of the book, which eventually brought it to Salvatia’s knowledge. entities in this current life, which rendered it impossible for just to terms with that. They insisted paths first crossed, only odds in her favor.... is the UFO expert Max Polito himself, not a small unthreatening little lad like the boy Nigel. This racks up more enough to revive any one human at a time who is killed at the hands of a Dreg, and this time the resurrected human It’s you she wants, although should understand far more rapidly, “Salvatia will not harm her captive Melony without the honor of your presence. “Well...yes, there were drawbacks to my little scheme, such as the very nature of your being split into two entities in this current life, which rendered it impossible for just Andrew Erlandson to retrieve it alone, yes sir. Your Dreg twin brother Simon intercepted portions of the book, which eventually brought it to Salvatia’s knowledge. Damn it all, why couldn’t your mother just stick to one child at a time? But even though this phenomena is a rarity
to our kind, the risk was inevitable. I knew of it when I wrote it. Because of it, overall, we have the advantage....

“Think of it: both our lives have been directed around it. Why had you been writing for me all this time? It was Bari’s idea. To protect you. To protect me. To protect the interests of the book....”

At once there came upon them a voice familiar and female and from everywhere, “It’s truly good to see you in your full potential, Ralston, and not as the obnoxious twerp you’ve lived your passing life as....”

Bari emerged into a dimension of space between them, and the genie-like torrents below the transparency of her waistline whisked out the candlelight, leaving only the light of the table lamp to illuminate the room; the light cast jousting shadows around the doorway from what was now the three of them as they conversed.

“Bari,” Ralston acknowledged her welcomingly. “And in such a timely manner, too. I was just talking about you. But you know that, don’t you. Hello.”

“Yes, I know about as much as you think I do,” Bari replied. “But you don’t know everything, and neither do I. Still, I know more than you, even with your experiences with those vagabond Watchers, even with as much as you’ve read of this book of yours that has yet to be written and that’s responsible for both the good and the bad in all this. Salvatia and Andrew’s Dreg twin brother are holding Melony in anticipation of our eminent rescue attempt. That much is clear, seeing how their ambush didn’t turn out to be here, at your residence. It is in this respect that you must have acquired better insight than I, for you have read this book whereas my ‘Born and I haven’t. So....tell us, before you ramble further about revealing sweet nothings to Andrew....where do you believe they’re holding Melony? Umm, so we could get on with it?”

“All right,” Ralston said, submitting to a moment of consternation, “so be it. Mind you, there’s no immediate rush. Salvatia will not lift a finger until we make that journey and go for her bait. Now, let’s see...

“...I haven’t had a good meal in a long, long time. You don’t eat as much, if you find yourself becoming a creature like me throughout the course of a couple months when you’ve spent a lifetime convinced you’re human. I’m starving, come to think of it. I know a certain diner in Carbon Canyon that just might suit all our needs....”
A congress of stars came forth through recessions of the Halloween Witching Hour’s cloudy sky, or what remained of it, bestowing Carbon Canyon with its first glimpse of the heavens of a new November. The parting clouds had drifted on opposing currents of wind from every glimpse of each horizon to gather here, rendering the neighboring regions cloudless with only the local weatherman paying any mind. At the height of the spectacle, they encompassed the view above with all the thickness of the inner cotton-white lining of a thermal jacket. Either by coincidence or by a higher power’s predestined omen, the cue for their dispersal came no sooner than when Andrew Erlandson and Ralston Cooper set foot on rocky ground as they vacated their cab.

As the cabby dismissed them, pulled back down the narrow highway and into the deep dark, his f.m. stereo’s Talkradio Newswatch host remarked about the climate in a relieved sigh over the diminished chances of rain. The cabby wasn’t listening, preoccupied as he was by the confounding uselessness of his high beams against the obscure road ahead; he was at the same time spellbound by his inability to remember where he was, or who it was that brought him here, or to radio in for assistance...

...it was going to be quite a perilous while before the sun would rise and allow the poor soul assurance of his bearings and of a way out....

***

Ralston knew exactly where he was, though in this life he knew just as well that he’d never been here before. He knew how it would come to be that Max Polito would be drawn here to inevitably meet him and assist him in writing the very book that he already read. Andrew, on the other hand, had no clue: “What is this place?”

“It’s a place I had read about,” he answered. “A place where we need to be now. It’s not a bad place. Just a forgotten place, and the Watchers I’ve encountered took care to avoid any discussion I’d try to create concerning it.”

“How’d you know how to get here?”

“Bari knew.”

“You really believe Salvatia’s waiting for us here?”


Andrew was never, ever, precisely, ready for it.

Andrew remained garbed in his black costumed disguise, so be it if the globule-eyed grey alien semblance from above the shoulders was genuine. It was genuine, as was Ralston’s; together they resembled an air-brushed portrait from some contemporary expressionist flaunting commercial new-age t-shirt art. Ralston, rolled-up jeans and sweatshirt and black trenchcoat jaggedly cut with scissors at the hem line of a five-year-old, felt himself the more hip of the duo...and in his wizened stature, at least he stood a hip inch-and-a-half taller than Andrew. This was still less than five feet.

Andrew’s persuasions toward Ralston teetered from trust to distrust and then back to trust since their departure from the Brea home and through to this very moment. During this period, the course of the ride, they’d shared little conversation. For one thing, given the nonhuman obviousness of their appearance, they did not want to be too animated for the driver, which might’ve upset the bewitched man further. The virtual silence was an opportune time for Andrew to mentally absorb everything.

All that Ralston was and all he had told him in the upstairs bedroom was true, to the greater extent, which was self-evident. The exception to this was the bit about the Watchers nabbing this now-infamous manuscript from Ralston’s hands, giving him just enough time to read up to recent events, but no time to read further. Andrew could wring those words out like a rag soaked wet with lame excuses. In this life, he’d never been able to fully trust Ralston, and any skepticism on Andrew’s part was to Andrew a reaction glittering in merit.
Nevertheless, Ralston, in this present state, was far more trustworthy than he ever was. What Ralston was a part of, Andrew was a part of. Bari was a part of it. Melony and her husband were a part of it. In the big picture...hell, everything, the whole damn world, might as well be a part of it.

Bari, who’d made herself as unseen as the molecules in the air throughout the ride, was no longer with them. The two exchanged blank glances, then, gazed soberly upon the lone diner before them.

***

They proceeded along the diner’s car-less gravel lot welcome-mat. Obscurity christened the rooftop and what was apparently a dormant generic neon sign. The windowed front highlighted a patron here and there, in corrals of booths or nestled upon bar stools at the counter intercepting the front register.

A rectangular wooden sign stained to a deep brown oak dangled in the mellow breeze from links of chains. Displayed upon it in antique fashion was a burnt engraving of three words in quotations:

“We’re never close.”

Not far from it, a window posterboard heralded a cursive-penned message:

**MIDNIGHT MEAL SPECIAL:**

All-you-can-eat

Deep-fried

Pawns.

*(see inside for details)*

“Don’t they mean prawns?” Andrew commented.

“Hold it a second,” Ralston said, stricken to a halt by his own senses suddenly, and Andrew halted with him.

“What is it?”

“Be prepared for anything,” Ralston instructed, eyes scanning the area. He then proceeded forward.

“Wait,” Andrew said, and Ralston halted again, turned, looked at him. “What’s wrong with this picture? We’re not about to just waltz into a public place, are we? I mean, the cab driver we could handle, but...there’s people in there, and well...look at us!”

“Tell you what,” said Ralston. “I propose we step in to this fine establishment, ignorant to all of that and pretending we haven’t a clue as to how plainly exotic we appear.”

“Let’s say they freak out, as they all should. Wouldn’t we, normally?”

“What do you mean, we? You’ve been exposed to Bari all your life. You mean, and what the rest of us call, humanity. But if they freak out, that’s quite all right, because that would be a normal reaction. We’ll get the hell out and away from here and retreat to some quiet place where we can rethink our strategy. But if they react in a way short of this, that’ll be our cue that shit ain’t right, and we’ll know this trip wasn’t a waste of time.”

“Agreed.”

They entered the diner.
The inside of the diner at first proved to be even less of a thrill than it was looking at it from the outside. Andrew and Ralston were greeted by yet another sign, a freestanding sign of cheap plastic with a metal base. It was the kind of “please wait to be seated” sign one would expect, except all it read was WAIT in bold lettering.

And so they waited for a short while at the sign. The wait gave them time enough to inspect the drab surroundings. It could have been perceived as odd or otherwise indifferent that a waitress did not eventually pop into sight to greet them, but there were no waitresses at all. In fact, noticeably, there were no employees that either one of them could see; none, either behind the front counter nor in what they could view of the kitchen.

A basket of fries awaited pick-up at a vacant chef’s station.

