

SOMETHING KNOWN

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Contents

Prologue: The Monk & The Mayor	7
(Summer)	16
PART I The Town & The Valley	16
The Reprobates	17
Stranger in The Valley	30
A Succession of Unbelievable Occurrences	37
Meeting the Mayor	50
(Autumn)	57
PART II The Villagers	57
Bessy & Bessy	58
A Wish for Water	64
Abbey's Feelings	74
Two Blue Stars	85
Landing Birds	94
(Winter)	100
New Wheels	101
About Andrea	112
PART III A Voice Apart	120
An Odd Realization	121
An Unwanted Vote	127
An Offering of War	131

Hunger Pains	140
PART IV A Path	146
Fire Talk	147
A Path.....	152
The Monk & The Mayor II.....	155
One Last Walk.....	170
PART V A Lack.....	176
The Reprobates II.....	177
Bessy & Bessy II	179
Two Blue Stars II.....	181
A Wish for Water II.....	185
PART VI Between the Town & the Mountain ...	191
A Lordless Manor	192
A Way Through the Woods	204
The Veritable Brotherhood.....	212
The Pebble & The Tree	223
Jaron Kyler	237
(Spring).....	246
PART VII Dolor's End	246
Another Whisperer	247
A Wish for Water III	250
Two Blue Stars III	263

Landing Birds II.....	269
Abbey's Feelings II	279
New Wheels II.....	285
About Andrea II	293
The Reprobates III	300
A Full Circle.....	302
Epilogue	305

For all those
who have whispered
in my ear

Prologue: The Monk & The Mayor

Deep in the forest, far beyond the allure of the open valley, a man walked through the trees. His steps were weighty and tired, breaking and cracking the many layers of sticks and leaves left on the forest floor by previous autumns. Usually he enjoyed his daily walk to the edge of the forest and through the glen; but on this particular day the land beyond the woods seemed to taunt him with hints of the unending possibilities which lay in its every open direction.

The man groaned as a root from an ageing oak tree tripped up one of his heavy, careless paces. He kicked it and split the dry timber into two disjointed portions. Looking at it for a moment, he tugged at his deep brown beard which had grown well past his jaw. A matted string of hair obstructed his vision, so he tucked it behind his ears and the strand fell into a cascade of long curls which draped around the bones of his shoulders. The forest was spackled with invaded light that crept around the tree trunks and outer reachings of limb and leaf. A soft fade of yellows and golds pooled around the man's feet and the two halves of a dead root.

After a long day's walk the man would often sit and watch as, light by light, the stars would appear and pin the sky with their tiny shinings. Today, however, there had been little solace in his daily meditation within the wood, so he turned and trudged back in the direction from which he'd come several hours earlier.

He needed an audience, and there was only one man who would be able to provide the wisdom he required:

In almost all of his troubles, Abbott had been there to guide and to teach, to listen, and to learn with him during his years growing up in the monastery. Abbott had always taken an interest in the young man; he taught him the ways and places of the forest, educated him, showed him how to pray, how to meditate, how to live simply. And most importantly, it was Abbott who had first taken him to the Orphic to learn of the Vim, also known within the brotherhood as the Great Secret; and it was Abbott who knew best of what paramount importance it was to protect it.

The young monk knew that Abbott would not be pleased with what he had to say. But he would know what to do.

* * * * *

It was nearly dark when the last of his hefty steps finally reached the monastery. The air loomed with the smell of spices coming from the camp's culinary quarters.

The evening meal was always a social occasion, full of light-hearted conversation and casual exchanges; and being so, it was not a good place to entertain serious matters of any great weight. Usually, anything of consequence was brought to the fire rituals, where the monks ceremoniously assembled around a large bonfire to preside over issues of great magnitude; but rarely did anything take precedence over such an important thing as food.

The burdened strides of the young monk reached the main hall and walked in.

"Look who's decided to join us this evening!" one monk yelled as he set the final place at the end of a long table and went swiftly back into the kitchen.

Most of the brothers had already gathered around the table and were cheerfully engaged with each other's company as the young monk took his newly set place and sat quietly as the food was brought out. He gave only brief answers when asked about his day.

"You spend more time at the forest's edge than you do here with us praying and in meditation,

or consulting the Orphic and using the Vim,” said one of the monks from across the long table as he chewed on the last bites of his meal. “It reminds me of a story about another man who spent all his energy on other tasks aside from his own.” The monk across the table swallowed and propped himself up animated and high in his seat. “It’s the story of the stonecutter who was always wandering away from his work.” He cleared his throat. “Once, a long time ago, there was a stonecutter who decided after a long day of cutting stones to go for a walk. On his walk, he passed by a rich merchant’s house, and through the open gateway saw many fine possessions and important visitors. ‘How powerful that merchant must be!’ thought the stonecutter. And he became very envious and wished that he could be like the merchant. Then he would no longer have to live the life of a mere stonecutter.

“Due to the great power of his belief, the very instant he had this thought – to his great surprise – he suddenly became the merchant! And he enjoyed more luxuries and power than he had ever dreamed of and was envied and detested by those less wealthy and powerful than himself. But soon after his supernatural transformation, a high official passed by, accompanied by attendants and escorted by soldiers. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow before the procession. ‘How powerful that official is!’ he thought. ‘I wish that I could be a high official!’

“He then – again, quite miraculously – became the high official! Everywhere he went he was accompanied by soldiers and attendants, and he was

feared by all the people who had to bow down lowly before him as he passed by. On one particularly hot day as he was marching in one of his many extravagant processions, he looked up at the sun; it shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. ‘How powerful the sun is!’ he thought. ‘I wish I could be the sun!’

“And then – in a truly profound metamorphosis – he became the sun! He shone fiercely down on everyone, scorched the fields, dried up the wells, and was cursed by the farmers and laborers. But one day a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth so that his light could no longer shine on everything below. ‘How powerful that storm cloud is!’ he thought. ‘I wish I could be a cloud!’

“And with this desire – in what might only be described as some sort of divine occurrence – he became the cloud! He flooded the fields and villages, blocked out all the light of the sun, and was reviled and loathed by all. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by some great force and realized that it was the wind. ‘How powerful the wind is!’ he thought. ‘I wish I could be the wind!’

“In an instant – with such a magical force that the human mind cannot even begin to fathom it – he became the wind! He blew tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooted trees, pushed clouds wherever he pleased, and was hated and feared by all below him. But after a while he ran upon something that would not move no matter how forcefully he blew against it:

a huge, towering stone. ‘How powerful that stone is!’ he thought. ‘I wish I could be a stone!’

“At that very moment – in a way just as spectacular as anything which is brought into existence – he became the stone! He held clouds in their places, blocked out the sun from the sky and the land, was unaffected by the wind and the rain, and towered above all else. But one day as he stood there, tall and proud against all the other elements, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into the solid rock which made up his being, and he felt himself being changed. ‘What could be more powerful than I, the stone?’ he thought. He looked and saw, far below him, the humble figure of a stonemason.”

The young monk at the other end of the table smiled and chewed, looking down at his meal.

When dinner was finished the monks all went off to their separate tasks: Those who’d prepared the meal cleaned the dishes while the others went to observe their nightly rituals of individual prayer and meditation.

Abbott’s black vestment and long, white beard flowed around his bony structure as he began walking toward his quarters. But the young monk came from behind and asked to have a word with him in private. “Of course,” Abbott said kindly. “Walk with me.”

So, the two men walked together until the young monk finally broke his silence, “Abbott,” he

said pensively, "I am at an impasse with myself."

"How so, my friend?" Abbott asked with starward eyes.

The young monk's confession poured out of him like water flowing to a lower place. He told Abbott of his love for the monastery and for the other monks, and how he'd cherished the experiences given to him by their many wise teachings. He spoke about the passion he'd acquired for the simple and the mundane, and how he felt that through learning to recognize the divine brilliance in those everyday things that his life had been given a meaning greater than he could have ever imagined.

But then a look of somberness took hold of the tight skin of the young monk's face and folded it into shallow, fleshy creases. Abbott listened as his pupil confessed of the void he felt within his heart: how he longed to be amongst regular people and to live and work as they did. He spoke about the daydreams he had while on his daily walks; how he would look out on the open valley and think of breaching the bounds of the forest to live with the world.

". And what would you do with your teachings?" Abbott asked cautiously.

"You mean the Vim?" the young monk asked. Abbott stopped walking and tied his hands behind the cut of his frock. "I don't know," said his pupil earnestly. "Maybe others should know it too."

Abbott phrased himself carefully, "There is a reason that no one has ever left the monastery. If you

cannot find contentment here within these woods – given the depth of the truth you possess – peace, joy, enlightenment, happiness where will you find these things if you don’t already have them? The secret we keep is greater than any truth those on the outside claim to understand. The power it contains – albeit a simple thing – has the potential to yield disastrous consequences if ever it were to be mishandled. It is a secret for a reason. People beyond the forest don’t care to know of its greatness and the profound freedom it enables those who hear it. They care for smaller things – things less real than what you and I already have. They live in a world of concepts, not in a world of actuality – the world our great knowledge allows us to see. Those living outside these woods are captured by the world. They would rather build their lives on a thousand illusions, all woven together, than to hear an utterance of the singular truth we – you and I and all the brothers – protect. Ignorance is easy; the truth is difficult. So let them have it! You are one of the few privileged enough to know! What more is there?”

The young monk looked at his master incredulously for the first time, “There *are* other truths out there – truths within the everydayness of people’s lives: truths in a day’s work, in a conversation with a stranger, or in the busy hustle of a city street I’ve never seen the city before. I’ve never spoken to a stranger before – I’ve never even looked one in the eye! Never, here, in the shelter of the woods, have I ever touched these experiences.”

“You know the greatest secret the universe holds,” Abbott said in the quietest tone either of them had taken.

“And now,” said the young monk with a growing confidence, “I wish to know its lesser ones.”

The two men stood soundless and still for what seemed like a long while.

“I cannot give you permission to leave this place.”

“Then what should I do?” the young monk asked with the innocence of his earlier, more inquisitive days.

Abbott shook his head, “Go and see the Orphic. Go tonight It will know.”

And with that, the young monk was hurrying up the path from the monastery to the Orphic to do as he’d been instructed.

Walking back alone, Abbott kicked at the dirt of the path as he replayed what the young monk had said about lesser truths and the common experiences of those outside the monastery.

When he got back to camp one of the other monks saw him, and with a smile asked kindly, “I saw two monks go into the night, and now only one returns. Where did our young friend run off to this time?”

Abbott looked through the inquisitive monk like glass as he said, “I’m not sure where he’s gone But I don’t think he’ll be coming back.”

(Summer)

**PART I The Town &
The Valley**

The Reprobates

In between the hills, beyond the far stretchings of the woods, lay a broad valley. Swept with open pastures and fertile soils, it grew tall prairie grasses that bent gently under the channeling wind. As the years passed, a few sparse farms were built, and a splotchy dirt road had been forged from the cattle as they were driven through the otherwise grassy plains of the glen.

Hours beyond the city and isolated from any well-traveled route, most of the land was unowned and unused, extending in expansive throws of beauty and tranquility. What few farms did speck the gully's many long miles were too far apart to be called neighbors, though they did network on occasion, exchanging seed and livestock, giving tips on what compost worked best with certain types of plants, and retelling the news they'd heard from a passing rancher or supplier from the city.

On one such farm, Dale Pembroke stepped out into the settling night and listened to the shrieks and howls of wild dogs bounding off the walls of the nearby hills. The crescent of the moon hung like a single white shard of a heavenly chandelier below the ceiling of the sky; Pembroke gave it a passing glance as he pulled at the unpatterned whiskers of his chin.

He thought about his old brigadier's rifle

sitting broken in the cellar – the chamber having clogged after taking a pop-shot at an absconding fox who had slipped into the property and killed two hens several weeks before.

Trotting out toward the animal pens, he rallied the sheep together, shut the chicken coup up tight, and went out to the main gate of the property to double check the lock. He walked back to the open door of the house and turned to survey the yard one final time before climbing the stairs to his bed.

In the distance, the howls of wild dogs pierced the night.

The next morning Pembroke arose from a restful sleep. He dressed and made coffee in an old pot on the wood-burning stove. The morning air was a mixture of dry heat and dust as he unhitched the latch of the chicken coup and was greeted by the excited clucking of two dozen hens, eager to flutter about the outer portion of the pen where they fed. He spread grain around the outer pen and collected three fresh eggs for breakfast before filling the troughs of the sheep with meal and water. As he did every morning, he watched the sheep eat. Today, however, he paid particular attention to two animals within the flock, both of which stood out amongst the others.

The first animal, a three-year-old ewe, had come up with a bad limp in its right hind leg the previous week. But having examined the hoof carefully, Pembroke saw no indication of foot rot – a

contagion which can quickly spread to kill an entire herd in a matter of weeks. However, after watching the hobble persist into the second straight week, he thought it might be time for a reexamination after breakfast.

The other sheep he watched carefully was a younger male whose wool coat grew erratically from its back in patchy, almost hair-like splotches. Though the irregular growth of hair was possibly a sign of border disease – another equally devastating infection – the young lamb showed no other indications of weakness aside from its inability to grow the wool which Pembroke sold to suppliers once or twice a year.

After a few minutes of observing the sheep, Pembroke went inside and cooked the eggs he'd collected on the stove. When he was through eating, he came back out to open the pen and let the sheep roam the pasture. He checked the foot of the limping ewe, and though he saw nothing, decided to trim the base of the hoof anyway before letting the animal stagger out to the open field with the rest of the flock. Even from afar, Pembroke could easily distinguish the two untowardly animals as they loafed within the bulk of the otherwise healthy pack.

He watched them for a few moments before walking over to his acreage of corn to see if the crop had made it through another rainless day.

It had been a bad season for rain in the valley, with hardly enough moisture to dampen the ground below the topsoil, much less grow a hardy stock of

white corn and soy – both of which weakly sprouted in frail gasps above the arid earth. The plants in the fields looked more and more like the dirt every day, turning brown and brittle, drooping under their own lifeless weight. Even the tall grasses of the basin’s meadows beyond the farm looked like thin stalks of golden wheat, blistered and beaten by the pounding sun.

Pembroke knelt beside a withered sprout of a leafy soy plant and felt its sharp, flaky texture against the skin of his hand. Overhead, the sun moved to its highest point in the sky and gave the fields a vacant, yellow stare. Pembroke looked up with his hands shielding his eyes and kicked at the dust which floated amongst the stale air, caking the plants in a cloudy, brownish hue.

That evening after tending to the animals, he washed and retired to his whittling knife and a meager supper of beans and flour tortillas with eggs and a small unripened tomato from the vegetable garden in the back of the house.

As the light receded around the contours of the hills, the stars etched their way into the canvas of the sky in a subtle tapestry of white orbs.

After sitting a long while on the porch whittling the thin end of an oak branch into a gentle spear, Pembroke put down his wood-working and headed to the dusty driveway that led to the main gate of the property. It had been locked all day, though, when he arrived, he checked it, nonetheless. Finding

it secure, he perched himself on top of the rust-scabbed iron bars of the gateway and looked out onto the sullen world beyond the bounds of his property.

It was a soft and quiet night.

Pembroke adjusted his ten-gallon hat and breathed in the slow passing of the wind as it crossed over his face in airy puffs. He exhaled and dismounted the cross-poles of the gate, walking back to the house and arriving at the porch, where he surveyed the yard one last time before turning to climb the stairs to his bed.

Only the delicate sounds of the tall prairie grasses could be heard in the distance as they brushed and swayed beyond the gate.

* * * * *

It was well past midnight when the animals started screaming. Knocking his knee against the end table, Pembroke leapt out of bed like an uncoiled spring. Bowling the front door open with his left shoulder, his momentum carried him outside onto the porch and over to the chicken coup where a wild dog made its way back under the fence and across the pasture into the night.

“God damn it!” he shouted after the fleeing predator. “God damn it!”

Though it was dark, he could see a blood trail

from the fence to the hen house where a rooster lay dead in a ravaged pile of feathers and entrails. Hands at his side, Pembroke went in to dress, and when he came out he began to fix the misshapen fence and re-board the floor of the coup.

“God damn,” he said as he filled in the dirt from under the fence dug out by the dog. “God damn.”

* * * * *

The motor of the pick-up truck hadn't been started in weeks, though it sounded like it may have been years. The animals had all been tended to, and the sheep looked comfortable laying in the shade of the stable as Pembroke pulled away. The truck stopped at the main gate and Pembroke unhinged the lock and drove the clunking engine off the property in the direction of the winding dirt road that sliced through the vale like a bloodless vein. It was the only road in the valley, but it did not pass Pembroke's farm, so to get to it there were a series of overgrown lawns and unkempt passageways to cross before the old truck could turn its rusted body onto the dirt and tread of the seldom-traveled pathway.

At the cusp of the east end of the forest, Jaron Kyler's farm was roughly an hour's drive across

the valley. It stood out alone against the empty earth. Paint blotched the siding and clung to the shingles, exposing the original wood. Tan, ruffled shutters flanked a pair of windows at either side of the front door which stood closed and hitched at the lock by a worn brass knob.

Kyler was the main supplier to the other farmers in the valley. When the merchants came out from the city, instead of making trips to the various farms strewn throughout the countryside, they unloaded their goods with Kyler, who, in turn, stored and distributed a fifty pound bag of seed, or a few gallons of gasoline to those who needed it.

Having heard the mechanical gasps fluttering down the road, Kyler came outside and waved a dirty yellow rag at the sputtering automobile as it pulled its clunkered body near. Hustled and exhausted, the engine of the pick-up turned itself off with a cough and a sputter and out hopped Pembroke with his ten-gallon hat, a half-cocked grin, and a fully extended hand in Kyler's direction. "Hello, Jaron."

"Well, hell, what brings you here, Dale? Didn't expect to see you 'till later this month."

Pembroke reached into the passenger's seat and pulled out a long object wrapped in tattered cloth. "I was hopin' you could get this here rifle in 'a workin' order here for me. The chamber's been rusted shut and I can't seem to get it ta' recycle."

Kyler took the long body of the gun in his hands, "Well, you sure did pick a bad time to come

with this. I don't have any spare parts currently, and the rifle I did just recently have for sale was bought up last week by one of my suppliers." Pembroke tucked his lips into his teeth and shook his head.

"What seems to be the urgency?"

"A dog problem. A wild pack seems to be livin' – er hunting anyway – on the upside of the hills, and one of 'em mustered the gall to poach 'a couple 'a my hens by way 'a diggin' under the fence, through the fallow and up and under the floorboards 'a the chicken coup."

Kyler scratched at the back of his neck while giving the sun a cockeyed stare. "Heck, Dale," he said finally, "I've got an old Winchester inside. The crown's a little off, but the action's good – and it's a forty-four, so it should do the trick with anything you might need. I don't see why I'd be needin' it anytime soon, so I'll loan it to ya', and you just bring it back whenever you come by to stock up. In the meantime, I'll keep my eyes open for anything better that might come along."

Pembroke folded his arms and waggled his body back and forth while his feet kept themselves in place, smiling his half smile.

"Have you heard the news?" Kyler asked as he reappeared with the old rifle and presented it to Pembroke.

Pembroke held the gun with his hands and cocked it once, placing the butt against his shoulder, aiming it at the sky. "We're gonna' finally get some

rain?” he said, looking back at Kyler with an eyebrow raised.

“Somebody just bought up nearly all the unowned land between here and Braden’s creek – and half the damn forest too!” Kyler said, ignoring Pembroke’s previous remark.

“Some ‘a the valley?” Pembroke asked casually, still admiring the rifle.

Kyler practically leapt up into the air, “Not *some* of the valley – the *entire* valley itself – and half the damn forest too! Who in god’s green earth would wanna’ buy up the entire confounded valley is well beyond me. Don’t have any idea what he plans to do with it – don’t suppose anybody does, really. Maybe he’ll make something. You know, do *something* with it. Could be anything. Lord help us if he decides to put one of those quick-roads to the city through here. Waste of fine country that would be. It’d be an awful eyesore, not to mention all the commotion.”

“Indeed, it would,” Pembroke said. And he aimed the barrel of the unloaded gun at the horizon and squeezed the trigger.

* * * * *

Back at his own farm, Pembroke sat for many nights on the porch in his rocker with his whittling knife, a small, half-carved branch end, and

Kyler's rifle at his side, as the sounds of dog calls reverberated in high-pitched rebounds across the vale.

On one such night he had fallen asleep in his chair, hands folded with the brim of his hat pushed over his eyes.

In unison, the animals started shrieking.

Two dogs had breached the perimeter of the fence and had already tunneled their way into the sheep's pen. Pembroke rose from his seat coolly, the gun in his hands, and spotted his targets.

One – a rabid, slobbering canine of tooth and hair – ripped ferociously at the underbelly flesh of one of the larger sheep, while the other dog, in the midst of its own kill, perked its ears at the sound of the rifle's chamber cocking into action. Two shots were fired into the pen, and one dog fell dead amongst the hysterical sheep. The other fled the way it had come in – under the wall of the pen and across the pasture. Fumbling with the spare cartridges in his pocket, Pembroke loaded and fired his remaining rounds after the dog, which scampered through the yard into an opaque, unintelligible background.

Pembroke cursed loudly and went to the pen where the body of the first dog lay with a barrage of pellets through its chest. The other round had landed squarely in the head of one of the ewes which now also lay dead and bleeding about the floor of the corral along with two other sheep killed by the dogs. He reloaded the rifle and pumped another round into the lifeless body of the dog, which only made the

cries of the terrified animals all the more frantic.

Taking the blood-ridden body of the wild dog by the tail, he dragged it out of the pen and across the lengthy field of the open pasture, leaving behind a groove of warm ooze which paved one long, inky streak against the ground. Finding what he believed to be the point of entry, he flung the body just outside the border of the outer fence and let it lay there. He walked back through the field and past the corral where the remaining three dead sheep lay motionless at the feet of the many frightened live ones.

“God damn,” he mumbled as he climbed the stairs and went to bed.

* * * * *

He awoke the next morning well after the sun. Coffee was made. The chickens were let out of their coups. The troughs of the sheep were filled with meal and water, and the mules were given fresh straw. After the sheep had eaten, he let them out of the corral and into the pasture, eyeing the hobbling ewe and the patchy-haired male.

All the blood had drained from the bodies of the three dead animals, and they lay stiff and cold in the shadows of the overhanging awning of the pen. Pembroke took his shearer and shaved them until

they were nothing but pink skin next to wool and blood. He took the sheep that had been shot in the head and gutted it, slicing it into several large, meaty pieces. The other two animals that had been torn apart by the dogs he dragged out of the corral and across the pasture, following the blood trail from the night before. When he got to the body of the dead dog just outside the fence however, he continued towing the two animals across the open field beyond his property, all the way to the edge of the weald, where he scattered the two carcasses a few hundred yards apart.

He looked at the two bodies, then glanced back in the direction of the farm and put his blood-red hand to his chin and rubbed it a while. Immediately, he went back to the house and began to gather materials. He collected a shovel and some fencepost and wire and loaded them in the back of the pickup truck and drove to the spot where he'd strewn the bodies of the dead sheep and began to work feverishly. Within a few short hours he had constructed a holding pen of four posts and plain, widely-laced wire which wrapped around the posts in a small square. When he finished it was almost evening, so he drove the short distance back to the farm and made supper and ate it. Without whittling or rocking in his chair on the porch, he went to bed that night with the rifle sitting unloaded in the downstairs hall.

The next day, after taking care of the morning chores, he walked out past the decaying corpse of the

wild dog and to the brink of the forest where he had built the pen and spread the hair-plucked bodies of the sheep. Both carcasses had been almost completely devoured, leaving nothing but the flies and maggots to pick at the red-white bones which protruded from the ground like a shallow, disrupted grave.

Pembroke nodded his head and went back to the farm.

Before dinner he shepherded all the animals back into the corral, except for two particular sheep, which he sheared and loaded onto the back of the truck and drove off to the edge of the forest. He stopped near the small, isolated pen he'd constructed the day before and unloaded the two animals, placing them in the undersized area in between the four posts and plainly laced wire. One animal limped within the pen, favoring its right hind leg and newly trimmed hoof. The other scratched at its wool-splotched body against the fencepost. Pembroke left them no troughs of meal or water before he drove back to the main gate of the property and made his own dinner.

That night he went to bed early for the first time in many weeks. And when he slept, he was not bothered by – nor did he hear – the howls of wild dogs in the distance.

Stranger in The Valley

On a small hill overlooking the valley, a man stood and surveyed the sprawling regions of the forest and the tunneling glen below. He came down the slope of a grassy incline and strolled through the basin. After walking a short while he strayed into the woods and put his hand on the first tree he came to, feeling the rough bark which ran up the trunk and branched off into a thousand leafy pegs. Sunlight came through the treetops and spotted itself in warm pools of gold between the brambled ground. Following a scant deer path, the man walked until finding a fallen tree on which to sit.

Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes and bowed his head to his chest. When, finally, he looked up again, a yellow arm of the sun rested on his face. With another inward breath the man tenderly came to his feet and took the winding narrows of the deer path back to the open valley.

* * * * *

Jaron Kyler was out on his front stoop with a hammer, a handful of nails, and a small can of

grease. He poked and prodded at a squeaky board which flexed and moaned when stepped on. With the incision of a thin clamp and a liberal spill of grease onto the fasteners, he pressed on and off the clangorous plank with the force of his boot. For the first time in weeks it didn't make a sound.

Wiping at his brow and picking up his hammer from an adjacent board, he looked up to see a man walking toward the house on the shoulder of the dirt road. Kyler watched his every motion as the man trotted up to the house with a kindly smile. Though it was the hottest day of the drought thus far, he appeared comfortable and cool. "Can I help you with something, sir?" Kyler asked, a bit puzzled.

The stranger smiled brightly at him, "I hope so, yes."

"And with what might that be? Your car break down? You're quite a ways off if you're trying to make your way back to the city."

The stranger's smile grew by a full tooth. "No, I'm not trying to get back to the city at all," he said. "As a matter of fact, this is exactly where I aimed to be."

Kyler rubbed the back of his sweat-beaten neck. "Well, if you don't mind me asking then, sir –"

"Pardon my manners," the stranger said, extending his hand. "My name is Eli Deo."

Kyler's hand removed itself from the back of his neck and shook that of the stranger's. "Jaron Kyler. It's a pleasure, Mr. Deo. What is it that I might be able to help you with?"

Deo looked out at the wide expanse behind him, “Well, I’ve recently purchased quite a bit of property around this vicinity – some of which stands directly adjacent to your property here, Mr. Kyler. As a matter of fact, the land I’ve bought runs both in front and in back of yours, and if I’m not mistaken, comes extremely close to the very stoop that we’re standing on now.”

Kyler began to sweat even more profusely than before. “Ah – er – well, yes, yes, that maybe true, ah – Mr. Deo, was it? Yes, I’ve heard about you – well, not about *you*, per se, but I did hear that someone bought up most of the land in the valley. Now, when I bought this particular lot some odd number of years ago, I built the house on the very edge of the property so as to maximize the space for growing.”

Deo’s head oscillated on top of his shoulders as he scanned the house and surrounding area. “I see, I see,” he said. “Well, being as how we’re more or less going to be neighbors, I’ve come to take a look around and make you an offer in the process.”

“An offer?”

“That’s right, Mr. Kyler. I’d like to buy a small parcel of your land – not your house, mind you – but a small plot of the land itself.”

Kyler’s eyebrows knitted themselves into two twines. “Well, sir, I couldn’t sell you my land. Even with the drought as bad as it is, it’s the land that still provides a good portion of my income.”

“Of course, of course,” Deo said, nodding his

head in agreement. “However, I’m not asking you to sell off your primary source of income.”

“Then what are you asking, sir?”

“I’m asking to buy just a tiny portion of your land as per a technicality. It’s nearly the only piece of property in the whole valley I don’t yet own, and, for logistical purposes, it would make my endeavor here easier if I was to actually own this little plot right in front of your doorstep, you see.”

“I don’t exactly,” Kyler said with a touch of sharpness.

“Let me be blunt, Mr. Kyler: I’ll give you ten times what this portion of your property is worth today, plus any money you ask for on top. I’m not asking for the house or the rest of your land. Your property is right on the fringe of the outlines for the project I wish to develop here, and I’m hoping you’ll be something of a partner with me when it unfolds.”

Kyler was taken off guard. “You mean to tell me you’ll give me ten times the value of this land as it is today, and I can stay here and continue on as I please? *Ten times* the value?”

“That’s correct. All you have to do is give me the written authority of this small plot here in front of the house, and you can keep the rest of your acreage in the back for growing. I’ll give you not a penny less than my offer, and you can pretend that, otherwise, nothing’s changed.”

“What’s the catch?” Kyler asked.

“No catch.”

“What are you planning on building here? It’s

not one of those quick-roads to the city is it? Waste of fine country that would be. It'd be an awful eyesore, not to mention all the commotion," Kyler said nervously.

"It's not a highway, no. I love this valley – always have – and I want to make it one of the most beautiful places in the world."

"It already is beautiful, Mr. Deo," Kyler said, a bit sadly.

"I promise you, I can make it even more" and he threw his open hand up level with his shoulder and looked overhead as he searched for a word, ". miraculous."

Kyler again slid the palm side of his hand to work over the back of his neck. "Well, being that you bought up nearly the entire valley I don't have much of a choice, do I?" Kyler paused a moment and looked around him. "Heck, Mr. Deo, if you give me ten times the worth of this property and let me continue to live here and do what I will, I'd be a fool not to take you up on your offer."

Deo nodded with a tight-lipped grin, "Good. I'll bring the papers by in a day or so. There's just one thing left that I have to do before we can finalize the transaction."

"What would that be?"

"Oh," said Deo, looking Kyler straight in the face, "there's just one more thing I have to do before I can go forward. You know – a technical matter. I have to make sure I've got the right man, or, the right house, that is."

Kyler nodded, “Well, I suppose I hope that you do, sir,” Kyler said reluctantly.

“I think I do. I’ll be back in a day or so with the papers, Mr. Kyler. Until then,” and he shook Kyler’s hand and started off toward the dusty road.

“Mr. Deo?” Kyler called after him, “You need a lift somewhere?”

Deo paused and turned, “No,” he said with his same full-toothed smile. “I’m alright. I don’t have much use for cars.”

“Well, where are you going? There’s nothing around here for miles,” Kyler called back.

“No worries,” Deo said with a wave, “I’ll be there in a snap.” And he turned and walked on down the road.

* * * * *

The woods were bleary and still as soft footsteps approached the fringe of the forest. Light and careful, the steps moved evenly – calculated and refined – as if dancing with the ground. Reaching the last tree before the openness of the valley, two feet paused under the bony stature of a man with a long white beard and flowing black vestment which blew in loose garments below his ankles and around his hands. He studied the wide meadows with broad, gazing stares, caressing the many distant hills and

generous sweeps of land with his eyes.

It had been a long time since he had ventured out this far to look at the sky.

Rhythmically, he came out from the cover of the wood and onto a slightly elevated plateau over a wide-ranging pocket of the vale. Inhaling an exaggerated breath, he released a burst of air from his lungs and the trees behind him rocked and bent as though the winds came directly from his mouth. He took stock of the land and once again breathed in an intentional manner, letting the air pour slowly out of his lips. Again, he breathed, all the while with his mind on the in-taken air, feeling it fill his chest and slide away from his body in a directed channel. The air supported him, composed him, recycled itself within him, and released. And in turn he arranged the night with his simple breaths. They supported each other, he and the night.

Another airy intake: It told him something. "It is here," he whispered back to the midnight. "*He* is here."

And he seated himself on the plateau which looked out over the valley and watched.

A Succession of Unbelievable Occurrences

On a small hill on the other side of the valley, a man stood with his arms folded behind his back, surveying the glen below. A small farmhouse and the winding cut of a dirt road were just barely visible through the nighttide.

He breathed in slowly and intentional, and when he exhaled, closed his eyes and held the thought of gathering clouds in his mind; as if conducting a symphony over the valley, clouds – like ashen-black smoke – assembled themselves in giant, descending clusters.

He breathed out and thought of wind, and a swell of air ferociously cast its way through the tall prairie grasses and up to the highest tops of the trees in the forest.

Another breath, another thought, and lightning strobed the dark, casting brilliant white flashes within the rumbling overcast.

The man pointed a finger in the direction of the small farmhouse beneath him and a streak of lightning rapped to the ground, igniting the desolate earth

* * * * *

Kyler slept restlessly in his bed. Turning over on his side, his body helixed like a long, puckered string on top of the covers above the mattress. The heat made it difficult to lie still, and every so often Kyler would give a sleepy stretch and a turn and peel himself off one end of the bed to flip over to another corner where he would sweat and fry and roll back to his original position.

Awaking in a moist pool, he scratched his thigh and rubbed his brow with the back of his forearm. Blinking to consciousness, he noticed that he was unusually warm.

Outside the open bedroom window something crackled.

His nose twitched, catching a tinge of smoke as he rolled over and again closed his eyes.

A pop came from outside the window like a gunshot, and Kyler sprang up to attention. His eyes, now fully opened in the unlit room, burned as if the air was made of gasoline, and his inward breath caused him to gasp and wheeze.

The floor beneath him sunk a half foot and he jumped out of bed with the prowess of a frightened cat. Smoke – black as empty space – plumed in, taking hold of every corner and crevice as Kyler stumbled his way to the bedroom door.

Reaching the hallway, he could hear the

chewing of the fire as it gnawed and spread in orange, concentrated glows, embering the house in a pulsating burn. He ran down the stairs and crashed straight through the front door outside to the lawn.

Sprinting to the well, he raised a half-filled bucket of water and ran it up to the house which now burned with large flames emanating from the apertures. The small bucket did nothing against the blaze, and with another pop and a crack, the frame of the house folded in on itself, buckling like the wood in a campfire.

Rubbed and burnt, the pyre continued to smolder for several hours late into the night, consuming everything until the ruins of the house were nothing but ashes and soot against the ground.

The winds picked up and the clouds grew heavy with thunder.

And finally, after a long-long wait, there in the valley, it began to rain.

* * * * *

The blades of the grass tickled Kyler's eyelids as they blinked, then opened at a plane even with the ground. In a fit of exhaustion, he had collapsed and slept in the very place where only a few hours earlier he had watched his home kindle and

burn.

His first waking thoughts were of the fire, and he wished and hoped that the previous night had been a dream; that somehow the house had not burned down and that he was lying outside in the dry grass away from his bed for some other reason.

Kyler turned over on his back and rubbed his eyes, exhaling. Lying as he did with his chest to the air, the light blue firmament stretched out in an endless extension.

He exhaled aloud once more and sat up, immediately turning to look at the remnants of the house. But what he saw there convinced him that he may have been dreaming after all:

There it stood, as collected and tidy as it had only a few hours before. Tan shutters flanked the windows at either side. The door stood sturdy and shut, clamped at the lock by the hump of a worn brass knob; and the paint, which blotched the siding in white coats, clung dryly to the shingles, half exposing the original wood.

The house stood firmly, as prim and perfect as it had been the day before, complete with four standing walls and a roof; and the frame – as solid as ever – rose up from the ground without the slightest indication of a burn mark, smoke damage, or blemish of any kind.

Kyler stood up in disbelief. Had he dreamt the inferno which had driven him from his bed? Was

the pile of simmered rubble a hallucination – an imagined event caused by an overheated slumber?

He rubbed his eyes again and approached the house, touching the scaffolding poles of the front porch with a careful hand; they were as solid as the day he had built them. He climbed the front steps and they did not dematerialize into a dreamy vapor. The corroding brass knob of the door twisted within his clenched hand, and the inside of the house looked pristine and untouched. He came back to the porch and rubbed his neck as he paced about.

‘It must have been a dream – the whole thing, one long, nightmarish dream.’ And just as he finished the thought, he stepped on one particular plank in the porch floor and it gave a groaning squeak. ‘The whole thing a dream,’ he concluded, happily distracted by the twittering plank. ‘A premonition maybe – like some kind of *déjà vu*. The board, the man who came to the house, the fire – all unreal. All a simple dream.’ And he went to fetch his toolbox from the shed.

* * * * *

Out on his front stoop with a hammer, a handful of nails, and a small can of grease, Kyler poked and prodded at the squeaky old board which flexed and moaned when stepped on. With the

incision of a thin clamp and a liberal spill of grease onto the fasteners, he pressed on and off the clangorous plank with the force of his boot. It didn't make a sound.

Wiping at his brow and picking up his hammer from an adjacent board, he looked up. There he was: A man walking toward the house on the shoulder of the dirt road. 'It's exactly how I dreamt it,' he thought with amazement.

Kyler watched his every motion as the man trotted up to the front stoop with a kindly smile. "Hello, Mr. Kyler," the stranger said with a full-toothed grin. "I'm back."

* * * * *

Kyler stood on the porch staring at the man with a terrified look and said nothing.

"Are you all right, Mr. Kyler?" asked the stranger, inspecting him carefully.

"I'm okay," he said hollowly, his face as white as a cloud.

"You do remember me, don't you? Eli Deo – from yesterday?"

"Of course, Mr. Deo," Kyler said with the same expression. "You'll have to excuse me; I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Oh," said Deo with a suddenly easy voice, "I

see. I was afraid something was the matter. Yes, that was some storm last night – lots of thunder and lightning.” Kyler looked even more ill than before. “Well, maybe this will make you feel better,” and he pulled out a few creased papers from his breast pocket. “It’s my offer and the legal documents that sign this small portion of the property over to me. I know we didn’t talk about an exact price, but I had the land assessed, and just to let you know that I’m a man of my word, I’m offering even more than the original ten times the worth,” and he handed the papers to Kyler.

