

THE SONG THE BIRDS FORGOT

A NOVEL BY
RICHARD BOROVSKY

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Quote from Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tse, translated by Lin Yutang.

Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms, An Interpretation by William Q.
Judge. The Theosophy Company. Los Angeles, California. 1973

Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, by Edwin Abbott
Abbott. 1884

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To charioteers of every sort

The Nameless is the Origin heaven and Earth.
The Named is the Mother of All Things.

Therefore:

Oftentimes, one strips oneself of passion
in order to see the Secret of Life;

Oftentimes, one regards life with passion
in order to see its Manifest Forms.

Lao Tse

“If you want to get divine, get personal”

Emily Gold-Finch

Also by Richard Borovsky
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A PEACEABLE KINGDOM
THREE OF HEARTS

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PART I

THE SKY-BLUE QUILT

That last day with Trixie was in 1999. We were picnicking in the park and she was wearing a white summer dress with nothing underneath it. It was late May. It was my thirtieth birthday, and I was full of myself. When Trixie stood up in the hot wind that was blowing that day, she was a sight to be seen.

“Stay like that,” I said. “You’re gorgeous.”

She hiked her dress up over her knees and tiptoed around me on the grass. “Like the Fairy Queen?”

“Yes... like Titania.”

“Titania,” she said, striking a dreamy pose.

We’d finished our lunch: cheese, sausage, bread and Champagne and were a little drunk—we must have been drunk to be going on about “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” a play we’d both seen for the first time the night before. We weren’t the Shakespearean theater-going type. This wasn’t Midsummer but it might have been. It was a hot day. This wasn’t a dream, however: we were wide awake, at least in the conventional sense, we were.

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“So if I’m the beautiful Queen Titania, that would make you Oberon, the King, right? Or would you be that man who was turned into a donkey, or was it an ass?”

“Speaking of asses,” I said, but as I reached up to stroke hers, she sat down with a kind of plop on the sky-blue quilt she’d brought along with the picnic basket. She was beaming like a full moon.

“What?” I asked.

“Let’s get another bottle of Champagne and stay here all night.”

“I don’t think they allow that,” I answered. “Not here, right by the zoo and the conservatory. If we wanted to do it, we’d have to find somewhere we could hide—like the Rookery. That could be fun.”

“No, that won’t do. I meant by all these flowers. Why don’t we try? If we create the right state of mind and think more subtly than everyone else, we could be invisible. You could.”

“Me? Invisible?” I laughed. “Me?” I took off my sunglasses, beamed at her, and put them back on. We had laid out our quilt between two long, luxuriant flower beds next to the Lincoln Park Conservatory and directly in front of the Zoo, close to the statue of Schiller, the German poet and dramatist; and not that far from the Shakespeare statue just across the street. Not only were we in the middle of things, but it was the first hot Sunday of the season. We were surrounded by late tulips, yellow and gold; hot pink petunias and pansies in red, magenta and deep purple. We were in a milling sea of people: multi-colored parents with multi-colored children; lovers, holding hands and not; packs of teenagers, ruly and un; oldsters, firm and infirm; people alone, some lonely, some not; and other picnickers too, but probably none as deeply in love as we.

“Sure, I’m willing,” I said, feeling the bubbly. “But I don’t want to give up this spot. One of us will have to stay. I know a liquor store over on Clark Street. I’ll go if you like.” This was the north side of Chicago, close to Lake Michigan.

“Couldn’t we *summon* someone with Champagne?”

“You mean like the Fairy Queen again...? Or giving a homeless guy fifty bucks and ask him to buy us a bottle of the good stuff and keep the change?”

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“A trustworthy homeless guy?”

I looked at Trixie dubiously. “Let’s wait ten minutes, okay? If we see someone that fits that description, we’ll give it a shot. Otherwise, I’ll go and leave you here to fend for yourself. Or you can go and I’ll sit and pine for you. Is that bottle completely empty?”

Trixie, sitting cross-legged, poured the last little bit, took a sip and left one for me. “You’ve never had occasion to pine,” she said. “I’d like to see that.”

I ignored her. “You know,” I said, “there should be a governmental post filled by exclusively lovers. A high one. A cabinet post. They should have the final say on all decisions regarding human welfare. Like mothers, you know...who should be the only ones with the power to declare war?”

“What happens if they fall out of love?”

“No, that’s not it. It would be a revolving position. There’d be no shortage of fresh lovers, so there’d be a term limit, a short one. Maybe two weeks, because it wouldn’t matter who the people were, just so they had the juices flowing. They’d radiate good will. People in love are all alike—didn’t some writer say something about that? Or was it happy families?”

Trixie shrugged. “What about people who stayed in love forever?”

“Tough luck. They’d have to relinquish power just like everyone else.”

“So how would the lovers be chosen? Would we qualify? Would there be a test? And are you looking?”

“I’m looking. I haven’t seen any prospects yet. And of course we’d qualify. We’d be the *lovers exemplar*. The position would be named after us. We’d be mythic. And I don’t know the selection process. I haven’t figured that part out yet. But in a world that had a ministry of love, someone would devise a way to choose the lovers.”

Trixie uncrossed her legs, leaned forward, hands and knees on the quilt, and put her face close to mine. She smelled of Champagne and expensive perfume. “And what about in a world like this? Who guarantees our welfare?”

I kissed her lightly. “In this world, we fend for ourselves.”

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I left five minutes later to buy another bottle of cold Champagne. When I returned to the park, the picnic basket and the sky-blue quilt were gone. So was Trixie—my true love, my artistic collaborator, my partner in adventure. Vanished.

§

I hadn't been gone for more than twenty minutes. The spot where Trixie and I had been picnicking was occupied by a family of five. They were unpacking a picnic basket of their own. They were speaking Spanish. Trixie was nowhere in sight.

"Excuse me," I said. "Did you see where the woman went who was sitting here?"