A curious couple each clad in thermal jackets so oversized they could have been mistaken for sleeping bags occupied the two far right corner bar stools, silently grubbing on finger foods.

A gentleman, elderly and frail and adorned in muscular twitches sat in a booth aligned against the front stretch of window glass to Ralston’s right; his frizzy hair was parted across the top of his head to a vacuous baldness in a Larry-of-The-Three-Stooges kind of way. Opposite him at his table, the bobbing of a matted gray head of hair revealed he had company.

To the left of the front counter register and seated atop a barstool was another elderly chap, garbed in the worn denim of Dickie coveralls and nothing but bare skin beneath. His scrawny, barefooted hillbilly self was undistracted from the cracker island he erected upon the green waters of his split pea soup.

The other side of the diner’s interior was just as uneventful and lifeless; to the rearward left, at the last window seat of the last booth, a nest-like mound of dark auburn hair crowned a face buried in cradled arms slumped over the table.

Six people as inert as the outside night itself, yet given the outside night and the area beyond, this was the most happening place around. Accompanying all this was the barely audible, subtle, soothing sounds of “Do You Know the Way To San José,” ala elevator music, via speakers resembling shower drains dispersed every yard or so across the ceiling.

“Ralston,” Andrew said in a whisper, “what do we do?”

“We stay together,” Ralston answered. “It’s likely they’ll want us separated.”

“You think they’re here?”

Ralston’s eyes squinted, eyelids blinked like the flicking of pale white camera shutters over two glistening black lenses. He spied a pack of menthol longs upon the polished counter in clear view beside the denim Dickies man’s split pea soup.

For one thing, Ralston figured, it would be nice to partake in a little nicotine rush. For another thing....

“Wait here,” Ralston said next. “I think I’ll test the waters a bit.”

“Good luck,” was the only reply at Andrew’s disposal and he chose to wait for him. Ralston wasn’t about to stray too far and wasn’t about to leave his sight, and none of the six patrons had given them notice yet anyway.

Just like Ralston, too, to want to be the first to instigate attention.

“Excuse me, friend,” Ralston straightened himself gentlemanly and groped for a tug at the Dickies man’s denim, “you don’t suppose I can bum a smoke from you....?”

“You ain’t my goddamn wife,” the Dickies man muttered nonchalantly, undistracted from his saltine crackers.

“So go ‘head, young tadpole-man, help yerself.”

Tadpole-man???

“Uh...don’t mind if I do. Thanks.” Ralston sidestepped the barstool at one side of the man and snagged the pack of smokes from the counter, picked a single from the pack, perched the cigarette’s butt between what slits remained of his lips, and returned the pack to its place. His eyes never withdrew from the man and the man’s eyes never withdrew from his soup.

Ralston nagged at him again. “Hey, sorry. Umm, you got a light? I seem to have misplaced mine on my
intergalactic star cruiser....”

“Ain’t got one,” the man replied, unflinching. Then, the denim man’s right arm lifted, exposing an underarm pit infested with carefully braided hairs. All of his fingers curled fist-like but the index, which pointed as he spoke again. “But they do. They have a light for ya. Those ones, the ones on the other side....”

Ralston turned his gaze into the direction where he indicated, the direction of the thermal jacketed couple at the counter’s opposite end.

It was as though the couple sensed they’d become the objects of attention, for as soon as the attention was drawn to them they simultaneously returned Ralston’s gaze.

Ralston immediately recognized the couple, and the very reality of who they were drew him towards them in hopeless abandon, utterly awed, and it wasn’t because the couple might’ve held between them a light for his smoke that he lost a grip on reality himself.

It was because the red thermal jacket contained his prodigal girlfriend, Jessica as she reared her head to teeter Ralston’s way, and the wearer of the lavender blue thermal jacket at the hind side of her raised a muted expression belonging to none other than his literary agent William Behn.

To make matters even more confounding, the two withdrew their mutual glares as he approached, and they turned towards each other, arching forward face-to-face, hidden all too intimately to have not been engaged in a kiss.

If it was a kiss, it was likely a kiss not to spite him, but a kiss ignorant of him. They were neither receptive to his presence nor to the fact that he was alarmingly alien. This insight gave Ralston ample moments to retreat a step and regroup his thoughts.

We stay together.
That’s just what he’d told Andy-man.
Andrew.
Ralston about-faced, in attempt to call Andrew to join him, forthwith.
But there was no Andrew.
There was merely the deserted sign—which read WAIT, now pivoted to face him as if to address him once more and the overhead soundtrack of instrumental easy listening.

***

“Wait here, I think I’ll test the waters a bit.”

Ralston, after all, held a superior grasp on the situation, supposedly; to be here was his idea.

But Andrew instantly aborted his attention, however, to heed the unexpected call of his name by a voice both familiar and female emitting from the direction of his left. Intuition set him in motion to hearken, as if the voice were from Bari’s own multidimensional lips.

But this was not Bari’s voice.
The next second, he perceived that it was Melony’s.

He abandoned the vestibule where he stood, exit stage left, ventured past Ralston and the Denim man at the counter to the beckoned call of his utmost interests.

Conceivably, the source of direction from which the voice summoned him was to the left; maneuvering that way pitted him against the sight of nothing more than what he’d already observed. The counter ended abruptly to his right by a walkway gap to the kitchen. This was succeeded by a textured wall embodying a single rest room door and meticulously hung Elvis Presley portraits. The places to sit were to his left now, an avenue of four booths of tables along the stretch of front windows.

The occupant of the far booth’s corner seat stirred, and by now Andrew assumed this had to be a woman, yet she did not raise her head from her folded arms.

No one else could’ve called to him, for no one else appeared to be around from where he swore the voice called.
Except for this...this woman.
Could she be...?

He approached her slowly until he drew closer to a glass door past the last booth and leading to the outside. Scotch tape held a poster of a cup of coffee and a can of MJB across its bottom half, and attached to its top pane of glass was a cardboard sign:

PRIVATE PARTIES ONLY.
Then, the woman he approached lifted her head and glared directly at him, the hazel pools of her eyes a fountain of tears.

The woman was Melony.
Melony...in likewise condition that Andrew had seen her last, silky black Halloween witches’ gown and a belly bulge from the Andrew-yet-to-be-born.
And in a pitifully heartbreaking state of anxiety.
Andrew froze, his instincts quick to stifle any exertion to take her by the hand and lead her the hell out of there...to so might have been just what her captors were waiting for.

“Andrew, I’m...I’m sorry. Get away from here! It’s a trap! I’m sorry...he...he made me call your name!”

“He?” Andrew was puzzled. “He who?”

“My husband....”
The gastric echoes of a toilet flush accompanied the opening of the restroom door, which by this time was to Andrew’s rear.

Andrew riveted to a deliberate stance in total view of the being which, after a few steps, emerged from the restroom and switched off its inner wall light absentely, as if by habit.

By the looks of him, the being was clearly pissed off, gazing upon Andrew in a startled fury and recognition that had been rehearsed in hindsight.

Andrew recognized this being also.

“Max J. Polito....”

Only he was indeed a being. And clearly by definition of appearance not a human one. Not anymore.
His overall countenance resonated a distinct and eerie beige aura, despite the preppy getup of trousers and sweater and leather jacket, which he straightened at the collar. His blueblack hair was unkempt and flailed, his pale expression that of an intent but otherwise zombied madman.

He extended a defiant, ghostly finger at Andrew, accusatory and succinct. “You know what that sound is, you piece of Everborn toad shit? It’s the sound of my marriage going down the toilet!!!”

A predominant intimidation festered Andrew’s first reply. “But...haven’t you been dead?”

“You screwed my wife!!!”

“Yes, but, I can explain...wait a minute, I don’t have to explain. You’re a mindless shell of a puppet now, hosted only by the will of the Magdalene, Salvatia. I know. What the gobbeldy-goddamn do you care about, concerning the problems of your neglected marriage??”

“You’re so very right, my bastard stepson,” replied the Max-thing. “But you can always call me Uncle Maxy....”

“How about if I call you piece of shit?”

“How about if I call you a little death....?”
Uncle Maxy’s eyes flared from a color like that of his hair to a blazing orange to match his Magdalene creator’s.

“You can’t kill me,” Andrew said with bold confidence.

“But I know someone who can....”

And with that, Uncle Maxy lunged for him.

Melony, panic-stricken and helpless in the corner of her booth, let out a scream.