The offer was staggeringly more than Kyler had envisioned. “Well, now I must be dreaming,” Kyler said aloud, looking at the papers.

“Oh, no,” Deo said with his calm smile. “I assure you – this is all very real.”

* * * * *

That night, after the papers had been signed and Deo had gone, Kyler, exhausted and confused, went to bed. The air outside his open bedroom window was cool and he slept a hard, dreamless sleep.

A short distance away, on a small hill overlooking the valley, a man stood with his arms folded behind his back, admiring the glen beneath

him. A small farmhouse and the winding cut of a dirt road were just barely visible through the cover of the nightfall.

The man breathed in slowly and intentional, and when he exhaled, closed his eyes.

He thought of buildings and streets, houses and sidewalks, a park with a small pond, a gazebo, a school, people, life

. He breathed out and pointed a finger in the direction of the small farmhouse below

* * * * *

In the morning, Kyler awoke still tired, but feeling better than he had the day before. He lay in his bed, calm and unmoving, and watched the sun come through the slits of the blinds which covered the bedroom window. The house had not ignited into flames during the night or reverted back to a pile of ashy timbers, and Kyler tried to make sense of the unbelievable occurrence with his first waking thoughts.

Finally, he arose and went downstairs to make himself coffee; and when the water was warmed and the beans ground and mixed, he took his mug to the porch.

Opening the door, his eyes went straight to that particular plank in the floorboard he had worked

so hard to silence, and he stepped on it with his heel. It squeaked and moaned like a rusty hinge closing in the wind. Rolling his eyes in disgust, Kyler picked up his head and began to draw his mug to his lips. But his hand stopped halfway.

In a trance, Kyler's fist opened up, letting the coffee fall away, colliding with the creaky board of the porch.

"I don't believe it," he said. "I don't believe it."

* * * * *

The unending view of the world which jettisoned out from Kyler's porch like a meadowy ocean was gone; and in its place, to the finest detail, stood the fully constructed spread of an entire town.

Where once there had been open fields was now a town block, with houses and yards, fences and fire hydrants, sidewalks and trees, all lining the paved street in precise increments.

Kyler stepped off the stoop in bewilderment and looked around.

Street signs, lampposts, intersections, storefronts with stenciled windows, a bank, a bus stop, a bench, a rail station; and on the side of his own home, where once an animal pen had stood, was now a small building with a bright red sign across the

top which read, “Kyler’s Market and General Store.”

Again he thought he must have been caught in some elaborate dream and he bent his knee to the ground where the winding dirt road had been replaced by an immaculately cobbled street, and he touched it with his hand; it had both feeling and texture, and he did not suddenly awake.

He went across the road to the wall of a building which read ‘Coffee’ and felt it. He then ambled to a street pole and kicked it with his foot. He walked over to the spikes of a white fence and pricked himself on the palm.

Every fencepost was solid, every brick firm, every window made of true glass complete with Kyler’s own reflection. He walked through the middle of the street, reading the different names along the marquees: ‘Bank of Dolor’s End’, ‘Hal’s Pub’, ‘Dolor’s End Antiques’, ‘Town Hall of Dolor’s End’.

Aside from Kyler’s lonesome steps, the town was quiet and empty.

Finding his way back home amongst a myriad of other unfamiliar houses and shops, Kyler scratched his head as he looked around. He climbed the stairs of the porch, a single floorboard squeaking under his weight, and he opened the front door.

He was tired suddenly and decided it might just be best to go back to sleep.

* * * * *

F ar off on the other side of the valley, Dale Pembroke rolled himself over on his mattress in a subconscious trance and breathed heavily on his belly before finally lifting his eyes. He was nearly naked except for his drawers, and the covers had been cast to the foot of the bed, hanging off the end in a pile. As soon as he realized he'd awoken, he recognized his skin was dry and clean without the usual beads of sweat from a long, muggy evening of unrest. He was almost cold as he lay there in the initial moments of his early day, so he pulled up the covers to blanket his half-naked body. He had slept straight through the night without the disruptions of wild dogs or irrepressible heat.

Kyler's rifle stood barrel up in the corner of the room, cocked and loaded. The dogs had been coming back with an even greater frequency as of late, and it appeared to Pembroke that his plan was beginning to backfire. The dogs were unsatisfied with what they found in the pen he'd made at the edge of the forest. Once every few days he would take one of the chickens that was not producing any eggs or a sickly calf and enclose it within the pen, hoping that it would be enough to satisfy any predators and keep them away from his farm. But instead of deterring the dogs it seemed to be attracting more.

Pembroke sat up and rubbed his eyes. A deep

breeze pressed against the growing whiskers of his face. He placed the skin of his foot on the grainy venire of the floor; the earth had become so dry and light that the topsoil would pick itself up with the wind – if ever there was any – and blow right through the open windows, covering the interior of the house with the scattered remnants of the ground’s outer casing.

He went downstairs to make breakfast, but as he came down the stairway his eyes caught the scenery from beyond the open casements of the main floor: He was not dreaming – the sharp grit of the steps under his feet assured him of that – though he felt as if he should have been.

Pembroke rushed down the remaining stairs, hopping the final two in an athletic bound toward the door. Turning the knob, he instantly felt a rush of cool wind as he stepped outside in profound wonderment at what he saw: To the furthest extensions of his property – all in neat little rows – were the many thousands of sprouts of what Pembroke had thought were dried up and dead seeds in a once thirsting soil. Every sprout from every seed he’d planted and had been waiting on all season was elevated and spry-looking, as if for months the rains had fallen on their patient rests.

“Well I’ll be,” Pembroke rubbed his chin, surveying the suddenly fruitful acres. “I’ll be”

The sun was dim and humble and extremely red as it sat lowly in the morning sky, but Pembroke didn’t notice it until he looked to the distant regions

of his now blooming acreage and saw an oncoming
march of flat, dark clouds on the horizon.
It looked like rain.

Meeting the Mayor

There was a loud knocking coming from the front door as Kyler awoke uncomfortably from the sanctity of his bed. He sprung to his feet and hurried down the stairs. Opening the door, he was greeted by a large man dressed in a suit with shiny, slicked-back hair and shoes to match. Behind the man stood the unrecognizable layout of the newly refurbished town; cars drove down the street and people strolled casually along the sidewalks, looking in the windows of the shops.

“Mr. Kyler?” the man asked firmly.

“Yes,” he said through squinting eyes.

“The mayor would like to see you, sir. He’s sent a car for you.” The man moved his large body aside and extended one hand in the direction of a sleek looking automobile.

“The mayor?”

“Yes, sir. He’d like to see you at his estate and has sent me for you. Please, come with me, sir,” said the man flatly.

Still baffled, Kyler, in a trance-like wander, followed the flapping of the large man’s tie to the back of the car and got in.

They drove away from Kyler’s home and down Main Street, which kept perfectly with the outline of the winding dirt road that had been in its place. Kyler marveled at the shops and streets, the

homes and the people that littered what had been open pastures and vast meadows between the hills and the forest only hours before.

They traveled the main artery of town, passing a neighborhood of colorful houses and plush lawns picketed with mailboxes and walkways. After a time, a turn was made onto a side road which rambled between a light brush on either side. Kyler noticed they were heading directly towards the brink of the forest, and the road became more of a pathway crowded by grabs of hedges and outreaching limbs on the cusp of the invading wood.

After a short jaunt along the isolated road, they came upon an immense black gate, barred with thick steel tubes. The car came to a complete stop before the gate swung open and they drove in past the breach. As they came up the drive, Kyler could see their destination: A house of monstrous proportions sat bleak and intimidating in the foreground of the foothills at the woodland's edge.

They pulled around to the main entrance and the driver hopped out and opened the back door. Kyler stepped onto the surface of the drive and was led up to a huge oak-carved entryway which opened with an echo creaking that filled the giant hall on the other side. "The mayor's simply instructed me to ask you to wait here," said the driver, and he went off coolly back to the car.

Kyler carefully toed the antechamber. Fine oil paintings and other artifacts hung over the oakwood floor, along with a giant mirror which he approached

and inspected. His reflection gaped back at him; it looked tired. His hair was matted and knotty, and below his eyes were the impressions of two dark semi-circles that drooped toward his cheek bones. He put his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes; when he removed them, another reflection stood in the mirror next to him.

“Hello, Jaron,” said the reflection in the voice of a man. Kyler whirled around as his eyes lulled into focus. It was Deo, who smiled his toothy grin and looked around the hall before saying casually, “I figured it would have been rude of me not to have you over after barging in on you like I did.” Kyler was silent, eyeing Deo warily as he came in closer. “Would you like a drink?” Deo asked, motioning to a full-sized bar at the other end of the parlor.

“Sure,” Kyler said thinly.

Deo led the way to the bar and poured two drinks in small, roundish glasses, handing one to his guest. “Cheers,” he said, holding the honey-blond liquid to the air, “to Dolor’s End and its first citizen!” And he drank a healthy swallow as Kyler sniffed and sipped shyly from the rim of his glass. “Do you like the house?” Deo asked, waving his drink around, “I designed it myself.”

Kyler balked momentarily before setting his glass on the polished, woody surface of the bar. “What is this?” he asked.

Deo’s lighthearted expression fell away from his face. “You don’t like it?” He seemed almost insulted.

“Like or dislike has nothing to do with it
. . . What *is* this? What have you done to the valley?
Where has all this come from? Why is it all here?
What’s the point of it? How did you *do* this?”

Deo put his drink next to Kyler’s and looked at him somberly, “You mean the town and all that?”

“You know what I mean, damn it!” Kyler flared. “The fire, my home, the damn town, this house – everything! What in the hell is the going on here? Fires don’t create things – they burn ‘em up. Towns don’t build themselves, and if they did it wouldn’t be overnight! So, I’m asking you, what exactly is it that’s going on here?” Kyler was taken aback by his own courage and suddenly wondered if he’d said too much.

“Well, that’s the real reason I brought you here today, Jaron,” Deo said, contemplative and solemn. “You see, in all honesty, I’d like to tell you something – something that I’m not sure you’re ready to hear – something I’m not sure anyone’s really ever ready to hear. It’s a very beautiful thing – the most beautiful thing in all the world; but it can be the most dangerous thing too. Its power is so feared and so respected that only a very few men throughout the ages have ever heard its utterance. It is the single truth of the world; but in that truth there is a great and dark power, that, if misunderstood, can ruin those who know it. For many generations it has been kept hidden within the minds of a selected group of guardians, thought too burdensome, too complicated for common men. It is a knowledge that can turn

kings into beggars, and men into gods.

“But as for me, Mr. Kyler, I think that humanity’s been underestimated. I think it’s been deprived — starved by its own ignorance of such a thing. I think people are ready to hear it, and I’ll be the one to tell it to them. And if I’m right, and if they *are* ready to know it, then the world will finally be liberated from thousands of years of suffering and angst. And if not, well, then I’ll be proved wrong, and as quickly as the town was erected it can be disassembled.”

“I don’t understand. Are you trying to say that this whole thing – this town and everyone in it – is some sort of mystical experiment?”

Deo gave a thoughtful look at the surface of the bar. “An experiment? It sounds so impersonal. I prefer to think of it as an attempt at liberation: A revolt against the many teachings of the world which falsely accuse life itself as being more powerful than we who live it!”

There was a long pause.

“Well,” Kyler chirped as the confidence he’d had only moments before all but drained from his being, “then what’s this secret? Is that how you were able to do all this?”

“Oh, it’s not just something you blurt out loud. After all, it *is* a secret.” Deo looked at Kyler slyly. “In time, you may come to know it too. Look around you – there are hints of it everywhere. But what’s the rush? For now, you don’t worry a thing about it. You leave all that up to me. Just enjoy that

store of yours and run it well. I'm sure you'll have plenty of business to be doing. And if you choose not to you can take your money and go; I've opened up an account in your name at the town bank. All the money is there, so you can do with it – and with the rest of the town, for that matter – whatever you like,” and Deo extended his hand to Kyler, who looked at it for a moment before shaking it uneasily.

“But I still don't understand,” Kyler said.
“How did you build –”

“Come,” said Deo, putting his arm around Kyler as they walked to the main entrance of the house. “In time you *will* understand.” And the front door opened, and Deo pushed Kyler off in the direction of the car where the driver awaited. As Kyler tottered away, Deo called out after him, “Jaron, let's just keep this between you and me, okay?” Kyler nodded hypnotically and got into the car. Deo watched as the vehicle navigated the angles of the driveway and plowed out of sight.

Walking thoughtfully back into the house, Deo retook his own drink at the bar and put the smooth cut of the glass to his lips and emptied it, leaving the legs of the remaining liquid to slip towards the bottom of the cup. He thought of how Kyler had reacted, and in a way, he felt sorry for him. Perhaps he had thought too highly of him; perhaps he had given him too much, too quickly.

He went to the large picture window in the living room. Through the glasspane, a willow tree's branches swayed over the ground like a thousand

individual strings. The vast horizon sprawled out over the yard and the forest and the newly minted town beyond the bounds of the estate. From where Deo stood within the house, he could see the whole thing.

(Autumn)

PART II The Villagers

Bessy & Bessy

Bessy Gimbal came out of the woods near the backyard of her new house to play in the sandbox. She spoke in a very serious way. “Now, Bessy,” she said apparently to no one, “where should we explore first?”

There was a short silence.

“I wanted to go back here first so we could see the yard. We’ve never had a yard like this before! My mommy and daddy said that we’re very lucky to have a big yard like this one. When they told me about it I thought it would be big, but this is big! Really big! Look, Bessy, it’s got a tree! My daddy said he’d hang a swing from it and we could swing all day after school. Won’t that be fun? I wonder what school will be like here. My last school was lots of fun – I hope you can come with me,” she said, looking beside her at the open air. “At my old school we used to play a game called ashes to ashes. I’ll show you,” and Bessy reached out her hands as if grabbing the wind and she twirled around and around until she got dizzy and collapsed in a fit of laughter.

“Bess!” a woman’s voice called from the house.

“Hi, Mom,” she cackled, still dizzy from her spinning.

“Who are you talking to?”

“My friend. Her name is Bessy too and she

looks just like me!”

Mrs. Gimbal peered through the fanlight of the kitchen at her daughter who stood alone in the backyard. “Someone’s here?” she asked, scanning the yard.

“Yes,” said Bessy, pointing to the vacant space beside her. “This is Bessy – just like me! She looks like me too.”

“Oh, is that right?” Mrs. Gimbal said in a curious way, looking around, still only seeing her daughter. “Well, come inside! I want to show you something.” Bessy wobbled up the lawn to the back door and entered the house. There were boxes all half opened and unpacked everywhere on the floor. “I want to show you your room, silly girl.”

“Okay, Mom. It has a big window, right? You said it had a big window.”

Mrs. Gimbal smiled and took her daughter by the hand. “It has a lovely window for you to look out at any time you want to, dear. Now let’s go upstairs and you can guess which one is yours.”

Bessy let go of her mother’s hand and went racing over the boxes and up the stairs. The house reminded her of a dollhouse she’d once gotten for her birthday, before she put all the small furniture in the rooms.

There were more boxes in the rooms upstairs as she peeked in each one. She scuttled down the narrow, carpeted passageway of the hall until her eyes caught a rectangular collection of light on the floor which streamed in from a large window that

dominated the wall facing the backyard. “This is it!” She went to the window and ran in a circle around the room. “This is it,” she confirmed. “I’ve found it!” And she went on exploring the upper level.

When Bessy came back downstairs her mother looked at her and said, “I’m tired of all this unpacking – and we’ll have plenty more to do when your father comes back with the second load – so I was thinking that maybe we’d take a walk. It’s such a nice day, and there’s a park around here somewhere. Maybe we can find it.”

“It *is* a nice day! I like it here!” Bessy proclaimed. “Bessy knows where the park is and she says she’ll take us there.”

Mrs. Gimbal looked at her daughter with a quizzical smile, “Who is this Bessy, again?”

“She’s my friend,” Bessy said, looking at the empty space standing next to her.

“But *you’re* Bessy,” Mrs. Gimbal said skeptically. “Where did you meet this friend of yours, again?”

“I told you, Mom, her name is Bessy too – and she looks just like me. I met her in the woods in the backyard. She can do all sorts of fun things and she’s really, really smart – and she knows something fun too! But it’s a secret. Wanna’ hear?”

“Bessy!” Mrs. Gimbal lashed out sternly, “I told you to stay out of the woods while mommy was unpacking! Didn’t I?”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but I was excited to go exploring,” Bessy said apologetically.

Mrs. Gimbal sighed a deep sigh and said, "We're all excited, dear, but no more wondering off by yourself, young lady. Understand?" Bessy shook her head yes. "Good. Now let's go find that park."

So, they went out of the house and down the street, wandering the block.

The whole town was impeccable. There were neatly placed trees along the street wedged on small strips of lawn between the curb and the sidewalk. New homes with clear-clean windows and names and addresses printed on the mailboxes were guarded by crisply painted fences.

After walking only a few minutes they came to the park; it held a small pond and a playground, a baseball diamond, and acres of open space with plenty of picnic tables and benches all around.

Bessy could hardly contain herself as she looked at her mother. "Go ahead and play, sweetheart," Mrs. Gimbal said. "I'll be here watching."

So, Bessy ran in the direction of the playground where a few other children were swinging, jumping, climbing, and laughing their way over and through the swings and slides, monkey bars, and wood beams. Mrs. Gimbal trailed from a distance and sat at a bench not too far from where Bessy swooshed down a tall slide and climbed the ladder back up again.

"Mommy, push me!" Bessy yelled as she reached the bottom of the slide and galloped to the swing set, bouncing into an available seat. Mrs.

Gimbal walked over to Bessy and began pushing her gently from behind.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” said a young mother who pushed a boy on the swing next to Bessy.

“It certainly is gorgeous,” Mrs. Gimbal said. “We had just come outside to get out of the house for a little while.”

“Us too,” said the woman, giving another push on her son’s back as he pendulumed skyward.

“We actually just moved here today. And my daughter has quite a bit of energy with all the excitement.”

“Really?” the young woman said, “We just moved in today too! We just got here a few hours ago from the city and I’ve got a whole unfurnished house full of boxes just up the street waiting for me to get to them.”

“Sounds exactly like my house!” Mrs. Gimbal smiled with great delight.

“Well, I’ll take the liberty of welcoming us both to the neighborhood!” And the two women laughed.

“We should get together – us two ‘new’ gals – and get ourselves acquainted with the area.”

As she spoke, a tall red-headed woman with a baby came up to the swing set. “Hi,” the woman said in a friendly way, “I’m sorry to bother the two of you, but could you all tell me where the nearest grocery store is around here?”

“Well,” started Mrs. Gimbal, looking a bit stupefied, “you’re asking the wrong two people. We

both just moved into town.”

The woman gasped, putting her hand on her chest in excitement, “That is so odd – I just moved here too!”

“Really?” asked Mrs. Gimbal, looking perplexed. “When?”

“Why, just today.”

A Wish for Water

Far away from the valley, it was becoming cold in the city.

It was cold as the wind gushed down the avenues and froze the air between the skyscrapers. It was cold as the traffic cop huffed on his whistle with thin, white plumes escaping from his mouth like smoke from a dragon. It was cold as the street vendors left their places after the evening rush. And it was cold under the viaduct near the south bend of the river which ran along the border of downtown.

Under the viaduct, the river seemed to move in frames, just barely able to keep from clumping together in icy patches. Winters were long and lethal. Blankets hardly kept from one month to the next. Clothes and shoes which didn't quite fit right had to be worn in bulky layers. And there was never enough to burn: Newspapers went up too quickly, wood was hard to come by – and even if a cache was discovered in a dumpster or a discarded chair was left out in front of an apartment building, it was never enough.

Though, at the moment, a tindering of collected garbage burned with low flashes just above the rim of a metal trash can. A rotted skid was thrown into the can and a hundred tiny red cinders

floated up and into the air.

A raspy coughing redoubled off the dinge below the street as the dirt-cloaked hands of a man reached toward the flames. His clothes were gritty and tattered. From above, the rush of car engines echoed in mechanical thunders. The man left the dull kindles in the garbage can for a small glass bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag which sat on the soot-laced cement. Bringing the bottle to his chapped lips, he drained the remaining contents and tossed it carelessly into the garbage can and stood closely to the blaze, huddling within himself. The alcohol kept him as warm and alive as the fire, and he needed more of it.

Searching the inseam pocket of his dilapidated overcoat, he found two single dollars and some loose change; with a few more dollars he could buy a fifth of whiskey from the bodega and maybe steal a pre-made sandwich from the open case by the magazine counter. It was an old trick: While paying for countless small bottles of alcohol, the old hobo would intentionally fumble a quarter behind the sales clerk's side of the counter, and while the merchant bent down to pick it up off the floor, he swiped a sandwich or a bag of nuts or whatever he could before the clerk's eyes peeked over the lip of the counter again.

He waited until the fire dwindled to a char of red coals and embers, and with the night sky freshly above him, he came out from under the viaduct and

headed to a heavily traveled intersection of the city to bum nickels and quarters from passing strangers.

Rush hour was the best time for a beggar. While other vagrants on different street corners used showy approaches with elaborate acts and schemes to allure people's charity, his approach was simple, sincere, direct, and frequently shamefaced. Often times while sitting humped against the wall of a building, he would pretend not to notice if an attractive woman passed by his crouch; and often times she would pretend not to notice him.

After a span of nearly two hours of begging, the old hobo had collected enough money to buy a small bottle of alcohol. He went to the bodega and bought the whiskey with a shaky hand that almost prevented him from coyly grabbing the pre-made sandwich off the shelf and transferring it smoothly into the deep of his side-coat pocket.

Back at the viaduct, he relit the fire with a dry wooden match and sipped from his bottle as he watched the water from the river lumber past him.

'I wish I was water,' he thought. 'To be moving – even slowly – and become something like rain in the clouds, or a puddle on the street.' "To water!" he slurred to no one, raising the bottle to the embankment of the bridge that blocked the clear autumn sky with hard cement. Though, as he raised his bottle it slipped from his hands and crashed to the ground into a thousand wet shards. The old hobo

cursed aloud. Fumbling and frustrated, he searched the inseam pocket of his coat with dirty fingers and found only a few cents. He cursed again, and with the fire still well fueled, resurfaced to the bustle of the street above.

When he got to the bodega the clerk gave him a look.

“The bottle I bought earlier was cracked and broke,” the old hobo said as he went straight for the whiskey in the rear corner of the store.

“What? What?” asked the clerk in a foreign accent.

“The bottle – I was here earlier – it broke.” The old hobo now carried the whiskey to the front of the store, “You know me. I was here earlier. I always come here. You know me. I don’t have the money, but I’ll give it to you tomorrow. It’s just tonight – ”

“No money, no alcohol. Must pay now,” said the clerk forcefully.

“I can’t pay now. I’m sorry, but I need this,” he put his empty hand on the door and began to push it open. “I’ll pay tomorrow, I – ” but a loud clutched coming from behind the counter stopped him in his stride.

From behind the cash register the clerk aimed the barrel of a cocked shotgun directly at the old hobo’s chest. “Put bottle down and get out of here! Put it down or I shoot!”

The hobo looked at the gun, then at the bottle in his hands. And ever so calmly he unscrewed the

cap off the bottle, and opening his throat, took tremendous swallows until the entire bottle was nearly empty. When he finished, he let the bottle slide out of his hand where it clunked noisily on the floor. “I didn’t really need the bottle anyway,” he said, and pushed through the sway of the glass doors and into the night street.

“Don’t you come back!” yelled the clerk, muffled from behind the closing of the glass doors. “Next time I shoot!”

The tingling warmth of the whiskey in his body and the shock of cold from the outdoors suddenly made the old hobo feel light-headed and tired. He walked a few blocks and found a portico in which to rest, so he sat with his back flush with the building entry, wrapping his coat tightly around him.

There was no telling how long he had been there; it may have been an hour or two – or maybe it was just a brief moment that past before the door opened and the old hobo found himself lying flat on his back halfway inside the lobby of the building. Looking down at him was the scowl of a well-dressed man with sharp eyes that squinted at him with discontent. “What the –? I can’t even walk out of my own home without having to crawl over you people!” And with that, the well-dressed man attempted to step over the old hobo, but as he did the toe of one of his loafers kicked the old hobo’s head, immediately causing his ear to bleed. The old bum began to pick himself up off the floor, but when he got to his knees and turned towards the half-opened door, he drove

his shoulder into the edge of the doorframe and collapsed again, this time on his stomach. The old hobo tried to reach his feet, but once again fell over, knocking his head against the floor. “Come on! Get out of here and don’t let me catch you again!” the well-dressed man shouted, and he began to walk off; but before he got very far he turned, and reaching into his breast pocket, took out a bill, crumpled it up, and threw it at the bleeding ear of the old hobo, still lying at the foot of the portico. “Try to do something useful with that,” the man said sternly, and he walked off in his original direction.

The old hobo picked himself up off the cold, hard bed of the sidewalk and held his head in agony. On the ground lay the crumpled bill which he grabbed and unfolded into a wrinkly rectangle. His blurry eyes widened; the single bill was worth more than he could earn in a week of begging.

There was a tap on the withered shoulder of his jacket. “Move along. Come on – move along now. C’mon, get up.” It was a police officer, who, in turning the corner, had only seen the dirty jumble of a man lying on the sidewalk.

Grunting inaudibly, the hobo stood and walked off, attempting to appear as sober as possible. There were few people in the downtown streets as he shuffled past the empty newsstands and dark windows of the storefronts. He was too tired to walk all the way back to the viaduct, and the frost of the air began to override the whiskey in his stomach. He knew he could not stay outside unshielded, so he

walked a few blocks until he reached the train station. As he passed through the revolving doors, he felt the warmth of stale air. He walked down the marble steps to the main terminal where several other street-folk were sprayed out amongst the benches and floor.

Sitting on an empty bench facing the boarding schedule of the outgoing trains, he looked back through the terminal to the revolving doors at the top of the marble staircase and thought about the city beyond. He thought of the viaduct and how the waters of the river still had many months left to float hunks of ice across his tired, sunken eyes. He thought of how the garbage can fires were often so pungent that he could hardly keep himself warm before he was forced to stand upwind so he wouldn't get sick with the smell. He thought about his nights on the street corners while he sat with his dirty hand outstretched as the beautiful women of the city stole brief glances at him before walking past.

A robotic voice crackled from the intercom system and echoed to the rafters of the eminent hall, "This is the final boarding call for the Braden County line on track eighteen. Final boarding call for the Braden County line on track eighteen. Stopping at Cremson, Mount Hill, Bristerton, Bedrock, Langford, Barrington, Uniondale, Claremont, Charlton, Applecrest, Gleeson, Astonia, Jolesence, Sadermesh, and –"

"You're in my seat," said a wretched old woman touting a large bag of cans and a husky jacket

with many small holes. There was nothing but empty benches everywhere in the hall with only a few people sitting and lying across the hard, contoured surfaces. “You’re in my seat! I was here – I’m always sitting here! This isn’t your place!”

The crackle on the loudspeaker rang over the woman’s shouts, “Final boarding on track eighteen.”

The old hobo looked up at the woman and came to his feet. “You can have your seat,” he said. “I’m leaving anyway.”

At track eighteen, the train stood parked as it let go an exhaust of compressed air. The old hobo bounded into the first car he saw and was met by the skeptical face of the conductor who gave him an even deeper look of distrust while handing back change for the large bill.

“How far will this get me?” he asked.

The conductor looked through him, “End of the line; you’ll have to buy another ticket to get back,” and he walked on to attend to the other passengers that peopled the long car of the train.

The old hobo flopped into a seat at the end of the car as the train began to chug along the steel rails, tie after tie, and out of the station. The sleep he fell into was heavy and deep. When the conductor awoke him, he was still very tired and was now very dry, as if his stomach had been filled with hot sand. “End of the line, pal. Time to get up.” Tired and groggy, the old hobo stepped off the train to the blue-black of the midnight. He asked the conductor standing on the

platform where they were. “Dolor’s End,” the conductor said, looking down the track. “Brand new stop for us – never been here myself.”

The air was cool, but it was warmer than it had been in the city as the old hobo walked from the depot down a street which led to the heart of town. The town looked neat and orderly. The buildings were much smaller than those of the city, but they were dignified and quaint.

Parched and exhausted, the old hobo hunched himself into the cradle of a doorway along the street. There was nothing open and no one around. But just as he was about to fall asleep, a woman – buxom and tall – came walking up the sidewalk. Pretending not to notice her, the old bum hid his head in his arms. “Excuse me, sir,” she said, seeming surprised to see him. “Are you okay?”

He looked up at her with doleful eyes, “Yes, I’m okay.”

She was even more beautiful now that she was close. “What are you doing here? Don’t you have any place to go?” He looked at her expressionlessly and said nothing. “What’s your name?” she asked, concerned and sincere. It was the first time anyone had asked in a long, long while.

“Graham,” he said, sounding surprised to hear it aloud. “It’s Graham.”

“Well, Graham, my name’s Lisa. I’m just getting off work – obviously a little late tonight – and I was on my way up the block to get something to eat; there’s a little bar and grill up the street here that

serves food late. Come with me and I'll buy you something. We can't have one of our own out in the street all night in this cold, now can we?" Graham smiled and looked embarrassed. "Come on," Lisa coaxed.

And he got to his feet and followed her for a block and a half into a pub with a dozen locals. Lisa led the way to a small table with plastic checkered cloth over the top and they sat.

"Hello, Lisa," said the bartender, who came around from behind the bar to take their orders. "Working late tonight?" She smiled and said that she was. "Who's your friend?" the bartender asked. Lisa introduced Graham with a rosy-cheeked smile and told Graham that the barman was also the owner. "My name's Hal," said the barman politely. "As you can see, I'm a little shorthanded around here so I'm doing most of the legwork. And I – like everyone else in this town – am just starting out here. Just opened not long ago," he said with a laugh, "and I'm just starting to figure things out. So, what'll it be?"

Lisa ordered a sandwich and a light beer. Graham looked behind the bar at the lush, full bottles of assorted liquors stacked in precise rows behind the taps and the register. But suddenly, the sandy feeling in his belly burned sharply as he began to think of the taste of bourbon against his lips, or the way gin stayed within his throat like a dull blaze. "Water," Graham said, definitively. "Just cold water for now."

Abbey's Feelings

The banner that hung above Main Street read: 'Welcome to the Town of Dolor's End', and it blew in the wind as a red convertible rushed under it. The car was a gift given to Stephanie Spencer by her father to ease the transition of their move from the city. Though it was the middle of autumn, the sun was warm and bright, and she drove through the center of town with the top down and the music playing loudly from the stereo.

In the car with Stephanie were her friends Amanda Carthy and Mary Peterson. Amanda had recently been elected senior class president, while Mary's cheerleading experience at her previous school solidified her position as co-captain of the varsity squad without even making much of an effort during try-outs. In the backseat to Mary's right sat Stephanie's little brother, Jim, and his best friend since they'd both moved into town, Steven Holiday.

The heads of Stephanie and her passengers poked above the frame of the car, and their hair blew about in all directions. Stephanie said something, but it was difficult to hear with the wind, so Jim leaned up to the driver's seat and asked his sister to repeat herself. "I said, let's stop and get some cigarettes and go back to Amanda's house," she said, turning down the stereo.

"Fine with me," Jim said. "That okay with

you, Steven?”

Steven tried to glance at his wristwatch inconspicuously, “Sure, sure. Fine with me too,” he said, shooting a quick glimpse at Mary, who sat chewing her gum and looking out at the passing scenery with her hair blowing away from her shoulders.

They pulled into the parking lot of Kyler’s general store, and Stephanie popped out of the car with the motor still running and ran inside. When she came back she had a funny grin on her face, and rolling her eyes said, “That general store guy is so weird. He’s always pacing around, and every time I’ve ever been in there he looks like he’s in a daze. He’s so creepy.”

“Yeah, he is kinda weird,” Mary confirmed from the backseat. “I mean, he’s kinda cute – sorta farmer-like and rugged – but he is kinda weird.”

They drove to Amanda’s house where no one was home, so they went to the back porch and listened to music as they smoked their cigarettes. “This is a great album,” Steven said as a new song came through the speaker in the den and thumped out to the back of the house. He stole a look at Mary as she observed the pink-white arch of her manicure. “It’s good stuff from start to finish. I know every song front to back.”

“I love this song,” Stephanie said as she came dancing out the back door, having turned up the music loudly.

“Steven’s got really good taste in music,” Jim

said to no one in particular. “He’s got an ear for it.”

“I don’t like it,” Mary said without looking up from her nails. “It’s just a bunch of noise to me.”

“Oh,” Steven backtracked, “yeah, I mean, it’s okay,” he said with red in his cheeks. “It’s not my favorite.”

“Come on, guys – dance with me,” Stephanie squealed, taking her little brother and Steven by the hand and swirling them around awkwardly and off rhythm.

“You guys wanna’ do something else? I’m totally bored,” Amanda said, flicking her cigarette butt into the bushes.

“Like what?”

“Well, we could go to the park,” Steven said.

“And what? Swing on the swings?” Mary cooed.

“It’d be a change of scenery is all I’m saying.”

The girls looked numb to the idea, and the boys watched their expressions carefully while trying to think of some other suggestions. Suddenly Mary’s face lit up. “We could go by Tom Galfer’s house,” she blurted. “He and Steve Repking were gonna’ hang out there today. Let’s go see what’s happening with them.”

“He is so cute,” Stephanie chimed.

“I have geometry with him. He’s always writing in his notebook or drawing pictures or something. I don’t think he has a girlfriend, though,” said Amanda.

“Well, we’d definitely have to drop the boys

off first,” Stephanie said, looking at her little brother.

“Fine with me. I don’t wanna be hangin’ out at some guy’s house anyway. Right, Steven?”

“Yeah – no, right,” Steven said befuddled, his eyes meeting Mary’s for the first time all afternoon.

Everyone got back in the car, but it was getting cooler, so they put the top on and rolled up the windows. “Where do you live again, Steven? I know I should remember by now,” Stephanie said apologetically. Steven told her not to worry and said that he could be dropped off with Jim. “Do you have any brothers or sisters, Steven?” Stephanie asked.

Steven paused for a moment, “Yeah,” he said slowly, “a sister.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older.”

“How much older?”

“Actually, she’s your age.”

“Really?” Stephanie said, looking at the other girls.

“Do we know her?” Amanda chirped.

“No, you wouldn’t know her – she doesn’t really go out much,” Steven said, looking away.

“What’s her name?”

“Sarah.”

“And what’s your last name?”

“Holiday.”

“Sarah Holiday,” Stephanie said, trying to place her.

Mary just looked out the window.

Stephanie dropped the boys off at her parent's house and the two of them waved at the girls as the car tires screeched and spun away. "You wanna come in and hang out for a bit before dinner?" Jim asked. Steven thanked Jim and explained that his family was eating early and began to walk home.

As he ambled in through the front door of his house, he could hear his mother's footsteps quickly crossing the carpets of the second floor above. Before he was able to close the door behind him, his mother was at the top of the stairs putting an earring through her left lobe, "I thought you were going to be home an hour ago." she said, pressing the earring shut with a raised eyebrow. "Steven, we talked about this before you went to school this morning, remember?" Steven looked at the floor and apologized. "Well, at least you're home now. I was about to call a babysitter – I really thought you'd blown me off," she said, primping her hair in the mirror of the upstairs hall.

"No, I just forgot what time you were leaving."

"Your father is meeting me at the school for the parent-teacher night and I'm running late. I gave your sister her medicine already and left money on the kitchen table for dinner. Have you been smoking? I can smell it from up here." And she brandished her hand in front of her nose as she walked back into the master bedroom and out of sight.

“No,” Steven’s voice followed her.

“Your sister’s in the family room and she says she’s hungry.”

Steven rolled his eyes and walked from the foyer into the kitchen where he could hear the blare of the television in the next room.

Steven’s sister Sarah was three years older than him, but ever since he could remember it was always he who had to watch over her: A complication during pregnancy had caused Sarah to stop breathing just before birth, and the doctors were uncertain as to whether or not she would live any longer than a day or so due to the damage the lack of oxygen impressed upon her tiny heart, lungs, and brain. But she did survive those first few critical days, and many more afterward, and she grew as physically strong and capable as any girl her age. However, when her motor skills developed, people began to notice the long-term effects of her complicated birth, and though Sarah had the body of a fully matured teenage girl, her mental capacity was that of a toddler, and she shared many qualities attributed to a girl not much older than four or five years old.

Sarah carried with her, at all times, a doll with red hair and freckles that she named Abbey. The Abbey-doll was older than Steven, though it looked about as old as the dirt that made its once bright red freckles appear as dull grayish spots across the worn cloth of its face.

“N-hiiii, Stevie!” Sarah said from her place in front of the television as she heard him enter the kitchen. She loved Steven for the same reasons he resented her: if ever Sarah wanted to play, she asked for Steven to play with her. If she wanted to be read to, she asked for Steven to do the reading. And, of course, it was Steven who was always charged with the duty of taking care of Sarah when their parents were away – a duty he imagined he may never be relieved of.

“I hear you’re hungry, Sar. What d’ya want to eat?”

“Pizza!” she screamed excitedly from the next room.

Their mother entered. “Sounds like you two are having pizza, huh?”

“I don’t want pizza. We always have pizza every time you guys go out. She gets her way every time and I don’t feel like it tonight.”

“Oh, dear, can’t you two just have it for tonight? It’s all she’s been talking about the entire afternoon: ‘When’s Stevie coming home? I can’t wait to have pizza with him later.’”

“How do you even know what she’s saying or what she wants? *She* doesn’t even know what she wants, and she just moans and doesn’t make complete words half the time. All the time!”