Though they looked sympathetically at me, they didn't appear to understand. I tried the little Spanish I had and seemed to convey my question, but the man answered that they'd just arrived and had seen no lady in a white dress. He seemed sorry to have disappointed me. Then their two children started to interrupt but were silenced sternly by the father. He apologized for their behavior, but his apology felt like it carried a heavy weight. He was speaking more meaningfully than he realized.

I looked around at the sea of people in the park. Bright summer colors: reds, yellows, oranges, whites; the scents of flowers, sunscreen. The wheels of circumstance were turning. I felt the friction of the interlocking gears, but I had no choice. I did what anyone would do.

"HELLO!" I shouted. "HELLO-O! DID ANYONE SEE WHERE THE WOMAN IN THE WHITE DRESS WENT? THE WOMAN WHO WAS HERE? ANYONE?"

My voice sounded thin in the bustle of the hot, windy day. Radios were playing; children shouting. Among those who were walking, not many stopped. A few looked at each other; some looked at me—but only for a moment before they shook their heads or shrugged and walked away, off along the flower beds. Of those who were sitting in the grass, some looked up at me but most did not. It was a few moments before somebody got up and approached me. He was in no hurry. He'd been sitting with a girl and looked like he was still in high school. He wore a black tank top; a dagger tattoo on his left shoulder. He seemed sullen.

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"I saw a lady in a white dress going that way," he said, pointing toward the entrance to the zoo and looking at me dubiously. "Why? You lose her?"

I didn't feel like I owed him an explanation. "How long ago?" I asked.

"Fifteen minutes, maybe."

"Was she carrying a basket and a blue quilt?"

"I dunno, mister. I dunno what she was carrying. Why? She your wife?"

"Toward the zoo?" I asked.

He pointed; his look dismissive.

"Thank you," I said, and strode off in that direction.

There was a pause. "Hey! Fuck her for me, mister," he called after me. "And fuck you too!"

§

Four years earlier, I learned that Trixie was a musician interested in my work. Though I was trained in sculpture, I'd turned my artistic energies to kinetic art: the design and construction of mobiles, in the tradition of the great Alexander Calder, the inventor of the mobile, and the undisputed master thereof. My work was inspired by a famous Calder work named "The Streetcar." As in all mobiles, the flat, suspended pieces in Calder's, "The Streetcar," were powered by the moving air currents in the room—in this case, a gallery in the Art Institute of Chicago. But this mobile was unique: among the balanced, hanging pieces, was a metal plate and a clapper, which occasionally came together, sounding like a streetcar bell. With this in mind, it occurred to me that mobiles could be designed to sound a number of tones, in patterns both random and pre-determined: visually pleasing works of art that would compare to a wind chime as an automobile does to a bicycle; a complex musical instrument powered by indoor breezes, currents and drafts. It was Trixie's knowledge of musical scales and chordal possibilities that led to our initial collaboration and contributed to the creation of a number of complex, polyphonic mobiles. We had worked together on the most ambitious of them all, the culmination of our work, a work just completed that May: a three-story-high, multi-tiered musical mobile, the installation of which we were soon to direct in a

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museum atrium: a kinetic instrument with forty gleaming, ovoid metal plates and chimes, and a dozen shades of iridescent blue and hints of sunlight yellow.

§

It was the animals' eyes that disturbed me most as I entered the zoo. I'd begun to run. People also stared at me: they stared as I stopped and shouted out, as I asked if anyone had seen a woman in a white dress, a woman with a picnic basket and a sky-blue quilt. Some people backed away from me, some shrugged and shook their heads, but the animals heard the concern in my voice—because according to reason, this was impossible. Trixie and I were deeply in love: wholly and eternally committed. Nothing in our history predicted this separation. This was not abandonment. It was a vanishing.

It was the eyes of the hoofed animals that particularly distressed me; it was they—as prey—that sensed my alarm most deeply. The eyes of the elegant, silky vicunas, alert to threatening turns of circumstance; the eyes of the tall, spiral horned kudus who scattered at my approach and peered at me from a distance; the frightened eyes of the white-tailed deer, the antelopes and the delicate gazelles; the baleful dark eyes of the one, imposing oryx, with its long, straight, sharp horns; and the eyes of the zebras, running together, muscles rippling, looking at me warily.

I'd run and walked rapidly down all the paths and through all the houses. The zoo was small: it had taken a half-an-hour at my pace, and I was soaked in sweat when I came to the end of the path at the far north end of the zoo. There was only the Rookery left to search, but I knew with a numb certainty that Trixie wouldn't be there either.

The Zoo Rookery was a place with an air of enchantment we'd visited often together. An over-grown, dark, untended place, the Rookery was a refuge for waterfowl and humans as well. Never crowded and always shady and cool, its flagstone paths led around ponds and a waterfall under massive trees and thick shrubbery. Ducks of all sorts and swans swam in the still water that mirrored the greens of the trees. People sat, often alone, on stone benches and steep banks. There were places to hide in the Rookery.

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I stopped running when I entered, sat down on jutting stone overhang and closed my eyes as my pulse slowed and I caught my breath. I couldn't shout there; I couldn't break the spell by the green-black cool of the lily pond. As I'd run, questions had battered me. All the dead-end questions, all the toxic ones in every form and permutation: all the *whys*, all the *hows*, all the heart-breakers. They knocked, they hammered at me, but gained no admittance. That much I'd learned. There was no point. I knew too much. It was only when I'd calmed myself a little, and shed those shards of desperation, that I leaned back and looked skyward. I felt both immense and minute. My arms, rigid behind me; my hands pressing down on the damp stone, my head thrust back, what I saw seemed inevitable. In the topmost branches of an oak there flapped what I first thought was a flag—a huge one, blue and white? Or blue and yellow? A Swedish flag? But, no. That wasn't it: the white I saw was the white of the clouds and the yellow was the sun. The flag was just blue, like the sky. And it wasn't a flag. It was the quilt, Trixie's sky-blue quilt: it was flying high and alone from atop a towering oak, the single tallest tree in the Rookery on that hot windy day in May. I stood up and stared for only a few moments: it made more sense than one might think.