***

“Jessica...??”
Ralston reached forth an attenuated hand and rested its palm upon the area of thermal jacket which would have been Jessica’s hip. Andrew’s absence from the situation was by no means cause for him to forsake the matters at hand; this was his girlfriend and William Behn, for chrissake!
And then Jessica swiveled upon her barstool to directly face him.
This time, it wasn’t Jessica.
Not at all.
What would’ve been who he’d perceived as Jessica was now a profoundly wizened, twisted creature in mock disguise, an abomination distinctly Everborn in all its pre-grey alien visage. The hair it donned was but a human wig which slipped backwards off its head as if retrieved into its thermal jacket’s backside by an unseen thing. Its hairless
face was overcome by the barely healed scarred wounds of scratches perhaps caused, Ralston was quick to summarize, by the telltale straight retractable razor it clenched like an infant to a rattle within its right hand.

If this had indeed been Jessica before and not an illusion, then what faced Ralston now couldn’t possibly be it who was....

“Scratch!” cried Uncle Maxy from the other side of the diner. “I’ve got him! I’ve got a Midnight Meal Special for ya!!!”

Ralston wished he’d been given the opportunity to read this portion of the book, if indeed so far the events following his and Andrew’s departure from his Brea home hadn’t already altered history. He could not take his eyes off Scratch, not for anything, let alone to scope out what mayhem Andrew had gotten himself into since his partner disappeared from the WAIT sign, for to act upon this distraction might prove fatal.

Scratch himself cocked his head in a glance over Ralston’s shoulder in acknowledgment to the summons, a reflection of overhead lights converging into a single horizontal glimmer out his otherwise opaque left eye. After but a second’s time, he resumed his beady fixation upon Ralston. Scratch squatted where he sat, bare feet scabrous and ashen such as the rest of him with toenail talons flexing like those of a bird of prey into the brown cushioned bar stool. The red thermal jacket cloaked about him engulfed him from all sides but the front, giving off the aura of uncanny nobility like a gargoyles dwarf in royal robes. Apart from this, he wore nothing more than grime-soiled cut-off jean shorts which hung from bony malnourished alien hips as if it was the last morsel of overcooked meat on a beef rib.

“My Beloved One shall deal with you in a heartbeat,” was what Scratch said to Ralston. The hand baring the razor elevated not to strike but to bully, but the higher it went the further his minuscule hand regressed down his sleeve to leave all but his gangrene-toned fingertips and clawed nails clenching his weapon. “And I don’t think you’re gonna like what’s going down.”

William Behn raised his gaze once again Ralston’s way from behind Scratch, and this time, as gazes momentarily locked, Ralston noted Behn’s expression as one stricken with the impetuous fear of a mouse in a snake’s lair and driven to tears.

Then came the bombastic disruption of a limp and lifeless human corpse fallen from above without warning in a colliding ker—thump across the counter abreast of all three of them. The body of a very real and very slain Jessica rebounded a centimeter or two upon impact as an oversized gunny sack of grapefruit would, settling motionless and wide-eyed in a soulless stare, her head scalped into a pulpy baldness. Bloodflow escaped the lowest corner of her lips to form an expanding pool that saturated half her Tweety t-shirt and the portion of appetizer basket still visible at the feet of a Ralston taken aghast.

Secondly, in turn from above and suddenly from where Jessica fell, Salvatia herself released her invisible grasp of the ceiling and the unseen wooden beam between the space of ceiling and roof, descending in a deliberate pomp and circumstance to a position behind the counter. She faced the three of them in all her Messiah Complex self-glory, arms outstretched and like a voluptuous woman crucified over the breadth of Jessica’s remains. Her skin tone was of her typically exquisite shade of silver but far more lustrous, as if in result of a Tar-nex bath, as if she’d recently shed her skin. Orange-blazen eyes scowled down upon a Ralston insignificant in size to her.

Ralston stood where he was, alarmed by the rapidity of the situation transpiring before him, too mindful and earnest nonetheless to cower in fear.

Yet he knew enough to be afraid....

“Ralston, my darling,” Salvatia proclaimed in recognition of him. “Do you have any idea how all I’ve been longing for these past...oh, these past centuries...could have been accomplished years ago if only I’d known about you sooner? Why, I would have already won my right to freely become a physical entity in your world by now, if not for you and that surprise cameo of your wretched Watchmaid Camelia! But alas and all said and done, you’ll find your precious book is about to be rewritten by me....”

One broad backhanded swipe of her glossy black fingernailed talons was adequate for Salvatia to behead William Behn. His body slid and fell limply off the stool in a plop onto the tile floor with the impact of a water balloon splash of liquid crimson from his headless neck, his head toppling afterwards upon a blood-seeped cloud of thermal jacket fluff.

This act shook Ralston off guard enough for Salvatia to take him to his dismay, and she seized him within the grip of her unoccupied hand, his entire throat and neck engulfed the next instant by a fleshy silver palm. She lifted him upwards, up, over the counter, his limbs dangling in subjugated impotence, until their faces were within the odor of the other’s breath, their gazes locked.

Scratch, feeling a bit overcrowded, pulled out of the way and assumed Behn’s bar stool, stumbling amidst his own thermal threads.
“But like your agent just now,” Salvatia continued to Ralston, “your Watchmaid Camelia had gone the way of eternity and at my hands. Your little endeavor with the book, however and to my delight, has now become your fallacy. You see, I win in the end. The Magdalene await my advent, and I have an Everborn to kill. Let’s see if you will do....”

And the Magdalene Salvatia raised her talons to take his life. Ralston was hoping for a little intervention at this point.

“My God, Scratch, I’ve got him!” Uncle Maxy asserted a second time. “Come on and get him before the prick gets away!”

This time an all-too-eager Scratch hopped off his bar stool and scurried across the diner, confident that Salvatia had things under control. After all, it was really Andrew he wanted, also. His master’s beige minion monstrosity held Andrew captive as planned, like an unwrapped Christmas present of glory days.

Scratch had only to scurry past the WAIT sign at the diner’s vestibule for him to be out of range for Salvatia to remain materialized. She’d invested many a season tutoring Simon BoLeve towards her persuasions, yet he was always thinking about his own ass first.

Hence, with Scratch’s departure, Salvatia faded away in mid-sentance from a “Get back here, you son-of-a....” Ralston plummeted airborne and free and alone now, then into the arms of Bari as she materialized to catch him just before his forehead was to collide against a bar stool leg. His cut-off trenchcoat was like a trampoline canvas as she held him there, and his ebony tear-drop eyes fought to see Bari’s semblance against a curtain of eyelids drawn heavy with relief.

“Where were you ten seconds ago?” Ralston said to her.

“Go,” Bari instructed, “assist my Andrew while I pursue other matters....”

“But...Andrew needs you...”

“I know what I’m doing....”

Without another word or further time wasted, Ralston did as Bari said and leapt from her arms and onto his feet. He turned his back to her and fled after Scratch in a determined fury to kick his ass; already, at the diner’s opposite far end, Max was succeeding on his own in overpowering an Andrew half his size, having virtually pinned Andrew bent-over-backwards by both arms atop the table surface of the corner booth. Melony was struggling to maintain her balance as she stood over the two of them upon the seat cushion, flogging the back of her estranged husband’s beige jacket with blows from rampant fists.

“Go ahead, you pregnant bitch, exert yourself,” Uncle Maxy exclaimed to her. “That’s not my bread bakin’ in your oven, but any way you bake it, it’s coming out burnt!”

And Scratch was nearly upon Andrew, too. Ralston did not know whether Scratch would instantly kill Andrew as soon as he’d come down on him, but the possibility was there; Ralston couldn’t risk that. He only hoped that Bari was swifter than he and that she did indeed have a strategy.

A strategy she would let him in on.

Ralston couldn’t help but notice in the process of the chase how the diner’s elderly patrons did not react to any of this chaos; yet as he chased past the length of the counter, he offhandedly caught ear to the mutterings of the denim Dickies man:

“You ain’t askin’ me fer no more cigarettes, now....”
46.

Private Parties Only

As the self-proclaimed Uncle Maxy for indefinite reasons, Maxwell J. Polito in current form was in essence two scoops of zombie in a raisin bran of ghost. In other words, he was ghostly enough to be considered an apparition yet was physical enough to restrain Andrew Erlandson pinned backside-down across the corner diner booth table.

It was a bitch of a chore for Andrew to crook his pygmy-sized knees into himself and find footing for his floppy sneaker bottoms against the chest of the beige bastard, to push him the hell away. The effort required Melony’s strength as well to do this and she took the hint and aided him. Uncle Maxy lost his grip upon Andrew and toppled backwards against the wall of Elvis portraits, broadsiding Scratch just as he arrived at the scene.

Andrew bounded up off the table and regained his stance long enough to assess the surmounting plight.

“Melony,” Andrew directed her by a flurry of hand motions towards the side exit door, “go, dammit, get out! I’ll follow you....”

Mel slid off the booth seat cushion and landed on her feet to the floor, was quick to ascertain her bearings in her fervent panic and managed a handful of doorknob. She turned it, found it unlocked, and exited into the outside night.