Steven’s mother paused momentarily from her last-minute preparations, and in a strong tone said, “Give your sister a break and just order the food. Will you, please? You can get whatever else

you want.” And she continued scurrying about the kitchen for a moment before going into the family-room to give Sarah a kiss on the forehead goodbye. “Goodbye, sweetheart,” she said, blowing her son a kiss across the room on her way out the door. “And stop smoking!” she nagged.

Steven walked into the room where his sister sat engaged with a children’s program on the television. “Pizza! Pizza!” she shouted as he entered.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“N-you n-wanna n-watch n”TV wit’ me?” she watched her brother with two wide, saucery eyes.

“No.”

“N-you n-wanna play ‘ouse wit’ me n’ Abbey?”

“No, Sarah.”

“Pizza! N-I n-wanna-it be wit’ a’ maroni.”

“What, Sarah?” Steven said, half annoyed.

“I n-wanna-it be wit’ a’ maparoni,” she said with greater enthusiasm.

“What, Sarah? Speak clearly. I can’t understand you,” Steven said with a breathy exhale.

“Ameperoni!” Sarah said with clearer diction, “ameperoni!”

“Pepperoni? It’s pepperoni. P - P. *Pepp*-er-*oni*. *Pepp*eroni. How many times do we have to go over this? Use your words. Learn to speak, for god’s sake.”

“N’I’m ntellin’.”

“On what?”

“N-on n-you snaid god. N-ya can’t say god –

so n'I'm n-tellin' n-mom non n-you," she said stubbornly.

"Fine. Tell. I don't care," and Steven went upstairs to his room and shut the door. Searching through his vast collection, Steven put on the album they had heard earlier in the day at Amanda's house and played it loudly. Shortly after, Sarah came in with her doll in hand and said something inaudible between the slur of her voice and the volume of the music. "What, Sarah?" Steven asked, turning the song down slightly. Again, she spoke and again Steven could not understand her. "What? What am I playing?" She shook her head yes. "Just some old album," and he turned the volume back up.

"N-Abbey n-wants ta' dnance wit' n-you," Sarah said, extending the doll towards him.

"Well, I don't want to dance with her."

Sarah looked genuinely concerned, "But Stevie, n-you have to 'er n-you'll 'urt 'er feelins."

"No I won't," Steven said, standing up and moving across the room. "It's a stupid doll and it doesn't have any feelings, Sarah!"

"N-you 'ave to," she affirmed.

Steven made an agitated gesture with his arms and turned the music down. "No, I don't have to! I don't have to dance with her, I don't have to play house, I don't have to order your stupid pizza, and I don't have to sit here and listen to you. Now get out of my room!" he shouted. Sarah said something back, but again Steven could not understand her thick, underdeveloped diction. "What the hell are you

saying, Sarah? What are you saying?!” Sarah shoved the doll into Steven’s chest and repeated herself in an angry voice. “What, Sarah? What?!” But Sarah only pushed the doll deeper into Steven’s body and forced him to stumble backwards.

As he fell, he grabbed at the doll’s red-yarn hair and pulled it, causing a large tuft to fall to the floor. Regaining his balance, Steven swiped the doll from Sarah’s hand and flung it into the hallway. Sarah looked at him for a moment with wild, shaky eyes and began to beat him with closed fists that flung about like fish jumping out of the water. Steven caught her hands in his and pushed her away and she fell hard on her back, hitting her head on the floor.

Like the moment before exhaling an outward breath, everything was still and quiet; even the music seemed to stop playing in the background. And then the high pitched shrill of a loud scream pierced the air.

Sarah clutched her head as she lay there on the floor. Steven moved toward her like a disobedient dog approaches its master, but she recoiled from him and snapped a kick into his abdomen. She shot up, still wailing and holding her head, and ran down the hall and into her room, slamming the door behind her. Steven regained his wind and somberly shut off the music. He went to the door of his sister’s room where he could hear her crying from behind it. The knob was locked, so Steven tapped gently just above it, “Sar? Sar? Are you okay?” Her sobbing increased when she heard

her brother's voice. "Sar? Sar? Just tell me you're alright."

This time, Sarah's response was more or less clear to him, "Gno n'way! N-I 'ate n-you!"

Steven closed his eyes and extended his chin to the air, resting the back of his head on his shoulders. Turning, he saw the Abbey-doll in the hall between Sarah's room and his – a large section of tangled, red-yarn hair missing from the top of its head. He went to his room and found the hair, and taking a needle from his mother's sewing kit, restitched it onto the Abbey-doll and placed it deftly at the bottom of Sarah's bedroom door. "I'm sorry, Sar," he said in a whisper so soft that he himself could barely hear it. And he went into his room and turned the music back on faintly.

Two Blue Stars

Roxana Valentine woke up in an easy, comfortable way. Her dark blue eyes opened like two small stars appearing in the dusky sky. The sheets of the bed warmed her, and she rolled over to her side and fell back asleep for another half an hour. When she awoke again, she yawned and rested for a few minutes more. But unlike yesterday and the countless days before that, this morning she did eventually have to get up.

Quitting her job had been easy. Selling her high priced, uptown condominium had been easy. Moving to her new home in Dolor's End had been easy. Even giving full custody of her three children to her ex-husband had been comparatively less difficult than the simple task of stepping that first thin foot onto the cold wood of the bedroom floor. In many ways, to keep tucked into the creases of the bed, where not even the long gazes of sunlight could see her, was easier than anything else she did all day.

It was why she'd moved away from her life in the city: No phone callers or well-wishers or motivators with a moral injunction or inspirational message of hope. There was no one to see her body corrode into a withered shell of hairless skin. In her new home, there was nothing to push her into a feeling or emotion; there were no reminders of things

she would be leaving or never get the chance to do again. And in the absence of her old familiar life she found a great relief.

Following her first foot with another, she walked across the uncarpeted floor and stood in front of a mirror above the dresser and haphazardly pulled out some clothes from the drawers. The mirror reflected the thinning frame of a middle-aged woman with a pretty face full of white skin that went all around her head and to her back. And she did not dare to look at it.

She washed, dressed, put on her wig with the strawberry-blonde highlights, and came through to the kitchen where she made herself a small breakfast and sat down to eat it on the table in the center of the room. Aside from the bed and a large cushioned chair that sat in the den, the table was the only piece of furniture she owned; decorating the house would be a frivolous waste of time. The empty rooms of her new home served as a physical reflection of what strength she clung to after years of a losing battle, and she floated in and out of them as if she were an undead ghost waiting for ordination. She had only been to the attic once to place the boxes of old picture albums and school papers of her children away, and they sat alone and unopened in a tomb of insulation and dust.

Eating her breakfast quickly, she left the house on foot and headed for town. Main Street was a bustle of activity, but Roxana's eyes were fixed on

the corner bus stop, and when she arrived, she waited for only a few minutes until the bus came. The bus carried her for a few miles to the medical plaza next to the hospital. She got off and walked across the parking lot to the main medical building without stopping to look at the suite listing posted at the entrance – heading straight to the third office around the corner on the left and entered it.

The woman behind the counter smiled at her as Roxana came into the room. Roxana approached stoically as the woman spoke in a kindly voice, “Hello.”

“Hello,” Roxana said without looking up.

“Checking in? Just sign under the last person’s name, here,” said the woman, handing a clipboard over the desk.

Roxana glanced it over before signing:

NAME	APPOINTMENT TIME	ARRIVAL TIME
Chuck Raya	9:00	8:55
Denise Guastalli	9:15	9:23
Rob Burke	9:30	9:22
John Novak	9:45	9:50
Danielle Patricia	10:00	9:41
Whitney Miller	10:15	10:12
Ronald Richard	10:30	10:15
Eli Deo	10:45	10:45

Roxana signed the sheet and took a seat in the corner of the empty waiting area, clasping her hands tensely together in her lap. After what seemed like a long while, the door opened and out walked the doctor and another man; they did not notice Roxana sitting motionlessly on the other side of the room. “Well, you’re in extraordinarily good health, my friend. Now about the only ailment you can look forward to agonizing over is whatever headache the chamber of commerce might give you next.”

The second man walked to the coat hanger and put on a long overcoat as he smiled back and said, “There’s no treatment in the world that can cure that nauseating pain – but I think I’ll be able to handle them,” and he winked and they both chuckled as Roxana dropped her eyes to the floor.

She could hear the laughter unnaturally fade from the doctor, and without looking up she knew she’d been noticed. “Hello, Ms. Valentine,” said the doctor, flattening his tone.

“Hello,” she said with more breath than voice.

The second man slid his other arm into his coat sleeve, “I’ll see you at the charity auction next Thursday, then?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” the doctor replied with a glint in his voice. Each man waved at the other.

“Come on in, Ms. Valentine.” And she rose up from her corner, timidly taking small, carefully placed steps across the room. The man in the overcoat stepped aside to let her pass, placing a light

but strong hand on the back of her shoulder as she went by. The man's touch felt unexpectedly familiar, and she looked back and saw him smiling at her. "Right this way," the doctor said, extending an arm that pointed to the narrow white hall beyond the waiting room. She looked back again and found the man's eyes staring kindly but fiercely into hers.

Roxana gave only curt responses as the doctor casually asked her a variety of general questions inside the examination room. She seemed even less heartened as she rolled up her sleeve to watch the needles extract samples of blood for testing, and stethoscopes coldly prodded her skin in round, metal feels. "You've got to start showing up for these appointments on a regular basis, Ms. Valentine," the doctor said as sympathetically sounding as he could muster. "You can't afford to keep skipping out on them. I was worried you wouldn't be showing up again today." Roxana attempted to make clear, in a short way, how she didn't mean to keep missing them, but her voice tailed off before she was fully able to explain herself. The doctor looked at her in a way which reminded her of why she preferred to say nothing about her condition to anyone. "I want you to go right to the receptionist and make an appointment for next week, okay?" And even though Roxana could tell he hadn't meant to, he said it almost as if she were a child, and it made her feel slightly embarrassed to be coddled in such a way; but she thanked him as she covered up the thinness of

her arm with the unrolled sleeve of her shirt.

She crumpled up her appointment card and tossed it at the flap of a nearby garbage can as she left the building.

During the short bus ride back home, she sat staring at the tops of the trees – most of which had begun to lose their leaves, pasting empty branch-ends against the wintry sky. When she got home, she went straight back into the cocoon of her bed and slept.

* * * * *

The phone was ringing for what must have been at least the third time within the hour. Roxana pulled herself out of bed and into the midmorning air of the empty house. “Hello?” she answered in a perturbed mutter.

“Hello? Ms. Valentine?”

“Yes?” she said, rubbing an eye.

“This is Doctor Harris. I’m sorry to bother you at home, but I’ve been trying to get in contact with you nearly all morning.”

“It’s no problem, Doctor Harris,” she said blankly. “What seems to be the matter?”

He sputtered, “Well, ah, you see, Ms. Valentine, your blood work came in today and I need to get you back into my office right away. How’s

today? Sometime in the afternoon maybe?”

Roxana fanned for an excuse, “I’ve got another appointment this afternoon, Doctor Harris, so I won’t be able to make it.”

“How about tomorrow then? First thing – I’ll clear my schedule.”

“Tomorrow’s no good either,” she bluffed. “I’ve made an appointment for next week – can’t I just see you then?”

The doctor spoke tactically, “Well, Ms. Valentine, here’s the thing,” Roxana’s first impulse was to hang up the phone, but she kept the receiver against the side of her head, “your blood work came back today, as I mentioned, and it seems as though your numbers have gone back to those of a normal level.”

“My numbers?”

“What I’m saying, Ms. Valentine, is that, at least according to our tests here at the office, you seem to be making some sort of recovery. Possibly, you’ve even somehow entered into remission.”

“Remission?” she said with her jaw hovering slightly open below her top lip.

“Yes, Ms. Valentine. Now, I don’t want to jump to any conclusions here, but all the indications are that you’ve taken a dramatic turn for the better, but I’d like to be sure of that before I continue you on some unnecessary treatment. If tomorrow’s no good, then I suppose we can wait until your appointment next –”

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

* * * * *

A few hours later, Roxana Valentine walked out of the medical building where she had been tested, retested, and heavily scrutinized by several physicians who had cleared their afternoons for Roxana's arrival. The consensus by each and every one of them was all the same: Whatever had happened to Roxana's health was nothing short of remarkable. "Remarkable!" she repeated the word with an unconscious smile as she sauntered to the bus stop. "Remarkable!"

On the ride back home, she saw her favorite color on a parked car, and a dog walking with its owner happily down the sidewalk. There was a sign for a winter garage sale, and a funny advertisement for a plumber on a bench. At her stop in town, instead of walking back towards her house, Roxana went the opposite direction and walked the downtown village streets. She looked in the windows of the shops until finally she came to a storefront that grabbed her attention.

"Hello there," said the store owner over the twang of the bell on the door.

"Hello there!" Roxana said brightly.

"Can I help you with anything in particular?"

"Yes, you can," Roxana said, motioning to the

display in the window. "I'd like to buy this set you've got featured here."

Roxana and the storeowner worked out the particulars of the payment at the register. "Did you just mover here to Dolor's End?"

"Yes, about the same time everyone else seemed to," she said kindly.

"Well, it's always nice to have new furniture. Now, about the delivery: Is there any time or day that works better than another?"

"No. Whatever works best."

"Well then," the storeowner said, flipping through a thick book behind the counter, "how about tomorrow? Sometime in the morning?"

"Tomorrow?" Roxana smiled. "Tomorrow sounds great."

Landing Birds

From the vantage of her porch, Mrs. Alder could see all the way down the block in both directions. To the west, the street fluidly transformed itself from a residential area into downtown. In the opposite direction, large, naked elms guarded the homes of Dolor's End's eastern border. And directly across the street lay the open, faded-green space of an expansive park.

Much to the displeasure of her live-in nurse, Wilma Robbins, Mrs. Alder bundled herself up in layers and large earmuffs and took her morning cup of tea out to the front porch where she careened in her rocking chair. The street beyond the porch was full of cumbersome, languorous activity, like an old motor which churns and sputters before turning over. It was not an environment she had grown accustomed to.

Mrs. Alder was born and raised in a small prairie-land town with distant neighbors. She grew into a subtle beauty, was modestly educated, and married a medical student just after her twenty-second birthday. Her husband, Mr. Alder, became Doctor Alder, and the young couple had children of their own. Doc's clientele increased exponentially every year, and he made more house calls while gaining experience and reverence from all those he

treated. When their three children grew up, they each moved into the city and had families of their own but would often come back home to visit. And Doc and Mrs. Alder grew old together. They loved their children, and they loved each other.

Mrs. Alder always joked with her husband about the apparent frailty of his character; he was an undersized, thin man with effeminate qualities that, in many ways, worked to his advantage when treating patients. He was as soft-spoken and gentle when setting a broken bone as he was when doing the dishes. Rarely, if ever, did he complain, much less worry about more than what was for dinner or what his favorite teams had done in the previous week while reading the Sunday paper.

Mrs. Alder, however, was full of a healthy anxiety. If the garbage was not out by eight o'clock, she worried. If deer crept into the garden and ate some of the tomatoes she'd planned on putting in the dinner salad, she worried. If Dr. Alder was not home promptly at five thirty, she worried.

Though, it was not until later in life did the worries of Mrs. Alder truly have real cause: The smiles of Doc's wrinkled face became less and less frequent, and a vague confusion seemed to settle within him like mist over a bog. When he spoke, a slight tremble between the breath of his words became apparent. His skin grew faint and transparent, as though an inner rot had finally penetrated its casing.

On a Wednesday in October, Doc passed

away – easy and peacefully, like a bird landing on the water. The funeral was mostly a blur to Mrs. Alder, though she remembered the immensity of flowers and bouquets that streamed around the funeral parlor and infused her home. It seemed that every patient he'd ever treated sent an arrangement. "One flower for every case," said their eldest daughter, smiling under a handkerchief.

After staying with her for the week following the burial, her middle and youngest child returned to the city. And when the aromas of the flowers had faded within the quiet of the house, Mrs. Alder finally began to grieve. And she did it alone.

If a neighbor would come by with a pie or a casserole in the hopes of consoling her, she would assure them she was doing just fine. If she ran into an old patient of Doc's at the grocery store or on the street, she would listen to their praises and assure them that Doc would be happy to know how well they were doing.

And the days continued, and though Doc was less frequently on the minds of those she encountered, he had never fully left hers. In fact, every day was a further reminder of how old she had become and how much she missed him.

Her eldest daughter invited her to live in the city with her son-in-law and two grandchildren, but Mrs. Alder didn't want to leave the comfortable reminders of the life she'd sown, so she willfully declined. But she felt older. And she felt alone.

After a few years, her age and alienation began

to manifest in the usual ways: One day she lost her glasses and took the wrong medication. Once, on a Sunday, she waited all afternoon for the mailman to come so she could complain about the inconsistency of his arrival times. Another time, she called all three of her children to inform them that her neighbor was spying on her – calling her middle child twice without realizing it. And on another day, she fell, and that was it; she could no longer be left to live on her own.

All three of her children encouraged her to move into a retirement home in the city, but she resisted until she fell once again, and her arguments rested on deaf ears. Her contempt for the city – having lived for nearly eighty-five years in a rural environment – were understandable, so a compromise was forged: Mrs. Alder's son-in-law, Herald, a real estate broker, had recently purchased two homes in an up-and-coming rural town far away from the city. Herald planned on moving his family into one of the houses, while the other – only a few blocks away – he intended to rent out to boarders. Instead, it was agreed on that Mrs. Alder could live in one of the houses for free while Herald rented out the downstairs rooms. It was a perfect fit; not only would Mrs. Alder be able to keep an independent lifestyle, but she would also be close to her daughter and two grandchildren. In fact, she lived almost right between her daughter's home and the school her grandson, Steven, attended, and it was arranged that Steven would go and check up on her several times a week on his way home.

Mrs. Alder's eyes were fixed and motionless within their sockets, and she rocked atop the porch in her chair. A large flock of geese from the park had been startled and took off loudly, honking and flying clumsily overhead.

"Look at those birds go, Mrs. A," said Wilma as she stood behind the rocker, bundled loosely in her warmest coat. Mrs. Alder said nothing and continued to look blankly ahead. "You see those birds there, Mrs. A?" Wilma said in a louder voice. "Just look at all of 'em."

Mrs. Alder squinted her eyes and craned her neck forward, "No, I don't see them at all. Where? Where are they?"

"They're right there," Wilma said, taking a step alongside of the rocker and pointing in the direction of the flock. "See 'em?"

"No. Where? Where?" Mrs. Alder was becoming agitated and excited. "I don't see them. They're not there! Don't you tease me!" she harrumphed as the flock took formation under the clouds.

"Now, I wouldn't do that to you, Mrs. A. Look there – two more!" A pair of birds flew feverishly just above the rooftops towards the flock. Mrs. Alder didn't even bother to look for them and said nothing as she sipped from her lukewarm cup of tea. "Why don't you come on inside the house, Mrs. A? Why stay all morning out here in the freezing cold?"

“What?” said Mrs. Alder, squinting at her nurse. Wilma repeated herself and Mrs. Alder explained that she was waiting for her grandson to come visit her on his way home from school.

“But, Mrs. A,” Wilma explained patiently, “that isn’t until this afternoon – it’s only eight o’clock in the morning. Steven doesn’t come home from school until after three, remember?” She did not. Or if she did, her failing mind seemed unable to grasp the connection as she stubbornly and silently sipped from her cooling mug. “Alright, Mrs. A, you stay out here. I’m going on inside. It’s too cold for me.” Mrs. Alder gave no reaction but simply swayed back and forth in her chair, cold vapors of air pouring out her mouth.

In the blue heights of the open air above, a lone bird flew in the direction of the flock. It appeared to stumble gracelessly in midair as it jostled its way through the sky. Far below, Mrs. Alder sipped her tea, rocked her chair, and seemed not to notice.

(Winter)

New Wheels

The midday light was unable to penetrate the blinds that covered the window. From the bed, Vincent imagined the sun bouncing off the snow and casting a blinding, blanched brightness back into the sky. Outside he could hear the sounds of children running and laughing as they flung snowballs and made impressions of angels across the white lawns of town.

Vincent flopped over on his belly and breathed in deeply. He flipped again, rolling onto his back. He huffed and grunted, stretching his arms over his head and rubbed them both together while still in the air. He looked at his arms carefully as he brought them to his chest, resting his elbows on his ribs with his forearms parallel to one another, palms clasped and to the ceiling. The muscles between his joints were toned with long lines of definition that flexed and moved beneath the skin with a turn of his hand.

Placing his coarse palms to his face, he let them explore his head, rubbing the matted, oily hair on top. He massaged over his scalp and brought his hands back to his face, feeling the calloused skin below the thumb run against his bearded cheek. His hands ran lower to his neck and then to his stomach where he scratched an itch left there by his elbows. He rubbed it vigorously and paused a moment before

finally extending both arms down his sides and to his thighs

Just then, the bedroom door opened with a careful creak, and in peered the pretty blonde head of a woman whose brow rose curiously. “Good morning,” she said in a murmur.

“Morning,” Vincent said with a scratch of voice.

“It snowed last night.”

“I could tell,” he motioned with his head to the window as a holler of laughter came through the blinds.

“Would you like to see?”

“No, it’ll be too bright in here. I’m not ready to get up just yet.”

The woman came and sat next to him on the bed and ran her fingers through his hair as she looked at him with a tilted head. “Can I get you anything?”

“No. I just wanna’ lay here a minute, okay?”

“Of course,” and she kissed him neatly on the lips. “Let me know if there’s anything you need,” she said, patting his shoulder.

Vincent nodded with a long blink of his eyes. As she got up from the bed, Vincent could see the distinct convex arc of her belly. She was a thin woman whom the doctors had correctly predicted would show early.

Laying on his back, Vincent’s muscular arms pulled his body flush with the headboard, and just as he had practiced, he inched his way over to the precipice of the bedframe. With a push and a lift, he

raised his upper body above and out of the bed and firmly into the awaiting wheelchair. Securely in the chair, he swiveled it out of the bedroom and down the hall to the kitchen where the smell of fried eggs permeated the room.

“Did all that sleeping make you hungry?”

“Whatcha’ makin’?”

“Eggs.”

“Smells good.”

“Good.”

Vincent drew up to his place at the table – the only one without a chair – and tied his arms in a fold as he looked out of the large kitchen window. The snow veiled the ground, and light flurries drifted in airy sways.

“I shoveled the driveway before you woke up,” the woman preempted as she saw Vincent notice the wet boots that stood warming along the frame of the door.

“Laurie, I thought we were gonna’ hire somebody. I said I’d call somebody to do these sorts of things when the time came. I was gonna’ wait until I saw a plow or pay some of the neighborhood kids to do it. But I thought I’d take care of it. I said I’d take care of it, remember?” Laurie nodded as she brought two plates from the stove and placed them on the kitchen table. “Anyway,” he continued, “you shouldn’t be doing any sort of lifting or labor whatsoever! What are you thinking?”

“I can do a bit of shoveling – moving two-pound piles of snow from here to there. And the

doctor said I should be getting good exercise, and it was so beautiful I just wanted to be outside and – ” she quieted herself with a large mouthful of toast and chewed. Vincent chewed too but said nothing when he’d finished. “We’re supposed to get a lot more snow later on this afternoon,” Laurie said after several moments of silence. “I thought maybe we’d go take a ride into town and run some errands, though, before it does.”

“I don’t really feel like it today.”

“Vince,” Laurie stopped eating and placed her hand on top of his, “you have to start getting out more. I know this has been difficult – more than difficult – but you’ve got to start moving again.”

Vincent chewed his food and swallowed. He gave a hard but brief look at Laurie, pushed himself away from the table, and rolled back down the hall.

* * * * *

A light dusting of snow accumulated over what had already fallen from the night before. By mid-afternoon the sun was back out, blinking over the puffs of many white clouds that passed within the sky. Vincent sat and watched a weather report he’d already seen a half an hour earlier. Laurie walked into the room with her jacket and a wool-knit hat, “I’m going out.”

“Okay.”

“Please come.”

“No, you go ahead; it’s hard enough for me to get around, let alone with all the snow. The walkways probably haven’t all been shoveled, and it’ll probably be too slick out there for me.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” And she turned and left the room. Vincent looked blankly at the television screen and heard the clank of Laurie’s boots on the tile of the kitchen floor. Outside, the neighborhood children had resumed their playing after a midday break for lunch and hot chocolate. “Laurie?” he called. “Wait.”

* * * * *

The roads were wet but not icy as the van pulled into the rear parking lot of Kyler’s general store. Laurie got out of the driver’s side and went around to the back doors of the van where she pulled out a long and low-grade ramp which extended itself from the rear of the vehicle to the moist, black surface of the lot. Vincent exited slowly, noticing a small child stare in wonderment from the rear window of a parked car nearby. Laurie gave a smile of encouragement as he reached the ground, carefully pressing tightly against the brakes so as not to let his

wheels glide off the ramp.

As they came toward the entrance of the store, a man who was walking out with a large bag saw the couple and turned around to go back and hold the doors open. He was very handsome, with a strong, chiseled face that smiled and nodded as they passed him and entered the store. Laurie smiled back and thanked him. Vincent said nothing.

The store was bright and big – infinitely larger than it appeared from the outside. It had a little bit of everything, all laid out in neat rows with a middle intersecting aisle from one end of the store to another. There were aisles full of hardware and appliances: light bulbs, sockets, springs, tubing, wire, insulation, lumber, and a collection of equally useful gadgets and mechanisms. In another section were the meats and produce, including a fresh catch of fish laid out on ice shavings behind a glass encasement.

“This way,” Laurie directed, walking off toward the bread and grains. Laurie had been coming to the store so often that she had recently made friends with the owner, whom she described in the car as a nice man who seemed a bit distant at times.

“I’ll go and get the milk,” Vincent said. And he went off.

It being the weekend, there were plenty of other people there, eyeing small lists they carried in their hands and filling up carts with goods and supplies. In the dairy section, a mother herded her three young children as they all came running back from the candy aisle. Vincent watched the oldest help

one of his younger brothers place his candy bar into the cart by picking him up and letting him toss it in.

Vincent got the milk, put it in his lap and went off to find Laurie, who he saw a few moments earlier in an adjacent aisle fingering the frozen vegetables. Laurie gave him another task – this time to find a pound of flour – and he did so with the efficiency and expedience of a military operation. Immediately she sent him off again for sugar, and again he came back quickly and successfully, smiling as he playfully tossed it into the shopping cart. “Okay, now we need coffee.”

“Coffee. Right.” He went to one end of the store and then to the other. He went up and down one particular aisle he thought the coffee might be in twice but couldn’t find it anywhere. He thought to ask someone, but no employees were around. Finally, going back to the aisle he’d been up and down twice before, he stopped in front of a solitary brown bean that lay on top of a tile on the floor. He looked up.

There, on the second row from the top, was an assortment of coffee beans. Vincent looked at them disdainfully. He extended an arm fruitlessly at the distant canisters. Inching closer, he attempted to lift himself out of his chair with one hand while reaching for the coffee with another; as he did this, he slipped off his seat and barreled into the shelves, causing half of their contents to fall into the aisle. Vincent was braced against the shelves, clinging to them like a spider on the wall so as not to end up scattered on the floor with the coffee containers and

everything else. He strategically nestled himself safely back into his chair and looked around to see if he'd drawn any attention. A man came around the corner with a look of concern. "Are you alright?" he asked, matching his tone with his expression.

"Yes," replied Vincent with a reddening face. The man began to pick up the fallen items and place them back on the shelves. He was dressed in street clothes, though he had an official air about him. "Do you work here?" Vincent asked.

"Yes," said the man, placing another item on the shelf.

"I'm so sorry," Vincent said, noticing a small crowd who'd followed their ears to the crash. "I –"

"Please, I'm the one who's sorry; I should only put the things nobody ever buys on the top shelf. You sure you're alright?"

"Yes, yes – I'm fine."

Laurie poked through the scattering crowd, "Is everything okay, dear?"

The man turned from stocking the shelves at the sound of her voice, "Well, hello there."

Laurie was surprised to see him, "Hello, Mr. Kyler. Is everything alright?" she asked again.

"Fine, fine," Kyler said.

"I slipped out of the chair when I was reaching for the coffee," Vincent said shamefully.

"Oh, you poor dear." Laurie cupped his cheeks in her hands and kissed his forehead. "Jaron, this is my husband, Vince. Vince, this is Jaron Kyler, the owner."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Jaron said, putting a box of cereal down to shake Vincent’s hand. “I’m so sorry, again.”

“Please, it’s perfectly alright – nothing to worry about.” A stock-boy came to Kyler’s aid and proceeded to take up the task of cleaning the floor while Kyler struck up a conversation, awkwardly trying to defuse Vincent’s embarrassment. “Big snow, eh? We’re supposed to get a lot more too. In fact, it was starting to come down again last time I checked,” Kyler’s eyes suddenly looked beyond the couple.

“Hello, Jaron,” said another man coming toward him with an outstretched hand.

“Hello there,” Kyler’s voice lost all its energy and delivered the greeting in a flat, low monotone.

“How’s business? I figured it was such a beautiful day with the snow and all that I’d get out and come pay you a visit. Haven’t seen or heard from you in a while. When was the last time exactly?” said the man with a sly smile.

“Oh, ah, yes,” Kyler said, stumbling and seeming to lose his train of thought. “Ah, Eli, this is, ah – I’m sorry – I don’t know your last name.”

“It’s Kolo,” Laurie said politely.

“Mr. and Mrs. Kolo.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” said the man, shaking both of their hands. “Eli Deo.”

“As in Eli Deo, the mayor?” Laurie asked.

“Yes ma’am,” he said with a nod.

“Well, it’s a real pleasure,” Laurie gushed.

“We just love the town. The word on the street is that you designed the entire place yourself.”

Deo looked at Kyler. “That’s right,” he said. “I’m so glad to know that you’re finding it to your liking.” Laurie smiled, but Vincent noticed that Kyler nervously kept his eyes on the mayor. “Well,” said the mayor, “I’ve got to be going. It was a pleasure meeting the both of you,” he said with a smile before looking at Kyler. “Jaron,” he nodded at him, and as he did so his smile curved at greater angles just below his cheek.

“Well, we should be getting back before this weather keeps us from going anywhere at all,” Laurie said. Vincent apologized again and Kyler told him not to worry about it, and with a distant look, told them to get home safely.

The snow was piling up in floury bunches on the streets as they made their way home. When they arrived at their driveway, the shoveling Laurie had done earlier had been completely erased by the incoming flurries and wind drifts. It had gotten so cold that the garage door’s treads froze up and wouldn’t open. So Laurie parked the van in the powdered driveway and pushed Vincent up to the front door. She was barely able to get the metal wheels of the chair to turn, even with Vincent’s help, and by the time they finally did reach the house, the tracks had already been partially filled in with snow. Laurie unloaded the car, came inside, and made dinner. They ate and she went to bed well before

Vincent, who sat in his chair and looked out the front window.

He watched it snow all night, blanketing the van and the driveway. It covered up the day's earlier snowfall. It covered the walkway to the front door, covered the trees and bushes in the yard. It covered up the sidewalks and the streets. It covered up everything.

About Andrea

The front door opened, letting the false light from a nearby streetlamp invade the house with flat neon hues. The house was phantomly and quiet as the door closed and a light-switch flicked on. A pair of keys were flung into a bowl on the console table and rattled sharply within the ceramic. There was mail unopened that lay beneath the slot covering the floor, and a hand swooped down and picked up the envelopes, turning them all so the name of the addressee could be read.

TO THE RESIDENT AT
175 LENOX AVENUE
TOWN OF DOLOR'S END

It was a promotional mass-mailing of some kind. Another envelope was a bill from the electric company, another a bank statement. A fourth envelope encouraged the recipient to apply for a credit card, and a fifth urged the same.

The mail was sorted and shuffled, and as it was being carried to the kitchen table, another piece that had been stuck to the back of one of the envelopes fell to the floor; it was a postcard of a beach at sunset, and it was picked up and examined carefully. *'Greetings from Hawaii,'* read the card in a bold font. It was turned over and read:

Dear Sam,

Long time no write! We're loving our new life here in the sun! Both got jobs at a hotel and it couldn't be better! Still living in the room we were in when we first got here. Hope to be moving up soon. Don't know when we'll get a phone, so for now, this is still the best way to keep in touch. You and Andrea should come out here this year! Love to have you guys. Write soon.

Much love,

Fran & Jerry

Francis and Jerry had taken their honeymoon to Maui two years ago; shortly after their stay, they decided to quit their jobs, leave home, and start a new life. It had been a while since they had written – a few months, maybe – and Sam hadn't returned any of their previous letters.

They hadn't heard about Andrea; it didn't seem like the kind of thing one writes about in a postcard.

Sam tossed the card on top of the other mail and opened the fridge to find dinner; in a plate on the middle shelf was a leftover portion of the chicken and rice dish he'd made from the night before. He took it from the refrigerator and placed it in the oven. Exchanging his coat and tie for a pair of sweatpants and a tattered sweater, he went back to the kitchen to check on his food and took the mail from the table and went to his study where a larger pile of unopened

envelopes sat in a heap on the desk.

Sam sat and scrupulously opened every piece, letter by letter, and attended to them properly. Reaching the bottom of the pile, he again came to the postcard and read it over a second time; though the only word he saw was 'Andrea'. He put the card on the desk and went to the oven to pull out his warmed-over dinner. He was not as hungry as he had been originally.

Sam cleaned up from dinner and walked in a circle around the kitchen. He stood, folding his arms, and leaned over the countertop. His hand stroked the boundaries of his chin which was thickening from the cast of a shallow beard. It was quiet, and every movement Sam made rustled through the empty spaces inside the house.

Suddenly, he took long, exaggerated steps back to the den where he picked up the postcard and read it aloud softly. He read it several times over before sticking it on the refrigerator with the written side facing out and went to grab his keys from the ceramic bowl at the door.

* * * * *

The ride was long, though it didn't seem so. As he neared, he was swarmed by memories.

The parking lot was empty and black, and it was difficult to determine where the cement ended and the murk of the night began. Sam pulled up and parked. Winds came at his face as soon as he opened the car door, and he made his way to the sand. The waves were capped with white brims as they came to the shoreline and scattered themselves across the lip of the coast. Sam looked out onto the many crests of the dark waters rhythmically moving toward him and pulling back, and thought about the last time he had been there

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. **A**ndrea bounced and ran as fast as she could into the billowy waters. She laughed and screamed as she bounded headfirst under an oncoming wave. When she came up for air her eyes squinted, and her long brown hair tasseled above the surface. “Come in!” she hollered from the water. Sam lay on a towel and smiled, shaking his head. “Oh, come on! What have you got to lose?” “Dryness and warmth!” he shouted in a joking way back at her. “You’ll warm up after you dry off, you big baby. Now come on in!” He shook his head again and she smiled and threw a hand at him as she leapt over another breaking wave. When she finished, she

came out and lay next to Sam on the towel above the hot sand. “Wanna’ take a walk?” she asked.

“Nahh.”

“Come on, you bum! You can’t just sit here all day. Every time we come here you become a human beach blanket.”

“And that’s why I love coming here with you: I can just relax while you do all your running about and whatnot. This is my favorite thing we do together; you do your thing, and I do mine – together.” He smiled in the way he did when he knew he’d successfully annoyed her.

“Well, I wish we did our things *together-together*,” she smiled back, piling sand on his belly.

“After a long week at work I just like to do nothing for a change. And this is my favorite kind of nothing in the world. You know how busy I am, and I like to do this nothing, and I like to do it with you. And that’s *something*, you know.”

“Well, let’s do *something*, and you can call it nothing if you like.”

Sam smiled big. “What sort of something would you like to do?”

“Walk!”

And they got up and started down the shore. They went on for a while until they came to an open space free of umbrellas, fishermen, and crowds. “Let’s write something in the sand,” Andrea said enthusiastically.

“Okay, what?”

“I don’t know. Think of something. You

used to be such a great writer before you became Mr. serious businessman,” she mocked.

“Okay. But give me a premise. What should it be? An ‘I was here’ kinda’ thing? How about an Andrea + Sam?”

“No, no – better than that! More original A letter.”

“A letter, eh? Okay.” And he began digging his heel into the sand:

*Dear Beach,
I love Andrea & she loves
me.
w/ love,
A & S*

The message was so big that the bottom letters were immediately in danger of being eroded by the tide. Andrea noticed this and said, “I hope the water doesn’t get it anytime soon – it’s such a lovely message, dear.”

“Ah,” Sam said in a carefree manner, “the tide’ll get it sooner or later anyway.” And they walked on.

They went for a ways until Sam began to tire

and wanted to turn back. Andrea agreed, but as she did her eyes searched as far as they could down the shore in the direction they had been walking.

They went back, retracing their steps in the sand. Andrea took a particular interest in their pattern: She noticed when they were longer and determined that was the spot where they'd run directly into the flock of gulls and watched them noisily fly away. She concluded that where the footsteps were close together they had been holding hands, and where the prints took an irregular shape was when they had laughed so hard at Sam's imitation of a hermit crab that they'd both almost fallen over.

When they got back to their blanket, Sam laid down while Andrea read her book, but before she opened it she looked at Sam tenderly and smiled
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* * * * *

. **I**n many ways, it didn't seem so long ago. But standing in the cold of the winds that came off the water, it suddenly felt as if those warm days together had never happened at all. 'What did it matter now, anyway?' he thought.

He walked a short while atop the loose sand, the salt air cold at his face. After a short distance he

turned and retraced the single set of footprints which indented the way back.

The drive home seemed longer than the trip there. When he returned to town he felt like Dolor's End's only resident as he came through the late evening streets to his home.