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As it turns out, I'm not your typical modern man. Far from it. It's my intent, for example, to live to be a-hundred-and-fifty—that would be until the year 2119. Once that milestone is reached, I might choose to continue on, or then again, I might not. I really can't say. To assume I know how I'll view life and the world at that point would be foolish. Too foolish, I'd wager, to give me much of a chance of seeing my hundred-and-fiftieth birthday.

I hatched my plan on the eve of my twenty-first. At that age, the future seemed boundless, so in order to convince myself that I had something truly extraordinary ahead of me, I decided to adopt a radical new belief: namely, that I'd double my lifespan, that I'd outlive my contemporaries by seventy-five years. A belief, I felt at the time, that would alter even the perspective of a twenty-one-year-old. I had a lot of nerve, you see; and some foresight too. To cement my decision, audacious as it was, I also resolved to repeat it every morning when I awoke, and to do that every day *as long as I lived*, but not to resort to any other extraordinary measures to prolong my life.

If, for instance, I decided to become a vegetarian out of a distaste for meat or for moral or political reasons, I'd do it; but if, on the other hand, a longevity guru assured me that reducing my pulse rate, becoming celibate or adding morning glory seeds to my diet would add years to my life, I'd probably tell him to get lost, unless his suggestion appealed to me. What I *have* done, however, is this. From the age of twenty-one on, I've told myself, daily and emphatically, that since everyone on earth expects to live roughly seventy-five years, everyone on earth does. Change the expectation,

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change the life span—and, as I learned, a great deal more as well, most of it unexpected, some of it what most people would call *su-u-u-u-upernatural*.

My name is Jason Aeneas Finch—an improbable middle name, given to me by improbable parents. My father, Phineas Finch, Professor of Classics, wasn't only in love with my beautiful mother, Emily Gold, but believed she was a goddess. Not a goddess as in Marilyn Monroe or Sophia Loren or other heavenly movie stars of his day—no, he was convinced she was *an actual divine being*. It was never clear to me how he accounted for her unexceptional birth to Jewish parents, Jules and Ethel Gold, at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Chicago, in 1939; he probably had an explanation, but I've never known quite how to ask about that. In any case, I was given the middle name Aeneas since the original Aeneas, the hero immortalized in Virgil's "Aeneid," was born of a mortal man (presumably my father) and the Greek Goddess of Love, Aphrodite (my mother.) My first name, too, comes from ancient Greek lore, so one might say that I came into this world mythologically loaded.

My memories of my mother (Emily Gold-Finch) are sadly dim and few. I remember her dark eyes and have a sense of her presence, languid and resplendent. I remember pulling on her hand when she walked with me, and I remember how she read to me for hours, leaning back, propped up on pillows on her bed. I remember the phrase "rosy-fingered dawn," so she must have been reading Homer's *Odyssey*. I also remember her playing the piano. She was an accomplished pianist and the very sound of classical piano music summons up her memory. And I remember jewelry: necklaces, earrings, bracelets and rings; silver and turquoise.

She disappeared when I was three, wandering off into the woods behind a rented cottage on Castle Rock Lake in northern Wisconsin. According to police records, her footprints were traced for a quarter mile into the forest where they inexplicably stopped; something fitting for a goddess, but not for a Jewish woman from the north side of Chicago. As far as I know, Jewish women from Chicago rarely go off into the woods at all, and never vanish into thin air. There were no other footprints, human or animal, near the sight of her disappearance, however. Stunned and bereft as my father was, my mother's disappearance didn't surprise him,

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something I now understand, in retrospect at least. His reaction led the police to suspect he had some part in it, but without motive or evidence, no charges were brought. I can only imagine the interrogation.

Tall and thin, with a narrow, jolly face, someone said my father resembles Andrew Jackson in a good mood. My father is an eccentric man, so much so that those who don't know him well might question his sanity. Along with his renown as a classical scholar, he's well versed in many other disciplines, from the etymological to the entomological. He's still beloved by his colleagues; his students found him an inspiring speaker—some say an “orator”—yet he insisted on keeping his grey parrot, Euripides, on his shoulder while lecturing; he still speaks aloud to himself in full voice whenever the urge strikes him; he takes notes in ballpoint pen on his hand, forearms, shirtsleeves or any accessible portable surface (once his forehead, with the help of a mirror), sometimes at great length; and frequently falls into an abstracted trance from which he snaps out unable to remember whether he is (literally) coming or going. Though he's never been diagnosed, I suspect his great powers of concentration and oratory gift come with a certain deficit. Before her disappearance, I'm told my mother called him regularly every day to remind him to eat lunch and then again to come home after his classes were finished. After her death, his colleagues at the university took on this responsibility; they willingly led him to the cafeteria, saw that he (and his parrot) found a taxi at day's end and accepted other tasks to steady him and protect him from harm.

Some might say I needed protection as well; not from physical or emotional abuse, but from neglect: and it's true that beginning at the age of three, my independence bordered on neglect, but such a friendly and bountiful neglect that no one who understood it could possibly object.

You see, I was a privileged child. At three, I had the run of a large, three story Victorian house, a great unmown, fenced-in back yard and a wildly unkempt garden. I fed myself. I ate fruit and learned to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and pour glasses of milk. I also knew how to make ham sandwiches and developed an early liking for horseradish mustard, an unusual favorite among children three to five. I ate when I was hungry and only then, but

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whenever my father saw me eating, he dropped his books or dropped his papers or stopped talking to himself and sang me a sandwich song—either a peanut butter and jelly song:

*Peanut butter and jelly on bread,
Will cure the sick and raise the dead.
Hide a sandwich under your bed,
And you'll grow begonias on top of your head!*

Or a ham and mustard song:

*Frog's foot pie and toad's foot custard
Aren't half as healthy or half as good
As ham on rye with horseradish mustard!*

Then he sat down with me and filled my head with classical myths as I filled my stomach.