Andrew shuffled in reverse and into the door gap in turn after her, not an instant too soon before Uncle Maxy
could plummet forward to seize him again. The side door shut, and Maxy collided with its frame in pursuit, an extension of arm transparent as it stretched its reach through the uninterrupted glass. The remainder of him, still physical, slumped disconcerted against the exit.

The cardboard PRIVATE PARTIES ONLY sign on the door’s top glass pane hung in Maxy’s vision like the foreboding curiosity of a beware sign, until the red thermal jacket embodying Scratch caught up with him and his attentions.

Scratch was mortified at how Max allowed Andrew to slip away so easily as he halted, “What would I expect from a brainless henchman like you...?”

“Scratch!” called out a challenge from directly behind him, and Scratch flipped back his oppressive jacket in effort to spin around to face it. His jacket sleeve swallowed his retractable razor and the hand that held it completely, which frustrated Scratch all the more.

“Goddammit,” he swore, “even I can’t do anything right anymore!”

Scratch now faced Ralston, who’d caught up with him. Wary, Ralston moved backwards a few steps to establish a sharp distance.

From behind Scratch, Uncle Maxy had disappeared.

“Listen to me!” Ralston insisted, “you can’t be reborn! Not the way you’re expecting to be! Salvatia’s been using you, don’t you see?”

Scratch reacted in utter sarcasm. “Oh, and you’re just the one ordained to tell me all about it....”

“No,” Ralston replied, “I’m not telling you anything you truly already don’t know yourself.”

“If my brother dies,” Scratch declared, “I will take his place in the new life. Bari will become banished as a Magdalene in consequence and Salvatia will take her place as my Watchmaid. She’ll get what she wants and I’ll get what I want. It’s never been clearer to me. If you have a problem with that, why don’t you ask Salvatia all about it before you die?”

Scratch raised his gaze past him, a dead giveaway to the goings-on behind Ralston’s back; Ralston turned to find himself again face to face with the towering Magdalene Queen, her orange eyes ablaze, her talons ready to strike.

“Your idle chit-chat is over, Everborn,” Salvatia said to him with stark contempt, “and so are you...!”

“Not again,” Ralston recoiled with a partial whimper, bone-white hands lifting to cover his ebony eyes in expectation of the worst.

But Salvatia’s arm did not swing down upon him and before Ralston could close his eyes he looked and saw Bari billowing upwards from her rear, her coppery hand locked about Salvatia’s wrist in lifesaving restraint.

Salvatia fought against it, fought to veer over to one side with her other arm flailing for a striking point to her suppressor. Her jaws gaped unnaturally wide, her tongue protracted and flicked about the air over teeth now enlarged and jagged.

With her opposite hand, Bari grabbed hold of Salvatia’s thick black tresses of hair and wound them tight into a firm wad.

“Ralston!” Bari exclaimed. “Behind you!”

Ralston spun around to meet a slice from Scratch’s razor across the width of his lower right cheek. Scratch had relinquished his thermal jacket which by now encompassed his shoeless feet, and, naked but for jean shorts filthy and ragged, he resembled a malnourished alien madman. And he was.

Ralston placed his fingers to the wound and inspected his own seeping red blood.

Scratch stood poised and readied for a likewise offensive move.

Bari, in one swift stroke of barbaric strength, hoisted the contending Salvatia by the wrist and grappled hair and flung the Magdalene upwards, above and over her shoulder. Ralston caught wind of the cascade of frosty air from Salvatia’s lower aerial half, flinching from subsequent gooseflesh.

Bari released her grasp, and Salvatia hurtled into a thunderous collision clear through an expanse of wall to the right of the restroom door. A turbid haze of drywall dust emanated from the resulting gaping cavity. Chunks of broken plaster and splinters of inverted two-by-fours fell like rain. Elvis littered the debris.

Ralston lunged to his right and quickly reverted to the corner opposite Scratch beside the door so he could see the commotion while avoiding turning his back. Bari proceeded towards the destruction. Scratch remained poised and readied for either another attack upon Ralston or an escape to the outside and he appeared to be deciding between the two.

Ralston moaned. “What I wouldn’t give right now for a good dose of substance abuse.”

***
At the outer side of the diner there was an open terrace reserved for private parties only. During daylight hours, if presumably this diner was open for legitimate business in the normal everyday realm, this section would be held for advance reservations so as to ensure that no one unattended would ever eat and hop the fence before given the check, secluded as it was.

Andrew and Melony had certain reservations, but these had nothing to do with eating and everything to do with running. Upon their evasion from Max and their hairbreadth escape from Andrew’s pursuivant Dreg twin brother, they’d found themselves alone on the terrace and wondering where to go next.

The terrace was composed of a foundation of smooth concrete stained terra cotta and was wide enough to corral two rows of round wrought iron tables with glass tops, three in each row and each with four matching chairs and ample walking space which ended evenly with the building’s rear.

Andrew had led Melony away from the side door in a hurry, oblivious to the goings-on inside but for the reckoning that Max would continue after them. They initially stopped short past the wrought iron tables for a quick pause to assess the exit from where they fled; Max wasn’t there, he could not be seen even at the inside glass of the door. Instead, they could see from where they stood the gaps of the MJB poster and the cardboard sign revealing a confrontation between Scratch and Ralston, and a momentary struggle.

“This is all a dream....” Melony said in a way almost trance-like, as if she was trying to convince herself.

Andrew realized that perhaps Melony had been trying to convince herself of this all along, that this was all indeed a dream, for only in dreams can an average human accept what she’s been through since she met Andrew Erlandson.

She was like a spooked poodle as she stood beside him and he placed a comforting arm around her waist. She looked down upon him; the youthful man who’d once been twice his size. His height was now like a stunted child, and this gave her no comfort, not to mention how she was pregnant with his child and how because of this the dream would not end.

Only escape.

About them, around the perimeter of the terrace, a two-foot-tall railing of wrought iron to match the tables corralled the cement terrace floor on all sides. A dispersal of gladiolas blooming or dying to varying degrees accented the outlying border along the railing’s outer side. The sole illumination aside from what emitted inside the diner was drawn from strings of Christmas lights adorning and crisscrossing the ceiling of the overhead terrace awning.

Just as Andrew resolved to re-enter the diner to come to Ralston’s aid Melony panicked, grabbed hold of his arm in effort to flee over the railing in the direction of the front parking lot. Andrew spun around limply, a rag doll against the forceful tug.

“Melony, wait!”

A shadow emerged, elongated across the parking lot gravel from around the building’s corner, and Melony reacted to the sight with a halt, turning again, spinning an objecting Andrew right along with her. Melony pulled her alien companion to another railing past the tables and to another possibility of escape.

From where they ended their retreat, the overhead Christmas lights revealed tall grass beyond the bordering gladiolas swaying in the mild cool breeze, sloping downwards at an angle into a canyon-like darkness. Beyond this, there were dense trees towering from within a short ways away yet distant enough to allow a vacuous black clearing between themselves and the terrace.

A rumble issued forth from within the diner, a nasty earthquake-styled rumble; this commotion was enough to indicate to Andrew that Bari and Salvatia were getting physical. The next instant all fell silent.

Andrew gazed up at Melony, who remained adamant about fleeing.

“It looks as if we’re not going anywhere,” Andrew told her.

***

“Goddamn right you’re not,” Scratch’s outcry startled Melony and the Everborn at her side, whirling their attentions to the diner’s terrace entrance door. “Erlandson! You and I need to have words....”

Just as they turned, the door slammed shut and Scratch was outside with them, one hand clenching his razor, the other forcefully tightening its grip on the door handle so as to prevent a frantic Ralston inside from following after him. Scratch propped one bare foot against a bottom portion of door frame for stability as Ralston exerted one tug after another to get out.

Uncle Maxy’s ghostly beige presence came trudging up on the gravel from around the corner of the building’s front lot, through the wrought iron railing in a spectral flicker, before Scratch took notice of him.
“Where have you been?” Scratch scolded him. “You’re supposed to be holding him for me!”

“Hold your tongue, Dreg,” Max said. “I am the vessel of your Beloved One. Besides, why don’t you try getting the hang of instantly transporting yourself across space? There’ll be times when you find your sense of direction to be all fucked up. And I need a cigarette....”

Andrew took an upwards glance at Melony, who was seriously considering a retreat down the dark and grassy slope.

***

Ralston fought against the door’s handle and Scratch’s strong hold from the other side. His left palm was slashed wide open like a loaf of butter-top bread, at the fleshy portion of lower thumb. He cursed himself. It seemed like a good idea to keep Scratch from escaping out the door after Andrew. When he’d made the move for Salvatia’s Dreg, it cost him the stinging incision. His cheek still bled from the first one.

Ralston would later wonder why Scratch never carried a gun, how Simon BoLeve could’ve taken him out without a problem by now if the bastard simply shot him. But Simon was an addict to his weapon in ways where, particularly in the issue of his face, a gun would not at all do.