Entering the front door, Sam placed his keys gently in the ceramic dish and came into the kitchen, his motions echoing throughout the otherwise tranquil house. He poured a drink from the liquor cabinet and walked in a small circle around the living room. The postcard still hung on the refrigerator with the message side facing out; he stared at it for a good long time. Taking a sip from his glass, he put it down on the counter. He sighed and shuffled his feet as they walked him upstairs and into his bed where he turned out the light.

The house was quiet and still, and the sound of it kept him awake for a long time.

**PART III A Voice
Apart**

An Odd Realization

The bar was empty except for a single customer who sat with his drink at the end of the rail. Hal, the owner and sole tender for the evening, stood with one leg flexed as he hunched over the bar from behind it to read the paper. Across the room at a table next to the doors of the kitchen sat Graham, eating a sandwich with a glass of ice water. Graham tore and chomped at his dinner as if he were still picking out meals from dumpsters.

When Graham came into the bar the first time, Hal was leery about him; but there was also something he liked about Graham; despite the unrefined way he carried himself, he was immensely humble and sincere. Being initially skeptical, when Hal gave him a job as a bus boy he figured that sooner or later the longtime drunk would have too much bourbon one night on his shift, or show up late a couple of times, or not come in at all, and that would be the end of it. Though not only was Graham prompt with his hours and expedient in his work, he never once even looked at a drink on or off his shift; but he was known to drink several pitchers of ice water nearly every night.

After a short while of loyalty and dedication, Hal promoted him and let him live in the small loft above the bar where Graham made a comfortable

space for himself with a cot and a potted plant in the window.

“Graham?” Hal called to him without looking up. “When you’re finished eating will you go on over and fill the ice buckets and bring ‘em back here?”

“Sure thing.” Graham got up while still chewing and went to fill the ice.

Several men walked in and ordered drinks, taking them at their seats at the center of the bar. They spoke loudly and joked with each other, filling the room with a festive mood. “They’ll be married a year from this summer, so we’ve got some time to do the planning,” one man spoke out, raising his glass to his mouth.

“Where are they going to have it?” asked another.

“Right here in Dolor’s End. We don’t know where yet – either at the house or village hall, probably.”

“What?” said a third man, “Village hall? Your house? A young couple like that? You should see your daughter married in a church – good and proper. Don’t you wanna’ see her off right?” he asked.

“Well, it doesn’t much matter to me,” the man said with a shrug. “Why? Which church were you thinking of?” The group thought about this for a moment.

“You know,” one man’s voice rose up above the rest, “I’m not a particularly religious person, but I’m not sure if I even know of a church here in

Dolor's End.”

The debate became livelier as the men jogged their memories. One of the men addressed Hal directly, “Excuse me, sir. Do you know where there might be a church here in Dolor's End?”

Hal lifted his eyes from his paper and looked up at the ceiling as he folded his arms and arched his back to the floor. “Well as a matter of fact, no.”

“I don't think there is one,” said a fourth man. “Not one church, mosque, temple or synagogue in the entire town.”

“Isn't that funny?” They all agreed that it was.

“Well, aren't you on the zoning board of the city council?” one man from the group asked another.

“I am,” said the other man, “but there's not much to do – the whole town's already been developed.”

“Why don't you legislate a permit for one? It's downright criminal not to have a single place of worship.”

“Godless is what it is,” agreed another man.

“I can't believe there's not one single church in the whole town. Let me think a minute.”

“I'm tellin' ya' it's true.”

“Can't be. This town's got everything a person could ever want or need.”

“Not a church, though.”

“Godless is what it is,” one man squawked.

“Godless is right,” agreed another.

“Well, what’d you guys care? Ya’ didn’t give a lick about it these few months we’ve lived here in Dolor’s End – nobody else seemed to ‘neither – so what difference does it make?”

“All the difference in the world!” one of the men shouted. “Ya’ can’t go to a place that isn’t there! Can’t worship nothin’ if ya’ ain’t given the means. Hell, they build a church here in town and I’ll be the first one through the doors! Be there every Sunday. The whole rest of the town’d be there too – guarantee it. Can’t get away with *not* goin’ in a small town like this if everyone else is goin’. Bring it to the damn board. You go and you tell ‘em the people of this town demand it.”

“Ain’t nobody demandin’ anything ‘cept for you.”

“Oh, you wait and see. You just wait,” said the excited man, waving his mug in the air. “You’ll see an outcry – an absolute outcry is what there’ll be. I’ll start a damned petition if I have to. People’ll flock to church – flock to it, I tell ya’. It’s godless not to have a single church in town. Godless.”

“Godless,” agreed another man within the group.

There was a short pause. “I’ll bring it by the mayor next week at the meeting,” the man within the group said.

All the way at the end of the bar rail, a voice apart from the group spoke up. “The mayor? That man is a limey, good-for-nothing, pigheaded bastard who doesn’t have any business runnin’ this town or

anything else for that matter.” The other men stopped their chatter and looked towards the corner of the bar. Perched on a stool with a small amount of suds left in a large glass sat a lone man who looked at the group and raised an index finger in their direction. “He doesn’t have the use for a church in this town – probably doesn’t even want one if I know him like I do. You can’t trust that man as far as you can throw him, and you can’t hardly throw him because his head’s too fat.”

Hal, the bartender, walked over to the man and interceded, “Now, Jaron, you come in here – almost every night lately – have a few, and start bashing the mayor from here to the hills. What’s your problem with him, honestly?”

Kyler looked at the barkeep and he looked at the men all waiting intently for an answer. “He’s a no-good bum who’s got something up his sleeve. He’s keeping something from you. He knows things – knows how to do things, and he’s keepin’ this whole town under his control without you even realizing it – just like he wants it.”

Hal looked over at the group of men at the other end of the bar momentarily, “I know the mayor, he comes in here once in a while, and he seems like a pretty good guy.” There was some clamored support from the other men as well. “He built this whole town,” Hal continued. “Gave us all an opportunity and a great place to live. Now, what’s so bad about a guy like that?”

The bar was still and Kyler looked around at

the faces of the men in the room; he checked the door with a turn of his head, leaned forward very seriously and said, “What if I told you that I know something about him?” No one said a word. “I can’t quite explain to you exactly what it is, but there’s something not right about him. Something unusual. Something *highly* unusual. He’s got this power – this ability. He can do well, he can do just about anything.”

A moment of dramatic silence was broken by Hal, “Well, sure he can, Jaron. He’s the mayor.”

“No, no, not like that!” Kyler said in disgust.

“Well, like what then?”

Kyler again looked around the room and leaned in further still. “What if I told you he built this town in one single night? The whole thing! Every house, every shop, every brick was laid, every tree planted in one single night!” his voice had become a whisper, though it rasped throughout the room. All the men looked shocked and confused at the same time.

“Jaron,” Hal put his elbows on the bar and hunched his shoulders, “I’d say that I think you have had quite enough to drink for one night.”

An Unwanted Vote

The cogs within the tower atop city hall churned, swinging the long arm until it hung low within the round of the clock-face. It crackled and coughed a mechanical chime in a slow, canned rhythm. The city council members chatted outside the boardroom near the mayor's office where they held their weekly meetings. The large mahogany doors of the room were closed, leaving the council members to talk amongst themselves in the lobby area. Coming out of his office, the mayor rounded the corner to see everyone standing around talking.

"The board room is locked, sir," someone said.

"Are you sure?" the mayor asked with a disbelieving grin.

"Quite sure, sir."

"Hmm," the mayor stroked his chin, "try them again." Someone did and the doors opened with ease and everyone flooded into the room and took their usual seats.

Business commenced as usual with the mayor outlining the agenda for the evening. The secretary read the minutes from the last meeting and the treasurer gave the weekly report and monthly projections. There was a motion to raise the pay of the police and firemen, even though there had only

been two emergency calls over the past few months and both of them were false alarms called by a nervous neighbor who had thought that Mrs. Fatum's house on Maple Street was on fire, when in fact, Mrs. Fatum turned out simply to be a very lousy cook. The motion, however, passed effortlessly.

"Okay," said the mayor, "moving on then. The zoning commission – do you have a report?"

"We do, sir," spoke up one member of the committee.

"Please go ahead," the mayor encouraged, opening his hand.

"Well, sir, we believe – as a committee – that the town of Dolor's End should make an allowance for a new structure." There was an undertoned banter around the room.

The mayor looked skeptical and asked, "What kind of new structure? The town is perfect as it is."

"Well, sir," the committee member said respectfully, "we propose to build a civic center for larger conventions, or theater groups, concerts, and a variety of other activities – adjacent to the western commercial district of town."

The mayor leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands together with a slight upward lip, "But, we already have a civic center – what's wrong with the one we've got?"

"Nothing," said the head of the zoning committee, pausing a moment. "It's perfect for a church."

"What do you mean, exactly?" asked the

mayor, seeming almost offended.

“Our proposal is that we turn the current civic center into a place of worship, full time. Dolor’s End does not have a single church, temple, mosque or synagogue, and given the design and location of the current center, it would be a perfect place to designate as Dolor’s End’s own house of religion.

Transforming the civic center would be easy and cost-effective. Specific services could be held on the weekends, while services could meet during the week – until other sects build places of worship on their own.

“And the new center we propose to build could be larger and attract more commerce and billings if it were not so centrally located; transportation could be arranged, and a large parking lot could be built around it so as to make it more accessible. The conversion of the old center could be practically immediate, and we could still use it in its current capacities until the construction on the new center – which could begin within the year – is completed.”

The mayor looked off balance, as if he might fall out of his chair, but an otherwise excited buzz circled the room amongst the other members.

“Wait, wait, wait!” cried the mayor. The room fell quiet. “Allocating funds? Construction beginning within a year? Who needs a religious center here anyway? We’ve got everything we could possibly –” the mayor sounded agitated and he nearly began to strain his voice until he noticed the many hopeful

looks gleaming in his direction. “Well,” he said, airing out a deflated breath, “I mean, if you really want to, I - I suppose I’ll allow – that is, before we do anything first we need to take a vote.”

An Offering of War

Bessy Gimbal's black buckle-down shoes swung on her feet as she sat at the kitchen table flipping through the comic section of the Sunday paper. She laughed with a squeal, "Isn't that funny, Bessy?" she giggled to the vacant air around her.

Mr. Gimbal came into the room straightening his tie. "What are you laughing at and who are you talking to?" he said from a smirk.

"Bessy and I were reading this, Dad," and she showed him the comic.

"You all ready, squirt?" said Mr. Gimbal.

Bessy said that she was and then asked, "Dad, are we going to start doing this *every* Sunday?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. Maybe."

Bessy looked back at the comic strip and huffed. "Bessy and I want to stay here and play."

"Well, one Bessy is welcome to do that if she likes, but my Bessy is coming with her Mom and me. A lot of people are going to be there, so I'm sure we'll see some of your friends from school."

"Yeah?" Bessy looked only slightly more optimistic. "And if we don't like it we don't have to go back, right?"

"Not necessarily, dear," her father said carefully. "It's not really about liking it or not."

"Well," Bessy questioned firmly, "why do

anything if you don't like it?"

Her father smiled, "Someday you'll understand." And he rubbed her head again.

Mrs. Gimbal put her earrings on as she came into the kitchen. "Ready?"

"We are," Mr. Gimbal affirmed.

Only a slight pout could be heard in Bessy's voice as she arose from her seat and said, "Come on, Bessy. Let's go."

* * * * *

There was not a parking spot to be found.

And people, like a neatly dressed herd, walked all in one direction through the village streets. The women wore elaborately decorated hats made of flowers and bows. Men adorned suits and long ties which wrapped themselves tightly around their freshly shaven necks. And the children were instructed to be on their best behavior as they lulled their way within the cold-pinching air of the midmorning.

The crowd grew solemn as they came closer to the large archway. They nodded and mouthed hellos to the smartly dressed men who stood just inside the entranceway handing out programs of the day's upcoming service.

The windows near the ceiling had been stained in iridescent colors, and the sun came through them in a prismatic spread across the floor and

opposite walls. At fifteen minutes before the scheduled start, most of the seats had been filled, and a mild chatter held the room.

Graham came in with a new shirt tucked into his trousers, looking winsome and clean.

Mrs. Alder clutched a walker that shook and trembled along with her as she hobbled down the center aisle of the enormous room. Next to her, watching her every quaking pace, was her daughter and son-in-law, followed by her grandchildren, Sarah and Steven, and her nurse Mrs. Robbins.

Steven hung behind his family by a few long paces and looked around the crowding room hoping they would take a seat somewhere in the back so as not to be seen by the majority of people already seated. Sarah carried her Abbey-doll tightly to her body and glanced at Steven from behind her shoulder. He thought his sister looked ridiculous walking around in public with a ragged doll. The two of them had gotten into an argument on the way over about Sarah leaving the doll behind, until their father – in an unusually loud voice – abruptly ended the dispute: Sarah was allowed to keep company with the doll and Steven elected to keep entirely to himself in silent protest.

He saw Mary Peterson and her family, and he quickly looked away before he got the chance to see if she had noticed him. Steven continued to trail his family as they walked down the aisle – much to his

dismay – toward the front rows.

Before taking her seat in one of the middle rows, Roxana Valentine had risen early from bed and read the Sunday paper in her new armchair. She looked as vital and healthy as she felt, wearing an appropriately stitched suit with medium heels and a sharp barrette that could be distinctly recognized by all who sat behind her. Her hair had begun to come in fast and thick around her head, and her star-blue eyes twinkled as they scanned the room.

Laurie and Vincent Kolo made their way through a side entrance where outside a ramp had delivered them to an ingress away from the bulk of the in-pouring crowd.

Even Sam came in with the horde, although he felt lost among the masses of families and couples all grouped together in small, bonded clusters. He cleared the front entrance shyly and immediately took a seat near the back where not as many people had situated themselves yet.

The congregation eventually all filed in, jamming the rest of the empty seats. Faces spread themselves out amidst the swarmed-over space like a human sea. The doors shut, but just as the last patrons had been seated and began to settle, craftily, Jaron Kyler entered and surveyed the crowd. He then found an open place in the very back row and took a

seat. As soon as he had, music burst into the air and all the members of the congregation rose as the pastor made his way to the head of the gatherers. When he reached his final position, he turned and smiled with his eyes.

The pastor was a kindly looking middle-aged man who had been brought over on short notice from a reputable church in the city, but he seemed instantly right at home as he began to speak after the music had gone quiet. He talked briefly about how happy he was that the church had found a wonderful new home in Dolor's End, and that it was a great honor to be able to preside over the first service. After a loud, though initially awkward round of applause, the pastor walked up to a podium carrying a thick book bound in cloth, and placing it down, he opened it and began to read.

Just as he had finished the first sentence, the large archway to the main entrance groaned open. Many members of the congregation turned their heads to the commotion, where, very casually, a lone man walked in and coolly let the large weight of the heavy entries sway closed behind him. Instead of attempting to look for a seat, he simply stood firm against the back wall and folded his arms across his chest as he waited for the pastor to continue.

It was the mayor.

A dull whisper swept over the congregation like water pulling itself over the sand and back into the brine. Not far away from where the mayor stood, Kyler crouched in his seat and kept his head forward,

pretending he hadn't noticed any disturbance in the service.

The pastor continued on with his reading, and when he finished, closed the book and walked up to the crowd and candidly began his sermon. He spoke about the value of community and how blessed they all were to partake in such a profound network. He spoke about loving one's neighbors and having the proper attitude in times of personal hardship and strife. Lastly, he mused on the idea of peace and prosperity amongst all the citizens living within the commonwealth he had mentioned earlier. "And as an initial gesture of that peace," said the pastor, concluding his sermon, "let us now extend to those around us an offering of peace and goodwill."

The entire congregation erupted in the prattle of a hundred different conversations. Husbands and wives kissed each other on their cheeks, mothers and fathers embraced their children, and strangers shaking hands exchanged well wishes.

Kyler kept mostly to himself so as not to turn and make incidental eye contact with Deo, who continued to stand statuesquely in the back. The mayor made no effort to shake any hands or engage himself in any way, but stood solidly against the back wall.

That is, until Bessy Gimbal – who, having spotted a classmate from across the room had left her seat to say hello – saw the mayor standing in the back and approached him. "Peace be with you, mister," she said, extending her tiny hand up to his.

Deo smiled at her and took her delicate palm lightly. “Thank you, sweetheart,” he said kindly. “And to you and your friend there, too.”

She smiled at him big. “She says thank you,” and Deo gave her a wink and she trotted happily back to her seat.

Upon seeing this, one of the ushers came over to the mayor and shook his hand vigorously as he thanked him for the opportunity that Dolor’s End had provided for him to become a first-time homeowner.

“I want to thank the mayor for putting in so many handicap ramps and accessibilities recently,” said Laurie Kolo to her husband. “It seemed like they sprouted up overnight after our conversation with him at the store a few weeks back.” And she went to shake his hand and wish him well. By the time she’d walked the short distance to the back of the room, however, she found herself waiting behind an older couple who were telling the mayor about how much they loved the landscaping of the park and how young and revitalized they felt every day when they took their routine walk through it. Three other people had left their seats and stood behind Laurie, waiting their turn to wish the mayor well, or thank him, or simply shake his hand.

After Laurie’s brief audience with the mayor she turned to retake her seat. As she did, she was astonished to see that the small line to shake the mayor’s hand had nearly formed all the way down the aisle, with more and more people filing into it

awaiting their turn. When she returned to her husband, the surrounding rows about her were nearly empty, as many people had gotten out of their seats and stood in line to give their best or introduce themselves to the mayor. Even the pastor himself spoke to parishioners around him as he edged steadily toward the back of the church in the line of the gratefuls en route to see the mayor. Almost everyone had gotten up to give him praise and thanks and were either in line or sauntering back with happy faces to their respective seats.

All the people of Kyler's once crowded section had gotten into line to shake hands with the mayor also, and it left him exposed and alone. So, torpidly, Kyler turned his head toward the lengthening line. His body was isolated and petrified in the naked space around him. He followed the line with his eyes to the back of the church with a calculated turn of his head and subtle raise of his brow.

As if he had been watching him all along, Deo's glare intercepted Kyler's and Kyler jerked his head back in a reactionary, though altogether obvious motion. Knowing he had been spotted, Kyler again turned toward the mayor; and there again the eyes of the mayor sat waiting for him in a fastened stare as he listened to the ongoing thanks of a humbled resident. This time however, Kyler looked directly at Deo as he shook another hand. Deo had to momentarily disrupt his eye contact to focus on his new conversation, but when he looked back, his glare

locked again with Kyler's.

Making sure that Deo saw him, Kyler stood up and walked away from his seat. The line was shortening, and people began to return to their places and wait for the service to continue.

Kyler walked to the retrenching line and stood to the side of it, then went quickly to the back of the church and right past Deo, nearly brushing his shoulder. The mayor pretended not to notice and gave his full attention to the person with whom he was speaking, but after a moment looked behind him, only to see the heavy stance of the doors swing together and firmly seal themselves. The line of gratified parishioners had finally thinned, and nearly everyone was back in their seats.

And the service continued.

Hunger Pains

Kyler sat in front of a steaming hot plate of food.

Every night after the store had closed he would scan the aisles and take something next door to his own kitchen and make dinner. Though, often times, just as he was about to eat, his appetite fell off and he would go to bed on an empty stomach that wasn't hungry.

He thought about his store. He thought about all the oblivious people to pass through and fill their carts, buying groceries and hardware, unassuming and unaware. 'Everyone has to eat,' he reasoned, looking at his plate while picking at a sliver of tenderloin. He chewed the meat for a long time in his mouth and finally swallowed it with an uneasy gulp.

He had been losing weight steadily over the past few months, eating only what small bits of meals he was able to before the thought of Deo and the town and its people arose in his mind. Though, in random moments he was successful in pretending as if he had always lived in Dolor's End and had always run Kyler's General Store. But in so many other moments – moments he could not conquer – he had no choice but to remember his life before Deo had come to the valley and turned it into a foreign place.

“Hell with this!” Kyler said aloud with a breathy heave of voice, tossing his fork from his hand and letting it drop into the uneaten meal in front of him. He put his elbows on the table and plunged his head to his hands, rubbing his eyes violently.

His appetite was gone completely.

Kyler tried furiously to divert his mind, but he could not; he had been haunted by his own perceptions from the instant he’d awoken to see that his beautiful valley had been destroyed. He thought of Deo tucked away from the town in his mansion. And he thought nostalgically of his old home.

A knock on the door cleared Kyler’s racing mind and brought him back to the kitchen where he sat over his cold and hardening dinner.

The rapping was light and curious.

Kyler went to the door and opened it slow.

There, in the rectangular casting of the wooden doorframe, stood the silhouette of a man. In the dark he was no more than an undistinguishable figure, yet he had the pronounced physical features of a ranch-hand, right up to the ten-gallon hat that hugged the round of his head in a gallant and dignified way.

The breath from his words crystallized in white vapors as it poured out of his mouth, when in a drawl he said, “Why, hello there, Jaron. It’s been a long time.”

* * * * *

The two men sat and talked while a pot of coffee warmed itself on the stove. “I’m sorry to’ve dropped in on ya’ like this, ‘n all right ‘round yer supper as it were,” Pembroke said apologetically.

“It’s no problem,” Kyler assured his guest. His uneaten plate sat coldly on the table where he’d left it.

“I haven’t seen ya’ around in a while, Jaron. Not sure I woulda’ exactly recognized the old place had I not asked a fella on the way inta’ town ‘bout where I might find a supply store; I thought I’d made more than a few wrong turns and gotten myself all kinds of lost. On the way’ inta’ town! Ha! By god, that sure sounds funny. I never thought Braden County’d ever see itself a town.” Kyler raised both eyes in an overly accentuated way and tucked his lower lip into his pallet, tightening his chin across his jaw and wrinkling the thick skin of his brow. “The snow done got me stuck a’ right couple a’ times on my way here, but I wanted to get here – wanted to get here before it all melts and turns ta’ mud and all. I hear it’s supposed to warm up a bit startin’ tomorra’. Snow I can dig through – mud I’d need a dozen horses to pull me outta’.”

“I understand,” Kyler said as he looked past his guest and out the living room window to the street

beyond. He sat there quiet, staring for an uncomfortably long while.

“Jaron?” Pembroke said, “I just need to get some supplies and then I’ll be outta’ yer hair.”

“I’m sorry, Dale,” Kyler said, his eyes refocusing as he searched for words, “I’m just tired.”

“Well, I understand,” Pembroke said, standing up, “you’ve got a lot going on over here. If ya’ don’t mind, I’ll just get me a few things and be off.”

“Not at all. Let me show you the store.”

Kyler showed Pembroke around the various aisles of the store, and Pembroke – in deep amazement at the complexity and seemingly unending variety – filled his cart higher and higher.

Pembroke’s truck was parked outside the store and the two men loaded the bed with almost as much cargo as it was able to hold. When the cart was empty and the truck-bed full, Pembroke and Kyler shook hands. “Good to see ya’, Jaron.”

“Same here, Dale.”

Pembroke looked around at the quiet town, “I guess it never was that fella’s aim ta’ just put one a’ those highways straight on inta’ the city through here, eh?”

Kyler smiled for the first time all night. “No, it certainly was not.”

Pembroke patted his old friend on the shoulder and got in his truck. But before the rusty door of the vehicle was closed completely it opened again, and Pembroke hopped out holding something

long and thin, covered by a light cloth. He called after Jaron who had already turned to walk the few short paces back to the house. “I almost forgot,” Pembroke said, extending his arms and offering the slender, draped object to Kyler. “I don’t need it anymore. Haven’t seen those damn dogs in months – not months I tell ya! Strangest thing. One day I got nothin’ but dust and dogs and the next it’s crops and not so much as a howl in the distance. I haven’t seen any coyotes, foxes, nothin’. But hey, I ain’t complainin’.” There, in Pembroke’s hands, was the long metallic and wood body of the Winchester rifle Kyler had lent to him in those dry summer months that seemed so long ago. “The pitch is real good – so’s the action. I also brought along all the extra rounds I didn’t use for ya’.” Kyler looked at the gun, enraptured by the mere feeling it generated in him as he held it. “Thanks again for the loan, Jaron,” Pembroke said. And he got back in his truck and pulled away.

Kyler clutched the gun tightly and put the box of bullets in the pocket of his shirt. He brought it downstairs and into the basement and put it back on the mount on the wall. He looked at it hanging there, but took it down again. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he placed two rounds into the chamber, cocked the pump, and aimed it into the air, raising the barrel to the empty room in front of him. He nodded with approval as he lowered the weapon and switched on the safety, leaving the bullets locked into the chamber. Again, he mounted the rifle on the wall and

admired it for a moment.

His stomach rumbled and immediately he was overtaken by an extreme, almost painful hunger. So, he went upstairs to finish his dinner; and when he did, he found himself still hungry, so he made himself another plate, and ate that too.

PART IV A Path

Fire Talk

The woods were tranquil and serene, touched with the last fading waves of dusk's light. Deeply embowered within the forest, far away from the open mouth of the valley, a fire of dried sticks and pine needles warmed the faces and vestments of the men who stood in a circle around its heat. They were quiet and solemn. An unfamiliar tension loomed in the usually joyful faces of the men around the pyre. This would be a discussion none of them would ever forget, though, at the moment, none of them wanted it to start.

It was almost completely dark now, and the pulsating light from the fatwood swelled, illuminating the monastery in winks behind them. There was a twist of wind in the upper stretching branches of the barren trees, and finally the conversation began as a single voice sliced its sound through the air. "He must be stopped," said the voice, which grew in strength as it continued. "He must be stopped right now if we're to salvage the knowledge we have sworn to protect! I will not sit another day waiting here in these hills, hoping against all hope that by some miracle he does not do any further damage than he already has!"

At hearing this, every monk immediately began yelling and talking over one another in a noisy, chaotic clamor. All except one, whose voice was the

most respected of all the other monks. “My friends! Brothers!” The monk shouted above the rest, gaining their edgy attention. “We must continue to conduct ourselves with the vigilance and patience we have shown already. Otherwise, a hasty move on our part could damage the Vim just as much as anything else.”

The monks collectively muttered lowly to each other until one amongst them spoke up, “But, Abbott, surely to do nothing has it’s virtues in many instances – but this cannot be one of those times! The Vim – the sole thing kept in good confidence and under our proper guard – has been stolen and exploited by one of our very own renegade brothers! We have been patient for so long – too long! We must act, and we must do it soon.”

Abbott did not even attempt to speak as one of the other brothers continued, “The Vim is being exposed and misused! We cannot let this continue! Soon enough the secret could fall into the wrong hands and –”

“Wrong hands?” shouted another monk, “It’s already in the wrong hands! Anyone who vows a life dedicated to the protection of the Vim and then leaves that oath to abuse its knowledge is the person with these wrong hands you’re speaking about!” This was met with loud approval from the others.

“Brother Eli must pay for this! He must be brought here and made to pay! And that entire town should be burned to the ground.”

“Or simply erased from existence,” exclaimed one eager brother, “the same way it was created! I’ll

do it myself!”

A debate about how best to return the town to the peaceful valley it once was detonated amongst the brothers. Some thought it would be best to send a sickness or an infestation through it, some thought it best to evacuate the town’s inhabitants; others figured it was safest to eliminate the town altogether in fear that the Vim had already been compromised.

“Enough!” shouted Abbott in a booming voice that sent a rush of wind through the stripped winter boughs of the naked trees. “Before any action of such drastic consequence can be employed, we should at least go to the Orphic one more time and consult its advice.”

“But, Brother Abbott,” said one of the monks humbly, “I have already gone to the Orphic – we all have – and it has been silent on the issue with everyone except for Brother Simon, and we have all already heard what he has told us.”

Brother Simon, a stout man of an innocent nature, spoke up, “As I’ve said before, the Orphic informed me that there was ‘a path’, but when I asked it to elaborate it said nothing.”

“A path?” asked one of the monks, “Are you sure that was all?”

“Yes,” said Brother Simon, “that was the only thing: ‘a path’. With the answer as vague as it was I hadn’t thought to well – ” he said with a shrug, “well, I didn’t know what to think.”

“There is nothing to think about. What the Orphic said to Brother Simon is exactly what it

meant: There is a way to deal with this, but that way is not for us to sit around and do nothing! The Orphic does not mean to confuse us. It means to lead us to answers just as it always has.”

“But what if the path is to do nothing?” questioned a monk whose voice was soft in asking.

“It said there was a path. That means there is a way!”

“But it did not say what.”

“Maybe whatever action we choose will be the proper one and it is up to us to decide.” The monks debated this half-heartedly for a moment, and after seeing the dispute turned over without any real progress, Abbott spoke and cut the floundering discussion. “We have passively waited for some time now, only to watch the situation deteriorate. When the Orphic said to Brother Simon that there is a path, then it must be so. I will go one final time to the Orphic to see if there is anything further it has to say before we make our decision on what it is that should be done. Until then, however, we should all clear our minds and try to see the situation freshly. When I return, we will proceed from there.” The monks agreed with some reluctance, anxious and impatient with nervousness; many felt that too much time had already been wasted, and the Vim, if mishandled, could, with all its power, destroy even itself if used incorrectly. “I will be back,” Abbott said, bowing to his brethren.

As the monks left the fire, two of them spoke quietly with one another as they walked away from

the flickering light. “Do you think Abbott will be able to extract anything from the Orphic?”

“The Orphic has a reason for being so cryptic. So, do I think Abbott will get the Orphic to say anything further? No,” responded the other monk. “. But knowing Abbott, he won’t have to.”

A Path

Abbott climbed the open cut of the path that led from the monastery to the humble dwelling of the Orphic; it was a trek he had made more frequently than usual in recent months. Some brothers went to visit the Orphic every week, others every day. But some, like Abbott, went only on sparse occasions if and when they were so compelled.

Until recently, life at the monastery had been simple, but Abbott imagined nothing greater for himself. He was the head priest and supreme authority amongst the brothers, acting as chief and chaplain in succession of the Vim and the Orphic which he served. Though he was not the oldest of the monks, his wisdom and humility had garnered him the honor of head priest – a position selected directly by the Orphic itself.

The Orphic was the most genuine and complete embodiment of the truth the monks protected. From the Orphic the monks not only learned the many teachings of the Vim – the guiding force of life and all the universe itself – but the supreme and ultimate secret which the monks had been commissioned to protect. Generation after generation, an intimate band of solitary brethren had kept themselves in the deep hills of the forest to guard the Orphic, learning about the ways of the Vim,

and keeping the secret so closely protected that they never spoke of it directly, even amongst themselves.

Keeping his gait rove but cautious, Abbott neared the place where the Orphic resided. ‘There is a path,’ Abbott thought, throwing the phrase over and over again in his mind. Yet, its ambiguity – general and enigmatic even by the Orphic’s standards – had fostered little insight for the high priest as he made his ascent.

He approached and quieted himself.

As Abbott came further, he could see a cove of open space at the end of the trail. A coating of moonlight came through the brakes of the wood and spread across the otherwise shadowy ground. Abbott’s trek was over; he had reached the Orphic.

He emerged out of the spiky thick of the enclosed wood. As he did so, the Orphic greeted him reflectively.

* * * * *

It was a long while before Abbott left the Orphic. The moon had crossed the sky and was lowering by the time he arose to start the descent back towards the monastery.

The monks would not be pleased. Abbott was no closer to any answer than he had been earlier.

As it was with the other monks, the Orphic made no mention to Abbott of the town or what to do about their renegade brother. In fact, Abbott had spent the entire evening in the Orphic's presence without either party having spoken a single word. Abbott was disappointed, though he thought better of it.

As he began to enter the mouth of the trail which led back to the monastery, he looked again at the Orphic sitting silent and motionless, overlooking the scenic view of the valley below. But it was not the Orphic that grabbed his attention: Behind the alcove on the opposite end from where the Orphic sat – caught by the angled light of the sinking moon – was an opening in the brake that Abbott had not seen before.

Retracting his steps, Abbott went briskly over to the indentation; it was subtle and slight, just barely faded into the brush and the trees around it.

But there it was nonetheless: another trail.

Scant and thin, the trackway was indiscrete, obscured by a surrounding grove of hedges. But the moon – set calmly in the perfect position, hovering just above the horizon – shone white light straight through its guise of sprigs and covering.

“There is a path,” Abbott said, looking back at the Orphic.

The Orphic maintained total silence, but seemed to smile a bit.

And shaking his head as he laughed to himself, Abbott started down the narrow width of the unknown trail.

The Monk & The Mayor II

The house sat rayless and still. Its lengthy hallways and cavernous rooms echoed with the tolls of a grandfather clock that reverberated from the antechamber to the study where light flickered from the fireplace. The mayor sat in the comfortable hug of a well-padded armchair. Sporadic limbs of the flames undulated in throws of tepid heat across his face.

Turning his head from the fire to the window, Deo could see the settling moon holding on lowly to the ends of the sky, scarcely huddled just above the tree line. There was the promise of another snow in the wind as it gently rocked the tops of the timber.

Deo cocked his head back to the hearth and placed one hand below his jawline holding up his head. He exhaled and closed his eyes, waiting a moment. A smile climbed his face as a repetitious wooden thud came from down the hall: a knocking.

Calmly, Deo arose from his chair and exited the study towards the antechamber. When he reached the main entrance he turned the large brass knob clockwise and opened the door, gleaming the foyer in moonshine.

Silhouetted in the framing of the entryway stood the enrobed figure of a man. The figure kept motionless as Deo looked him over briefly with a half-smile. “Well, hello there, Abbott. What took

you so long?”

* * * * *

Abbott said nothing, but looked at Deo with soft eyes from under his hood. It had been a long time since the two had seen one another. Opening the door further, the mayor extended his hand as he stepped back, beckoning the tired looking monk inside. As Abbott entered, the lights went up slowly to a comfortable level and hit his face as he let his hood fall around his shoulders and away from his silvering head. He seemed to have aged mildly since Deo had last seen him: His once shiny black hair now peppered into a frosty mix that ran all the way through to his beard. His eyes, still kind but piercing, appeared sunken slightly, as sags and defining wrinkles accentuated the lines of his austere and stoic face.

He looked around the room at the many fine decorations and amenities. Works of art and imaginative architecture brought the ambience of the house together in an understated elegance. Abbott nodded his head and continued to walk his eyes around the many nuances of the home.

Deo spoke in a calm and steady voice, “It’s been quite a while.” Abbott smiled and joined his arms behind his back, shaking his head in agreement.

He looked at the floor and then went back to inspecting the room. “I truly am surprised that you didn’t come for me sooner,” Deo added.

Abbott walked over to an ornament decorating the surface of a table in the corner of the room and picked it up, inspecting it, “No one wanted to act hastily,” he said casually. “And besides, no one knew exactly how we should approach you. But once I found the path you’d made from the Orphic to your doorstep, I knew you’d been waiting for us to visit you directly.”

“Naturally,” the mayor jeered.

“Naturally,” Abbott agreed, placing the ornament back on the table as he turned around to share a smile with the mayor. “We’ve been watching, and we’re not pleased, Eli,” he said as his smile flattened quickly. “Nor are we amused.”

“As I said before,” Deo clarified, erasing the smile from his own face, “I’m surprised I didn’t see you sooner. And I didn’t do this for anyone’s amusement.”

“And as *I* said before, we didn’t want to act hastily – and you shouldn’t have either. You should’ve at least consulted us.”

“This town has been here for months and I’ve heard nothing from the brothers.”

“You should have consulted us.”

“You’d have said no! And again, this town has been here for months, Abbott! Months! It’s nice to know that you and the brothers are still a body of all thought and no action,” Deo said tauntingly.

“We *are* going to act, Eli. Did you think we would just sit back and let this happen? Did you think we – the brotherhood of which *you* are still a part of – would let you exploit and slander the very thing we’ve all been entrusted to protect?”

Turning his back on his guest, Deo rolled his eyes toward the pillared ceiling and walked over to the bar to pour himself a short drink. “You know, my old friend,” the mayor said, lightly at first, “I imagine that for all the brothers’ outrage – after all of their trite, little conversations, and for all their pathetic attempts to contemplate a solution – I’d be willing to bet that you have been the only one to come out of that fortress you call a monastery, and come down here to see for yourself what it is that I’ve accomplished.” He began to yell, “It’s magnificent! A realized, concrete manifestation of a thing you and the brothers keep only for yourselves! Come with me to town and I’ll show you – I’ll show you what I’ve created. I’ll show you what’s possible – how happy they are! I’ve been waiting to show you! Just to look into the people’s faces – you’ll see what I’ve done! I’ve taken away so many of those sufferings they’ve longed to be rid of. I’ve cleansed them, made them whole again! I’ve afforded them the opportunity to feel strong and able – many of them for the first time in their lives. I’ve given them something life never did – something they couldn’t give to themselves!”

“And what could you give to them that they didn’t already possess within themselves?” Abbott asked confidently.

“Abbott, you have been in that forest too long. After I left you, I went out into the world and I looked at people – I didn’t judge them, I didn’t assume anything – I just looked. And you know what I saw? I saw that people could hardly validate their present breath much less their entire life. I changed that. I created a place where magic is alive! Where people will soon be able to live with the Vim directly. I’ve already used it on a few of them and it works! It works perfectly! And soon I’ll have the entire town under its influence. And it’ll be beautiful! It already *is* beautiful. Go out and see. Go out and look at them and see what I’ve done – what *we’ve* done, Abbott – you and I, through *your* teachings. The secret works. It really works! And not just up there in the forest – it works here amongst the people. It works in life! In real, everyday, honest life.

“And while it may not be for the masses, those of us who know and understand it can use it for the general benefit of the greater good. We can guide them like lost little flocks. They crave direction anyways. They’ve been waiting for someone or something to just take away all their pain and misery. They’ll worship us! They’ll praise us for taking all the struggle, all the suffering away from life! Can you imagine it? A life without suffering? A life where no one will ever again have to combat the overbearing forces of the world and succumb to them.