I never ate alone, and as I ate, I remember hearing how once in ancient Greece on Mount Pelion, a man dressed as a slave laid a tiny child at the feet of Chiron, the king of the centaurs. “A centaur,” my father explained, “was a fabulous creature—and I’ll tell you some day what *fabulous* means—but a centaur is half-horse and half man. Chiron had a horse’s four legs but arms like the strongest warrior; the hair on his man’s head flowed back like a horse’s mane and his beard grew all the way down over his powerful horse’s chest, and as King of the Centaurs, he possessed the wisdom of the Gods. When the slave laid the baby at the great, spear-bearing centaur’s feet, the slave asked him, in the name of his king, Aeson of Iolcus, to raise and foster the child as he had fostered the greatest of all heroes, the mighty Heracles. I’ll tell you about Heracles later, son,” my father said. “But do you know what the child’s name was, the child who was brought to Chiron on Mount Pelion?”

Of course I had no idea.

“His name was Jason—just like you.”

I don’t remember my reaction to this. I’m not sure if I knew that more than one person could have the same name. I assume that I took my dishes to the sink when I finished eating, but, as usual, I didn’t wash them or wipe remains of the meal off my face. I also

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dressed myself. I wore what I chose, even if I couldn't differentiate fronts from backs or button buttons in order. I didn't wear shoes.

I enjoyed this unbridled freedom only when my father was at home. He hired a housekeeper, a full-bodied, no-nonsense woman his own age, a widow from Boston named Mrs. Bindle, to care for me during his hours at the university. So, during the daytime on Monday through Friday, Mrs. Bindle fed me balanced meals including vegetables, bathed and dressed me, and cleaned the house. On the rare occasions that she wasn't busy with me and the huge place, she walked me over to the park where I learned that other children existed. I remember I didn't like them very much; they didn't seem very *bright*. I learned that word early on, and liked to use it to distinguish myself from other children. (An occasional smacking might have done me some good.)

I wasn't lonely, however; there was plenty to hold my attention at home. I had my yard and my garden. We lived on a residential street with large, old homes, but our house was a relic among them, and the yard was a nature sanctuary amidst the more traditional yards bordering it. There was a booming toad population in our back yard and garden; there were garter snakes and a colony of large black beetles. Mrs. Bindle feared all these things, and though she made sure I was clothed, properly buttoned, shod and fed, she didn't disturb me when I was out behind the house. I once chased the plump housekeeper with an enormous black beetle, but the *threat* of a smacking alone put an end to that.

It was only in the worst weather that I came inside, where Mrs. Bindle enforced rules of indoor behavior apparently unknown to my father. She wasn't a cruel woman, just a normal, practical one, so indoors I usually kept to my room where I was free to draw, color, sculpt with clay and play with the odd variety of toys I'd accumulated, many of which my father had scavenged from one department of the university or another, medical and dental schools included.

I played with animal bones, radio parts, an immense rubber band collection, dull edged surgical instruments, miniature statues of Greek and Roman gods and heroes, several sets of false teeth, lenses of all sorts from microscopes and telescopes, wooden models of molecules, a collection of watches in various states of dismemberment, glass eyeballs, a bag of marbles, one human skull,

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a large collection of springs of all sizes, several prisms, a paperclip collection of thousands, mineral samples, a box of gears, toy soldiers, a collection of hundreds of erasers, a skeletal right hand (wired together, but missing the thumb) and a small pistol with no ammunition. Along with these playthings was also a violin, a set of hand bells, a glockenspiel, a kettledrum, a trumpet, and one upright piano in pieces. Because of certain items, Mrs. Bindle was reluctant to enter my room, so I experienced freedom there as well during my formative years from three to five.

When my father was home, my freedom extended beyond the boundaries of my room. Euripides' perch was in the library; my father spent most of his time in there and so did I. Though the house's architect had designed the space as a large dining room, my mother agreed to convert it into a library/study when my parents first moved in. Floor to ceiling shelves were built in and several freestanding back-to-back book cases served as partial walls, screening off my father's desk from the rest of the carpeted room, which was furnished with a small leather sofa, leather wingback chairs and two oak reading tables with lamps. There was a wooden, five step staircase on wheels to reach the higher shelves in the room—a room that housed several thousand books, some old and valuable. When my father was home, I had free reign there, whether he was in the library or not. I took down as many books as I liked, shoving those without pictures to the side of the room. At times my father had to remove heaps of books from the floor just to clear a path to and from his desk.

If I went to the kitchen and made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, poured a glass of milk and brought my meal into the library when my father was there, he'd remind me to clear a table of books so I could sit down and eat more comfortably. Of course, when I came into the library with one of my two possible sandwiches, my father stopped reading, writing or talking, jumped up and sang either the peanut butter and jelly or ham with mustard song. Then as I began to eat, he continued on with the story he'd been telling me at my last meal. He was like a friendly book on tape.

"Once the infant Jason had begun to grow and thrive under the protection of the Centaur King," my father explained, "Chiron began to train him. At first Jason learned to ride on Chiron's great,

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broad back and hand him arrows from his quiver, which must have been great fun for the little boy. Then when he was older, Jason learned to hunt and to run more swiftly than children raised by men; he learned the secrets of the stars and he learned the ways of the gods; and once, while Jason was hunting in the forest with Chiron, he saw the great goddess Hera herself, the wife of Zeus, King of the gods, shining brilliantly and smiling upon him from a grove of trees.

“Now Jason knew it was a goddess he’d seen, but only later did Chiron tell him that it was Queen Hera and that she had a particular fondness for him. It wasn’t until Jason was fully grown and prepared to leave the mountain and return to the world of men, that Chiron told the boy about his origins. He told him how his father, Aeson, had been the beloved King of Iolcus, but his uncle, Pelias, had usurped the throne and his father, fearing for Jason’s life, had sent him to the mountain to be reared in secret...”

“*All’s well that ends well!*” Euripides may have chimed in at this point as well as any other—or maybe “*A watched pot never boils!*” His outbursts were unpredictable, but most often old-fashioned adages. I learned later that my father didn’t adopt Euripides as a fledgling, but as a *used parrot* who’d been taught to speak in truisms by his former owner.