In the issue of Ralston’s hand, it made it godawful painful to wrestle a door handle.

Bari, remaining a material Watchmaid a dozen paces behind, urged him, “Ralston, get the hell out of here!”

“I’m trying!” he shouted, exasperated.

“Must deal directly with this Magdalene, for only I alone can....”

Salvatia emerged from the rubble her body made of the wall Bari had flung her through. She’d remained physical during the impact, for she’d no time to react to Bari’s maneuver.

And the impact hurt like a sonofabitch.

Beneath the broken plaster and drywall, shards of wood and dust and fallen portraits of the King of Rock n’ Roll, Salvatia dematerialized.

Ralston abdicated his door handle battle to cop a look at Bari, who took a poised and readied position before the cavernous new entrance she’d made of the restroom with Salvatia.

The restroom door flung open suddenly with a resounding tumult of force. Its lower hinge tore loose from its frame as the door itself slammed into what remained of the wall.

From out of the doorway, Salvatia launched an assault upon Bari, and Bari was primed and readied. But she hadn’t prepared for what Salvatia held concealed behind her, nor for the crushing blow to the chops the next instant from a wallop of rectangular porcelain toilet tank top.

The force plummeted Bari backwards and onto a booth table, rendering her incoherent as she spilled onto the leather booth seating, rolling into a position below the table uon the floor.

Salvatia discarded the toilet tank top in a backwards Frisbee throw and smiled a wicked smile. She intently proceeded to the booth under which Bari had fallen, and all that could be seen of Bari was a circular swirling of currents whipping the air like invisible blender blades.

Then, Bari’s voice called out, “Ralston, you out of here yet?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about little Miss Watchmaid,” Salvatia called out to her. “Simon let him out, finally. It’s just you and me, baby. Whether Camelia’s ‘Born lives or dies is, to me, neither here nor there. He’s merely surviving long enough to witness the death of your beloved Andrew. Alas, I can’t say the same thing about Camelia herself, rest her soul....”

Bari arose from beneath the booth table, bringing the table up along with her by a single powerful grip upon its center support leg, uprooting it from its floor mount of bolted steel as easily as tearing off an ear of corn. With equal dexterity, Bari then utilized it as a shield. She struck a corner of it upwards into an effective collision with Salvatia’s chin, knocking her opponent back, with the full force of the attempted a forward lunge.

“You can’t win, Salvatia,” Bari proclaimed, “no matter how you’re persuaded otherwise.”

The Magdalene fended against the driving weight of the table shield to no avail. She managed confidently, “What makes you so sure of that?”

“Here’s a question going back at you: why, of all places, did you choose this diner for our inevitable showdown?”

Salvatia toyed with the question. “I knew you’d eventually show here, all of you, and I felt no need to have left a clue. It was meant to be. More importantly, my fellow Magdalene whom I shall redeem by your Andrew’s death have drawn me to this place. But this diner is a prominent and curious locale within the pages of that exquisite mistake of a book Camelia’s Ralston wrote, which written therein were all of the clues you required. Clues for you and also priceless clues for me.”
Bari replied with a sarcastic objection. “And to think for decades I assumed you to be a devious, formidable foe. You’re only an asshole disillusioned by a centuries-old obsession with power. Your obsession with power is worse than a man’s own obsession with his dick. And it’s made you naive.”

Salvatia’s physical makeup fragmented into an air-powder puff of cloudy mist which submerged into the table, through, and came together again to material form at its underside. She now faced Bari in an eye-to-eye invasion of Bari’s personal space. Having acquired the upper hand, Salvatia then said to Bari, “How naive....?”

Bari let go of the table before Salvatia could wrench it free from her grip and it toppled to the floor on its side. Salvatia’s hand immediately went for Bari’s throat, and Bari’s hand went for hers in turn. In a dual heartbeat they held one another’s throats, their opponent held high and clawed and poised to strike.

“You’re no match for me, Watchmaid!” Salvatia breathed. “Don’t you know from experience that even two of you are no match for me? I am a Magdalene, and I am the messiah of my kind. My victory was prophesied!”

It was true that one Watchmaid against a Magdalene wasn’t a fair match by far, and Bari knew this from the beginning. The strength and the ability to manipulate between dimensions and material objects didn’t quite cut it for a Watchmaid in situations like this, especially for a Watchmaid so relatively young compared to a Magdalene centuries old. If she was to defeat Salvatia, of all Magdalene, she’d have to rely on intuition and strategy and timing, on all the essential elements of a carefully devised plan.

And she wasn’t in this alone. She had not only her own Everborn to protect, whose life was at stake and revolved around every situation of the moment; she had Ralston also, whom she’d made a vow to protect and through years of intervention did a damn good job of doing so. She’d done so and then some, Ralston being the prick he’d always been and, thanks to her manipulation, a famous one.

Yet in some point in the aftermath of all that was meant to be of this, it was Ralston who would helm the writing of a book that would save them all.

Bari knew this now more than anything, and this gave her a confidence she was certain Salvatia did not have.

And a carefully devised plan.

At this point in time, it was all perfectly clear to her....

Ralston’s effort in transmitting a message back in time in the form of a final Ralston Cooper novel had not been directed towards Andrew or herself, had not been transmitted as a mere warning or insight for the good guys to get ahead of the game.

It had been directed towards Salvatia, in transmitted fragments picked up by her own Dreg who’d taken the ball like a God-sent omen and run with it.

It had also been directed towards the Watchers, or specifically towards the band of Watchers who had taken his own copy of the book from him and were the only ones with the advantage of having read through its entirety.

The book was responsible for Salvatia choosing this Carbon Canyon diner.

What Salvatia didn’t know, the Watchers knew.

Thanks to the book.

And the Watchers had a habit of frequenting this particular diner and its surroundings like a home away from many homes.
47.
The Watchers

God sneezed all of a sudden and without warning.
Or at least, it was as if.
Something in the air shifted.

Somewhere close by, a rooftop weathervane twirled in all directions and slumbering souls dreamed more deeply in their beds. Coyotes silenced their howls in the distance for reasons no less apparent than why they were howling in the first place.

A hush dripped upon the atmosphere like the ripples of water droplets falling into a pool the land was already submerged in.

It was as if the Watchers had descended.
It was as if God sneezed.

“Bless you,” Bari managed to mutter, not in polite response to God, but in response to the hush itself and the advent of its welcomed redemption, and she muttered this as soon as she’d felt it.

Salvatia felt it also, and she released her grip around Bari’s throat. This, for Bari, was redeeming in itself; the Magdalene’s strength had succeeded her own, and Bari found herself unable to dematerialize, unable to fight, unable to breath against both of Salvatia’s constricting hands. A moment longer, and Salvatia would have otherwise extinguished Bari’s breath altogether or snapped her neck, or squeezed her head from her body like squeezing apart a lump of play-dough. With mutually decreasing interest in each other, they lifted their heads and their gazes in curious scrutiny upwards.

The instrumental parodies of pop music from the ceiling’s shower drain speakers silenced, and the Watchmaid and the Magdalene together listened alertly for something more.

And then once, twice, the interior diner lights flickered off, flickered on.

Bari, in anticipation of Salvatia’s reaction to sensing the Watcher’s presence, took advantage of the distraction and broke free from her hold, pushing Salvatia away.

Rather than an attack of anxiety, Salvatia exhibited a puzzling state a bliss.

“How melodramatic.” Bari looked upon Salvatia with a bitter confoundment she could not conceal, like the look on the recipient of a very stupid joke.

Salvatia then disappeared from the room.

But there were urgent matters to tend to mounting outside the diner terrace. Bari’d been keeping keenly intuitive tabs on Andrew and on Ralston as well, and though her focus had centered upon the Magdalene Queen’s every move, she was prepared for an instant’s rescue should either Evenborn fall into harm dangerously more lethal than a few flesh wounds from BoLeve’s razor.

She disappeared out of the room also, for it was time to do just that.

***

“I see naked children walking in the grass,” Melony said to herself, said in her head where no one else could hear except perhaps for the children...for what appeared to be unclothed children scurrying and wandering about the tall grass at the foot of the terrace embankment. She’d noticed them during a final attempt to escape over the railing, and upon seeing them she soberly made up her mind to stay put.

“We need to confront my brother this way,” came Andrew’s persistent whisper to her, but as Scratch drew his
attentions towards the two, Andrew felt himself intimidated suddenly like a child at an elementary school Halloween costume contest, a human young boy in a prosthetic spaceman outfit standing beside his stage-stricken costumed mother.

He wished it was only that.
Perhaps in the next life.