“Come with me and I will show you a people content with life, alleviated from some of the most weighted and burdensome ailments of the human

condition – at least certainly more so than they were before coming to this town. And soon I'll eradicate *all* their sufferings. Every last one of them. You should see the people I've lured here. I've shepherded every walk of human destitute and hopelessness into this town, and they're all right here right now, as we speak. They'll be nothing but benefited by what I have in store for them. How did the brothers not think to do this ages ago? Why sit on the side of a mountain directing the course of the world when you can come down and rule the land you walk through?

“Here, I have brought the secret into being. I've personalized it and sculpted it by hand. I don't even have to pray anymore! All those hours wasted in the monastery laden with prayer. I have no use for it at all. And neither did the people of this town before they put in that ludicrous church. But I'll let them have it, and I'll watch them leave it. It'll be fun to watch them turn away once and for all from their religious longings. And soon enough they'll have just as much use for it as I do – none whatsoever. After all, why pray when you can make a thing come true all on your own?

“This had to be done, Abbott. It had to be brought to life. The people of this town have been given a gift they aren't even aware of – and the less aware they are the happier they'll be. They'll incur miraculous healings or simply consider themselves lucky that ever since they came here life hasn't dealt them any bad breaks, and they'll go on unknowing

and forever content in their unawareness.

“But *I* know. I’ll know that I brought the very secret of the universe down from the wilderness – where men don’t dare to walk – and from it made a town where the angst and anguish of life beyond my village streets ends, and a life of eternal serenity begins.”

Abbott was quiet for a long time. He studied Deo as they entrenched themselves in a mutual stare. After a few prolonged moments, Abbott opened his mouth and spoke, carefully choosing his words, “You cannot lift all the weights of people’s hearts, Eli. You know that just by looking into your own. It seems to me that you’ve acted rather haphazardly, without giving much thought to what’s really going on here. Without looking into why it is the world has set itself up the way that it has.”

“I have waited for quite some time,” Deo said. “And ever since I’ve left the monastery I’ve spent that time learning how better to direct and control the Vim so that one day – when I was sure of its success – I could come back and build this place and show you and the brothers what might be accomplished if only we willed it to be! This is only the start. Think of what could be done if all of us – the entire brotherhood – chose to channel the energies of the Vim into a broader, more encompassing area than that of Dolor’s End! We could rid the world of disease, end poverty, end humanity’s confusion – all with the blink of an eye!”

“But people would be forced into discovery –

into the benefits of the Vim – never finding it for themselves, never even having been given a chance to seek it out. They would be condemned to a truth they weren't looking for."

"Better condemned to truth than enslaved to uncertainty! So few people ever take the time to look for some kind of meaning in the world, and of those who do, almost no one finds it. You know that! And anyways, who looks for sickness? Who wants to grow up to be addicted, to be poor, to suffer in general?"

"They would never understand the secret! People would be living it without comprehending it and simply reap all its benefits without finding it for themselves and would be no better off than anyone already living in or outside this town of yours! That's just the problem with your experiment here, Eli: They're living the secret without understanding or knowing it – harvesting all the benefits without any of the work.

"The world is not like that, Brother. Where's the room for faith? Where's the chance to cultivate a relationship between the world and one's own self on one's own terms – through struggle and challenge and discovery, self-realization, self-sacrifice, self-knowledge? Knowledge of one's self *is* knowledge of the secret; it *is* the key to this life. But that comes out of reflection and the constant work of forging a relationship between yourself and the world. That comes from the continual communication, the never-ending dialogue we have between ourselves and our lives. Once you see that, there *is* no longer any

becoming! There's only communication! There's only this relationship between our own self and the world – and one comes to understand that what we think of as the world is merely an extension of the self. There's no longer any thing we need to be: We are already as we are – becoming is eliminated! Imperfection is no longer a concept, because everything is perfectly just the way it is already.

“And yes, there is suffering and there is sadness and there are all these things you're fighting; but, Eli, all of these things are the gifts of life. *Gifts!* All of them! There's no need to fight them when we accept that and see the truth of it. Every hardship, every pain, every perceived difficulty we come up against is the manifestation of the universal gift – just as much as anything we perceive as a blessing or good fortune. Once we see clearly, we realize that there is no 'good' or 'bad' – there just *is*. And once we realize that, we see that everything we encounter is a gift of this life. But it's only our own misguided perceptions that lead us to believe that we are separate from one another, separate from the secret, from the Vim, from the world. If we could dissolve our egos we'd see that not only is there no self, not only is there no good or bad, not only is there no becoming, but that we *are* the secret itself! *We* are! With all our so-called shortcomings and sufferings and pitfalls and struggles, *we* are the make-up of universe, and all its powers and mysteries are encompassed within our very beings. And it is only the work we do with and within ourselves that unveils to us what we truly are.

“You don’t just think a thing and immediately it exists. You don’t simply create your own truth to your specific liking and reshape the world around it; there is a truth to the world as well, and it is deeply profound and set up in a very particular way for a very particular reason. You have to have faith in its workings, and you must teach people to work *with* the world – to work within themselves and their own circumstances – with their own natures and with who they *are*, not who they wish they were.

“But the people of your town have no other choice, do they? They *must* live it. And because they must live it, it’s all they’ll ever know. They’ll never be able to know the secret for themselves. They’ll never want to. How could they? They’ll know nothing else. You’ve fattened them up to feed off of their hunger for the life you provide for them here. And in that, my friend, there is no freedom, no knowledge of self, no faith in the world, and certainly no truth.”

Eli, who had been shaking his head in disagreement for some time, picked up his speech immediately and spoke in a mayoral tone as if addressing a large crowd, “I do not wish for anything less than an end to the intolerable and unnecessary sufferings of this world. That is my truest want.”

“But you don’t entrust the people to know the secret itself so that they can direct it however they wish.”

“Ahh, yes,” said the mayor with a smile, “but, my dear Abbott, neither do you. And I don’t blame you or the brothers. Because in your seclusion up

there in the hills you are, in a way, confessing. Are you not? You believe that the common person is not ready or able to know the truth of the Vim. Isn't that right? You just said so yourself. And I must admit, I don't necessarily disagree with you."

"I hope you've not come to that conclusion the hard way."

Deo paused, looking confused, "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"I mean, you wouldn't have told or shown anyone the powers of the Vim directly, would you?"

"Of course not!" Deo said, breaking his eye contact with Abbott.

"Good," said Abbott, "because, again, someone who knows the Vim without the proper counsel – someone who knows of its essence without ever having looked for it or striving to know it in the first place – someone like that, should they know what the secret is or what it's capable of, such a person might compromise our work, or at the very least put your doings here with your town in great jeopardy. Only a person who wishes to know its essence in the first place will ever comprehend its power and meaning; left in the mind of anyone unprepared to grasp its implications, the Vim could render a person very-very dangerous, or even mad."

"You don't have to lecture me on the dangers of the Vim coming into the wrong hands," Deo barked. "I'm well aware of the possible fallout."

"Good," Abbott said, looking very seriously at his pupil. "Because I know it must be very difficult

without the support of the brothers to foster and perpetuate the Vim all alone. It must have been very tempting to at least show one person directly in hopes that you might be able to see the effect it had on such an individual.” Deo scoffed and let away a forced beat of laughter in a short, airy burst. “Just remember, Brother Eli,” Abbot said, “the Vim will find its own balance and do its own work, with or without our interventions Sometimes I think it has its own agenda entirely, and that it uses us rather than we using it,” he said with a smile. Deo smiled back and the two men looked at each other for a moment before Abbott took another glance around the room at the elaborate architecture and abundant accoutrements which decorated the spacious interior of the house. Abbott’s gaze then shifted toward Deo, and with another smile and a nod said, “Goodbye for now, Brother Eli. You’ll be hearing from us again shortly, I imagine.”

“Brother Abbott,” Deo said with a similar gesture. And with that, the old monk turned and left the house for the dark of the night.

Deo watched through the large picture window as Abbott walked at an even pace across the lawn and to the backyard. There he met the mouth of a labyrinth made of finely cut hedges and brush and entered it.

Deo looked above the tops of the labyrinth walls. Clouds gathered thickly in the skies above; it looked like snow. The large willow tree in the lawn bent and swayed, lurching and craning with the wind.

The mayor took in a deep breath as he faced the window and longingly cast his eyes to the forested hills beyond the maze in the direction in which Abbott had gone. He spoke in a thoughtful manner, apparently to no one, “It appears that our old friends from the forest are growing impatient with us.” He turned and walked away from the glassing. “And our other friend – the grocer – it’s pretty clear that he’s become angry as well,” Deo said contemplatively to the empty room. “I had such high hopes for him. I truly thought we’d finally be able to show the brothers that people are ready to handle the secret without having to learn it through suffering and struggling and coming to their own terms with it; I honestly believed that if we just showed it to them that they’d understand. But I suppose that’s the point, isn’t it? You have to come to it on your own – you have to suffer your way to the truth of it – otherwise it has no meaning, no value.

“Kyler was struggling, but he was doing so well with the way things were; I figured that he’d eventually come to some understanding of it, or at least come to me and ask to learn about it. I would have shown him. I wanted to show him. But instead, he feared and shunned me. He’s spiteful of me. He drew conclusions about the way things were, or just didn’t want to know at all. He didn’t care to; he wanted things *his* way – never made allowance for the possibility that maybe something else was going on here, something bigger than himself, but something that he was an integral part of. He just didn’t quite

get it – didn't quite let it in. And I suppose had he come to me wanting to know or wanting me to show it to him directly there wouldn't have been any lesson in this for the brothers, would there? They have to realize it just as much as anyone; we can't just force it on them either. They have to come to it in their own way too.

“But does it have to be like *this*? Isn't there another way to go about it? An approach where both Kyler and the brothers might understand – without one of them having to take such drastic action? Can't we buy some more time at least? Or isn't there something else we could do? There *has* to be some other way, doesn't there? I'll be honest,” Deo paused, and after a moment exhaled loudly, “I'm afraid.”

He stopped and listened to the empty room. “I understand,” he said with a sigh. “And anyways, maybe Abbott's right after all. Maybe no one's ready to know it – or maybe no one wants to. Maybe they're happier that way,” and he walked back to the window and stared out of it with his hands clasped behind him. “It's no matter now, anyway. What's clear is that the brothers need to be subdued. They're ready to act, and I'm afraid they're going to do something foolish if we don't let things play out the way we set it up to from the beginning. Abbott wouldn't have come here if they weren't going to make some kind of move. Something's clearly about to happen. I can feel it.”

Going back to his stance at the window, he again looked out to the gathering clouds. Outside,

the willow stood separated from the other trees of the grovery a short distance behind it. The tree was still, motionless and calm. It looked strong and peaceful and it brought him a sense of ease.

“Okay,” he said, exhaling loudly. “I trust you I’m ready.” And with that, before the snow put its touch to the ground, Deo opened the door and began walking slowly towards the tree.

One Last Walk

The clouds congregated above the outer reaches of the treetops which made up the rim of the deep forest beyond. The threat of snow loomed. Below, Jaron Kyler lay deathly still in a carefully placed vantage point amongst the protection of the wood. He had been in position for over an hour, waiting patiently, cautiously biding his time. Covered by twilight and the lip of the bosk, he observed a willow tree as it sat motionless and calm. Roughly a hundred yards from the willow stood Deo's insular mansion. From his position within the shelter of the forest's cusp, Kyler had seen a man in a thick robe come from around the back of the house and up to the front door; he had entered and after a while came out again, retracing his steps to the backyard into what looked like a maze made of hedgerows, and vanished out of sight.

The ground was cold against Kyler's chest, but he didn't feel it. His eyes scanned the exterior of the house as he waited serenely in the deep refuge of the shadows. Just then, the silhouette of a man appeared behind the large picture window which looked out onto the yard.

It was the mayor. And although he was still at a distance, it was a clear shot.

So, very gingerly, Kyler clutched the long metallic and wood body of a Winchester rifle.

The barrel of the rifle rose up and Kyler took aim.

The mayor shifted and paced, and the eye of the rifle waved and moved, following its target precisely.

But suddenly the mayor turned and walked off, leaving only empty light coming through the glass. "Damn!" Kyler cursed under his breath. 'You're going to have to go up there, Jaron, into the house,' he thought. But as soon as the thought had been completed Kyler heard the noise of a door closing gently, followed by the rhythmic increments of footsteps, growing louder, coming closer.

The mayor had come outside.

And he was suddenly well within range.

* * * * *

The mayor exited his house out the front door and looked up into the clouding sky as he strolled slowly into the lawn. The willow tree began swaying its long, thin branches like a thousand pendulums. Frozen strings of grass crunched beneath his feet. Through the dim of the air, Deo could faintly make out another set of footprints which ran across the lawn and toward the grovery which made up the border of the property. The tracks, Deo assumed, must have been Abbott's as he tried to find

his way from the house back to the mouth of the labyrinth which led to the Orphic and the monastery beyond.

Deo thought of his recent discussion with Abbott, and then of the talk between the two of them on the night he left the monastery; he thought of the conversation he had had with the Orphic on that same night. And he walked very slowly and intentionally across the yard.

It had all led him to here.

And suddenly after a few more paces he paused Everything had grown suddenly mute and still. The wind had ceased, and the trees of the forest stood with an unusual sense of quietness, as if they weren't there at all.

Even the ground felt as though it were dropping away from him.

Everything was turning comfortably dark, but remarkably close – like he was being swallowed by the world around him.

He did have one final sensation of a very loud sound, like a crack of thunder. But the sound had not come from the sky; it was much closer and now seemed – like everything else – to somehow be inside of him.

And then, there was nothing

* * * * *

Abbott climbed the path upwards through the black woods. He had no thoughts. He bent and shifted the weight of his body from one leg to the other. He observed the wind at his face and felt it pass through his hearty beard as it left his cheeks and blew against the limbs in a collection of trees behind him. His ears picked up the stuttered call of an owl hiding somewhere amongst a batch of evergreens.

But the owl's song, the wind, and all the other babbles of the wood were suddenly drowned by an abrasively loud crash.

Like a gigantic blare of drumfire, a furious wave of noise ran through the night, resounding off every tree of the forest and echoing up the hills.

* * * * *

Kyler waited.

Nothing happened.

The estate and the town in the distance had not evaporated into dreamish phantoms. He did not reawake in the hot summer swelter of his isolated country home.

So, with extreme caution, he broke from his

cover in the bower and crept through the yard toward the willow tree. The mayor's body was still as he approached, and Kyler's strides became lissome and controlled. As he came in closer, he fixated his gun at Deo's chest. The mayor didn't move; he didn't breathe. Blood appeared to ooze up as if it were a natural wellspring from under the mayor's inanimate shape. Kyler stood over the body like a wary hunter and poked it with the tip of the rifle.

It was done. A single shot was all it took.

Kyler dragged the mayor from where he lay and brought him deep into the woods, well past the lawn of the estate. When he'd come far enough, Kyler stopped and opened his mouth wide and stuck the barrel of the long metallic and wood rifle into it, clutching the trigger with his thumb. Deo's body lay still on the cold ground next to him, and he looked at it there as he bit on the rifle's end.

A sudden sense of peace came over him. 'It's over,' he thought. 'It's finally over.' And he took the barrel of the gun out of his mouth.

A strong wind blew hard at his face, and Kyler looked through the deep woods to the mayor's estate beyond the forest's edge. Laying the rifle down, he took Deo's body by a limp arm and dragged it further into the wood until he found a small chasm behind a clutch of spruce trees. Mindfully, he placed Deo into the hole and covered it with topsoil and some sticks, pine needles, and rocks.

The low-pitch of the manor's lights came through the brake from where Kyler stood; walking away from the hole, he retook the rifle in his red hands and started towards them.

* * * * *

Abbott finally reached the monastery in the small hours of the night. The grounds were quiet and there was only a single monk still standing at the firepit – now dashes of coals and ember. Abbott noticed him to be the youngest monk of the brethren, and the look on his face was teeming with angst and concern. “Brother Abbott!” he said excitedly, “The others got tired of waiting and went to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. What did the Orphic say? Have either of you found a solution? Do you think we’ll be able to end this soon?”

Abbott looked at the young monk with a face of seriousness before losing his gaze into the depths of the forest beyond. “No, my friend. Our problems may only just be beginning.”

PART V A Lack

The Reprobates II

Pembroke knew he was awake, but he was unsure why.

Only a few hours earlier he had gone to bed very tired after eating supper, leaving the dishes in the kitchen next to the sink.

But he was awake now.

The hot breath of his mouth came back at him as he lay with half of his face buried into the pillow. The farmer's eyes blinked only a few times before closing thickly. Though, just as his consciousness began to slip away, once again he found himself very much awake – only this time he did know why; it was a sound he'd not heard in a long time: Outside his window came the muffled screams of his animals – most noticeably from the sheep – all cooing in terror.

Pembroke rushed out of bed like water spilling above the brim of an overfilled glass. Having no time to find a light, he violently rummaged around the bedroom in search of the rifle. “Damn it!” he shouted, realizing in his half-conscious stupor that he'd given the gun back to Kyler.

So, armed with the handle of a broom he'd stumbled over as he bounded down the stairs and through the kitchen, Pembroke swung open the front door and streamed barefooted across the ground which was frigidly laced with a white varnish of falling

snow.

But it was too late.

Upon hearing the door swing open the dogs turned and began their retreat from the stable, back across the pasture and into the forest. Each dog carried the rubber, lifeless body of a sheep in the clutch of their mouths as they absconded from the farm; red-spackled trails dripped out and over the white earth.

In all the chaos and panic, the sheep had fled the stable and the entire flock ran in the opposite direction of the dogs toward the main gate, which, in Pembroke's over-confidence, he'd left unlocked and open. It had been so long since the dogs had last come that Pembroke had stopped locking up the gate to the pasture, much less the hen house and sheep's pen.

"No!" Pembroke yelled as he ran after the horror-stricken sheep. But they were too fast for him, and they ran out of the gate and scattered into the night.

Pembroke's sprint slowed to a halt, and he stood there as he saw the last of the sheep dart out of sight. All he could do was watch.

'Not a single trace of those goddamned dogs – not a howl or tracks in the snow – and then this,' he thought, rubbing his head.

There was nothing else he could do, so he went back inside to put on his boots and came out to lock the main gate.

Bessy & Bessy II

Bessy Gimbal sat in the cold grains of the sandbox behind her house and sobbed uncontrollably. From inside, Mrs. Gimbal could hear her wails and she dropped the chicken breast she'd been breading for dinner and came sprinting to her side. "What's the matter, Bess? Is everything alright? I thought you'd hurt yourself."

"N-n-no, it's not all right," Bessy said through a run of tears and fauceting nose.

"Well what's the matter then, dear?"

"It's Bessy," Bessy said.

"Bessy?" Mrs. Gimbal asked perplexedly before remembering her daughter's imaginary friend. "Oh, Bessy – your imaginary friend. What about her?"

"She's not imaginary. I told you: she's real, and she's gone."

"Gone?" Mrs. Gimbal said, "Where's she gone to?"

"I don't know," Bessy said under short intakes of breath, "I just met her to play out back here after school and I can't find her."

Mrs. Gimbal didn't know what to say, "Well," she stumbled, "maybe if you imagine her hard enough, she'll come right back."

Bessy was furious, "I told you she's not

imaginary!” and she leapt up and ran inside crying.

Coming back into the house, Mrs. Gimbal was met by the confused look of her husband who’d just gotten home from work. “Is everything alright?” he asked.

“She’ll be fine,” Mrs. Gimbal assured him, kissing him hello on the cheek.

“Well, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, of all things, it’s her imaginary friend.”

“Her imaginary friend, Bessy Gimbal?” he said grinning as he pawed the mail on the counter.

“The one who shows her how to do magical things and looks exactly like her?” he ended with a chuckle.

“That’s the one,” she said, sandwiched between breathy snickers.

“What about her?”

“Well, apparently she ran away.”

“Our daughter’s magical, imaginary friend of the same name and appearance ran away on her?” he asked humorously.

“That’s correct,” Mrs. Gimbal said, shaking her head and smiling back at him.

“That girl sure has some imagination.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Gimbal agreed, “she certainly does.”

Two Blue Stars II

Roxana Valentine sat comfortably in an armchair with a matching ottoman as she read her magazine. There was little she wanted to accomplish which she'd not already done: She had exercised in the morning, weeded her garden, and paid her bills in between a shower and light lunch. Later on, she planned on finishing the cushy romance novel she'd picked up earlier that week, or maybe getting her nails done at the salon in town.

Running her hand through her thick, blonde hair, she caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length wall mirror which she'd hung to make the room appear larger. She looked bright and full-colored, vital and poised, just as she'd remembered herself. There was a healthy twinkle all around her, and as she smiled at the reflection in the mirror her eyes beamed like small blue stars on her face.

As her gaze left the mirror and went back to her magazine, her ears perked to hear the high timbre of the telephone ringing from the kitchen. She arose from her seat and picked up the receiver with a polite, "Hello?"

On the other end was a receptionist from the doctor's office who asked that she come in for a follow-up appointment. Even though she had just been to the doctor a few days ago, she cheerfully set a date and hung up the phone, walking back to the

comfort of her armchair.

As she sat, the mirror on the wall caught the vibrant bounce of her hair cascading in descending blonde staircases over her shoulders. She looked at her reflection and ran her hand through the off-yellow locks and let her fingers become caught in a cluster of thick individual strands. Releasing from her head, one hand found another, and they folded across her belt.

And as if the sun had come out and enveloped their light, two small blue stars faded away behind thin eyelids and slept.

* * * * *

Roxana walked across the parking lot of the office complex and up to the main entrance. She passed the registry with the list of office suites and went directly around the corner and opened the third door on the left-hand side. Entering the waiting room, she went directly to the check-in station where the on-duty nurse recognized her face, but only smiled as she placed a clipboard on the counter and indicated for her to sign in the space across from her scheduled appointment time. Roxana signed the paper on the clipboard and took the closest seat to the counter, burrowing her nose in a magazine she'd brought from home.

About halfway into her first article, the ingress next to the counter opened and another nurse called her name. Roxana was led to the back and placed in an examination room where she was told the doctor would be in momentarily. It felt like an hour, but the doctor eventually entered with a timid nod of his head after looking up from his chart, which he then placed on the table facedown as he sat next to Roxana on a chair. “Roxana,” his voice was soft but direct, “I asked to see you here today because I wanted to go over something with you face to face.” Roxana said nothing as she waited for him to continue. “As you know, you’ve been in remission for some time now. But remission, of course, does not necessarily always mean that the body has healed completely.” Roxana kept silent. “Based on what we’re seeing from the results of the tests we ran on you when you were here the other day, we’ve reason to believe that we may again be dealing with a recurrence of your condition.”

“And what does that mean?” Roxana said with a quiver.

“It means, Ms. Valentine, that we have to put you back into treatment. We’re going to run some more tests today and then start you on a new regiment of your medication and begin seeing you here on a regular basis again, unfortunately.” He continued to talk in a calm, even way, but Roxana had stopped listening.

The rest of the appointment was a blur, and before she knew it she was walking into the front

door of her home and went directly to her room, flopping down on the bed. And there against the pillow, two tiny blue stars were washed away behind a stream of warm tears.

A Wish for Water II

Graham sat and drank his ice water from a stool off the corner of the bar rail. Beams of light bled through the windows as the sun escaped under the horizon. The pub had been slow all afternoon, but groups of patrons now began coming through the door in large numbers. People swarmed the high-topped tables and the booths and spoke over the jukebox which hummed from the corner. Graham became busier as the night went on, running drinks to tables and refilling the ice in the coolers as he changed the taps on the kegs and cleared away the empty glasses. As he did all these things – often attending to two duties at once – he drank his usual ice water out of a tall, clear glass.

“Graham!” called out Hal, as he busily served drinks behind the bar. “Take this tray to table thirteen,” he said, putting a round of different beverages onto a circular caddie.

“Okay,” Graham said. “Can you fill me up too?” he asked, placing his empty water glass atop the bar.

“Yep,” Hal said quickly as he turned to take another order.

Running the tray over to the table and returning directly to the bar, Graham saw a single, clear drink with ice sitting at the staff side of the bar

where he'd picked up the previous order of rounds moments before. "Is this mine?" Graham asked Hal, who was busy pouring two different liquors into a glass while a woman called his name from a few stools down.

"What, Graham?" he asked without looking up.

"Is this mine?" Graham said louder, pointing to the drink on the bar-top.

"Yeah-yeah," and Hal went off to the woman who'd been calling him to take her order.

Graham took the glass and put it to his mouth. In the drink, between the ice and carbonated tonic, was the distinct and burning tang of diluted gin. It ran across his tongue, dancing to the roof of his mouth like a gasoline fire on the surface of a body of water and slid hotly down his throat. Graham paused and held up the glass to his eyes as the alcohol continued to fuel a warm incineration within his mouth. It was a taste he'd not had since arriving in Dolor's End; and the single sip already had him thirsty for more. He took another swig – this time with the bottom of the glass tilted higher in the air – and before he knew it, all that was left were a few wet ice cubes.

"Graham!" Hal called out from behind the bar. Graham had, for the moment, forgotten where he was and what he was doing. "Graham!" Hal cried out again, "Bring these over to table eight, will ya?" And he placed three scotch-and-sodas in front of him and turned around to take another order.

Graham didn't hesitate as he took one of the drinks to his lips and emptied the glass. He then brought the two remaining drinks to the table. "Here you are," he said with a slight cock in his eye.

"We ordered three," said one of the men at the table.

"Very sorry, sir. I'll go get the third," Graham said with a close-lipped smile. And he went back to the bar. "Hal, I need two more scotch-and-sodas." Hal said nothing and made the two drinks in between stirring a martini for a gentleman at the front of the bar and pouring three beers for a group of women who'd just made their way to the other end. Graham craftily downed one of the scotch-and-sodas and took the other to the table.

The rush continued for another hour and then dispersed, leaving behind only a few regulars and late-night tipplers. The jukebox was lowered to a background buzz, and Hal had just enough energy to pour one more drink – this one for himself – before resting against the back wall behind the bar.

"So, Hal, did you hear?" said one of the regulars who slouched against the bar ledge.

"I hear lots. What's the news?"

"Well, for one thing, the mayor didn't show for the town meeting tonight. Didn't let anyone know he'd be missing it, and no one's heard from him. Kinda strange, knowin' the mayor and all."

"Hmm," Hal said, rubbing his chin after taking a sip from his pint. "Not like the mayor," he

said. “Not like him at all.”

“I heard they tried to contact him, but no one even knows where he lives or how to get a hold of him! Now that’s odd – if ya’ ask me.”

“He’s a strange one, the mayor,” said another man sitting not far away.

“I spoke to him briefly at church the other day, but I can’t say I really know him myself. I mean, nobody seems to really know a single thing about the man when it comes right down to it,” Hal said between sips.

“Jaron Kyler seems to know him from what I understand,” said a man at the end of the bar.

“And from what I understand, Jaron Kyler don’t seem to like him much either,” said another.

“I thought they were close.”

“Maybe they had a fallin’ out.”

“Went over to his store today - it wasn’t open.”

“Maybe it was after hours.”

“I went at one o’clock!”

“The man was probably at lunch.”

“Anyone see him here today? He sometimes comes in for a round or two after work, no?”

“Sometimes. Not always, though,” said Hal.

“Jaron Kyler – now there’s a strange bird. Always muttering to himself and whatnot. Just seems skittish – on edge always – like he ain’t ever quite right.”

“He’s a real ass!” chimed a new voice to the

conversation as Graham staggered up to the bar rail.

“What’d you say, Graham?” Hal asked, looking surprised.

“That’s right – a regular old ass who’s got a head for an ass and an ass for a head,” Graham said.

“Are you drunk, Graham?” Hal asked, as though he couldn’t believe what his eyes were telling him.

“Yeah, so what? I had a few – so sue me.”

“I thought you gave that up. You weren’t drinking on the job, were you?”

“I drink when I drink,” he slurred back.

“Aw, let the man have a few, Hal, he’s been doin’ good.”

“Thank you, sir!” Graham shouted. “Give that man a tall one on me and give me one on me too! No, no, give me two on me. Hal!” he snarled, slapping the bar with his open hand as he laughed.

“You’re cut off, Graham. You should a’ been cut off a long time ago. Look at you!”

“I’ll cut me off when I cut me off,” he snapped, and he took one of the empty glasses on the bar and smashed it on the floor.

“Damn it, Graham! Get the hell outta’ here and don’t come back ‘till you’ve sobered up!” Hal shouted.

Graham snatched up the drink of a man who sat at a bar stool next to him and drank down the contents, returning the empty glass on top of the bar with a loud, ringing force. “I wouldn’t stay here if ya’ paid me – which ya’ do – and I still ain’t stayin’!” he

yelled with his arms extended and flailing about like a bird that had just been shot from the air. And with that, Graham bumbled to the door and exited the bar with an incoherent shout.

The remaining patrons – including Hal, who was still at his post behind the bar – all looked at each other with turned-in eyebrows and open mouths. It was quiet until one of the men finally spoke, “What in the hell is going on around here lately?”

“I don’t know,” Hal said, looking at the lightless air pouring through the open door. “I just don’t know.”

PART VI Between the Town & the Mountain

A Lordless Manor

As Kyler walked up to the house, the pangs of nervousness which accompanied him as he lay in wait in the brush had been replaced by a confidence unlike any he had experienced before. He felt lucid and poised – a fearless warrior on a mission much more valuable than his own life.

Clutching the rifle tightly in his blood-wet hands, he pointed the barrel in front of him at shoulder level and approached the main entrance screened by the veil of a perpendicular wall. He waited a moment in the shrubbery next to the front door, but nothing stirred. So, cautiously, he raised his foot to the large handle of the door and pried it open. Kyler stepped in through the threshold and pittered over the hardwood floors with the gun aimed carefully at the empty space in front of him. The chandelier inside the antechamber was on, lighting the room in shimmers of crystal reflections.

“Hello?” he called out softly, making small steps towards the innards of the house where he heard the pops and cracklings of a single fire-eaten log as it smoldered and sank into the hearthside. “Hello?” Kyler said again.

But there was nothing.

Kyler walked around the main level. He peered out from behind corners and carefully toed his way through the many beautiful intricacies of the

home. Every nook was filled with some wonderful accessory or architectural design. Breathtaking works of art hugged the walls. There were hand-cleaved furniture sets of subtle, but elaborate designs next to stylish imported rugs and sophisticated amenities, all strewn about in a decorative, yet comfortable manner. In one room there was a collection of historical relics like those on display at a museum. Another room was made entirely of mirrors right down to the floors. In a hallway off the main corridor, rare rocks and minerals were wedged into the walls. There was an enormous greenhouse which gave way to an indoor pool and spa nestled between a mesh of water plants and trees which grew around it. There was a room devoted to plaid patterns, one to the color black, one to the color white, one which had a jungle theme, another with feelings of the desert. There was a library with perfectly alphabetized arrangements of thousands of books, a gymnasium, a game room, a bathroom made of marble that was bigger than Kyler's own home. The house went on and on and Kyler went from room to room carefully searching each one – looking in cabinets, going over papers, and syphoning through drawers. But other than the elaborate amenities, all he found were the otherwise commonplace things of a usual home; there were no hints or clues as to who Deo was or how he was able to do the things he could.

After a while, Kyler decided to go outside and scour the yard. A few flakes of snow began to drift to the ground as Kyler walked out the back door and

through a garden of winter perennials and sculpted hedges. Going further, he came to an enormous labyrinth with high walls that appeared to go all the way to the brink of the forest; he balked at the maze but didn't enter, opting instead to circle the perimeter of the house, which led him back to the driveway where he could perfectly see the lights of town not too far off beyond it.

Looking around, he reentered the front door of the manor and walked into the parlor where the fire had been reduced to a clod of gray ashes above the brick floor of the hearth. Kyler meandered into the library and thumbed through some of the books. He touched a few bars on the grand piano in the music room, smelled the geraniums in the greenhouse, and even washed his hands in the pool, where a plume of dry blood liquefied and mixed with the water.

Kyler's second trek through the estate yielded as many clues about Deo as the first; no secret passage was uncovered when he lifted books from their shelves in the library, no safe was discovered behind any of the paintings on the walls, no encrypted documents were found in his study. Everything was open, unlocked, and easily accessed.

'Everything,' Kyler thought, 'except for the labyrinth.'

* * * * *

With the rifle in his hands, Kyler stood outside the gateway of the labyrinth and looked behind him. The landscape between the house and the maze was neatly choreographed with fountains and statues and alleyway gardens, and his eyes roved about them warily before refocusing on the labyrinth. He took a large breath. Silently, he ventured in.

Kyler rapidly found the maze – full of its similar-looking turns and hedged walls of thicket and bramble – to be a difficult adventure. He walked into one dead end after another, until, quite by accident, he arrived back at the beginning. It was getting colder and snowing harder than before, and Kyler decided it would be best to go back inside.

Again, he searched the many cavernous rooms of the estate without finding anything odd or unusual, so, placing the rifle beside his chair, he sat in the library and began to read a hemp-stitched book he pulled off the shelf at random. It was late and the lids of his eyes suddenly grew heavy and the next thing he knew it was morning and the book Kyler had paged through a few hours earlier lay open across his lap. Although he thought is strange that he would fall asleep in the midst of his victim's home, Kyler felt rejuvenated; for the first time in months he'd slept peacefully, naturally, and easily, as if he'd been put under some kind of slumberry spell.

He stretched in his chair, casually recocked the rifle, and again began to search around the empty

house.

Yellow bars of the sun melted away the snow and came in from the many windows and skylights, making the estate look comfortable and warm. He spent the day again going through the many large rooms, looking at loose documents and mulling over anything which seemed as though it may yield a clue or point to something more – but nothing did.

After another round of unsuccessful searching, Kyler decided to ramble out of the house and reattempt to find his way through the labyrinth; although it was pulpy and wet, he walked within the passageways for what seemed like hours, but eventually found himself back at the entrance. Frustrated, he sauntered boldly past the willow tree to the spot where he had taken Deo and dragged him into the forest. Lurid burgundy paved the ground in uneven streaks, and he followed it all the way to the shallow hole he'd dug far within the encampment of the wood.

Looking at the plot where he'd placed Deo's body in the light, a sense of panic attacked Kyler for the first time. 'What have I done?' he thought. Fretfully, he disassembled the gun and placed its components in the knapsack he used to carry it and stashed it in a patch of thicket at the base of a small cluster of trees. Retracing the path he used to sneak into position the previous night, he stayed a safe distance from the driveway until he reached a thin road which siphoned through dense patches of forest for a short time before eventually conjoining with a

neighborhood street; Kyler then found his way to a sidewalk where, feeling comfortable enough to expose himself, he trotted past the quaint, towny homes of the block.

An old woman sat in a rocker on her front porch. Kyler passed her and noticed she was bundled up in layers of knit sweaters and a long, draping scarf, rocking back and forth in her chair. It looked like she was glaring at him, so Kyler gave her a nod, but she just stared. Paranoid, Kyler turned his head, and as he did so saw a flock of winter geese huddling together next to a half-frozen pond in a large park. The picturesque scape of the park, with its pond, its wooden benches, and well-manicured playground, looked inviting to Kyler. So, following the old woman's gaze, he walked past the huddle of geese and took a seat on a nearby picnic table and looked around. He was tired but didn't know what to do. Nothing seemed real to him anymore. It was only dusk and he'd not gone far, but his eyelids blinked in long stays across his eyes until finally he closed them and imagined himself back at his farm, embraced in the comforts of the familiar things he loved: The pitch of engine pistons caroming in the high grass as he ran the tractor in the fields, the smell of fresh rain on newly tilled soil, the mesh of colors on the easel of an unobstructed sky at sunset.

And for a moment – before Deo, before the town – he was back there.

But it was only a moment.

His reopened eyes were met by the cold view of the park. And with a deep release of breath, he arose and walked on. As he passed the swing set he noticed a little girl craning back and forth between the chains of the middle swing. Her head drooped to her chest and she whimpered meekly to herself. Kyler approached her carefully. "Are you okay?" he asked, not knowing what else to do. The little girl shook her head. "What's the matter?"

Her bottom lip quivered as it protruded out of her jaw, "It's my friend," she said, looking away. "She's gone."

"Oh, I see," Kyler said, taking a seat on a swing two away from where the little girl sat. "Where'd she go?"

The little girl shrugged, "I don't know, but she left me all alone."

Kyler bobbed his head, "It's tough to be all alone."

"Yeah," sniveled the girl as she kicked the dirty pebbles underneath her feet.

Kyler looked at the girl with widened eyes and started to say something but stopped himself. The little girl's sad face drooped under the weight of a lippy frown. "I wish there was something I could tell you," he finally mustered.

She looked even sadder than before, "There's nothing anyone can say." Kyler tried to think of something comforting or wise to tell her, but he couldn't think of anything, so they both sat there

together lurching back and forth unevenly on the swing set. “I have to go,” the little girl said after a few minutes.

“I hope you feel better.”

She nodded as she tucked her lips into the fleshy rose-coloring of her cold face and walked off to the far end of the park. It was all but dark now, and the little girl faded into the oncoming night.

Kyler was slightly disoriented as he looked around and noticed a neighborhood street on the other side of the park from where he’d come, so he got up and walked toward it. Lined on either end with sharp looking homes, the street eventually emptied into the cusp of downtown. As Kyler walked into town he noticed a subtle refinement caked into everything from the arrangements in the windows of the small shops, to the way the village square fused perfectly with an elliptical gazebo which he sat in and watched as light traffic crept calmly through the street corner.