“... When the full grown and fully trained Jason heard this news,” my father continued, “he was enraged at his uncle, Pelias, and wanted to see his father. It was on his way back to his home in Iolcus that something wondrous happened to young Jason. When he came to the flooded River Anaurus, he saw an old woman, laden with a bundle of sticks. She too was about to cross, and calling Jason by name, she asked if he would like *her* to carry *him* to the other bank. How could a frail old woman already burdened with a heavy load possibly carry him, and how did she know his name? Jason wondered, but to his astonishment, she lifted him easily and carried him across the swiftly rushing river. And suddenly Jason was bathed in a wondrous light as the old woman transformed into Hera, the same goddess he had seen in the grove on Mount Pelion. Jason listened in awe as she instructed him to go on to Iolcus and to act upon whatever befell him *as one blessed by the gods*. It was when the goddess put Jason down on the other side of the rushing river, however, that one of his sandals was swept off his feet by the

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power of the current. This detail may not seem important to you, son, but file it away in your memory.”

I most likely asked him what “file away” meant, and I’m sure he explained it to me, but it was probably at about this point in the story that I finished my sandwich, took my plate to the kitchen, put it in the sink for Mrs. Bindle to wash when she next arrived, and returned to my books.

The library floor was often strewn with books. There were books with pictures of animals, inside and out; with pictures of people, diseased and healthy, inside and out; there were books with pictures of statues of people and of gods: Jason and Heracles and Aeson and Pelias among them, and Chiron and Hera and Zeus. There books with pictures of cathedrals, inside and out; with pictures of engines, inside and out; a picture of the earth, inside and out, and books and books of maps. These I loved; I never tired of atlases. And then there were books with pictures of pictures. Color prints of paintings from Giotto to Picasso. There were books with pictures of flowers and plants, and of butterflies and moths; with pictures of ships, of locomotives and automobiles; with pictures of mountains and fossils and dinosaur skeletons, musical instruments and the insides of radios.

Since I loved playing on the moveable staircase as well as reaching for books on the highest shelves, I took a number of falls in the library—two with somewhat serious results. Once, when my father wasn’t in the room, I toppled off the fifth step, whacked my left arm on one of the reading tables on the way down and broke my ulna. My father, an amateur diagnostician, recognized the fracture when I found him and showed him my arm, but since he couldn’t be trusted to drive a car (“of too abstract a mind,” said one of his colleagues), he had to call an ambulance to take me to the hospital. I was four at the time but remember the thrill of that ride. Three weeks later, my arm still in a cast, I fell again. That time I bonked my head and don’t remember the ambulance ride. I do remember eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in my hospital bed, however, and to celebrate this meal, as always, my father sang the “Peanut butter and Jelly Sandwich” song, and continued his story of my namesake.

“Refer to your memory file now, my boy,” he said as I lay there recovering. “For as the years passed, king Aeson and his wife

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were lonely without their beloved child, just as I would be if you were gone. But still, they were confident that their son was safe under the protection of one so great as Chiron. The evil king Pelias was also confident. He had sent a messenger to his deposed brother to inquire about Jason, and was told that the boy had strayed from his nurse and had been devoured by a wild beast. Still, to ensure his security even further, Pelias asked the great Oracle at Delphi if he had anything to fear. The oracle, a priestess who magically spoke the words of the gods, answered Pelias that he had only one thing to fear: the coming of a half-shod man...”

I’m sure an explanation of “half-shod followed,” after which I referred to the appropriate memory file. Of course I don’t know whether or not the doctor who was caring for me and my concussed head was aware of my father’s reputation as a persuasive orator, but he probably was aware that I’d visited the hospital twice that month with injuries resulting from falls. I don’t know what my father told him to prevent a visit to our house from a child protective agency that would have curtailed my liberty and maybe even my father’s. It could have been the oratory.

No other hospital visits were required, but I suffered a number of lesser injuries during those early years sliding down all the banisters in the old house. My father never discouraged this; he delighted in watching his little son zip down from floor to floor, and though it thrilled me too, I slid without sound effects. Euripides randomly supplied some of those: *“Sticks and stones can break my bones! Sticks and stones! A Penny saved is a penny earned! A Penny saved! A Penny saved! Dead men tell no tales! Dead men! Dead men! Dead men!”* My father supplied the rest. “Wheeeee!” he’d shout, watching me slide down, or more frequently, listening from the library and hearing the sound of the seat of my pants on smooth wood. If after he shouted “Wheeeee!” he heard a thud or a moan, he rushed to my aid—but he never discouraged me, even though I slid dozens of times daily and always eventually fell. By the time I was five, I’d become a tough and fearless little boy—just like the first Jason, my father told me.

“When the first Jason had returned home to Iolcus,” my father explained, “his uncle, King Pelias wanted him slain at once, because the youth wore only one sandal and fulfilled the Oracle’s prophesy. But it wasn’t long before Jason’s good looks, his strength

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and the gleam in his eye made him a favorite of the people, just as his father, Aeson, had been. So Pelias, a hated king, changed his plan in order to win back favor. He brought King Aeson back to the city and flattered young Jason. He told Jason that one day he too would reign over Iolcus. He told Jason that he envied him, that he wished he had been raised under the eyes of the gods, and that if he had, he would have performed a deed that would bring honor to his great city and made his name known throughout Greece. Now of course, Jason wanted to know what deed that might be, and seeing an opportunity to rid his kingdom of the shining-eyed young man forever, the evil Pelias was glad to tell him. And so it came about that Pelias challenged Jason to make the perilous journey to distant Colchis, where a King named Æetes kept the famous Golden Fleece; and once there, to capture the fleece and return it to Iolcus. Naturally, Jason accepted the challenge. His father looked at him sadly, however, knowing that anyone daring such a journey was not likely to return.”