Scratch had at last grown weary of terrorizing poor Ralston and decided to focus upon the real matters-at-hand, upon the witch parody and her alien boyfriend/son; Ralston had been seized in an instant as soon as Scratch had allowed him to burst through the diner’s side door to join them. Uncle Maxy had been ready and waiting to snatch up the mock novelist at Scratch’s command like an awaiting mantis eager and impatient for its meal.

When the deed was done, Scratch toyed with a restrained Ralston, by blade and with words, words such as “you’re telling me how I can’t be reborn?? Why don’t you think about what just happened to your pitiful little self, at how your groupie girlfriend slut Jessica bit the big one right before your oversized fathomless eyes. Your destiny is fucked my friend!”

Ralston had not been prepared for this news, even after reading a majority of his own book, even after his recently acquired enhanced mental intuition and insight. Scratch then had withdrawn from him, leaving him for the following moments emotionally raped and devastated.

The Dreg then commenced his approach towards Andrew and Mel with a bag-of-bones stature preceding his own confidence, a menacing alien grey tinker-toy man welding a straight razor and a bloodlust.

***
“Well, if I ain’t the man in charge about now,” Scratch mused aloud and with a damnable pride. Yet as he passed the first two wrought iron tables and then the next one, he slowed in mounting consternation. By the time he was beside the last row of tables and about six feet between himself and the uncanny duo of his Everborn brother and the estranged ufologist’s wife, he halted altogether.

Upon the table beside him, he set aside his razor deliberately but calmly, his eyes never leaving Andrew’s. It was difficult for Scratch to determine whether Andrew’s own eyes never left him in turn and likewise, for eyes lacking pupils could only scarcely reveal exactly what it was they were observing.

But Scratch was clearly purposeful in making notice to all eyes present that he was relinquishing his weapon, dragging a single bony finger along the surface of the blade as a stroke of farewell sentiment.

Scratch held his position six feet in front of Andrew and Mel, not far enough away from them nor from the razor on the table to make either one of them feel more at ease. He sighed, slackened from his bolder stature and into a listless slump in composure as if to impersonate surrender.

“Listen, Andrew....” came the attempt of Scratch to reason with him, taking full advantage of a face-to-face and brother-to-brother moment. “...firstly, now that we can share together a short social exchange, I must apologize for not having written any letters or sent any postcards, hadn’t kept in touch over the years. You see, circumstances being what they are and all...they’ve made what I am today and you who you are right now. And here we are, swimming like feeder fish in the waters of circumstance, as if higher powers have purchased us in water-filled sandwich bags tied with rubber bands, to bring us home as aquarium food for the pets of the gods!”

“Umm, Simon?” Andrew said to his Dreg twin brother, clearing his throat in introduction. “We’re all of us here pressed for time. For your information, Melony and I have been under the impression that you were about to kill me and Ralston, too. If you don’t, then your Magdalene Majesty surely will, unless she’s incapable. So if you truly have something to say, release Ralston and let us all free, and we can sit down and chat as soon as we get the hell away from here. Otherwise, get on with it and kill me now.”

Scratch hesitated, questioned himself and stretched an index finger to his chin to think.

Andrew, impatient and observing his brother’s pause as a waste of everyone’s valuable time, motioned a tug at Melony’s witches skirt and another at her arm, turning away and toward her.

“All right,” he resolved sternly to Mel, “let’s go. Come on...it’s okay to flee. Down the embankment, he’s letting us go...I’ll take care of you....”

It wasn’t clear to Melony whether Andrew’s assertions were serious or intentionally sarcastic as if to purposely invoke a response from Simon; hopefully, to invoke a quick resolution.

Melony would nevertheless refuse to budge; even though she did not know what to do at this point, she knew what not to do, and that was to not escape down the embankment.

It was because of the unclothed children down there....

“Aaaah...goddammit Simon,” Uncle Maxy exclaimed, his patience exhausted from all of this, and all eyes turned towards him and his enervated prisoner. “You sonofabitch! At least Andrew mentioned one plausible thing
and I say also, let’s get on with it! Here, I’ll even help you off to a fresh start...."

With that, and with no more effort than with a Diaper Dan doll, Uncle Maxy let go of his strangle-hold on Ralston, only to lift the protesting Everborn up and fling his body across the air, over the railing and into the darkness of the steep embankment. Ralston’s screams faded, then abruptly squelched.

“There,” Uncle Maxy said in accomplished relief, brushing his ghostly hands together as if after having discarded the daily garbage.

“No!” Andrew cried out after his friend. He quickly abandoned Melony and rushed past Scratch, knocking into his side, and went for the section of railing where Ralston went over. He gazed down into the direction where Ralston disappeared, speechless, eyes searching.

As Scratch turned to Mel, her body stiffened and her eyes returned a transfixed glare upon him, helpless and hopelessly afraid.

“What are you lookin’ at?” he barked.

Scratch then turned once again, over to one of the wrought iron tables, where he picked up his cherished straight razor.

***

That was when, just then, Salvatia herself materialized to join him at his side; a swift backhand to a space-constricting table served as a clamorous wake-up call to all for her presence to be known, as if simply appearing among them in itself wasn’t enough. She then spoke to Simon, coaxing him, “Now is the time, my beloved!”

Scratch looked over at her and into her diabolical scowl towering above.

“You see that over there?” the Magdalene spoke and pointed a twisted, black-nailed finger at Melony, who broke from her frozen aghast and became animated again, head darting for an alternate escape route. “That over there in her womb is your potential redemption. Your way out. To emerge into the next life you must destroy your successor into that womb. The longer you allow Andrew Erlandson to live, the more Melony’s womb serves as incubator for his next life and not yours. You will cease to exist, my troubled beloved.”

“She’s lying to you!” Andrew moved from the railing to sternly face him, challenging what emotions and sensible reasoning abilities Simon might have retained. “How do you know she’s telling the truth? She’s manipulated you throughout your life to suit her will, not yours! All she cares about is transforming into a Watchmaid again, so she could become limitless physical and manipulate the rest of the world as we know it!”

“My plan is a mutual plan, Evenborn,” Salvatia hissed at Andrew, “for both myself and Simon, my beloved. The end will justify the means for him and me. Besides, it will be a better world....”

“Where is Bari?” Andrew demanded, as if Salvatia was responsible for Bari’s absence.

“I wouldn’t worry, dear,” came Bari’s reply from seemingly everywhere, as it seemed always at first to Andrew.

But then as Andrew looked and saw back to where he’d gazed down over the railing and into the depths of the embankment, Bari’s shadow came forth into rapid view as she emerged trudging in upward climb through the tall grass, a delirious Ralston draped limp, and mumbling nonsense in her arms.

“Talk about being in the right place and at the right time,” Bari continued. “It was as if the poor guy had fallen into my lap from out of the sky.”

“That’s pretty goddamn ironic,” Ralston uttered. “Some of us might as well have fallen from the sky....”

“Bari!” Andrew responded, and by the sight of her was thoroughly relived. “As usual, you’re just in time....”

“...Time enough, I must say,” as Salvatia say, “to witness a death, and my rebirth!”

“Oh, yes,” Salvatia corrected herself.

“Lets kill Erlandson,” Uncle Maxy regained his side spotlight. “My Queen, your power here is so great that, as you’ve witnessed, I can achieve physical feats like pinning Erlandson into a diner table and tossing Cooper over the side. Mr. BoLeve is clearly flaking in our efforts, like he did the first time when he flaked at the school playground. The Dreg’s a wimp. Why can’t I....?”

“Hush, my spectral puppet,” Salvatia told him. She then turned to all the others in a display of mock modesty. “He’s a little overzealous. What can I say? There’s more of myself inside him than there ever was any of himself. Besides, this must be the work of a Dreg alone, if it’s going to work at all....”

“Bari,” Andrew called, his attentions this time not abandoning his brother’s opposing leering stance, Scratch’s mounting persuasions towards his Magdalene’s will drawing him threateningly closer.

Bari responded not to Andrew, but addressed Salvatia personally, almost arrestingly humbly, in an unbiased time-out, to ask Her Magdalene Majesty a most uncharacteristic question. “Salvatia, excuse me sincerely, but I, in
the last recent moments before Ralston had fallen into my arms, had words with a number of your reclusive Magdalene sisters. Might I inquire, if I should allow your Dreg to take my Andrew’s life, and I become a dimensionally-challenged entity such as yourself, that I may become physical again through you like your sisters who anticipate the same redemption?”

“You wish to join me, Watchmaid?” Salvatia said with curious, brow-raised delight.

“At this point, yes,” Bari replied to her plainly.

Hearing this reply distracted Andrew promptly away from his overbearing brother. “What?”

Salvatia flexed her silvery-skinned palms and outstretched her arms as if awakened out of bed from a good night’s sleep, wrenching her dreamstate burdens away into a new morning yawn. Then, she addressed Bari stringently, black eye brows sunken together in fleshy folds over the glare of eyes blazing orange like pools of molten iron. She looked upon Bari this way, and imposed a vow to test her.