After a few minutes he came to his feet and walked to the outer reaches of Main Street where he heard a tinny, clanking sound. Wheeling his head around, he saw a homely-looking man holding a cylinder coffee can. The man sat on the sidewalk against the wall of a closed storefront and held the can out to Kyler. Kyler reached into his pocket to add to the collection of loose change swirling within the open hallows of the can. “Spare some change, sir? I’m very hungry,” the man said with a quivering but gentle voice. His breath came through his

chapped lips with the smell of stale alcohol. Kyler smiled a sad smile and searched through his coat pocket where he was surprised to find a few paper dollars which he gave to the old hobo. The man gratefully thanked him and recrumpled his body on the sidewalk next to the wall.

Kyler continued until he saw Hal's tavern, and feeling his tired legs aching and his belly quake with hunger, decided to stop in and rest for a moment. Inside the pub a few local patrons curled up tightly to the rail of the bar, and they turned to look at him before hanging back over their glasses. Kyler took his own spot at the bar and dug his hand into a bowl of mixed nuts while ordering a drink from Hal.

"What seems to be the trouble, Jaron?" the barman asked, placing a bubbling glass with clear soda atop a napkin at Kyler's elbows. "You seem off somehow."

"I don't know, Hal," Kyler said, shaking his head as he rubbed his eyes. "I think I must be going crazy. I thought maybe I had gone crazy 'till I woke up this morning. Then I felt better – even though I probably shouldn't have, all things considered."

"And now?" Hal asked.

"Now I just don't know anymore," Kyler said before taking the glass to his mouth.

"Well, what's the matter?"

Kyler hesitated and then spoke, "I had this problem – a big problem – and I got to the source of it and fixed it, or, at least I thought I fixed it, anyway. I did the only thing I thought I could do – the thing I

thought that, for some reason, I *had* to do; I don't even know where I got the idea from – it's not even like me to think like that. It's like I was walking around hypnotized by this notion that if I did this one thing then everything else would change – that everything would instantly fall into place. But nothing's changed – nothing different's happened, at least, not how I thought it might."

"Well," the barman said with a swallow, "can you just remove yourself from the situation completely? Situation's gone bad like that, sometimes you just need to let it go."

"I was going to do that," Kyler said with a grunt, "but all the sudden I felt – I felt really good about the whole thing. Felt like if I stuck it out a bit more I could really turn things my way, or at least get to the bottom of it, make some sense of it all. But now – now I just feel like I've gone and made things worse." And he took another sip from his glass.

"My feeling is that if you're in a place where ya' feel down and out about it – if you're feeling really hopeless but it's still important to ya', is what I'm saying – ya' give it one more go, and if it doesn't work out, ya' resign yourself ta' dealin' with it from there," the barman said.

Kyler looked at the tender and raised his brow before moving his head up and down thoughtfully. "Yep, that's what I'm gonna have to do."

Hal slapped his hand gingerly on the bar-face at Kyler's spot and went to stock some glasses which had air-dried next to the sink. "Hey, Jaron," Hal said

with his back to him as he placed the glasses in the shelves behind the bar, “you seen the mayor around?”

Kyler froze in his seat. He didn’t breathe.
“Why?”

“Heard no one’s seen him. He had something at town hall he never showed up to’s what I hear. And I know you know him, so I just thought that maybe you’d seen him around here or there.”

Kyler looked at his drink, “No, I haven’t seen him around anywhere. I mean, he’s fine as far as I know.”

“I saw him at church the other day,” said a man with a baseball cap seated at the bar.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Hal said, continuing to place the glasses side by side on the shelves behind the bar. “People make bigger deals about these sorts ‘a things than they actually are.” Kyler shrugged and said nothing. “Well, if you do see him, tell him I said hello,” Hal said.

“Tell him I said hello too – that all of us boys here said so,” said another man down the rail.

“I will tell him,” Kyler said, and thanked Hal as he finished his drink in a large gulp.

Hal’s advice at the bar weighed heavily on Kyler’s mind as he walked through the town, past the park to the neighborhood streets, and up the clandestine wooded alcove which led to Deo’s estate. He regathered the gun from the shoddily hidden knapsack he’d stowed at the lip of the forest, and cocking it into action, entered the large front gate of

the labyrinth. The wind came in blusters from the hills; and clouds — like dark, gray blankets — began to cover the sky behind them. Kyler walked the maze for about an hour but became disheartened as he rounded a corner and saw the opening of the entrance there before him. Frustrated but determined, he went back in, this time making intentionally different turns than he had before; but once again he found himself back at the entrance after half an hour. A third attempt landed him back at the starting point within five minutes, and a fourth, seething effort, brought him back to the entrance after only a few turns.

Shaking his head, he decided to reenter the house and search it one final time. Once inside, he called out through the smoky chambers, but his voice was met only by the loft of the ceiling and the lengths of the hallways where it faded and died. So once again Kyler roused about the manor, wandering amongst the many luxuries and wonders within it. After a full sweep without finding anything odd or peculiar, the house had become colder and it looked hollow and deep as Kyler sat in a large chair in the main parlor, placing the rifle up against a small table beside him. The barrel of the gun looked at him with an empty eye, and Kyler stared at it for a long while. Outside the pane of the large picture window, the many tree branches in the grove shook with the empty night. Kyler watched them lurch and wave for a moment before refocusing on the circular chamber of the gun which glared at him blankly.

A Way Through the Woods

Kyler slunk his body out of the chair and felt his way across the room to the large picture window which looked out onto the open lawn. It was snowing, leaving everything white and making it difficult to distinguish the earth from the sky. Beyond the frame of the window the old willow bent and swayed with the wind, and Kyler watched it for a while within the blur of the house. He thought about the way his home used to look in the snow as it basted the wide meadows in a white mantle. He thought about the town and about Deo and what he'd done to him, and turning, he glared back at the gun leaning against the table behind him.

On the other side of the glasspane a small bird swooped in across the window and landed on the ground. It hopped and bounced, pecking its arrowed beak at the underside of the snow before puffing up at the breast and flying off, leaving behind the tiny impressions of its feet. Kyler looked at the small, three-pronged markings of the bird – perfectly stamped white indentations, one in front of the other.

“That’s it!” Kyler said to himself. And he grabbed the rifle and rushed away from the window.

* * * * *

The snow had piled up a couple of inches, and Kyler's boots trampled through it one imprint at a time. Out the front door and around the side of the house, Kyler's feet – along with the prints they'd been making – stopped at the entrance of the labyrinth; a million white flakes hung to the walls of its brambles and thorn.

Kyler entered the maze, leaving a pattern of footprints behind him. Taking a right-hand turn at his first intersection, he came to a wall and headed back, retracing his steps until he met with an alleyway unmarked by his footprints. He took the new route until he was blocked by another wall, and again followed his footprints back until he found a clean white path clear of any prints in the snow.

He continued this – reaching deeper and deeper into the labyrinth than he'd ever been before – until finally he came to a circular area full of open-faced flowers in the walls above the covering of snow. In the middle of this circular area within the maze sat a bench, which gave it the feeling of a small park or a winter garden. But unlike the other points within the labyrinth, emanating from the circle were only two pathways: The one where Kyler had just come from with immediate walls and turns just off its flank, and another artery at the exact opposite end from where he stood. This second passageway, however, was

quite different than any other path Kyler had taken within the labyrinth previously; this path was more like a long corridor or hallway, and it continued in a straight line with no turns or walls for as far as Kyler could see. It appeared to go directly into the forest.

Kyler stood on the bench trying to see over walls, but he wasn't high enough. So he came back to the ground and started down the trail.

* * * * *

In walking the pathway, Kyler noticed that it was just like any other part of the maze, except that the walls did not fold into turns and dead ends, but continued in one straight line; unlike the preceding puzzle of choices and decisions at every intersection, this was a direct route. As Kyler continued, he came to a section of the trail which entered the edge of the forest, and the snow-fallen sky was interrupted by tree branches. Though the walls remained perfectly as they were, the trail went deeper and deeper into the ebony shadows of the wood, and he was soon climbing the foothills above the valley. Kyler walked for a few hundred yards up the increasingly strenuous grade of the path and rested for a moment, letting the wind come back into his lungs in a comfortable way before pressing further up the hill.

After another few hundred yards he was tired

again, but just as he was about to rest he noticed the path in front of him took a different shape: Up ahead, the walls of the labyrinth came to an end – rounding out like a shrubby wave washing up against the forest floor – and the pathway opened up and flattened out, becoming a small rimple through the undergrowth.

Kyler rushed up the last leg of the hill and came out of the walls looking at the brake around him. The muscles in Kyler's legs stretched and flexed in an easy way as they moved across the flat run at the top of the knoll, and the path became more of a deer-trail, streaming thinly between the woodsy shoots and trees around it.

After a few moments more, Kyler came to an intersection of sorts – the first one he'd seen since reaching the heart of the labyrinth. Just off the main trail there was an even more obscure pathway distinctly separate from the route Kyler had been on since the beginning of the maze; walking swiftly though with the denseness of the bower around him, he'd almost missed it. Curiously, Kyler veered off the main path to see where the other trail led.

Passing a clumping of catch-weed, he came over a small hump which opened to a glade. What Kyler saw there as he came out of the crosscut took away his incoming breath: Cleared amongst the trees which clung to the hill was an opening that looked off the side of a cliff and into miles of lower land. In the center of the bald, nearly cloaked by the snow, sat a large, flat rock embedded in the ground.

Kyler entered the clearing.

As he approached the berm of the overlook, all the lights of the town revealed themselves like stars glowing behind a thin cloud-cover. Perching himself on the rock, Kyler could see the entire spread of the glen below. All of Dolor's End was right there, placed perfectly under him as he looked off the side of the hill and into the valley.

As if a voice from within invited him to stay, he sat atop the even surface of the rock and watched. He watched the snow canter to the ground and heard the arms of the surrounding trees shudder with the light wind.

For a moment he'd forgotten about Deo and about his desire to return to his old farmhouse. He'd forgotten about what he'd done, and about the labyrinth and the estate beyond it.

For a moment, there was only the bald and the rock and the town below.

For a moment, he'd forgotten himself.

Kyler sat there and breathed a cold breath over the shelf of the hill. A gust came gently across the glen. He felt a connection with the world he'd not sensed in a very long time. And even though his seat was rimed with frost, a warmth ran through him.

He sat for a while, and, taking a final look at the glistening town below, he turned and went back to the intersection of the paths.

When he arrived at the crossroads of the two trails it looked as though the path to the bald

connected fluidly with the portion of the main trail that he'd yet to walk. Conversely, the section of the trail which led back to the maze was barely visible from where he stood; in fact, had he not been looking for it he never would have seen it at all. So, venturously, he continued in his original direction down the trackway which led away from the maze, further into the forest.

He went down the path, deeper and deeper into the woods. After a time, he smelled smoke drifting past his nose, and soon heard the crackles of a fire; the path seemed to be going right to it. He could see it now – red flares burning in crimps above the dregs of an ashy firepit.

His walk had been full of findings and surprises, but none of them had been quite like this. The sensation of peace and tranquility he'd experienced only moments before were gone, replaced by fear, and a feeling that maybe he'd come too far

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Kylar had finally reached the end of the trail that had started all the way back at the entrance of the labyrinth. What he saw shocked him and he stopped dead in his tracks within the darkness of the

path. There, at the end of the trail, surged a bonfire of a gushing white heat. But that was not what had stopped him in mid-stride: Around the fire stood more than a dozen figures all dressed in long robes with their hands folded in front of them, completely silent and still. Kyler would have been sure that they had heard him coming if it hadn't been for the statuesque way they stood. So, as stealthy as he could, Kyler began to back away.

But no sooner had he put his foot to the ground there was a very disquieting noise. "Where are you going?" said a voice from the fire. "We've been waiting quite some time for you, Jaron."

Kyler's heart palpitated and he could feel it throb throughout his body as his palms clammed up and his breath became short. The voice was strong and dignified, but there was a kindness to it also. "How do you know who I am? Who are you?" he asked tensely.

"We've been watching you for a while now, Jaron. We'd be happy to tell you why if you'll stay to hear it," the same voice said. Kyler was quiet. He wanted to run. After a moment of silence, a single man broke from the circle around the fire and came to the trailhead of the path. Kyler was still a good distance away as the figure, completely silhouetted by the firelight, stopped at the trailhead and said, "We mean you no harm, Jaron." Kyler looked back down the trail in the direction of the estate, and then quickly to the robed figure standing between him and the fire. "What's back there for you, Jaron?" Kyler was

frozen. “Come, Jaron. We’ve got some very important things to talk to you about. We know what you did and we’d like to help you. We’ll protect you so long as you cooperate with us.” And with that, Kyler ran down the path back the way he’d come. “You’ve been brought here for a reason, Jaron!” the man called after him. But Kyler was gone.

Turning back to the flicker of the burning wood, the old face under the frock was illuminated by the orange-gray fireside. His beard fell long below his chin and he stroked it as he walked back and took his place within the circle around the embers.

“What are we going to do if he doesn’t come back, Abbott?” one of the brothers asked with a look of concern.

“What we’ve always done,” he replied. And with that, they all bowed their heads and closed their eyes.

The Veritable Brotherhood

Kyler was panting and gasping as he reached the front door of his home. He had run the entire way back down the hill and straight through the labyrinth without making a single wrong turn. He had also ditched the rifle somewhere in the woods before crossing the property of the estate, and in a mad dash, scampered down the drive and in the direction of town. When he finally reached his own home, he opened the door, locking it tightly behind him, and collapsed on the first piece of furniture he came to, still barely able to breathe.

‘I should leave town,’ he thought with his hands running over his eyes and through his hair. But as his pulse slowed and his lungs pumped at an even pace, he felt overcome by exhaustion. ‘I’ll try and get some sleep and leave when I wake up. I have no money on me, so I’ll go to the bank and liquidate the account Deo set up for me and leave straight away. It will look suspicious, but by the time anyone figures it out I’ll be far gone,’ he reasoned. So he traipsed his way up the stairs and through the hall and flopped himself on the bed.

Kyler awoke after only a few restless hours. His first thoughts were of the night before and the

labyrinth which had led him to that cultish scene deep in the forest. Something about the way those men stood so quiet and still around the fire struck him with a fear he was not prepared to deal with.

Kyler looked up at the ceiling and wondered why it was that the robed men around the fire had wanted to speak with him, or what they would tell him. ‘How did they know it was me on the path? How do they know about Deo, and why would they want to help me after what I’ve done?’ he wondered. ‘But the labyrinth was clearly a path to that place – whatever it was – and it must have something to do with Deo directly.’ And with those thoughts in mind, he put his feet to the floor and walked to the window of the room which looked west against the sun. Outside, soft daylight touched upon the walls of the buildings in town and the hills of the forest beyond.

* * * * *

Late rays of sun came down amongst the ground and warmed off the snow, leaving the earth boggy and soft, as if it were a loamy grass sponge. Kyler’s boots sunk their way across the lawn to the gates of the labyrinth and entered it with strides mindful of mud pits and the collecting waters of melted snow. He could just barely make out his footprints from the night before, but he navigated his

way almost seamlessly to the center of the labyrinth, just as the first grays of night began to taint the sky.

Alone and unarmed, he entered the long, straight corridor of the maze which went directly into the forest. The trees grew thicker and the trail narrowed as Kyler hiked up the hill and into the woods. He reached the portion of the trackway where the main path intersected with the smaller path which led to the bald and the rock overlooking the town. 'Almost there,' he thought. And he trudged onward.

As the curls of smoke hit his nose, he steadied his pace so that he moved quietly and direct, as if he were an animal avoiding the hunt. When he saw the first flashes from the fire through the banks of the trees he stopped himself entirely: There, standing at the foot of the trail, as if patiently awaiting his arrival, was the outline of a robed man. With his arms behind his back he faced Kyler in the tunnel of the pathway. The man was alone; no one else stood around the fire. The two gawked at each other like a pair of duelers preparing to take aim. "What do you want from me?" Kyler called through the alley of the wood.

"I don't want anything *from* you. I want you, yourself."

"And why would anyone want me for anything?"

"Because you're the only other person who's experienced firsthand what we already know. And you've been curious enough to come this far. You

want to know what all this is about – what the meaning is behind everything that’s happened. You want the town destroyed and for things to go back to the way they were before Deo came along. But if you’re willing to work with us and learn from us, you may find that it’s possible to live harmoniously *with* the town while saving yourself in the process.” There was a slight pause. “Again, we know what you did, Jaron; no one’s judging you – it was Deo’s own foolishness which brought that upon himself. No one could expect you to endure what you did and not have a reaction, at least, not without the proper guidance; to be quite honest, I’m amazed Deo didn’t see it coming after all he’d put you through. He practically encouraged it.

“Now, I’m not commending what you’ve done, but I’m not going to punish you for it either. Yes, Deo gave you a store full of all the food you could eat and sell and gave you a comfortable lifestyle, but he took the life you’d created for yourself away from you in the process. What you truly desire is peace of mind and the assurance that there’s something behind all this; that there’s something else going on here. And there is. There’s something we know that may help you *and* those people who suffer in the town. And if you’re willing to work with us, maybe we can help each other.”

“What’s in this for you? How am I supposed to help?” Kyler mustered.

“There are some of us who wish to see the town destroyed as quickly as it was created. Many

believe that our knowledge can't be passed on to others without there being dire consequences.”

Kyler's trepidation dwindled slightly as the man came closer to him as he spoke, “But, if you are able to learn the wisdom we hold and succeed in comprehending what we have to teach you, then others in the town may be able to learn it too, and those of us who don't believe that other people can discover and utilize our secret will be proved wrong. With this knowledge we possess, people may be capable of saving themselves — along with the rest of the town – and possibly even beyond.” The robed man paused and turned and walked towards the fire, beckoning Kyler to follow. He sat on a stump next to the flames and motioned for Kyler to do the same. Flickers of light from the cinders revealed a small commune of huts and other humble structures which came together to form what looked like the semblance of a small village. As he sat, Kyler could see that the man in the robe was older, but vital and healthy looking with a genuine but serious demeanor as his eyes met Kyler's across the fire. Kyler's face became tight as he sat uneasily on the balance of a roundish, wooden dollop, cocking his head to the side. “You'll have to excuse me – I'm moving too fast. Let me introduce myself: My name is Abbott, and I am the high priest of the Veritable Brotherhood,” he said with a slight bow of his head.

“The Veritable Brotherhood?” Kyler repeated.

“That's correct,” Abbott said with a nod.

“We are an ancient order formed to protect the secret

essence of what we call the Vim or Vim. Vim is the force guiding all the things of this world; the Vim is in everything and everything is in the Vim. And those of us who comprise the brotherhood are its students and charged with the task of protecting the source and keeper of the Vim's great secret, which we refer to as the Orphic." Kyler nodded as Abbott continued, "The Orphic is the locational source of the Vim itself, and the very thing which imparts what we call the Vim or the great secret of the universe. The brotherhood was established to keep the secret of the Orphic – of the Vim itself – and use it to guide and shape the world. Every action, every consequence, every cause of mind and matter is a result and employment of the Vim."

Kyler looked at him in a respectful, yet, altogether incredulous way, "So you mean to say that everything that happens in the world is a result of a force you refer to as the Vim?"

"That's correct," Abbott acknowledged.

"And that you are part of a sacred order charged with keeping the secret of the Vim's essence protected?"

"Yes," Abbott said as he watched the skin of Kyler's brow fold into a downward crease.

"And the secret essence of this Vim is what again?"

"The essence of the Vim is kept within the Orphic. And it is actually the Orphic itself which keeps the Vim alive and active in the world. We are merely the keepers of the Orphic; the Orphic is the

vestige of the Vim. And within the extreme beauty and simplicity of the Vim is the single secret of the universe; a thing so wondrous that any person who knows this secret is instantly endowed with its power – the very power which causes the wind to blow and the sun to rise. The power which breathes life into a womb and then takes it back. It’s the same power which lies behind everything – the power that gives and heals any sickness. The power that silences all things, and at the same time enables their potential. The power which can destroy an army without taking up arms or build a town in an instant.”

Kyler turned his head and looked at Abbott with one eye closer than the other as the old man waited for him to respond. “I’m sorry,” Kyler said firmly, “but what does all this have to do with me?”

Abbott nodded, “You see, Jaron, as I mentioned before, I am a single priest in a litany of others. All of us know the ways of the Orphic and employ its powers into the world where we see fit to do so. The Orphic is our teacher and our guide, but it is we who ultimately intern its power and meaning by transcending it into the world. We are convoys of a greater force.”

“Yes?” Kyler said with a raise in his shoulders.

“Don’t you see?” Kyler shook his head.

“Deo — he was once one of us.”

Kyler was quiet in the luminous shed of the fire. His hand came across the curve of his face and massaged it from cheek to chin. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but this is all a bit much: An all-powerful secret of

the universe? An orphic? A hidden brotherhood which Deo once belonged to?” He stood up, “I’m sorry, but this is a story I just can’t –”

As he stood, Kyler was immediately silenced.

There, encircled around the fire on all sides of him, were more than a dozen men adorned in the vestments and positions of the previous night. He had not heard them approach, nor had he seen them only moments before; it was as if they had appeared out of the shadows of the woods. Their arrangement was tidy and prim, each standing shoulder to shoulder – one beside the other – all except in one area where a vacant space opened far enough for another man, like a broken circle. They all looked at Kyler, who stood with his mouth still open from what he’d begun to say.

“You see, Jaron,” Abbott continued from his place in the circle, “we need you, and the people of Deo’s town need you. And with Deo gone you may be the only one who can set things right.”

“Why is that?” Kyler asked, timidly meeting the eyes of the other monks amongst the fire.

“You are the only person in the town who knows what Deo did; you’re the only one living within his experiment that understands it for what it is – because you’re the only one to’ve been there before it even started. You see, the other residents of Dolor’s End were all drawn there – detracted from their previous lives with a sense that in coming to Deo’s town all their sufferings and all their anguish would be cast away from them like leaves from an

autumn tree; no one told them this – no one said it to them directly or in those words – but there is that unspoken hope within each and every resident. And for many, their prayers were answered. Some people were given chances they wouldn't have found outside of Deo's town. There were opportunities there, second chances – even chances for people who never had any at all. But they're not truly free in those opportunities; they're slaves to it! And now many of them are held captive by a force they don't understand.”

“So, what you're saying is that this-this secret of the Vim – or whatever it is – is holding people captive without them knowing it because they're unaware that Deo lured them to the town and was using them as an experiment of some kind?” Kyler asked.

“That's right.” Abbott continued, “It is the misused power of our holy secret that has transformed many of them from the free people they once were into people completely dependent on something apart from their own abilities – apart from their own true natures, and apart from their own selves. They didn't ask to know it or look for it on their own, and yet they're now spellbound to an entire town operating under the direction of Deo's implementation of the Vim. And the very secret which we have directed all these years is now dangerously exposed. So now we fear that without Deo's oversight, things may go very bad very quickly, until, like a cancer, it spreads.”

“But I thought the Vim was a good thing – a power in all.”

One of the other monks a quarter of the way around the fire from where Kyler stood spoke, “Things only appear good or bad to us because we falsely perceive ourselves as individuals, separate from all other things; when you consider only how things affect you on an individual level, then things appear as one way or another: Right or wrong, good or bad. The Vim is that power which *Being* itself emanates from. It is the ultimate source of all things. Because it is the ultimate source of Being itself, there is no division between what we wrongly perceive as distinctive things – separation between you and me, the clouds and forest, happiness and sadness, good and bad. The truth is that all these things are merely elements of that same singular source. We only label things as distinctive due to our false sense that we are individuals independent and isolated from everything else. Because it is the power of all things, the Vim is also the uniting force *of* all things. So, it’s incorrect to label something as one way or another. Things simply are as they are.”

Abbott picked up, “Should the Vim be exposed or fall into the wrong hands its entire balance may be thrown off. If someone in the town accidentally learned of its powers, its message may be misconstrued, or worse – misused.”

“So, what do you need me for?” Kyler asked, looking around the circle.

“We need you to decide the fate of that

town,” Abbott said solemnly and very serious.

“Me?” Kyler questioned, again looking to the various monks.

“Yes,” said another monk next to him.

“There exists a strong division amongst us: Some of us think the town can be saved, while others think the town has to be destroyed along with all its inhabitants. But we cannot make this decision ourselves. We have devoted our lives to the subtle implementation of the Vim, and this action calls for very unsubtle measures. Measures we – blinded by our bias and devotion to the brotherhood – are ill equipped to make.”

“So, it is up to you, Jaron,” said another brother. “You’ve already seen the power of the Vim for yourself, and if you can learn and understand it there may be hope for others to do the same, and the town might be worth saving. But if you can’t learn the secret on your own and are unable to comprehend its teaching, unfortunately, some of us will be proven correct, and we may have no choice but to disassemble the town and all those who have been corrupted within it.”

The brothers went quiet as Kyler cleared his throat weakly, “And how am I to learn the Vim?” he asked earnestly.

“That, Jaron, is precisely why you are here You must go and meet with the Orphic yourself.”

The Pebble & The Tree

Kyler looked at the faces glinting at him around the fire. “I’m not sure I understand. You want me to go and consult the Orphic? I don’t mean to second guess your decision, but I don’t believe I’m really the person you need.”

The monks looked at one another with hidden smiles in their eyes. “Belief, Jaron, has nothing to do with it. There is no believing here; there is only understanding. And for you to understand completely, you must go and see the Orphic.”

Kyler deliberated for a moment, looking into the fire and then at Abbott. “Alright,” he said sheepishly. “And when exactly am I to go?”

“You must go and see the Orphic now,” Abbott said affirmatively. As he spoke, the monks broke from their positions and backed away, leaving Kyler at the fire’s red-glowing foot.

“Come with me,” one monk said, standing at the trailhead of the path from which Kyler had entered the camp. Kyler looked around at the others, who, along with Abbott, nodded at him reassuringly. So Kyler backed away from the fireside and followed the monk into the black of the woods.

* * * * *

The two men were quiet as they negotiated the crosscut. Kyler recognized the path to the Orphic to be the same one which led to the labyrinth and Deo's estate. They walked for a time, moving through the night's stillness like burglars in a sleeping house, until they reached a point where the trail took a slight curve, heading upward over the small tuft of a hill. Kyler noticed it was the intersection he'd come to the night before, but said nothing. "Up there," said the monk. "The Orphic awaits."

Kyler walked up the path. He was alone now as he made his final strides over the short incline, and when he reached the top, the path evened out into thick brush. His steps were measured and slow, though his heart beat with the veracity of a drum.

Everything fell still as the brush opened up to the clearing of the bald. Within the crease of the basin below, the town sat pinned in small lights. It was the same place he had been to the previous night; the opening in the forest which looked down upon the town below, acutely positioned between the valley and the hills. From where he stood, the architecture of the vale was on full display.

Kyler looked around nervously. But just as it was in his original visit, the bald was empty of anything except for the firm implant of the rock within the earth. "Hello?" Kyler's call spilled over the hill and bounced impalpably across the valley. But

there was no answer, so he took a seat atop the rock and waited.

Nothing moved. Nothing happened.

Kyler looked out at the low coils of the town which piped through the glen and saw the vastness of the open land beyond it. From his vantage point on the rock he could see the exact line in the world where the mountains became hills, where the hills smoothed to forests and open valleys, and how the entirety of the earth lay naked against the sky.

Kyler looked around. There was still no sign of the Orphic.

‘Who, exactly, is the Orphic anyway?’ he wondered. With all the confusion he had never thought to ask.

Kyler waited on the hillside for a very long time. When finally he decided to stand and walk back down the trail toward the monastery, stars were fading on the curb of the sky. In reaching the monk’s pyre, he found them there in a circle as they’d been before – with a single open space just large enough for another person. “Come, Jaron,” Abbott said.

Kyler took the open position and filled the circle. The others watched him as if they were waiting for something, so he spoke. “Nothing happened. He — or she — wasn’t there, or didn’t show up.”

The monks murmured to each other in low and rapid exchanges. “What do you mean exactly, Jaron?”

“I mean,” Kyler said, panning his eyes across the crowd, “that I sat there and waited and nothing happened.”

This again sent the monks into a frenzy of murmurs. “He doesn’t understand,” said one voice over the others.

“I knew he wasn’t prepared!” exclaimed another.

“He wouldn’t know even if he did see it!”

“Quiet,” said Abbott in a firmness which shook the trees. He then looked to Kyler, “Tell us, Jaron, exactly what did happen?”

Kyler recounted his every move from when he left the fire. When he was finished, the monks were again silent.

Softer than Kyler could hear, one monk whispered to Abbott, “He can’t see it,” and then retook his stoic pose.

“Go, Jaron,” said Abbott, “and come again tomorrow.” The monks broke from the pyre and walked in the direction of their huts. Kyler stood and watched them go. But just as he turned to leave, Abbott’s voice floated after him, “Go again to that place, Jaron. Go there now.”

Kyler’s feet trudged back through the path towards the estate. He could feel it was late by the way his body moved between the shadowed tree trunks as he came to the intersection in the trail: One way led to Deo’s estate, the other back to the bald overlooking the town.

Standing in the exact place as the monk who brought him up the path hours earlier, Kyler thought of the warm allure of sleep before the memory of Abbott's parting words coaxed him up the small incline and back to the overlook of the bald.

He stood on the rock. Nothing at the bald seemed any different than it had before – except that the lights of town were now faded slightly by the complexion of the early morning skyline. So, after a moment, Kyler left the pedestal of the rock and headed back to town.

* * * * *

He slept very late into the day, and when he awoke the sun was angled sharply in the sky. 'It'll be dark again soon,' he thought, looking out the window to the sun-goldened treetops of the hills.

He waited patiently and left for the labyrinth under dusky skies. The ground had dried out and his feet were light and nimble along the path as the wafting smoke of the fire flared in his nose. Coming to the end of the trail where the forest and the monastery blended together, the monks were hemmed around the pyre in the same single-spaced formation. This time, however, Kyler stopped short of the fire as one monk broke from the pack and

passed him with a slight gesture, beckoning Kyler to follow. So once again Kyler found himself tailing the flowing garment of the monk's frock as they walked in silence toward the bald.

Coming to the intersection of the trails, the monk stood aside and ushered him in the familiar direction up the small incline to the overlook. Kyler, now alone, came upon the clearing covertly, as if to sneak up on it. Though, just as before, the bald was vacant except for the view of the town which perforated the deep valley.

Kyler again sat on the rock and waited.
And again, nothing happened.

After what seemed like an even longer time than before, Kyler walked back to the monastery where the monks hovered like pillars around the flames. He told the monks that nothing had happened and was met with disgruntled, ill-temperaments. "He will never know it!" one said in a vent of frustration. The tenor in their voices was sharper and even more urgent sounding than it had been the night before.

Kyler stood amid the circle dejected and embarrassed until Abbott spoke in a low, congenial voice, immediately quieting the others. "We mustn't blame any one person. And besides, maybe the Orphic has a reason for acting this way that we don't understand. Let's not forget, we've devoted our entire beings to the Vim, and we now ask Mr. Kyler – in the face of imminent danger – to not only seek out

the Orphic's counsel, but to understand it as well. Our attitudes might be premature, if not completely unfounded." Abbott looked at Kyler, whose face was crimson with blush and firelight. "Jaron, my friend, come with me I will take you to the Orphic myself."

* * * * *

Unlike the monk who led Kyler to the bald the previous nights, Abbott walked, not in front of Kyler, but next to him and spoke through an easy smile, "You may have noticed the intersection of the trails there up ahead."

"Of course," Kyler replied. "I noticed it the first time I walked the trail coming from the maze."

Abbott nodded his head as his smile broke into a light chuckle, "Then you are more astute than myself or any of the other monks."

"Coming from this way it's almost completely impossible to see. Though, coming from the maze it's pretty apparent," Kyler said.

"Maybe so," Abbott said as they came to the junction of the trails, "but sometimes it's amazing what you refuse to see even if a thing is right in front of you."

Before they made the turn up the last leg of the path to the bald, Abbott stopped and stood silent

for a moment. Kyler did the same. The two then turned up the trackway and mindfully approached the overlook. After a few moments of silence, they reached the clearing. The small lights of the town sparkled from below. Kyler noticed nothing unusual. The sky was clear across the horizon, and it shone over the bald and the lone rock which sat prominently in its place within the encircling forest.

Abbott walked humbly into the clearing, admiring it as if he was seeing it for the first time. Kyler followed as Abbott crouched beside the rock and stroked his hand against its smooth surface. Kyler looked around. So far, this particular visit to the bald was very much like his first few encounters there; no one aside from he and Abbott appeared to be present, and nothing abnormal happened.

“Abbott,” Kyler said as the old monk arose from his kneel, “how come you keep sending me *here* to see the Orphic? Maybe the Orphic won’t see me here. Or maybe instead of me waiting here, I need to go directly to him or her.”

“Jaron, don’t you see?” Abbott said in a very serious way. “This *is* the Orphic.”

* * * * *

“**W**hat?” Kyler said in confusion, looking all around him. “What is the Orphic?”

Abbott spread his arms, “This is. This very place.”

Kyler was dumbfounded. “This place? This clearing, or bald, or overlook or whatever you want to call it? This is the Orphic?”

“Yes,” said Abbott again. “The bald, the overlook, the cliff, the rock – this is the Orphic — the keeper of the one true secret.”

“But it’s just a *place*! I mean, it’s just a place,” he said again. “It’s a clearing among the trees with a beautiful view – but it’s just a place.”

“It is *the* place. And the trees and the view are a part of it too; they help make it what it is. You see, Jaron, contained within all things are tiny components of everything else – quite literally.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What we perceive as being different from ‘this place’ is needed to make this place – which means that all things we think of as disconnected from this place actually compose this place. Just as the city stands against the valley to make each other what they are, so it is with all things.” He bent and picked up a small stone. “Take this pebble, for instance. It is different from that tree over there. Wouldn’t you agree? Both the pebble and the tree are seemingly different things, *but to be what they are they need each other*. We could not say that this is a pebble and this is a tree if there weren’t other things in the world that were not pebbles and trees.”

“I’m still not sure I understand,” said Kyler.

“The pebble cannot be itself unless it stands

against the tree; the pebble needs the tree to make the pebble the pebble, which means that the tree is in the pebble and vice versa. When the pebble is itself, it is already outside itself – it is also the tree and everything else; that is, it is already whatever is not the pebble. Because, again, for the pebble to be a pebble it must come out of the tree and everything else; if the pebble did not contain in itself what is not itself, whatever is not the pebble could not come out of the pebble so as to make the pebble what it is. The pebble is the pebble only because of this reality; and it is just as much a pebble as it is the tree; only our minds separate the two things. And so it is with the Orphic:

“The Orphic cannot be itself unless it stands against what is not the Orphic; what we perceive as that which is not the Orphic is needed to make the Orphic the Orphic, which means that what is not the Orphic is in the Orphic and vice versa. When the Orphic wants to be itself, it is already outside itself; that is, it is already whatever is not the Orphic. If the Orphic did not contain in itself what is not itself, whatever is not the Orphic could not come out of the Orphic so as to make the Orphic what it is. The Orphic is the Orphic because of this contradiction, and this contradiction comes out only when we attempt to logically place things into conceptual categories.

“Everything in the world which we see as ‘separate’ from this place – the hills, the sky, the forest, the city, the people who live in the town and

all their thoughts and actions – all these things are needed to make this place what it is; and they need this place to make them what they are. The Orphic comes out of all these things. It is a part of all these things, and all things come from the Orphic.

“You, here and now, are standing at the genesis of all that is and is not; all things and events that have occurred in the past, will take place in the future, or are happening right now originate from right here. And in reality, there is no past or future; the labels of ‘past’ and ‘future’ imply distinctions that simply don’t exist – distinctions of *individual* perceptions – individual perceptions which are not the sublime, unified reality of the Vim. With the Vim, there is only what *is*. And what *is* is happening all at once and not at all.

“Remember, everything is the Vim. So, there is really nothing for it to do or to perceive, and since nothing comes into being without it, it is just itself acting with and within itself. There are no events or beings which are separate from one another; everything is the Vim; everything is the same. There is no becoming. Everything is composed with and within everything else. Therefore, nothing really *is*; only the Vim is. The Vim is the only thing that truly exists when you break everything down to its most basic element. All things we perceive as distinct are simply different manifestations of the same single thing.

“But to our limited perceptions which conceptualize and distinguish everything from

everything else, it is the Orphic that gives birth to the Vim and the Vim which sustains and perpetuates the Orphic. In fact, it is the Orphic that creates the entire universe itself. And within every mode of being in the universe the Vim is there. It is calling us, within us. In fact, it's something known to us already; we just have to rediscover it – we have to listen to it. But it is there.”

Kyler's head was swimming through the meaning of what Abbott had just expounded. “What do you mean by, ‘the Orphic creates the Vim?’ Isn't the Vim already created?”

Abbott looked deeply into Kyler's reflecting eyes, “You may find, Jaron, that the reality of time and its nature is not exactly how we think we experience it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that time is only potential events playing themselves out. Is it not? As you may find, the Vim unveils limitless potential in all things. After all, there is no cause and effect if everything is the same, right? One thing does not ‘create’ the other: everything works with, uses, and supports everything else. What appears to happen ‘first’ could not have happened if it were not for what happened ‘next’; the two are directly connected. But again, it's only we – who falsely think of ourselves as individual observers – who make all these distinguishments of first and last, cause and effect, good and bad, right and wrong, pebble and tree.”

“I'm still not sure I quite understand what you

mean,” Kyler said again, helplessly reeling in the depth of Abbott’s words.

“I cannot just give you knowledge without context; knowledge without experience is not true knowledge. I can’t explain to you the secret, or its meaning,” Abbott said patiently. “That’s for you to find for yourself. And if you can, then do with it what you wish.”