The story of how the Golden Fleece came to be at Colchis in the first place came on another day. I’d spent the morning in my room attempting to make an automatic glockenspiel. The glockenspiel (*bell-play*) is a percussion instrument with a series of chromatically tuned metal bars played with light hammers. Mine was missing a few bars but it served a five-year-olds purposes perfectly. I’d put the glockenspiel on the floor of my room and next to it erected a narrow ramp made of a half section of rain gutter I’d found on our cluttered back porch (another place of great interest to me.) The half-section was at least six feet long and was shaped like a very wide, shallow letter U. I elevated one end of it on a high chair back. A little way past the top of the ramp, I hammered the sides nearly together, so when I poured my large collection of marbles into it, they’d collect there and pass only one or two at a time down the ramp in fairly rapid succession. Near the bottom of the ramp, I dented the sides in an irregular way and then hammered the end open wide, so that as a marble ran down it, it would be deflected and flow off the bottom of the ramp in unpredictable ways. The Glockenspiel lay on the floor at the bottom of this ramp. So when I poured my collection of three-hundred marbles into the collection bin at the top of the chute, all three hundred would roll down, one or two at a time, careening off the sides and spilling in

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haphazard ways onto the tuned chimes of the glockenspiel. It took several minutes for all the marbles to pass down the ramp and play a long, complex, randomly composed, tinkling, clattering song, which invariably made me laugh. My father called the music “a modern masterpiece.”

It was after he insisted on a repeat performance, that my father surprised me by showing me how to make a new sandwich to add to my repertoire: American cheese on white bread with mayonnaise. Then sang his American cheese sandwich song for me:

*American Cheese, It's bound to please,
With white bread spread with mayo!
One slice or two, it's all for you—
A lunch that's A-OK-O!*

Thus began a new era of my life.

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BE KIND TO BUTTERFLIES DAY

During lunch that day, the day of my automatic glockenspiel performance and my first American cheese sandwich, my father told me the sad story of Phrixus and Helle, children of King Athamas and Queen Nephele. This was the tale of how these children tried to escape death at the hands of their wicked step-mother, Ino. After a typically mythic cluster of treacheries involving the gods, the harvest and blood sacrifice, the children were given an opportunity to escape the evil plot by flying off to safety on the back of a golden, winged ram, a magical gift presented to King Athamas and Queen Nephele at their marriage by Poseidon, God of the Sea.

Of course I don't recall specifically, but on this instance, Euripides may well have burst out, "*Time flies when you're having fun! Time flies!*" or something else inanely appropriate. My father always made a point of explaining the meaning of his parrot's interruptions to our stories, so, in this case, most likely, after a simplified commentary on the subjectivity of the passage of time, he continued on.

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“Despite Poseidon’s magical gift, things did not end well for Phrixus and Helle,” he told me, “for sadly, during the long, lofty journey, Helle grew dizzy and fell from the ram’s back and drowned in the sea below. If you look at a map, you’ll see that to this day the place of her drowning is called the “Hellespont”—*Helle’s Sea*.

“But the golden ram flew on,” he explained, “and when it finally landed with Helle’s brother in a land called Colchis, the people were in awe of the marvelous creature. The ram did not live long, however, and when it died, King Æetes, a strong and powerful ruler, hung its shining golden fleece from atop a great oak tree in a grove dedicated to Ares, the God of War—and there he kept it, his greatest treasure, hanging from the single tallest tree, protected by magically powerful warriors and other fearsome spells, making it unattainable to any who would try to seize it.”

It was after lunch that day, that my father and I took a walk I will never forget. Perhaps on a more modest scale, for me that day was like the one when the Original Jason beheld the goddess Hera resplendent in a grove of trees. On a much more modest scale. This was not Mount Pelion; it was flat land on the north side of Chicago.

I remember it was summer. And it was sunny, too, because I remember how vivid the butterflies looked that day. This was to be one of our butterfly walks. I enjoyed these, but I didn’t like the names. We walked past all the big old houses on Hawthorn Street. Though spacious, these weren’t necessarily elegant; many of the residents of Hawthorn Street were a little eccentric, but all had flowers in their front lawns and back yards, and butterflies love flowers.

“Look! Look!” my father said. “A *Papilio cresphontes*! A big one! Look!”

“What would I call it, papa?”

“You’ll call it a *Papilio cresphontes* when you’re older. Now you can call it a Giant Swallowtail...if you must.”

“I must, papa.”

“Very well.”

“It’s very big.”

“It’s the biggest we’ll see on Hawthorn Street, Jason.”

“What about on Broadway?”

“There too. It’s the biggest we’ll see in the U.S. of A.”

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“What’s that?”

“That’s just a fancy way of saying the United States of America—where we live.”

“You like to say things in fancy ways.”

“So I do. Language is a rich and multifarious tool.”

I just looked at him, but then back at the big brown and yellow butterfly that had settled in a small puddle on a driveway next to us.

“Multifarious means having great variety,” my father explained, patting me on the head. “I use these words so you will become familiar with them. I’ve told you this before. Your mind is like a marine animal of the family *Porifera*—that means a sponge, Jason. You know what a sponge is: and just as a sponge absorbs liquids, a young mind like yours absorbs information, effortlessly, without your even knowing it.”

“I don’t see the Giant Swallowtail anymore. Just a little white one. Lettuce?”

“No. Cabbage. I know you don’t like cabbage, but this butterfly’s called a Cabbage White. *Pieris brassicae*.”

“There’re lots of those, aren’t there?”

My father nodded affectionately.

“What’s fleece?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” my father said. “It’s the wool coat of a lamb or a sheep. I thought you knew. A Ram is a male sheep. You wear sweaters made of wool in the winter. Sometimes wool’s a little scratchy.”

As was often the case, my father sensed my question. “No,” he said. “Sheep don’t have fleece of gold. Only *mythic* sheep do: sheep in myths. *Fabulous* sheep do: sheep in fables, like our story. Only mythic, fabulous sheep can fly. The regular ones can be very good climbers, but only birds and insects can fly in our world. Now look over there. There’s a *Nymphalidae*—you can call it a Variegated Fritillary. *It’s flying.*”

“How did Jason get the Golden Fleece?”

“You don’t want to wait for dinner?”

“I can look for butterflies and listen to a story at the same time.”