“Do you, Watchmaid Bari, who was once Bari Davenport, a very human young lady who chanced to fall in love with an Everborn, swear allegiance to me? I know more than you can fathom, Watchmaid Bari, and I certainly know more about you. Three of Erlandson’s lifetimes ago you were a woman who chose to take the place of his last Watchmaid, who now lives her final days human again and in a home for the elderly in Southhampton, England. You saw to him through his subsequent life as a popular film director and then through this one. Surely you’re aware of how important your ‘Born is, and of his true name as a Watcher from long ago, and how for three generations you’ve loved him so....”

“Enough,” Bari said to her. “It surprises me not that you know these things. You’ve been in your state for centuries as where I have barely a century to speak of. I’ve made up my mind, and you have nothing to lose. Simon BoLeve can go ahead and kill his brother, see if I care, and I won’t raise a single finger to stop him.”

“What?” Andrew exclaimed, bewildered and betrayed.

“What?!” Ralston exclaimed, awakened fully and coherent in Bari’s arms, and Bari paid him no mind but to toss his body over her shoulders and back again into the depths of the dark embankment, his trenchcoat and limbs flailing through the air, his screams perishing into a haunted silence.

All this was at last enough to convince Scratch to abandon any lingering convictions and sentiment and to do the deed.

Andrew, whose slit of a mouth widened in horror suddenly, whose exposed alien-grey-skinned throat and neck diameter had decreased in size through the regression process, was easily beheaded in one swift stroke of his Dreg twin brother’s razor.

Andrew Erlandson’s severed head flung into the night, an airborne trail of liquid red blood hung and then fell in splotches to the terrace cement floor; his head fell the way of the embankment and down into the depths to where Ralston had vanished twice, where Melony had detected the first glimpses of the children down there. Andrew’s alien Halloween-disguised body collapsed before them all.

Salvatia cackled triumphantly, bellowing in delicious delight not only in the very execution of the murder, but at her own disbelief in how it finally came to pass. “Good, my beloved Dreg! Very good!”

Scratch exhaled a laborious breath, as like a gladiator victorious in the strenuous achievement of having stricken down an opponent, basking in a moment of thought-consuming glory before thinking twice about what he’d truly done.

Melony Polito fell to her knees just then in what could have been shock from having witnessed the traumatic act no doubt, she doubled over in agonizing pain, her arms folded into her belly and hands clenching elbows.

Scratch, observing this, diverted himself back into his Magdalene’s rapturous glare, intensely troubled. “What’s wrong with her? If what you’ve been telling me all along is true, then what Polito’s wife carries within her womb is now me! So do something!”

“So do what?” Salvatia lulled in her euphoria for a disenchanted reply. “You’re on your own from here on out. No Magdalene has even in all of history known this day. Truth is, you could be reborn, then again you couldn’t. Who could tell what to expect ‘til it happens? I, on the other hand, am guaranteed to be reborn, for it has been my prophesy....”

“What?” Scratch answered. Then, more profoundly aghast, “What??!”

“Watchmaid Bari!” Salvatia turned away from the impassioned Dreg and called forth to her persuaded accomplice, “Are you still with me?”

But Bari, who remained remarkably unmindful and even humble to the otherwise dastardly turn of events, knew what she was doing.

And it wasn’t what anyone could’ve foreseen.

***
“Still with you?” Bari returned Salvatia’s query. “Not in another, say, thirty seconds...” She grinned cleverly, and had she a wristwatch she would have given it a melodramatic lookover, just to set what she’d said in visual stone.

Salvatia looked upon Bari quizzically, until her attentions reverted to her subjugated phantasm Max Polito. Uncle Maxy dropped inanimate to the ground in all the instantaneity of a death angel’s call.

Scratch was both furious and perplexed, like an already caged lion surrounded on all four sides by the upturned chairs of whip-cracking lion tamers. Melony was paralyzed and arched over in a ball like a sow bug. On another front was the sight of Polito’s demise, the second to date. Before him, a traitorous Salvatia continued to ignore him, and behind him was the focus of Salvatia’s transfixed scrutiny.

Something was beginning to happen to Bari.

At the same time, something was beginning to happen to Salvatia.

Both of them began to glow a radiant orange hue about each of their waistlines, like luminescent hula-hoops at the point where their vaporous transparent lower torsos merged with their physical upper halves. As soon as this happened, a spark from the belt buckle region of both their glows ignited the bodies of the two entities as though they were two matchstick heads gone up in flames simultaneously. This proved to be a painful experience for both of them, albeit an experience short-lived. They emerged from the wrenching agonies of their mutual spontaneous combustions as opposites, yet opposites in colors alone.

The Watchmaid Bari bore upon her the silver-toned flesh of a Magdalene.

The Magdalene Salvatia bore upon herself the coppertone brass flesh of a Watchmaid.

The process had now become complete, the two entities’ roles reversed.

Bari’s Everborn was dead, which in the supernatural scheme of things resulted in the inability for a Watchmaid-turned-Magdalene to materialize into the physical realm except in the presence of a Dreg. Salvatia’s Dreg brought about this death, resulting in her taking the Watchmaid’s place.

The Magdalene Bari.

The Watchmaid Salvatia.

The realization of this new premise, the dawn of her reestablishment into the physical realm with no rules and no holds barred, brought to Salvatia an invigorating breath of fresh air, a top-o’-the-world, man kind of sense of invulnerability, and she basked in it.

“Come unto me, my sisters!” Salvatia cried out a summons to her anticipated regime. “All but for Bari, who I proclaim shall not carry the privilege of redemption. She shall suffer, and suffer alone while we shall rule!”

“I’m not so certain of that,” Bari announced to Her Highness, “of any of that. In fact, I believe everything you’re about is full of shit. And you’re about to see what I mean. Are you ready? All right, then. There’s something further I’d like to show you....”

***

Within the instant of the next heartbeat, they and the terrace and the entire diner’s side outskirts along down the embankment and the expanse beyond were engulfed by a tidal wave immersion of bright light, its beams trickling off in stardust fragments upon every object of substance its light revealed, like pixie dust trails, like an onslaught of luminous fairies cast down from heaven in a pitcher’s throw from a gargantuan stellar god.

The splendid aurora caught Salvatia and Scratch both likewise off guard like two deer in the middle of a peaceful night’s highway startled by a sixteen-wheeler’s high beams.

Bari remained calm and passive; Melony was too intensely preoccupied by her own pain to take notice.

From out of the tomb-like hush of the moment proceeding the advent of light there emerged an invasion of dozens of little people, spilling over from every direction of the encompassing railing and into the patio, dozens and then dozens more; it was a pandemonium of fetal-like, bare-skinned humanoids of varying shapes and sizes and statures, albeit not a one of them stood taller than four feet in height, no shorter than two.

Resembling naked children they flooded the terrace, encircling the tables, alien grey entities sexless but for undeterminable organs at their groins which for some could have been unmistakably female if they’d only hold still for a view. Their eyes were bulbous and teardrop-shaped and fathomless, double in proportionate size to any Everborn regressed so far as Scratch or Andrew. The dimensions of their heads were expanded, hairless and well-rounded, sleek and smooth, their stunted mouths near-lipless like those of their Everborn counterparts.

Beyond about all two hundred of them and beyond the diner terrace rested a spectacular vision, a colossal cylindrical metallic dome covering the expanse of terrain in the chasm of the diner’s rear canyon. Corralled between the foot of the terrace embankment and the forest of trees to its rear, the space craft, as it was, brilliant in all its
glory, stood situated upon four extended metal landing legs embedded into the earth below it. The untarnished silver of its surface reflected all its surroundings the way a carnival funhouse mirror would, yet it was this reflective dome which emitted the bright light consuming all.

“It’s the Watchers....they’ve found us!” Scratch observed, enlightened and very much afraid.

“You’re right about that,” Bari acknowledged. Then, to Salvatia, she said, “I do apologize, but your blessed sisters could not make it this evening. What, with the Watchers here and all, and with what was coming down, they made an about-face and dispersed, leaving your stupid ass here to fend for yourself....”

“You adulterous whore!” Salvatia roared. “You set me up!”

“You set yourself up,” said Bari. “Don’t worry, it was all meant to be.”

Salvatia struggled for another word but could not find one, nor could she conceive one thought to give rise to another, as a congress of Watchers surrounded her and subdued her. By the very touch of their multitude of tenuous hands and outstretched fingers upon the now-coppery flesh of her upper torso, Salvatia grew rapidly pacified as though subjected to the tranquility of an anesthetic secreted into her system by some magical means.