“But what if I never find it? Or what if, once I do, I don’t understand it?”

“Jaron,” said Abbott as he walked alone towards the mouth of the trail back to the monastery, “whenever anyone hears and acknowledges the secret, they immediately understand it and know it because it’s a part of them. But it’s what we choose to do with it, how we choose to handle it. You could hear it and dismiss it immediately. Many have. In fact, most people mistake and replace their knowledge of it with other, lesser things, and they let those things control them so tightly that even if they were to hear the secret directly they wouldn’t care. But as you may find, if you honestly seek out the truth and are willing to let it in, it will come to you and you can work with it in miraculous ways. Remember, you and it are not separate things.”

“Yes,” said Kyler, standing in place next to the rock, “but what if I never get to know the secret in the first place?”

Abbott’s smile could be seen white and wide through the dark distance, “The Orphic has a way of communicating itself to those who seek it out. And

anyway, I have faith in you.”

“Why?” Kyler said, not sharing Abbott’s optimism.

“Well, after all, Jaron, didn’t you already find the Orphic on your own before we brought you here?”

“Yes,” Kyler said softly, “but I had to be told what it was. Someone did have to bring it to my awareness.”

“Hmmm,” Abbott mused, “maybe then – if you ever do learn the secret – you should make others aware of it too. But that, my friend, will have to be up to you.”

And with that, Abbott was gone.

Jaron Kyler

Kyler sat on the rock for some time after Abbott had left and thought about all he'd been through since Deo's arrival. He looked around. A tingle went through his body which both calmed and warmed him. Sitting there in the serenity of the night, Kyler found himself believing in the possibilities surrounding the implications of an all-powerful secret Deo had helped to protect.

The sky was bright with star shines, and the valley below glittered with the lights from the town. Kyler sat quiet and still, watching.

* * * * *

In the days that followed, Kyler spent his time in constant visits with the Orphic. Night and day he would navigate the labyrinth and tread up the hill through the forest to the intersection of the trail where he came to the bald to sit and watch.

He watched the clouds move and change with the wind. He watched the shadows pivot across the ground. He saw how the hills sat silently over the earth, and observed the town buzz and flutter with

activity, and then sleep. He noticed how the lights of the town and the stars seemed to blend almost indistinguishably into one another as if there was no point in which the sky ended and the earth began. He listened carefully to the beating of his own heart and how it coursed through him methodically and easy. He watched his own thoughts come and go in an ephemeral cycle of movement. ‘Just like the clouds,’ he thought And then the thought was gone.

* * * * *

On one evening, he sat atop the rock looking off into the depths of the basin and the town below. He turned, and in the background noticed the forest and mountains sitting quietly behind him.

Slowly at first, something crept deep within him. It was a feeling Kyler had not had since before Deo’s arrival – a feeling that there, in between the town and the mountain, he had somehow found his place in the world again; observing the town from a distance, though still close enough to it to see its lights and faintly hear its callings, Kyler felt content for the first time in a long while.

Feeling a sense of accomplishment, he was

about to stand and head home when suddenly he heard something coming through the brush. Kyler whirled around. His heart – which only moments before had beaten easily and true – palpitated at a torrid speed. He could see nothing behind him, but there was something there, and it was coming closer.

It shuffled and shifted weight.

A large twig snapped.

A rustle of leaves whisked the ground.

The brush shook.

It was on the trail coming over the short incline.

Kyler was standing, but his body was frozen.

Silhouetted by the dark of the forest behind it, something emerged from the path, stopping just before it reached the clearing.

Kyler didn't move. He couldn't breathe.

It came near, slowly.

'It's a man,' Kyler thought, as the figure loomed from its stance at the mouth of the trail. And it was. But this man did not wear a robe like the monks, and his moves were clumsy and hesitant.

He came closer and into the starlight.

"Oh my god," Kyler said in a whisper. The momentary relief he felt vanished, giving way to a terror unlike any Kyler had ever experienced. "It can't be," he said. "It can't be!"

There, staring at him in the nightscape was the very last person in the entire world he ever thought he would meet.

The man stared back at him with similar

astonishment.

It was himself.
It was Jaron Kyler.

* * * * *

As if staring into a pool of still, clear water, Jaron Kyler looked directly into the equally frightened and confused eyes of Jaron Kyler.

For a moment, neither one moved. And then, very slowly, both Kyler took a step backward with the same motion at the exact same instant. They took deep breaths, again at the same time. “Are you —” they both said at once, but each stopped simultaneously to let the other speak.

“Are you —” it happened again.

“Are you the Orphic?” they each said quickly.

It was as though Kyler were looking into a mirror at a reflection.

“I thought you were,” they both said in chorus.

Both figures took another step away from each other, only this time Kyler tripped over the rock and fell to the ground. The stumble broke the mirror effect of the two Kyler, and the being on the ground looked at the other who remained standing. Kyler picked himself up and they continued to eye one

another. Kyler circled his mouth as if to speak, but didn't, and the other Kyler's lips kept pressed and sealed. Seeing this, Kyler swallowed and said, "Why did you come here?"

"Why did you?"

"To learn the secret," Kyler said, looking squarely into his own reflected face. "So why did *you* come here?" he asked again.

"I didn't know until just now."

And with that, Jaron Kyler leaned in closely to Jaron Kyler, and whispered into his ear

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. **T**he words crossed Kyler's ear like the first warm wind after a long winter. There was no room for doubt or interpretation – nothing to wonder or think about; in the words he had just heard was something larger, something immediate, something omniscient and eternal.

And Kyler now knew it, and it was everywhere.

It was all he heard and all he saw, all he tasted and smelled. He recognized it in the way the trees framed themselves against the sky. He could feel it flowing within the blood of his body. It stood placated in his mind, though he did not have to think of it or dwell on it; there was nothing to be thought

about – it was simply there – truly and tangibly in everything he perceived. Kyler pondered momentarily about how it was that he never recognized it before but was again swept away by the marvel of what had now consumed him completely.

The next thing Kyler knew he was alone, standing atop the rock and looking all around him.

He exhaled. The wind blew casually through the trees.

He brought a single knee to the ground and held himself still; the rock kept silent beside him.

He ran his hand through the cold dead forest floor, and the fallen leaves and frozen grass rustled and crackled around him.

He stood and extended his arms above his head, and legions of tree branches stretched themselves skyward.

Pointing a finger at the town below, a single light blinked on. He pointed again – this time to a different part of the town – and as if pushing an invisible button in the air, another small light kindled. Kyler again took aim beneath him and pitched his finger at a particular light somewhere toward the middle of town, and as if he held its very switch in his hand, the light turned off.

Kyler laughed.

He pointed upward at the bright stars, focused on a single one, and moving his hand slowly above him, dragged it across the sky; it moved like a distant chariot. He focused on another, this time

bringing his hand quickly across the horizon; the star shot swiftly by in a comet-like blaze.

Kyler then redirected his fingers to the lights of the town and made the same motion as he had with the stars – moving them around the town, rearranging individual glows as though they were incandescent marbles in a pit before him. Then, taking the lights themselves – not the posts or the streetlamps or windows from which they emanated – he brought them up to the sky and blended them with the stars, crowding the far away darkness in small pinheads of independent shines.

Kyler sat on the grass leaning his back to the rock. He noticed how the twigs and the leaves aligned themselves on the ground and how the trees were stripped and cold-looking. He thought of the verdant trees of summer, thick and whole with color; no sooner than the notion crossed his mind, a lush grove of trees surrounded him there in the bald. Kyler let out a soft breath, and the wind blew through each newly flowered tree, peg by leafy peg.

The ground Kyler sat on was hard and unforgiving, so he placed a hand on it and thought of warmth and instantly his seat became temperate and comfortable. He thought of the flowers he'd seen being sold in the town's boutique, and at once there sprouted a burst of them within the circumference of the clearing. And as the rest of the world sat in the chill of late winter, Kyler had transformed the bald into a pocket of spring.

Kyler stood and realized that everywhere he

stepped he crushed a flower's stem or disfigured its button, so he thought of himself at the mouth of the path to the clearing and instantly he was there, looking over the new growths that had sprung up within the bald. The trees were ripe and full, and the flowers looked as though a wild garden of the world's greatest arrangements had all sprouted in a single place.

Kyler thought of Deo's estate and he was back at the mansion, standing at the gates of the labyrinth. Kyler could do nothing but laugh at the wonder and amazement of his power. All he had to do was think of an action – any action – and think of the secret at the same moment and it unfolded in front of him.

All he had to do was think of it and it happened.

He noticed, however, that his thoughts and the actions which followed came almost too suddenly for him, so he employed a gesture or a motion to conduct the happening: A snap of his fingers and he traveled through time and space. A blink of his eye and the color of the sky changed. A lift of hand and a rock floated off the ground. He snapped his fingers and watched the sun set over the waves of a distant island. He snapped them again and strolled about Rome and the pyramids, toured the courtyard of a king's palace in the height of the Renaissance, sat on an ice-aged glacier as it inched across the Nordic Tundra.

All he had to do was think of a place and he

was there, experiencing, interacting, and witnessing like anyone else. But this was no dream – it was as real as anything he'd ever lived – and he touched, tasted, smelled, heard, felt, and thought his way through place after place in time after time: He was a prairie field under a herd of trouncing buffalo. He watched the battle of Lepanto from the shores of Cyprus, became a recently laid brick amongst the Himalayas in the Great Wall of China. There was nothing he couldn't be, no place he couldn't go, nothing he couldn't do.

With a thought and a crack of his thumb and index finger he was back at Deo's estate standing in the hall of the main entrance. Another snap and he was back at the Orphic, looking down at the town.

The bald was still blooming with sprigs and flowers the way he had left it; but the town seemed the same, huddled neatly within the womb of the valley. Kyler thought of his experience a few nights before; he thought of the park and the little girl, the village square and the pub.

And he put his thumb against his index finger and snapped them together

(Spring)

PART VII Dolor's End

Another Whisperer

The neon sign in the window fuzzed and blinked on the other side of the tinted glass. Kyler noticed the air was much cooler in town than it had been at the Orphic, and, rubbing his hands together, he blew on them with a breath that looked and felt like warm smoke. Turning, Kyler pressed on the door next to the luminescent window and opened it. Several patrons held their drinks to the flat of the bar and they turned their heads to look at him as he stepped in. He smiled gently and took a place at an open stool and watched the eyes of the barkeep raise as he approached. “Evening, Jaron,” Hal said. “What can I get you?”

Kyler thought of a different scenario and snapped his fingers.

The scene reset itself:

Several patrons held their drinks to the flat of the bar, but no one seemed to notice as Kyler took a seat at an open stool. After a moment, Hal came up to him. “How’s it going, Jaron?”

Without a word Kyler raised his hand and let go another resounding snap.

Once again, the scene started over:

Kyler sat at a stool at the bar and watched Hal as he poured a drink and placed it in front of Kyler.

“Soda-water, right?”

“Right,” Kyler said, raising his glass.

“That’ll be two-fifty.”

Kyler snapped his fingers.

“Soda-water, right?”

“Right.”

“This one’s on me.”

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you so much.” Hal took an open palm and slapped it down softly in front of Kyler before walking away to the other end of the bar. Kyler chuckled, giddy with himself, and finished his drink.

Giving Hal a nod, Kyler pushed his stool away from the bar’s edge and walked toward the door. As he stepped outside, a rush of wind hit his face. He shivered and began to walk back to his house, but stopped, and, laughing out loud, raised a cold hand to the air. Though, just as he was about to let go of another snap, a trembling voice called out after him. “Spare some change, sir?” Looking over his shoulder, Kyler saw the frail outline of a craggy looking man who stood limply on the street corner. He resembled a wet dog, hungry and infected. Kyler turned and faced him. The man’s body trembled and shook, his hand quivering almost violently in front of him. The wind blew harder and colder than before and the man’s voice came out of his mouth in bravado, “Spare some change?” Kyler looked at the old hobo good and hard; his nose ran across the matted scruff of his unkempt face and his eyes

watered as another blast of wind nearly blew off the tattered cap which clung to the greasy mats of hair on his head.

“No,” Kyler said with a straight face, “I’m sorry – I don’t have any change to spare.”

The man’s sunken eyes fell to the curb as he said, “Alright – thank ya’ very much,” and he began to walk away.

For the brief moment during his exchange with the tattered man, Kyler had forgotten about the happenings of the past few days, and all at once everything came rushing back through Kyler’s mind: The first time he met Deo, the town, the mayor’s estate, the rifle, the labyrinth, the trail through the woods, Abbott and the fire, the Vim, the secret, the Orphic and the last words Abbott had spoken to him there. “Wait,” Kyler called after him. “Wait a minute.” The old hobo turned. “I do have something for you.” The man put out his hand, palm side up. “No,” said Kyler, closing the man’s hand with his own. “It’s not that.”

And Kyler leaned up next to the old hobo and whispered in his ear

A Wish for Water III

Graham could not believe his ears when the man's whisper fell quiet; the words echoed in him like a bell. "I don't believe it," Graham said in astonishment as the man pulled his warm hands away from his ear. "My god," he said, but the man had already smiled at him and begun walking away. "It can't be," Graham said, and started to weep. Graham collapsed there in the street and cried. The words repeated themselves over and again in his memory. "It's unfathomable!" he shouted. Yet, somehow, by a mere whisper, he was able to grasp it; and what was more, he knew it to be true.

He continued to weep on the sidewalk until finally he picked himself up and stood half-cocked against the wall of a building. Graham breathed hard and heavy. He thought of the words whispered to him and reached into his pocket; grabbing the first thing he felt, he pulled out a slow, dirty hand from his unraveling trousers and held it up to the light of the streetlamp. There in his hand, illuminated by the streetlights above, was a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. Graham's mouth gaped. Another hand shot into a different pocket and it too pulled out a bill – this time a fifty. He reached into his back pocket, his breast, his coat: A twenty-dollar bill, a five, a ten.

Amazed and excited, he went to put the fistful of dollars into his right hip pocket but found that

there was hardly any room to fit his hand. Money fell from his torn shirt; it fell from his sleeves and his hat. There was so much of it that after a few moments Graham stopped trying to gather it all up. He took a handful – as much as he could grab – and threw it up over his head. Sticking his hand immediately back in the same pocket, it was as if not even a dent in the bulk had been made. He hollered with excitement. ‘I can do anything with all this money! Anything I want in the world!’ he thought, barely able to contain himself.

He looked around as if possessed by some pleasant demon. But what caught his eyes were not the beautiful homes on Maple Street, or the cars parked in single rows on either side of Main, or even the manikins donned in nice warm clothes inside the display window of the clothing store across the boulevard. What caught Graham’s eye was a single neon light, dully fuzzing inside a tinted glass just a half a block away. Like a night bug drawn to an incinerating fire, he floated there automatically, and before he knew it his hand was on the door, pushing it open.

He took an open stool and pulled it close, hugging the bar rail to his chest like a lover he’d not seen in years. Hal came up to him, “I told you, Graham, no money, no drinks, and you can’t work it off – not as drunk as you’ll be, anyway. Now take a hike.”

Graham eyed him smugly and took a one-hundred-dollar bill out of his pocket and placed it on

the bar. “Oh, come on, Hal. You wouldn’t turn away a paying customer, would you?”

Hal looked at him doubtfully. “Where’d you steal that from?”

“Why, Hal, I’d be insulted if I wasn’t so damned thirsty. Double gin and a shot of whiskey.”

Hal took the money from the bar and held it to the light as he went to the register. “Sorry, Graham, I can’t change your bill,” and he laid it back in front of him, “you’ll have to go somewhere else, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, no problem,” Graham said, exchanging the hundred for a twenty. Hal looked at him skeptically but went to the well to fix his drinks. “No, no, Hal – top shelf, please.” With a sigh, the barkeep went to the shelf and poured from his best bottles and placed the drinks in front of Graham who slung them down his throat and quickly ordered another round.

Graham drank heroically until close, and leaving an enormous tip, staggered out. “Ha-ha-ha!” he hollered at nothing in particular. He fell on his face. “Ha!” He got up and swayed through the streets like a pendulum and found his way to a motel where he decided to rent a room. He awoke the sleeping clerk behind the counter in a slur.

“Just one night, sir?” asked the clerk through a yawn.

“No, a year’s worth of nights,” and he took piles of money from his pockets and stacked them on the counter. Astounded, the clerk passed him a key

and a receipt.

The next morning Graham awoke in the comfort of a bed for the first time in a long while. His head pounded and his stomach creaked like an old wood floor. Rolling his stiff joints to the edge of the mattress, he tossed his feet to the floor and went to the sink, putting his mouth under the spout of the faucet for a long drink. The hotel soaps were still in their packing and the towels hung in rectangular folds on the racks.

He stood in front of the mirror in the clothes he'd worn the night before; they were the same clothes he'd been wearing for many weeks, only now as he looked at them in the reflection every pocket bulged with dollar bills. Reaching into his trousers he pulled out a wad of paper dollars and let it fall to the floor. He reached into the same pocket, and again he pulled out a fistful of cash and let it drop to his feet. He reached again and again until a pile of money came up to his knees. "Ha!" he said aloud, briefly forgetting about the pounding in his head.

Graham grabbed his room key and headed outside. It was a gloomy day with long flat clouds hanging over the village like a low ceiling. He walked to the liquor store and bought up more than he could carry, so he made two trips, drinking a fifth of mint schnapps on his way back. With his new purchases he made a wet bar out of the motel dresser, lining its cedar top with large bottles, cans, and containers. He drank until his head stopped pulsing and watched

television.

He drank some more.

He drew a bath and washed and when he got out, he felt dirty putting on his old clothes, so he went out and purchased an entire wardrobe and took a taxi loaded to the trunk back to the motel. Trying on a new pair of pants, he stopped and thought a moment and reached his hand into the pocket and pulled out another hundred-dollar bill. He tried on another pair, and just as before it brimmed with cash. "Hal!"

After passing out among the empty bottles and cans which lay strewn around him in the bed, Graham awoke to the blare of the television set and rolled to one side of the bed, knocking over a hollow aluminum beer can which hit the carpet with a dull ping. Graham sat up against the headboard and coughed into his fist. A half-emptied bottle of whiskey left the nightstand and hit his lips like warm rain flowing through an open gutter. He watched a game show and then the news over the rest of the bottle, and after a few solid swallows of rum, decided to venture out.

The streets of the town were a sharp reminder of things he didn't care to think about, and Graham quickly found his way back to the pub, meeting the eyes of several familiar patrons as he walked through the door. Hal was behind the bar, but barely acknowledged him. "Who'd ya' gotta' pay off to get a drink around here?" Graham hollered in Hal's

direction, waving a large bill.

Hal came up to him like a cowboy walking into the street for a showdown. “Where you gettin’ this money from, Graham? Honestly.”

Graham smiled with his liquor-soaked gums, “You might just say I was recently informed of an inheritance I’m just now claiming.”

“Or, you might say you’re full of it.”

“You might – but I might just say what I just did,” Graham bumbled. “Or I might just say I’ll have a double vodka.” Hal went to make the drink with a doleful expression.

Graham drank until close again, and as the lights flickered on and the patrons cleared, he wobbled like a loose top on the cusp of his stool. “Time to go, Graham,” Hal said.

“I’ll be havin’ one more,” Graham coughed, pounding another large bill in front of him.

“No, you won’t. It’s time to get going. Now scoot.”

“I’ll pay. I’ll pay. Whiskey and water; it is late after all.”

“It’s time to be going, Graham. Go get some rest and sober up. Eat something for goodness’ sake.”

“Eating just makes me thirsty, Hal. Whiskey and water.”

“You gotta’ go, Graham. Now.”

“I’ll pay you a thousand bucks,” he slammed a pile of money on the bar.

Hal poured the drink into a plastic cup and

took only a few bills from the lump. “Take it to go.”

Graham fumbled his way to the door.

Outside, the ground felt as though it rocked and swayed under his feet, and the drink Graham carried out hit the pavement just before he did. Looking up from the edging of the sidewalk, the earth seemed to spin violently out of control as if it had strayed from its orbit. Graham pulled himself to a knee and crawled to a familiar alley around the corner where he laid himself on the cold, jagged embrace of an opened-up cardboard box.

When he awoke, a pile of bills lay under his head forming a makeshift pillow. Not far off something smelled like vomit. His head pounded ferociously. His stomach clenched itself into a tiny contraction, and the inside of his mouth was coarse and sandy. He took on only small movements at first, rolling to one side, extending an arm, bending a toe, rubbing a sticky hand through a mess of hair. The alley was like a wind tunnel and he shivered once before focusing back on the searing pains straining throughout his body. The damp, pebbly hold of the alley floor pressed him to his feet, where his body stammered, tipping over a nearby garbage can. The catch of a brick wall balanced him for a moment until, uneasily, he walked to the street and headed uptown. It looked late in the day, but his eyes squinted at the reflections of light in store windows and passing cars. Graham didn't know where he was going, he just needed to walk.

Stopping in an alley not far from where he awoke, he threw up to the side of a box full of broken glass and felt a little better. When he came out, he felt the urge to sit, and did so against an adjacent wall. He slumped with his hands folded across his knees. Someone placed a handful of change at his side, and before he got up again, he grabbed the coins and crammed them into his pocket.

He carried his ailing body through town and found himself standing in front of the train station. He'd not been there since first arriving in Dolor's End, and as if in a trance, walked into the small depot. The departure board flashed, and Graham saw there was a train leaving for the city in ten minutes. The line at the ticket window was short, but Graham decided to skip it and go directly to the train, paying the conductor as they pulled away from the station. Graham slept the entire ride and was awoken by a passing briefcase as it nudged his shoulder. Exiting the train car, he felt better – but only slightly – so he bought a large beer from an in-station deli and drank it with a fell gulp. He bought another beer before heading out into the bustle and jam of the city's explosion of horns, streetlights, and people.

The city was an open rush, and the feeling overwhelmed and reminded Graham of so many days wandering its streets. No one noticed him as he moved with the crowds, ambling under the giant pillars of the skyscrapers which loomed overhead like huge walls of an enormous grid.

Graham floated in and out of most every bar

and pub he passed – places he was never able to go into previously – and before he'd gone six blocks he began to feel much better. He went to the bodega he used to frequent and gave the man at the cash register with the foreign accent a few hundred dollars. "You don't remember me, but I remember you. And trust me, I owe ya'." And he smiled as the man behind the register looked at him ambiguously.

Walking out the door, Graham started on a very calculated track, passing up every bar and tavern on the way.

* * * * *

The overpass thrummed with street traffic as the river slinked by beside it. As Graham approached, the memories of the years came back to him. It was just as he'd left it: The garbage can billowed with smoldering trash as the river lapped the concrete shore that supported the thick braces of the viaduct.

In a soot-filled corner below the underbelly of the bridge, the figure of a man lay twisted and folded in a complicated heap. Graham had often fought off intruders and other tramps who came searching for a place to rest, and this man's face seemed familiar as he lay with his eyes closed, breathing slow against the hard slab of the cement.

With soft steps, Graham came closer and the sleeping man stirred uncomfortably, opening his eyes. The hobo blinked and moved a bit, conscious, but lethargic and weak as he extended a begging hand. Graham looked at him good and hard. But instead of reaching to his bill-stuffed pockets, he bent down to the man and cupped his mouth to the hobo's cold ear and whispered softly into it.

Graham backed away and waited. But the hobo did nothing except once again extend his arm and asked for money. Graham again bent over him and whispered the words exactly as they had been whispered to him a few nights earlier. But again, the hobo seemed not to care. "Did you hear me?" Graham asked.

"Spare some change?" the hobo said weakly.

"Didn't you hear me? Didn't you hear what I just said? Don't you realize what it means?"

"Can you spare some change?" the hobo said, slightly louder. Graham again went to the hobo's ear and again the hobo said in a weak throat, "I don't care about that. I just need some money – anything you can spare." Flabbergasted, Graham reached into his pockets and pulled out handful after handful of cash, raining piles of money in front of the hobo's widening eyes. "God bless you, sir," the hobo said hypnotically as he watched the bills cascade to the grimy pavement.

Graham turned and walked away quickly up and out of the viaduct and back to the street. He went straight to the station and caught an evening

train to Dolor's End.

* * * * *

Back in town, a feeling he hadn't felt in a long time rumbled in his stomach as he walked away from the depot. It was late, and there was really only one place he could go.

As Graham opened the door of the pub his eyes instantly met Hal's, who stopped the conversation he was having with a patron and told Graham to leave at once. Graham approached the bar rail anyway. "I said get out, Graham. I ain't havin' ya' drunk and loose around here makin' a scene. And I don't have any more handouts for you. You're not gettin' served here anymore. Period. Ya' understand?"

"I'm not here for a drink or a handout, Hal. I'm here to eat. I'm starving," Graham said soberly. "Is the kitchen still open?"

Hal's expression changed. "When was the last time you ate, Graham?"

"I can't really remember."

Hal looked at him and put a palm under his chin, kneading one of his cheeks. "I told ya' I'd give ya' something to eat last night when you came in here, but ya' just kept beggin' for a drink. Just one drink,

ya' said, and I'll be gone for good. You'd never come in askin' for another free drink ever again is what ya' said. You remember makin' that scene? Ya' probably don't, as drunk as you were." Hal sighed, and looking at Graham shook his head and said, "Well, the kitchen's not open, but I guess it could be. If I were to turn on the oven and feed you whatever I got back there, how you gonna' pay for it? This ain't no damn soup kitchen."

Graham reached into his pocket, but aside from a few coins he'd been given earlier in the day, his hand was met by nothing other than empty space. "I don't have any money," Graham said, feeling the hollowness of his inseam.

Hal rubbed his chin and shook his head, saying finally, "Well, I know you don't have any money. You've never had any money! Every time you come in lately, you're always begging for a drink But I can't let you starve to god-damned death." The barkeep looked at the old hobo incredulously. "You're gonna' work this off – and I ain't puttin' you back at the bar again. For this, you're in the kitchen doin' dishes and moppin' the damn floor is what you're doin'."

Graham smiled, "Thank you, Hal."

Hal gave a grunt and went into the kitchen. He reentered with some pretzels and told Graham that it would be a few minutes before the hot food was ready. So, Graham plopped himself at the end of the bar and put his hands in his lap. Hal came back to him and placed a tall glass of ice water on a coaster.

Graham smiled shyly and took a sip. The wash of the liquid fell down his throat and coated his stomach. He drank three more glasses, and after his meal had one more, and when the last legs of the water had left the glass, he put it down and wiped his mouth with the tattered sleeve of his arm. He wasn't thirsty anymore.

Two Blue Stars III

Two dim, blue eyes blinked open as Roxana rolled over in her bed, shoving her head into her pillow. It was a bright day outside, but the early spring was kept at bay by the blinds which eclipsed the windows, sealing off the house in dust and darkness. Roxana would've stayed in bed all day again had she not missed her three previous doctor's appointments; but now the pains in her stomach had become so severe that she could no longer go without an anti-nausea medication, and the only way to obtain the prescription was through the doctor.

So, with great reluctance, she put a thin, cold foot on the floor and came out of bed like an old bear awaking in spring. Where once a full-length mirror hung to greet her as she got out of bed, there was now a blank wall with a single nail jettisoning outward at a rusty angle. She dressed herself and put on a flowing, strawberry-blonde wig over the smooth surface of her head. Embattled with morning sickness, she skipped breakfast and walked four blocks to the bus station near Hal's pub with heavy steps. She was early and waited on the bench beneath the plexiglass awning with clasped hands.

As she sat, from the corner of her eye

emerged a tattered looking man who stretched against the wall of an adjacent alley. Roxana pretended not to notice him. She shifted uncomfortably and looked the other way as he moved from across the sidewalk to the bus stop and stood behind Roxana, who again shifted positions, glancing at him surreptitiously. Their stares locked for a moment before Roxana nervously rustled in her purse and pulled out a single dollar bill. She held out the bill, but the old bum just stood there and looked at her.

The roar of a bus engine turned the corner like a metallic thunderstorm. Roxana stood swiftly with the bill in hand, but the man made no attempt to reach at it. The bus pulled up with a squeak in its brakes and let go a sound of compressed air as it stopped and opened its door. Roxana stuffed the bill back into her purse and hopped up the stairs past the driver. As she took her seat, her sad blue eyes again met those of the old hobo's as he stood next to the stop and watched the bus pull away.

At the doctor's office, Roxana was quiet as the nurse took her to the examining room. She avoided eye contact with the doctor when he came in to ask her a few questions and direct her on how and when to use the medication. "I'll need to be seeing you again in a few days now, and you really must begin to make it to these appointments with some regularity. I know this is difficult, but we're here to help you and you're going to need more assistance as this process matures."

Roxana shook her head ‘yes’, tightened her thin lips, and sealed her eyes.

* * * * *

Even though the trip was short, she felt tired and worn as the bus pulled its long body back through the streets of town. Stepping out like a limply old woman, she exited the bus and peered around the stop to make sure no one was around, and in succinct steps, she walked in the direction of her house.

Her slender, waify frame was just about to pass Hal’s pub when before she could scream a hand was placed over her mouth and she was whisked off the sidewalk and into a nearby alley. Too weak to struggle against her assailant in any formidable way, she attempted to bite the palm clamped firmly around her lips, but as she went to do so she was flung up against the back end of the alley. “It’s okay – it’s okay,” a man’s voice said in a way which only frightened Roxana further.

She screamed into his hand, but the noise was muffled and subdued. With a slight twitch of her eye from the corner of her socket, Roxana caught a look at the man as he attempted to restrain her: His scraggly beard and shabby, dirt-plagued brow were the unmistakable features of the old hobo from the

bus stop earlier in the day. He had seen her there and stalked her — waiting like a tiger in the brush of the alleyway — until finally she reemerged, unsuspecting and alone. ‘How could I have been so stupid?’ she thought. ‘I should’ve gotten off at the next stop to be safe. He saw me this morning, as weak and as timid as I am. He saw me and waited.’ The man shifted and repositioned his body, grabbing her closer. ‘This is it,’ she thought. Roxana darted her neck in a violent turn, momentarily shaking free of the man’s hand around her mouth, “I don’t want to die!” She wanted to scream it, but the words dribbled out of her in a whimper. Hearing this, the man paused for a moment, grabbing her closer still. “Oh god,” she whispered.

He leaned in, his face moving quickly to hers. Roxana went limp, stricken with fear as the old hobo turned her head to one side, and ever so gently pressed his mouth close, and whispered in her ear . . .

. The words echoed like sweetly sung melodies played over and over in the music of her head. The old hobo’s grip had been released and she looked at him with awe and surprise. “My god,” she said to him with her own hand now covering her mouth. “It’s true.” The old hobo nodded and turned, walking back through the alleyway. Roxana called after him, “Wait!” He stopped and turned a tattered back away from her. “I I don’t know what to say.” Water collected in her eyes like puddles.

“I – I’ve been so foolish. Thank you. Thank you so much.” The old hobo smiled without parting his lips, and again turned, walking out of the alley and into the street. “My god,” she said. “Oh my god.” She walked the rest of the way home in a euphoric daze, smiling and laughing to herself, repeating all the while, “It’s true! It’s true! It’s really true!”

When she arrived back home, she noticed that the bushes adjoining the front walk were overgrown, and that the flowerbed she started was full of weed-sprouts. She walked inside the house, still snickering, but she could now barely control it. She erupted with unbridled laughter, spewing it like a fountain. She had to sit; she could hardly breathe it came out of her so hard. After a few minutes, she gained a loose composure and chuckled, shaking her head and drying her eyes.

“Whew!” she said, giggling more. Lifting herself up from her seat, she put two hands on her hips and looked around the room. “My, my, my – this house is a mess!” she said cheerfully. And with that, she went to the closet and pulled from it a mop and some cleaning supplies. She sang to herself as she scrubbed first the floors and the counter tops, moving on to the dishes and the kitchen and then into the living room to dust the furniture and beat the rug.

Opening one of the windows in the house, she caught her reflection in the glass pane; her smile lightened, and her song fell quiet. There, trapped between the light and the glass, shone back at her a

withered and depleted reflection. The bone protruded from her face under her cheek and she touched at it with equally frail looking fingers. She looked at herself for a long while there in the glassing, until, motion by motion – so slowly that she didn’t even realize it – a smile crept up and sat handsomely in the middle of her face. She wore it brightly and proud and it widened and twinkled. A chuckle came from it, and the beauty and joy locked away through so many trying and tiresome days came tumbling along with it.

Still engaged with her reflection, she sighed and opened the window with a hum and went about wiping it down. She dashed up to the attic and dusted off the box with the old picture albums and her children’s school papers in it and went through them all carefully. Afterwards, she went to the basement and brought out a large mirror and replaced it over the jagged nail jettisoning from the wall in her bedroom. “Well, that’s that,” she said aloud, looking into the glass with a grin.

The house was clean, and the fresh air venting in from the apertures caught her nose with a hint of spring. ‘I should get to work on the outside now,’ she thought. And humming, she stepped out the front door and let the sun pinken her face. Her eyes shone back at the light like two beaming blue stars. “What a beautiful day,” she said to herself.

And it was.

Landing Birds II

The morning grass of the park was beaded with tiny orbs of dew. A flock of geese waddled and honked beside the pond. Approaching the gaggle curiously, a dog without a leash caught the attention of a single bird which sent out a loud warning cry as it escaped the ground. The other birds followed, noisily taking flight – except for one, who flapped and stumbled across the grass, unable to lift itself to the air. Though it looked bent and disjointed, it beat its wing intensely, but was forced to watch as the rest of the flock saddled a high wind and soared away. The bird again thrashed fruitlessly below, dithering for a moment before folding its crooked wing uncomfortably alongside its body, and walking around in a circle, called out to the empty sky.

Just across the street, perched high atop her porch, Mrs. Alder sipped her tea from a steaming mug. She squinted and scoffed at the cars and morning joggers as they passed, and she mumbled something incoherently to Wilma who stood behind her with a plate of hot toast. “What was that now, Mrs. A?”

“I didn’t say anything to you!” she snapped, looking back behind her slumped shoulder blade. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Oh, come on now, Mrs. A, you remember me. I know you do.”

Mrs. Alder gave her an incredulous look, “Yeah, I remember you alright,” she said sharply.

“Oh, Mrs. A, I know you do more than just remember me now. You ‘nd me been thick as thieves for a good ‘ol long time here.” Mrs. Alder, however, had stopped listening.

She had grown steadily worse over the recent months, and dementia had crept over her like a cold blanket. “Where’s Steven?” she asked, almost angrily.

Wilma placed the toast on a tray in front of her. “Steven doesn’t come home from school for a while, Mrs. A. Not ‘till this afternoon.”

Mrs. Alder appeared not to hear her and gazed out to the park across the street. “His sister’s an idiot! A real idiot, I tell you.”

Wilma rolled her eyes, “Now, Mrs. A, that’s not very nice of you. Sarah is a special girl with special needs, and aside from the fact that it’s not very nice to call people idiots, she’s your granddaughter, for goodness sake,” she said in the way an actor repeats a line she’s regurgitated a thousand times before.

“She’s an idiot. Where’s my grandson? Where’s Doc?”

“Mrs. A, your grandson won’t be coming home from school ‘till later, and it’s not Doc – it’s Steven. Besides, we’ve got plenty to do today ourselves.” Mrs. Alder continued staring blankly in the direction of the park. “You hear me, Mrs. A? We

got us an errand to be runnin' today, you and me."

"Well, where's Doc? He'll come with us."

"Doc's been gone a long time, Mrs. A."

"Where'd he go to?" she continued like a roaring lion.

"He passed away a number of years ago, Mrs. A. Remember?" Mrs. Alder said nothing and continued to look across the street and into the park, occasionally lifting her head upwards to pan the sky. "Alright, Mrs. A," Wilma said, opening the front door, "you enjoy the morning and eat some of that toast now before it gets cold on ya'. You need to eat something before you go."

"Where we going?" she snapped back.

"We're going out today. Now won't that be nice?" Mrs. Alder said nothing. "Eat some of that toast," Wilma said again, and she went inside the house.

"What toast?" Mrs. Alder asked, looking past the cooling tray to her side. But Wilma was gone.

* * * * *

The doctor's office was idle and slow. Old magazines were spread in uneven placements across the tables and chairs of the waiting room. A lone

woman, feeble looking and thin but with bright blue eyes, sat in the corner of the room flipping through a tabloid as she hummed to herself, occasionally letting go of a small chuckle as she turned over the picture-heavy pages.

The door leading to the hallway opened and in walked Wilma and Mrs. Alder. Wilma coaxed and encouraged the old woman as she leaned her shaky upper body on the crossbar of a metal walker, and step by tiny step, she inched her way into the room. “You wait in here now, Mrs. A,” Wilma said, leading Mrs. Alder with her walker to the nearest seat. “I’ll be right back.” And she went to the window to sign in and talk with the receptionist.

Mrs. Alder planted herself down and looked around the room as if she saw a bug flying about the ceiling. The woman in the corner pushed a strawberry blonde tuft of hair back from her star-blue eyes and went back to her magazine. “Who are you?” Mrs. Alder said with a dart of skepticism.

But before the woman in the corner could respond, Wilma came from the counter and apologized. “Now, Mrs. A, don’t go about pesterin’ nobody,” she scolded gently. “That’s just a nice lady keepin’ to her own business – just as you should yours. I’m sorry, again,” she said to the woman with the star-blue eyes, giving her a wave.

“It’s okay,” said the woman in the corner, smiling.

“Where are we?”

“I told you on the way over here, remember,

Mrs. A? We're going to the doctor's office.
Remember I told you that? Well, here we are."

"We're here to see Doc?"

"No, Mrs. A. He was a doctor alright, but
he's not the one we're here to see today."

"I wanna' see Doc," the old woman said
decisively.