“Well, well. I’m not sure if I can look for butterflies and *tell* a story at the same time. That would be called *dividing my*

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concentration. Some of my friends think I can't do that very well. But I'll try."

Ordinarily we didn't have stories during walks, so my father reached down and took my hand. Just to make it special, I thought.

"Capturing the Golden Fleece was far too difficult and dangerous a task for one man alone, son, so Jason gathered around him all the great heroes who lived in Greece at the time. Some are still famous today: like Heracles, son of Zeus—people call him Hercules now—and he was the strongest and bravest hero of them all; and Orpheus, who was the magical poet and musician who charmed the animals with his music and played his lyre to make the sun rise every day. And Jason gathered many more, all of them perfectly fitted for the quest, among them two brothers, Zetes and Calais, who had wings on their ankles.

"But to reach distant Colchis they needed to build a ship, and the goddess Hera came to Jason in a dream and directed him to Argus, the shipbuilder, who would lead the heroes in their work, completing the task with a magical beam in the ship's prow—a beam taken from a grove of Zeus himself. Once the ship was finished, the heroes called it the Argo, and themselves the Argonauts. And so they set off on their quest: the heroes at the oars beneath the Argo's sails, to the cheers of the people of Iolcus."

My father paused.

"There are a whole bunch of Cabbage Whites," I said.

"I see," said my father, glancing at little white butterflies among a border of red and fuchsia flowers on a lawn we passed. "But are you still listening?"

I nodded. My father was still holding my hand; this continued to make me happy as we walked on.

"Of course the Argonauts met with adventures and trials on their journey to King Æetes' realm in Colchis. Heroes always met with adventures and trials—that's what made them heroes."

"So if I want to be a hero, I'll need to meet with adventures and trials? Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right, but the adventures and trials won't necessarily be what you expect, son. The Argonauts met with water nymphs that lured one of their party beneath the cold waters of a spring, never to return. They met a king named Phineus who had sought the wisdom of the gods and had been punished by cruel birds

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with women's heads called 'Harpies' or 'Snatchers' who plucked out his eyes and snatched all but the most meager scraps of food from him. They came to an island populated only by maidens whose company would lead them to forget the Golden Fleece they set out to gain. And they met with huge clashing rocks that came together to crush any ship that tried to pass between them. These things will not happen to you, son, but things of no less difficulty, and perhaps all within your own mind."

"Like nightmares?" I remember asking.

"Maybe, but probably not. You'll probably meet with trials to test your kindness. To remain always kind is as difficult as any trial the Argonauts faced."

I remember the very peculiar feeling that came across me when my father told me that. It was a feeling of deflation on the one hand, and on the other, the chill of an adult reality I'd never before imagined. The simplicity of his words suggested an expanse of myself not yet revealed, and I felt that. I also knew I didn't have to think about it yet.

"Tell me about the Snatchers," I said.

"In just a little while," he answered. "First I want to talk to you about the habit of kindness, a very important habit to acquire early on."

"I know it's good to be kind, papa."

"But when you're older, but not yet a man, you'll probably forget. Most people do when they're growing up."

I remember being chilled by this thought as well, not that I understood kindness in anything but a simple, childish way: but still, in my innocence, the thought of losing it frightened me. "How can I remember?" I asked.

"You must try to practice kindness at least once every day. Try to. If you forget, it's no great harm. If you forget, be kind to yourself about forgetting."

And this, I remember particularly. How amazing this idea seemed to my five-year-old self! The idea of being kind to yourself was an epiphany to me. It would remain so for many years to come.

"But there's something else we can do too," my father said as we walked on past the lawns and homes on Hawthorn Street. "We can plant a marker in time."

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This, as I recall, amazed me even more than the notion of self-forgiveness. I envisioned a red pennant planted in the lonely, windswept tracts of the past.

"We can decide that you'll remember this day always. This day when we talked about always practicing kindness. We can try to make it memorable."

"How can we do that?" I asked, mystified now.

"First," my father said, "we must name it. What shall we name this day?"

It must have been then that I saw the second *Papilio cresphontes* or Giant Swallowtail, as I preferred and still prefer to call it. "We can call it the butterfly day," I suggested.

"Well," he said, "that might do, but would that remind you to always strive to be kind?"

"Be Kind to Butterflies Day!" I cried. "How's that?"

"That's superlative! That's incomparable! That's matchless, Jason! *Be Kind to Butterflies Day* it will be! But you'll need a little bit more, I believe." He paused. Then he looked up and down the street. It was early afternoon, but no one was in sight.

"We'll need a little something to make this day paramount, memorable, unforgettable." Again he looked around. And then quite calmly but quickly, he began to take off his clothes. Off came his black shoes, his black socks, his starched white shirt, his conservative grey wool slacks, leaving my father, all six foot four of him, thin as a rail, clad only in a pair of shocking, fire-engine red boxer shorts. Then, as if there were nothing unusual in his behavior, he put his hands on the sidewalk and with a swift, athletic movement, kicked his long legs into the air, took several steps on his hands and shouted from a full hand stand:

"IT'S BE KIND TO BUTTERFLIES DAY! NEVER FORGET IT! IT'S BE KIND TO BUTTERFLIES DAY! NEVER FORGET IT! IT'S BE KIND TO BUTTERFLIES DAY!"

Once said, he came back to his feet and dressed even more quickly than he disrobed.

"There," he said, a little out of breath. "I think you should remember that, do you agree? Particularly if I give you regular reminders. Monthly to begin with; the quarterly—which means

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four times a year. And annually—yearly—when you’re older. What do you think?”

As I recall, my first impression was my surprise at his red shorts and how shockingly resonant that sight was with my imagined red pennant planted as a *marker in time*. That he had taken off his clothes on Hawthorn Street didn’t surprise me as much then as it does today, but it did impress me, particularly since I wasn’t allowed to take *my* clothes off outside—except in the back yard. As far as the long term effects upon my memory are concerned, his tactic was eminently successful. I also remember a little more from that summer day.