The Watchers closed in about her, embracing her, violating the decreasing tempest of invisible air currents below her waist with their intrusive bodies and hands. Collectively, the foray reached their hands beneath her, into the air currents and up into her, inside of her, fingers probing and digging upwards behind her veil of coppery flesh and within the region of her abdomen. They found a stable hold just then, gripping, and altogether in one forceful downward tug brought forth two human feet, then legs, like magicians pulling a rabbit out of an overturned hat.

The currents of Salvatia’s lower torso ceased in their movement, disappeared. The body of a young woman, naked and newborn baby pink plunged onto the concrete ground. The entirety of what had been Salvatia’s freshly-converted Watchmaid skin, long black hair and hollowed eye sockets, fell to the floor in a mound alone like a latex body suit, vacated and spiritless, never again to do any harm.

The human young woman that had been Salvatia, sprawled face-up upon the terrace floor, opened her frail brown eyes to the beings assembling above her.

And she let out a piercing scream.

One by one, the beings surrounding her took hold of her, lifting her body up above their heads. She did not fight against them; perhaps she was incapable. Perhaps, in the turmoil of a rebirth into her old self of centuries past, she did not want to fight.

And yet, she continued to scream. Even as the Watchers carried her, past the tables, up, over the railing and down the embankment, her screams echoed into the night and for all eternity.

The majority of Watchers did not retreat, however, for Salvatia’s demise was not all that they had come for; if they’d come for anything else, by the looks of their collaborated advance, they’d come for Scratch next.

Scratch, looking about and realizing he was doomed as they diligently closed in on him, brought his gaze upon Bari. “What is to become of me? Am I still to be reborn?”

“You were never to be reborn,” Bari told him. Then, on second thought, she decided to elaborate. “If you posses any soul at all, perhaps the essence within you, in which dwelt some degree of good, will survive.”

“You go to hell!” Scratch cursed her. “We’re all screwed! You’re a Magdalene now and my brother is dead, and Camelia’s Ralston is dead, and so is Polito and his very estranged wife soon, it appears.”

“Simon BoLeve, you misunderstand,” Bari corrected. “Misunderstand what? That we’re all screwed??” “No. You misunderstand, for one thing, that I had a nice opportunity to converse with this wonderful clan of Watchers here before Ralston had fallen into my lap and they told me to trust them. They told me all I had to do was to allow you to take my beloved Andrew’s life and all would be fine. I do trust them, because...well, they’re Watchers for godsakes, the Master Magicians themselves!”

“But....”

“Oh, and look,” Bari said with enthusiasm to prove her point.

And Scratch dared to look.

Before the Watchers could overtake him, he chanced to gaze over the railing and down the embankment. Other Watchers were already at work with Andrew’s severed head, bringing it up carefully as others upon the terrace orchestrated the removal of Erlandson’s body. Over the railing the body went, ever so carefully, until the body and the head were reunited and tended to by the several dozen Watchers encircling about them like bees.

In the distance from this, Scratch spied Ralston walking towards the ship, flanked by many of these Watchers and shouldered upright by several as he went, as though he’d suffered a mere minor injury.

To Scratch’s left, another group of Watchers proceeded towards Max Polito’s body, to his right they dealt with the ufologist’s wife.

“You see, Simon,” Bari uttered explanatory parting words to him, “the Watchers here have been after Salvatia for centuries, but the only way for them to take her down was to get her into an enchanted location such as this diner
and then for her to become physical enough to be overcome. It was all too easy, as soon as they let me in on the whole scheme. And, by the way, if they can revive Max Polito from death to life, they will surely do likewise with my Andrew. And don’t forget: Max Polito and Ralston Cooper are destined to live, for it is their book that predetermined this all.”

“Hi, how are you?” said one Watcher to Simon BoLeve, an arm outstretched for a handshake. “Not so sure that’s the appropriate question, on second thought. My name is George. Would you come with us, please, right this way.”

“We’re here to fix things,” said another shorter Watcher, in a matter-of-fact fashion.

“I was an Everborn until I became a Watcher again about ninety-seven years ago,” said another, reaching out to help usher Simon along. “An unfortunate accident, really, involving a mob riot and some hairless ostriches. Oh, humanity!”

“It’s okay, Henry, you’re not a part of humanity,” George hushed him.
And with one touch of his hand, Simon succumbed to him and the other Watchers about him, and they together directed him out of the diner terrace and towards their ship in the canyon.

The remaining Watchers approached Bari, finally, alone.

“You’re certain this will turn out all right?” Bari asked one of them.

“Don’t worry, dear Watchmaid, we’ve got it covered from here on out. Oh, and thank you....” replied a Watcher directly before her as the others encircled her, crowding about and pressing against her; to her astonishment, she could tell her skin was ever so slowly becoming a coppertone brass once again, and it occurred to her that she would endure, at least until her beloved Everborn’s next life’s end.

“Follow me now.” Another Watcher spoke.
And Bari followed.
It was supposed to happen this way, all of it, after all.
It was supposed to happen this way, because the story is now told.

I scooted myself away from the desk, or, rather, wobbled my chair from leg to leg backwards across the carpet until I was at a reasonable distance from the desk to flex my hands and fingers. I stretched my arms. I wondered how instant it was, the transmission of this manuscript I was now completing to the hands of Andrew Erlandson back in time to the previous August. Then I realized it was as instant as yesterday; as instant, perhaps, as a lifetime.

I wondered how different the story would be if the story itself had not been an influence on its events, and had neither I nor the Watcher collaborated to tell it and transmit it through time, where would circumstances take us?

This thought gave rise to another: in many ways, a book has already been written for all of us. It’s just that it’s not every day you’re going to come across a copy.

I looked over my shoulder and I saw the Watcher sitting upright in his robe with legs crossed Indian-style upon the center of the bed nearest me.

He smiled upon me wearily, languidly, but he was very much pleased.

Our task was at an end, and, for both of us, it had been a long night.

“I suppose it’s about time I rid myself of the addiction to these wretched things,” the Watcher then remarked, and exhaled his last breath of cigarette smoke, crushed the butt into an ashtray memorial graveyard of the last of his mortal vices.

I sighed, and thought to myself the same thing, although many more questions plagued my mind aside from this resolution.

I wondered, but what now? My quest for knowledge was essentially at an end, or at least to the extent of my career, and although my life had apparently ended months ago, it had begun anew last night.
And then again, just this morning.

There came a knock at the motel room door.

“Go ahead,” the Watcher said, “open it. Dawn has come, you know. For all of us.”

I stood from my chair and without hesitation abandoned the typewriter for the door. My expectations fluctuated between a number of possibilities as to who I might find once I opened the door. In my lifetime, if you count the moment of my birth up until now, I’d opened a *boulevard* of doors, so to speak.

This would be no different, the opening of this one, than any other. And just as exciting.

I opened the motel room door to the outside dawn which blinded me at first, being that my eyes had been accustomed to only a mild degree of light amidst a night time of what seemed like ages.

And before me I beheld my wife. She carried in her arms a newborn son wrapped in several layers of knitted blanket.

She was happy to see me.

The infant gazed up, upon me, and chuckled for innocent unprovoked reasons that I will never know.

And I knew, looking upon them both, that this was another beginning set about by an end.

“Follow me now,” Melony said to me, “there’s something further I’d like to show you....”
About the Author

Nicholas Grabowsky’s novels of horror/fantasy, both as himself, as Nicholas Randers, and as Marsena Shane, have generated worldwide acclaim for over two decades and praised by many of today’s most popular horror gurus in the literary world. He began his career in traditional publishing houses with brisk sellers in mass market paperback horror, and the last ten years have seen him hailed by many as a mentor and advocate to the smaller presses, which has become to him a passion.

His body of work includes the award-winning macabre aliens-among-us epic The Everborn, The Rag Man, Pray Serpent’s Prey, Halloween IV (and its special edition), Diverse Tales, Reads & Reviews and The Wicked Haze, Sweet Dreams Lady Moon, numerous anthologies and magazine articles, with projects extending to screenplays, poetry, songs, film, and a wide variety of short fiction and nonfiction since the 1980’s.

He’s a veteran special guest at numerous genre conventions and makes appearances and signings across the United States. He has been in the limelight as a radical gospel preacher right out of high school and in the following years a rock vocalist, teacher, lecturer and activist, editor, publisher and founder of the Sacramento-based Diverse Media, which has recently blossomed into the subdivisions of Black Bed Sheet Books, “Fine publishers of exemplary literature, fiction and non” (but mostly horror/fantasy), and Black Bed Sheet Productions, which produces independent film.

Currently, Nicholas is at work with numerous anthologies, graphic novels and comic books, a children’s book, a cook book, an Everborn sequel and the novels The Downwardens and The Sirens of Knowland. His independent film projects include the upcoming slasher creature feature Cutting Edges, as well as co-writing the independent film Into the Basement, for Triad Pictures.

Also by Nicholas Grabowsky:
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