A nurse opened up the door by the counter
and called out, "Roxana Valentine?" The woman in
the corner smiled and placed her magazine down.

"The doctor will see you now," the nurse added.

"What'd she say?" Mrs. Alder asked.

* * * * *

On her way out, the woman with the star-
blue eyes saw Wilma and Mrs. Alder in the waiting
room of the office. Wilma was holding a bottle of
medications in either hand as she spoke to the doctor
about how and when they should be administered,
while Mrs. Alder sat in the same seat she'd held
before, but this time looked blankly in front of her.

The blue-eyed woman surveyed the room for
a moment; no one was paying her any attention, so
she approached Mrs. Alder, leaned into her, and
whispered into her ear before sneaking away

“Thank you, doctor,” Wilma said, and turned to face Mrs. Alder, who, to her surprise, was already standing.

“Yes, thank you very much,” Mrs. Alder said spryly. “I’ll do like you said: The blue pill in the morning and the red one before dinner. As my husband used to say – god rest his soul – doctor’s orders are next to the lord’s very own; though, he was a doctor too, you know.”

Wilma and the doctor looked at one another. “Ah, well, no, Mrs. Alder, I didn’t know that about your husband,” the doctor smiled.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Alder said with a nostalgic tone. “He was one of the best of his day. Well, anyways, we’ll see ya’ next time,” she said as she nodded and tucked her bottom lip into her top. And with little assistance from her walker, she moved through the door.

“That must be some darn good medicine,” Wilma said under her breath. And the two women left the office.

When they arrived back at the house, Mrs. Alder went straight to the porch, moving her walker effortlessly, like the way an ox moves with a plow. “Take it easy, Mrs. A,” Wilma pleaded in a tone filled with surprise. But Mrs. Alder was well ahead. When Wilma finally did catch up to her on the front stoop, Mrs. Alder was standing without the support of her walker, admiring the view. “Mrs. A, don’t you wanna

sit down here in your usual spot?”

Mrs. Alder looked back at her and smiled, “You know what I’d really like to do, Wilma?”

Mrs. Alder had never called Wilma by her name, and the shock of it lay smacked across her face, “. What’s that, Mrs. A?”

“I think I’d like to go over there,” and she nodded to an open bench in the park where a small gaggle of birds had assembled. “If I remember correctly, you bought some bread last week at the store, didn’t you?”

“I did, ma’am,” Wilma said with her jaw hung open.

“Let’s bring it with us. Those birds look hungry.” So, Wilma got the bread and the two of them walked the short distance to the park across the street; Mrs. Alder, with her walker, plugged along at a good pace as Wilma strolled beside her. They sat at the bench and broke the bread into small pieces and fed it to the birds that squawked and pecked at the crumbs until there were none left to be had. “They’re wonderful animals. Don’t you think so?” Mrs. Alder said in more of a statement than a question. “Just absolutely wonderful.”

After all the bread was gone and the afternoon sun began to fall back towards the horizon, Mrs. Alder asked Wilma what time it was. Wilma took a brief look at her wristwatch, but was interrupted before she could answer the question, “I’ll bet Steven will be walking by soon, and I don’t want to miss him.”

So, they went back to the house where Mrs. Alder assumed her normal position on the porch. “I’ll be inside, Mrs. A. I’ve got some cleaning up to do if that’s alright with you.”

“Fine, fine, Wilma. Here comes Steven now,” she said with a wave of excitement as Steven approached.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Wilma said to herself, and went inside shaking her head in disbelief.

“Hello there, Steven!” Mrs. Alder waved to her grandson who was still a half a block away.

“Grandma?” Steven said, sounding surprised as he came walking up the street. He went to the base of the stairs and started up them, eyeing his grandmother carefully.

“Hello, Steven! How are you doing?”

Steven cocked his head and gave her a skeptic’s grin, “Fine, grandma. How are *you* doing?”

“Oh,” Mrs. Alder said, “I’m just wonderful – absolutely wonderful. How was your day? Are you coming from your friend’s house – Jimmy is it? Or straight from school?”

Steven looked stunned, like he’d just been called on to give an answer he only half knew, “Ah, yes, Jimmy, that’s right He’s good. And no, I’m coming right from school. I’ve got to watch Sarah again today while my mom’s running errands and dad’s still at work.”

“Your mother’s always been a busy woman. When she was younger, I used to tell her to slow down, but she never listened to me,” she chuckled at

the thought. “How’s school coming along?”

“Good, grandma.”

“And Sarah?”

“Good, grandma. She’s good.”

“Well, good. You tell everyone I send my love, okay?”

“I will, grandma.”

“And I love you too,” and she opened her arms up like a bird ready to take flight. Steven, shyly and awkward-like, came to her embrace and hugged her delicately. She kissed his cheek, but as he began to pull away, he felt her grip tighten and she brought him in close once again. Though, this time, instead of another kiss, she turned his head to her lips and whispered softly into his ear

. After hearing his grandmother’s words, Steven stood up straight and sharp and looked even more awestruck than before. “That’s amazing,” he said, looking to his grandmother.

She smiled at him. “Go on now,” she said.

Stupefied, Steven left, looking back at her, and she waved and blew him a kiss. Mrs. Alder breathed a sigh of relief. ‘How lucky I am,’ she thought to herself, and pointed her gaze across the street to the park where a flock of geese landed by the pond. She watched them peck and shimmy in the grass for a while, until suddenly – in a single, choreographed movement – they all took to the air, leaving behind them only the ground. ‘How beautiful,’ Mrs. Alder thought as she watched them soar up and through the

blue vault of the sky. And with that, she settled into her favorite chair high atop the lofted view of her porch, closed her eyes, and died.

Abbey's Feelings II

Steven looked back at his grandmother as he walked away. Her words churned and repeated in his mind as he ambled toward home.

Coming up the street, he could see his mother scurry from the house to the car, back and forth like an ant carrying food to its colony. "Hello, dear," she said without breaking stride. "I'm on my way out. I put money on the table so you can order something. Your father will be home after his dinner meeting in the city, and I should be back sometime after him," she spewed. "Are you okay, Steven? You look funny," his mother noticed, eying at him in the reflection of the car window as she ran a hand through her hair.

"Yeah, Mom," Steven said.

"You sure?" his mother asked, breaking from her reflection to put a hand on his forehead. "You don't feel like you've got a temperature."

"I know, Mom. Truly, I'm fine."

"Okay, good. Now, your sister's inside watching her show. I know you two haven't been getting along very well lately, but do try your best to be civil with one another – especially while your father and I are away this evening. Okay?"

"Sure, Mom."

And she gave him a kiss on the top of his head before sliding herself behind the wheel of the

car and pulling away.

Steven came in the front door and petered through the hallway; the house was quiet and still. “Sarah?” he called out timidly as he looked around. “Sarah?” he said a little louder, “Where are –”

“I’m right here,” said an unrecognized but familiar voice.

Steven turned around and saw his sister sitting at the kitchen table with her hands folded in her lap. “Sarah?”

She looked up at him with shiny eyes and a quite smile. “Hello, Stevie.”

“My god,” he whispered.

She dropped her eyes to the table as if she’d become embarrassed slightly, but cleared her throat and spoke in perfect diction and clarity, “I don’t know what to say. It’s funny, because all this time – all these years as I’ve watched you grow into the wonderful person you’ve become – I’ve always wanted to be able to tell you so many things I never could express. And now,” she again shed her eyes from him before continuing, “well, now I can – now I finally can – and I don’t know what to say other than I want to thank you. So So, thank you. Thank you for always being here for me. I know I’m difficult sometimes and I know we fight a lot But I just I just want to be with you; I want to be near you. You’re my best friend and really the only person I’ve got beside mom and dad. I know you’re growing up and growing apart from me in your

own way, and it's just something I can't understand; I want to be able to, but I probably never will, and for that I'm sorry.

“But I don't even really know enough to realize you're growing up; I just know something's happening, and it's something happening to you that will never happen to me. And that's okay, because you're becoming your own person, and to have all of those life experiences – experiences you only get with maturity – is a gift. But in a way, my condition is a wonderful gift too: I'll never have to go through the complicated things life unveils to you as you grow older. And I'm okay with that.

“Because all life is a gift – no matter what shape it takes. Everything is a blessing – even the suffering, even the hard things. Every moment we spend, every thought we have, every action we take is a beautiful, miraculous occurrence. We are the world's way of looking at itself, of speaking to itself. As individuals, we channel forces much greater than us, and we give the world a way of recognizing itself. And all you have to do is simply be who you are, no matter who that is.

“And yet, there are so few people who are happy with who they are or what they have and they try and accumulate more, hoping that things outside of themselves might, in some way, change them as individuals. But no matter what we have, it never changes who we really are. And unless we have faith there's no possibility of seeing this. And I'm not talking about faith in a god or in a religion – I'm

talking about faith in everything.

“We have to have faith that we are part of something ineffable and nameless, and that it puts us through countless trials in life, and we often don’t pass the tests. But we have to have faith that it’s only because we *do* fail that we’ll be able to realize our potential, and then go beyond it. And we have to realize that even the mere opportunity to be a part of these struggles is a gift; the struggle itself is a gift, and the suffering we incur from it – no matter how painful or seemingly meaningless it is – is a gift. Because no matter how bad or hopeless something might seem to us as individuals, there’s always something more that comes from it. We’re not pawns in some sort of cosmic game; we’re major contributors in the world’s recognition of itself in itself. And every life, every happening, and every form of consciousness compounds the innate meaning in everything; and it is all a gift.

“Everything is a gift – even if it doesn’t appear that way to us at first – we have to realize we are only part of a larger whole, and it’s a whole that is mutually beneficial, mutually nourishing. Even if the world seems to act entirely against us, it is there *for* us. The world is always providing for each and every parcel of its being; and that’s love. And we are intricate, indispensable parts of that love, and everything we do or think contributes to it and carries with it a meaning greater than we could ever imagine. No matter what capacities a person’s mind or body might hold, all hearts have the same unlimited

potential.

“Because, people are not their minds and their bodies alone; there’s something deeper inside of us, something impenetrable and unscathed by the world. It’s something that’s ours – each and every one of us – something that we have that nothing can touch, even if we, ourselves, can’t quite identify it for what it is. It’s something which shines through us and goes unseen and unrecognized most of the time. But it’s something known by all of us – something unspoken of and deep within us. But it *is* known, and it *is* there; and with it we can do anything we want, anything we wish to do. And I see it so clearly in you; because even if you’re not aware of it, you’ve shown it to me, again and again, and you’ve helped me to realize it in myself – and there’s no greater gift than that.

“So, thank you, Stevie; thank you for letting me see it. Thank you for being who you are and for treating me the way you do. Just know that although I’m not always able to express it, I am always able to *feel* it; and I always feel it, and I always know.”

Steven stood there in front of her, his mouth opened slightly. “. You’re welcome, Sarah. But thank *you*.” She smiled, stood, and embraced him tightly. When, finally, she pulled away, Steven kept her at arm’s length, clutched her by the shoulders, and looked at her. She was beautiful and still and she looked back at him affectionately. “So, what do we do now?” he asked.

“N-I n-wanna’ play-a witha’ n-Abbey wit’ n-you.”

Steven gave a laughing grunt. “Okay, what do you want to play?”

“N-let’s play n’house, n’ n-you can be da’ daddy ‘nd n-I’ll be da’ mommy, ‘nd n-Abbey can be da’ baby.”

“Okay, Sarah.”

And she picked up her doll and gave it to Steven, who looked at it in his hands. The Abbey-doll had gotten discernibly older, with marks of the years laced throughout its cloth skin and button eyes which stared off above the thread-woven smile it wore at all times. Aside from the wears of time, the Abbey-doll had never changed, and never really would. And as he held it there in his hands, Steven realized that something about its timelessness gave him his own sense of wonder and peace.

New Wheels II

The long spokes of the wheelchair reflected the light pouring into the hall and smattered it in a kaleidoscope pattern against the walls as Vincent came into the nursery.

Laurie stood with her arms folded and surveyed the room. “Hello, dear,” she said to him sweetly.

Vincent looked up at her from his chair. She looked heavy: Her midsection puffed outward like a round hill, and her face was red and plump, and it matched the swelling that ran downward to her breasts and arms and ballooned her feet when she stood for too long. “Hi,” he said back softly.

Laurie refocused, and extending a bloated finger said, “I think we’ll have the movers from the furniture store put the crib over there. What do you think?”

“Sounds good,” Vincent said, looking off in another direction.

“Do you like the color?”

“The color’s fine.”

“But you don’t love it.”

“I said I like it just fine.” Vincent rolled to the window to look outside. The early afternoon was highlighted in bright streaks of sunlight, making even the shadows on the ground appear a faded gray. He looked through the glassment like an inmate looks

beyond the fences of a county jail.

“Vince? Did you hear what I just said?”

Vincent shut his eyes, tightly closing them off to the scenery outside the window. “What’s that?” he asked.

“I said that the men from the store will be here soon and we need to mail the utility bill today.”

“Okay,” he said, looking back through the glass.

“Can you take the bill to the mailbox up the block, please? We missed our mailman at the house today, but the mailbox up the street doesn’t do a final pick-up until five o’clock.” Vincent didn’t react.

“Hello? Vincent?” Laurie prodded at him.

“I don’t know, Lor. Can’t you just wait and do it tomorrow or something?”

Laurie’s cadence changed from a gentle nudging to an unmistakable sternness, “Vincent, the men will be here any minute and they’re going to set up this room. That bill needs to be paid and it needs to be paid today. Now, I don’t remember the last time you left this house, but you have got to start doing it with some regularity and stop moping around all day looking out of damn windows.” It was a tone he had only heard from his wife in rare instances, and never once since the accident.

“So, what do you want me to do?” he said meekly.

“I want you to get yourself out of this house and go to the mailbox before the five o’clock pickup!” she nearly shouted at him, and her fattened cheeks

filled up even redder than before.

Like a scolded dog, Vincent wheeled himself out of the nursery and through the hall to the kitchen table where the bill was, reflecting kinetic light from his spokes all the way. Tucking the bill in his shirt pocket and putting on a pair of loafers, Vincent went out the garage door and down the grade of the plywood ramp. Coming out of the garage, the light which once danced off the twirl of his silver wheels was now enveloped by a bright ocean of afternoon sun. Vincent looked up and down the street; the quickest route to the mailbox went up a large hill, and though to avoid it he would have had only to go a few blocks out of his way, Vincent opted to attempt and climb it.

As he approached the hill, he saw some of the neighborhood children outside playing in the front yard of a white-trimmed house. When Vincent passed, they stopped their running and shouting and watched him roll by. Vincent glanced at them, flashing an uncomfortable smile. They were awestruck – especially the smallest one, who gawked at him frozenly, looking scared.

“Matt, Ryan, Heather,” a woman called from the front stoop, pretending not to notice Vincent. “Come on in here.” He rolled on, but not before hearing the woman explain that it was impolite to stare.

The hill was getting steeper and Vincent’s arms were beginning to burn and strain. He forced his wheels forward, pressing on for another quarter of

a block until he decided he needed a rest. Turning the chair to the side, he attempted to apply the brake, but the momentum of the turn carried him further than he'd intended, and he suddenly found himself sliding down the hill. The chair rumbled and accelerated, speeding faster across the pavement until a small pebble in the sidewalk threw Vincent from his seat, and he bounced like a tumbleweed across the road.

Sitting up as best he could, he examined the scrapes and bruises on his arms and rubbed his head feverishly. The chair had flipped and came to rest on its side with one wheel still spinning. The envelope had fallen out of his shirt pocket, and one of his loafers was missing.

"Are you okay, mister?" said a teenage boy who came running up to him.

Vincent nodded that he was alright, and the boy kindly attended to fetching the wheelchair a few yards away and brought it over. "I'm fine – I'm fine," Vincent said as the boy approached him, pushing the chair. "Just hold it steady," Vincent ordered. He lifted himself with his arms up to the base of the chair, "Hold it steady now – this godforsaken chair!" he cursed.

"Let me help you," said the boy, taking Vincent by the arm. But Vincent shook him off and tried to boost himself back into the seat, but was unable.

"Here," said the boy again, "let me help you."

"No!" Vincent shouted at the young man who

looked at him with surprise. “No,” Vincent said again, “I can do it myself.”

“I know you can; that’s exactly what I mean,” and the boy leaned up close, and whispered in his ear
.....

..... Vincent sat in the street like a statue as the boy gave a confident smile and walked off down the block. The wheelchair shone in the glistering sun, and Vincent fixed his eyes to it like a child watching a star fall to earth. He went to pull himself closer to the chair, and as he did, he felt a sharp pain ride up the back of his heel. He twitched, and with a flinch, turned his head away from the seat of the chair and to his foot, where blood bubbled from a shallow cut.

“No,” he said with astonishment. Vincent looked at his foot and ordered it to move; and ever so slowly, a toe wiggled cautiously as if was being dipped in cold water. Vincent looked at his foot and again commanded it to move, and it budged uneasily as if thawed from a long, dormant winter; this time the entire row of toes bent and cracked their joints, flexing the attached bones within the foot and bringing them just below the skin like the lift and fall of piano-hammers as the keys are pressed. His eyes became the size of eggs as Vincent gave his ankle a twist; a knee bent, and his thighs contracted below his waist. And with a spring and a push he lifted himself up and stood. “I don’t believe it!” he cried, and he gave a holler of excitement and paced around like a man trying on a pair of shoes. “I can walk,” he said

again, this time with quiet humility. Sturdy and strong, his legs stretched and bent under him, and he hopped off the ground shortly once, then higher. “Ah-ha!” he shouted, jogging a short sprint.

He ran to fetch the envelope which had fallen from his pocket, regathered his missing loafer, and jogged up the hill and to the mailbox. His lungs tingled and pulsed. From the mailbox he continued further across the neighborhood and into town. Never having ventured out on his own before, Vincent was mesmerized with the beauty and structure of the town. Everything seemed so perfectly placed: Each brick was cemented with the precision of a careful sculptor; the streets were lined with walnut trees and elm, oak trees and maples – all flowing rhythmically aside one another, block by block. All the shop windows were set up just so; and every line in the sidewalk lay at exact intervals as Vincent’s feet glided over them in light, easy steps.

Vincent came to an intersection where a car approached and stopped at the crosswalk urging him on. Smiling and waving, Vincent skipped across the street and took a turn at the next block and headed toward the park, running down the low grade of a small hill. “Wooo–hooo!” he shouted as he went running by the open banks of a pond in a full sprint, past a group of birds who squawked and hissed at him. He ran straight across the park and came out the other side, catching his breath in gasps and wheezes. “Amazing!” he said between pockets of his own breath. “Simply amazing!”

The names on the street signs were unfamiliar to Vincent as he passed them, but eventually he found the cross-street to his own and followed it to his neighborhood. 'How wonderful it all is!' he thought as he came into the garage, squeaking and rattling up the ramp. 'How wonderful.'

The door opened and Vincent came through it and into the kitchen. Mellow light invaded the house through the windows, and Vincent moved about, diffracting and spreading irradiate collages on the walls. He heard Laurie rustling in the nursery and went to her. "Hello," he said from outside the room.

She turned, "Oh my god!" she said with a yelp, "Look at you!" Vincent just smiled. "What happened to you?" Laurie asked, coming closer to get a better look. "Your wheel's bent and wobbly and you've broken a few spokes and – oh my god – your foot! Do you realize your foot is scraped and bleeding? Just look at you! Look at your chair! Honey, are you alright? What happened?"

Vincent's smile curved even further up his cheeks, "Well," he started, "I had a fall. Down that hill on Sycamore Street, I think. Anyway, I couldn't quite make it up the hill and started rolling backwards and fell out of my chair."

Laurie gasped again and knelt beside him, tenderly stroking his head, "Oh, my poor baby! I should have never sent you out there. I'm so sorry."

"No, no," Vincent said with assurance, "I fell, but I got back in my chair. Luckily someone helped me up." He paused for a moment in thought, "And

even though my chair was bent up and I was a bit bruised myself, I felt okay. I felt real good, actually.”

“You felt good?” his wife said, warping her face tightly.

“I did. I wheeled myself all the way into town, and then to the park and found my way back here. Oh, and I got the bill to the mailbox too,” he winked.

Laurie looked at him straight in the eyes as she kneeled at the side of the beaten-up wheels of her husband’s chair. “I’m just glad you’re okay.” And she kissed him on the temple.

“Come on,” Vincent said as he sat in his chair and spun its wheels in reverse.

“Where are we going?”

“I thought we’d take a walk.”

And they did – with the light gleaming and sparkling from Vincent’s magnificent wheels all the way.

About Andrea II

The front door popped and sprang and gave a screechy creak as it swung through the breezeway on rusty-gold hinges. A wind-gush burst into the house. A set of keys dangled from the lock for a moment before they were pulled from the slot and placed into a ceramic bowl on the console table with a loud clank. A pile of mail lay beneath the chute on the floor, and a pair of hands scooped down and fumbled through it finger to thumb: A service message from the gas company, a pre-approved credit card advertisement, a pay stub, a bank statement, and a small white-laced letterhead addressed to Andrea.

Sam held the letter in his hands and placed it on top of the others; flipping the envelope over, the return address was stamped in black ink from a post office box in the city, but Sam didn't bother to open it. With a turn of his wrist, he again stared at the name for what seemed like a long while before walking over to the wastepaper basket in the kitchen to cast it in with the other debris.

Sam made himself a small dinner and ate in the blaring silence of the house, which was occasionally interrupted by the light pings of his fork against the emptying plate. He then rinsed the dish in a fountain of tap water and let it soak within the sink.

Sam kicked around the house, shuffling from

room to room. He sat in the large armchair in the den and paged through an old magazine. He rustled past a clutter of dusty boxes in the basement. He organized some papers on top of the desk in the study and put them into collated piles. The kitchen looked used and untidy as he passed by it, so he cleaned his soaking plate with a lanky sponge and let it air-dry in the plastic holder next to the sink. The water spots on the bathroom mirror were removed; the candles in the drawers of the armoire were reorganized.

Passing a row of pictures in the hall, he noticed one frame was tilted slightly and stopped to adjust it. The photo was of a sun setting over the beach, with red rays coming off the horizon like slender threads from a spool. It was one of the only pictures Sam had ever taken which had come out well enough to have been passed off as professional, and to look at it made him think of Andrea. He thought about taking the picture and storing it in one of the large, unlabeled boxes in the basement, but with a sigh, he gave the frame a press of his hand and re-centered it against the wall.

The garbage can in the kitchen was full, and the letter addressed to Andrea stuck out on top of it like a large paper barb; so Sam took up the plastic bag lining the inside of the can, tied it in a knot at the top, and brought it to the street.

The night was softening. Easy touches of a warm wind floated with the air.

Sam placed the garbage on the street, but as he started back to the house, he heard something his ears could not distinguish. He stopped to listen.

Low-pitched and trembling, something hummed sonorously, droning through the quiet streets of the neighborhood. It came closer with a gaining roar, like a train car coming down a track, or a pair of giant roller skates planing on a gravelly road. Sam turned to look up the street.

There in the shadowy distance, a large object bumped and growled its way down the small hill of the road like a boulder tumbling through a mountain pass. He watched closer as the object came toward him. “Woooo!” yelled a voice out of the rolling jumble. And with a whisk of air, a man in a wheelchair came burning by like a shallow comet. The street flattened out at Sam’s driveway and both the man and his chair slowed to a stop with the squeak of a brake-pad and an eruption of laughter. The man in the chair turned around and headed back in Sam’s direction. “That was too fun not to do again,” he said as he passed Sam’s folded arms.

“It looked like it,” Sam said, half amused. “I think I could use some fun like that myself.”

“Oh?” said the man in the chair, “well, I could lend you my iron chariot here,” he said, patting the chair.

“That’s okay,” Sam said with a quarter smile.

“Then how about a little push?”

Sam reluctantly got behind the chair and took hold of the two rubber grips which fanned out from

the back and began pushing the man up the hill. “So, do you always go barreling down the hills and streets of Dolor’s End in the night?” Sam asked sarcastically.

“No,” the man laughed. “My first time. Though I think I’ll have to do it more often.”

Sam became slightly more agitated with every inclining foot. ‘What am I doing pushing a grown man up a hill so he can ride back down it like child on a sled?’ he thought.

“Beautiful night,” the man in the wheelchair continued. Sam gave a sigh and agreed. “You sound sad,” the man pried as they reached the top of the hill.

Sam forced a laugh, “We can’t all be rolling balls of joy,” he said mockingly, though he was immediately sorry he had.

“No,” agreed the man, “not rolling ones anyway,” and he laughed easy and sincerely.

“What’s your secret?” Sam asked, trying to sound apologetic.

The man turned his shoulder, “Funny you should ask,” and he motioned for Sam to lean in. He did so, and the man whispered into his ear

. Standing up straight, Sam looked light-headed and faint, as if he might topple over with a slight gust. The man in the wheelchair smiled big at him and he spun his wheels around and took off down the hill in a rush of laughter.

Spelled with awe, Sam took drifting steps back home. Once inside, he stood in the breezeway and tilted his ear to the bowels of the house as though he

were listening for a sound. He whirled around in a circle, looking lost and confused. With a sudden dart, he fled into the kitchen – but nothing was there except for the dish drying in the rack beside the sink and an emptied garbage can. Dashing to the study, only stacks of neatly collated papers greeted him. Rapidly, he hurtled up to the bedroom, but there he found only a vacant bed, made and primed just the way he'd left it. As he came downstairs and back through the hall he looked disillusioned, like a child who'd hoped for a gift that never arrived.

Entering the hallway, he noticed the picture he had straightened before going outside was again hanging lopsided on the wall. He approached and leveled it. Though, in the midst of doing so he paused. "Of course!" he whispered excitedly with wide eyes. "Of course!"

* * * * *

The wind was cold and immediate, blowing steadily off the opening of the waters. The tide pummeled the grainy-beige shoreline like wet thunder. As he walked, salt mists caromed through the air and filled his lungs. He crossed the parking lot and trudged through the sand halfway to the water, stopping to look down the inky seascape.

There she was.

She seemed unaware as Sam approached, shuffling about the shoreline and looking out beyond the waves. He was close now – not more than a few feet – and he could see her eyes as they glistened in the silver sheen of the moon. “Hello, Andrea,” he said humbly.

Haloed by starlight, she smiled in a familiar way at the sound of his voice before turning to him. “Hello.” Her voice was as like music careening from an open window.

He sighed with a smile, “I miss you I really miss you.”

“I know,” she said, and took his hand in hers and rubbed it sweetly. She tugged at his arm and encouraged him to walk with her, and he did – two sets of sand prints trailing.

The water nibbled at their feet and they walked in a comfortable silence before talking kindly to one another in low, steady voices. Before long they were laughing and joking, running through the tide and calling out after each other. They picked up shells and watched the sky, threw stones into the waves and felt the wind cross their faces.

They walked for quite a way, and after a while Sam became tired and wanted to rest. “Let’s stay here,” he said to Andrea with a smile.

All at once the joy dropped from her face, and in its place was a dour, hapless stare. She looked with wistful eyes to the direction they had been walking, and then reset her gaze on Sam, who looked back at her with the same somber glance. “I can’t,” she said,

touching his face.

“I know.” He held the cold skin of her hand to his cheek and kissed it. “I love you,” he said with a sad smile.

“I know,” and she retook his hand in hers and squeezed it. “I’ll always know. And that will always be here; it doesn’t have to leave with me. That’s yours. And it will always be yours.” And with a final look as she let his hand break away from her own, she turned and continued walking.

Sam watched her go as she dwindled into the dark of the berm, blending with the shore and the water. And when she had faded out of sight, he again felt the cold breezes as they whipped in bellows around his head.

Sighing, he looked off to the direction in which Andrea had gone; nothing was there.

So, with a turn, he started back the way they’d come.

Their prints were still fresh – stamped perfectly into the sand – and as he passed them, he remembered each one. ‘Here we laughed,’ he thought to himself with a smile. ‘Here we held hands. Here we were quiet. Here we threw stones. Here we ran?’

The Reprobates III

The grasses of the paddock burgeoned with a greenish tint under the cloudless morning sky. Shuffling through the dust outside the coupe, a rooster pecked at the leftover scraps of cornmeal that had been scattered from the feed the evening before. It clucked and hung its head low, perusing for an extra morsel of grain or a small bug to snack on before breakfast.

With a steaming cup of coffee in his hand, Dale Pembroke watched as the bird's neck weaved and bobbed, puncturing the earth with its beak as it scoured along the ground-boards of the empty stables. Pembroke took a long sip from his coffee and placed it on the banister of the porch. He fed what few hens and roosters had survived the cold winter of heavy snows and dog attacks and watched them eat with his hands against his hips.

Noticing a fallen plank of wood jutting from the fence like a broken thumb, he grabbed a hammer and some nails from the shed and went around fixing all the loose boards and wobbly stakes which enclosed the pasture and the corral.

As he rehitched a rotting post to a cross-board on the far side of the paddock fence, something caught his eye: There in the meadow, just beyond the perimeter of his property, grazed a large drove of sheep.

Pembroke rubbed his chin and watched them for a while before leaving the fence, reemerging with a large bag of meal slung over his shoulder. He opened the gate to the pasture and walked into the meadow where the sheep stood grazing and spread the grain at their feet. He then made a thin trail with what he had left, leading it back to the unlatched gate, and spread the remainder of the oats at the opening of the fence and into the pasture. When the bag was emptied, he went to the barn and retrieved another, but this time he filled the troughs until they overflowed and then filled the water pails in the stables with buckets he harvested from the well. 'There,' he thought, brushing his hands together. 'Now they can eat it if they want, or not if they don't'.

The rest of that day Pembroke watched as sheep came in and out of the pasture through the open gate to come and go as they pleased. Later on that night as he was getting ready for bed, he heard the wail of wild dogs in the distance. Out his window, some sheep had gathered in the stable to lie under the warm roof and in the hay. A single healthy-looking calf walked out of the fallow through the gate and into the far away night.

'Tomorrow I'll begin to plant,' Pembroke thought. 'I don't reckon that dogs take much to sweet corn and soy.'

And with that, he tucked himself into bed and slept.

A Full Circle

Deep in the forest, the trees verdantly colored their limbs with tiny blooms. Small flowers grew around the stony slopes of the mountains.

At the monastery, smoke from a fire rose in plumes and touched the sky, mixing with the clouds in amorphous white puffs. Sitting at the edge of the burn, Abbott watched as the fire feasted on a hot banquet of twigs and logs.

From the living quarters, a hooded monk walked toward the fire and came to Abbott's side. Abbott looked at him with the same eyes he gave the fire. "So, Abbott," he said softly, "what do you think?"

Abbott smiled and turned his attention back to the fireside. "I think you may have been right after all; maybe the world *is* ready to hear the truth you and I know. Maybe it's been ready to hear it for some time now – or maybe it's always been ready to hear it and we've foolishly tried to keep it hidden. Obviously, this is what the Orphic wanted all along, or else it never would have put those thoughts in your head about leaving the monastery in the first place. And it never would have instructed you to come back and create the town or have allowed such a division amongst the brotherhood. But by doing it that way – rather than just giving us an order to create a town

and disperse the Vim within it – it allowed for us to discover the natural abilities of people to work with the Vim, and it allowed us to rediscover the secret in a new way for ourselves. And besides, who are we to keep the secret from anyone who wants to know it?”

The monk let his hood fall around his shoulders revealing his face; it was Deo. “I’m not so sure we have much of a choice anyway,” Deo said lightly. “The Orphic never ceases to amaze me with its plans and schemes. I was so confused and afraid when it instructed me to leave the monastery, and I was afraid to come back. But those fears paled in comparison to how scared I was when I learned what Kyler would have to do to me in order for the Orphic’s plan to work fully. I wondered if the Orphic would really protect me like it promised; I had no idea if the Orphic would actually sacrifice me or just make me appear dead to Kyler. But I followed its instructions exactly – every step of the way – from the moment I left the monastery to the moment the bullet entered my body. I put my complete faith in it, just like you told me to so many times over the years.

“But to be honest, for a while after the Orphic and I had set up the town, I thought it was just using me without caring about what would happen to me – or to any of us – personally. At times I fooled myself into thinking that the Orphic had its own agenda, and that it had abandoned me, forgotten about me. Sometimes the things that the Orphic does can seem unfair to us before we realize the entirety of its plan – a plan which we can only see if we put our

full faith within it. Sometimes I forget that it's not that the Orphic uses us or that we use it, but that we draw from and support each other equally."

"I've said something like that before," Abbott remarked. "But to do what you did took courage, Eli. It meant going against nearly everything all of the brothers had told you. It meant following your faith in the Orphic and its plan; and even though none of us – including you – understood it completely, that faith brought you, and the rest of us, through."

Behind Deo came the other monks, all of whom took their places around the fire and stood noiselessly as Abbott arose. The brothers looked at him with venerated attention, like eager soldiers awaiting a general's orders.

Abbott cast his eyes around the circle to each monk, and then to Deo, and ever so gently, turned the corner of his mouth upwards and smiled.

Epilogue

Inside, the manor was completely still.

The rooms were empty of everything but their decorations: Artwork hung on the walls like small portholes. Velvet drapes ribboned the windows next to finely carved table-ends and ottomans. The individual chards of a chandelier floated over an elaborately woven rug.

Kyler drifted about the long halls and lifeless rooms, pacing aimlessly, filling the manor with the shuffles of his own tired footsteps. With every step he took, Kyler knew he was alone.

The elegance of the estate seemed dull to him, and he found himself daydreaming as he wandered through it: He thought of his small country house before Dolor's End had sprung up around it. He could hear the blowing of the wind in the tall prairie grasses and smell the wet fields after a rain flooded over the surface. He thought of the town and of the woods, and of the Orphic, and the Vim which whispered through his mind like a beautiful song he kept replaying in the music of his memory.

With a snap of his fingers or a blink of an eye he could be walking through the city, or overseas, or in distant times, or back in his own comfortable home – before Deo, before the town But his fingers did not move, and his eyes made no blinks, and he

regained his presence and found himself alone, coming through the long halls and empty rooms of the manor.

He went to the large picture window overlooking the front lawn. The willow swayed and danced its creaking boughs to the rhythms of the wind, and instead of simply imagining himself below its reedy branches and appearing there, he took the time to walk to it, mindful and quiet in every motion.

From the tree he ventured to the end of the driveway and decided to take the obscured roadway from the house all the way into town. He passed buildings and streets corners, houses and sidewalks, trees and open yards, an alleyway, a school, people, life.

As he approached the park, he saw a flock of geese by the pond and began walking toward them. Passing by park benches and picnic tables, ballfields and playgrounds, he came upon a small girl talking to herself as she built grainy sculptures in a sandbox next to the swing set. He recognized her instantly, "Hello there," he said politely.

"Hello," said the girl, looking up from her packing and digging in the sand.

"What are you making?"

"A town."

"Are you feeling better?" Kyler asked.

"Yes," she said, still packing and sculpting the sand.

Kyler nodded at her and grinned, "Well, have a nice day."

But before he could walk away the little girl called after him, “Hey, mister, wanna know something? It’s a secret.”

Kyler came toward her, still grinning. She motioned for him to come closer, and when he did he leaned into her and she whispered into his ear

. Kyler arose with a chuckle, “It’s funny,” he said, “but I already know that.”

“Yeah,” the little girl said, going back to her work, “I think everybody knows it. They just forget sometimes.”

“I think you’re right,” Kyler said, smiling at her before walking off across the park and into town.

Coming to the village square, Kyler found a seat in the gazebo and watched as the bright blue eyes of a beautiful woman darted away from him as she passed. Down the block, children coming home from school bounded with excitement. A man stopped to pick up a loose dollar wedged in the sidewalk. A car of teenagers drove by playing the radio loudly. An elderly couple sat hand-in-hand at a café on the corner. Two men walked up the street in conversation. The entire town brimmed and flowed in orchesis, and Kyler watched it all closely and for a long time.

As the final slivers of light fell below the earth’s subtle edge, Kyler walked back the way he’d come, taking along with him the memories of the

shop windows, and the feel of the warm wind as it coursed through the neighborhood streets and met with his face.

When he arrived back at the estate it looked vacant and cold from the outside; so instead of going back in, Kyler made his way to the labyrinth and walked its corridors, intentionally getting lost on the way. When, finally, he did reach the center, he continued on, climbing the low grade of the foothill until it reached a fork in the path. Making the turn, he came through to the clearing of the bald – which had begun to teem with its own organic signs of spring – and he stood tall on the rock overlooking the crystalizing lights of the town.

As Kyler looked at the valley, the secret echoed once again within him and he thought of it repeatedly and how, in knowing it, the randomness of the world seemed unimportant – softened somehow by a deeper significance.

Kyler closed his eyes. He thought of the town and of the way the shop windows looked in the refracting light, how the trees lined the streets in perfect formations, how the people looked as they walked by the village square. He thought of his old home and of the farmland beyond it, and of the monastery, and of Abbott and the other monks, and the estate and the willow in the lawn, and the labyrinth, the pathway, Deo, the bald, and the secret.

He thought of it all as he looked out onto the valley, and drawing in a breath, shouted out the secret

as loudly as he could. The words echoed off the valley walls, and Kyler's heart swelled with a fullness he never thought possible.

And closing his eyes, one by one, all of his thoughts began to leave him:

He erased Deo from his mind and forgot how his old home looked and felt before it had become part of the town. He let go of his memories about the old farmland and the people who lived there. The image of the shop windows left him, so too did the feel of the wind as it came through the streets. And the park benches and the geese and the pond were gone – and the estate too – and the willow and the labyrinth, the monastery and the monks, the path, the bald, the town, the villagers, and the valley itself. Even the secret dropped away and out of his mind until there was nothing left

. And he opened his eyes