“Oh, yes! The Harpies!” my father said once we were back inside. We were in the library, and I remember how excited I was to be having the story continue still further. I was sitting on the floor next to his desk, which was piled high with books, open and closed. This was entirely out of the ordinary. Stories had always and only accompanied sandwiches: maybe the introduction of American cheese on white with mayo had changed our routine forever.

“Just as the ram with the Golden Fleece was wonderful, the Harpies were terrible. Their female heads were grotesque. Their hair was black, their feathers were grey, their eyes were red, and their breasts and wings and fearsome talons were caked with blood. When Jason and the Argonauts visited King Phineus at his palace in the city of Salmydessus, they were invited to the king’s banquet table, where, as I told you, to punish him for stealing the wisdom of the gods, the swarming Harpies fiercely snatched food from the blind, frail king’s hands whenever he tried to feed himself, and devoured it all but for a few crumbs.

“No one had ever been successful in driving the Harpies away, but there were two heroes among Jason’s company who might have success, and King Phineus promised to share his divine wisdom with any who could save him from his plight...”

“Don’t you and the king have the same name, papa?” I asked.

“Except for the spelling, yes, son, we do. Why? You look worried. Does that worry you?”

I *was* worried.

“*Time flies when you’re having fun! Time flies!*”

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“There are no Harpies on Hawthorn Street,” my father said, shushing the bird. “Or anywhere in the world today—except in people’s minds, perhaps. They’re mythic creatures, fabulous creatures. They were a way the people had of warning themselves. They were reminders of the danger in trying to know too much. This is not yet your concern. You’ll need to learn a great deal before you encounter any danger. I assure you. You need to learn more than I know, before there’s any danger at all.”

The possibility of learning more than my father knew was also a shocking new concept. This was a day of epiphanies. In fact, I was full to the brim, and I don’t remember anything more of “Be Kind to Butterflies Day.” But I’m sure my father went on to tell me that it was Zetes and Calais, Jason’s companions with wings on their ankles, who were successful in driving the Harpies away; and that in return for this favor, King Phineus told Jason the secret of how to pass the terrible clashing rocks that guarded the entrance to the Sea of Pontus which led directly to Colchis and the Golden Fleece. But enough was enough. I’d already learned that if I wanted to be a hero, I’d meet with my own trials, inner trials, in an adult life I’d never imagined. I learned that when I was older but not yet a man, I’d forget something very important that I’d need to remember and that in that intimidating adult life it was possible, maybe even necessary to learn to *forgive oneself*. I was also told that it would be someday possible to actually *know more than my father*; and that above all, kindness would be so very important in the future, that my father stood on his hands on Hawthorn Street in nothing but his red underwear proclaiming to me that it was **“BE KIND TO BUTTERFLIES DAY!”** and that I should **“NEVER FORGET IT!”**

Was this day the end of my childhood? The beginning of the end?

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STEPPING OUT

I like to think my years in elementary school, high school and even my first years in college passed quietly, unexceptionally: that life didn't disturb me and I didn't disturb it. And to a large extent that's true. I went to a small private school where I did very well academically. Unfortunately, this success did nothing to dissuade me from my feeling that I was "brighter" than my peers and, at times, from letting them know all about it. It was fortunate that I hadn't yet developed any *powers* beyond the norm. There may have been casualties. I went off to college when I was sixteen.

In my early childhood I'd learned to amuse myself in solitude, however, and I never became one of the more popular people among my peers. I did have friendships, some of which endured for years, but nearly all these friendships were with girls. I was always happiest around girls, even during those years where boys and girls avoid each other. Girls always seemed to *understand* things in ways that boys didn't. I was never interested in the kinds of things girls *did*: playing with dolls when they were young, talking incessantly on the phone or going to the mall when they were older, but I liked how they thought about things, *that* they thought about

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things, really. I didn't realize then that it was their *feeling* not their thinking that made them seem so companionable to me. I would never have told any of the boys I knew about "Be Kind to Butterflies Day."

I did have friendships with boys; these were intense but rarely lasted long. With boys, I was haughty and I teased. Physical fights were rare in my school environment; if I'd fought, I'd probably have won some and lost some, but I never lost an argument. I always had the last word, which was often unkind. My father might have done well to have taught me to be kind to boys and not butterflies. Though I was in many ways blessed and thrived like the son of a kindly professor and "a goddess," I was a boy who, under less fortunate circumstances, might have carried a gun and used it.

Some of the girls I knew might have understood the significance of "Be Kind to Butterflies Day," but I didn't feel free to tell any of them about it either. It wasn't until my twenty-first birthday, once I'd resolved to live for a-hundred-and-fifty years and once I'd met Anita that I really opened up to anyone at all. I suppose it was easier to reveal myself once I'd made my audacious resolution. The need to hurry had been wholly eliminated from my life, and as time passed, a slew of benefits settled in to occupy the space created by slowing down, moment by moment. One of those benefits was a capacity for intimacy, but this arose in me only gradually; it ripened. Certain changes didn't require waiting, however.

My first decision once I hatched my extended longevity plan was to get falling-down drunk; shit-faced, as I put it back then. Having turned twenty-one in late May of 1990, I seized the moment and made midnight rounds of the bars Groverton, Iowa, the college town where I lived, and my new secret buoyed me up enough to prevent my actual contact with the pavement until the sun was up and shining. I don't remember the events that preceded my landing on the sidewalk, but I do remember being helped into a police car and taken to the local jail to sleep it off.

When I woke, I had no idea where my shirt was, my wallet, my right shoe and sock or anything I had in my pockets. Shit-faced as I'd been, I didn't remember the people I ended up with that night,

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but I felt secure that I didn't tell anyone about my plan, secure that I would have remembered that. Reaching the legal age for drinking was good enough reason to be celebrating.

By the time I was set free, I'd missed my classes for the day—it was a Friday—and after a queasy, wobbly walk home and a snack that settled in my stomach like a pool of mercury, I fell asleep again until the next morning. I do remember that the very thought of my resolution to live to a hundred-and-fifty filled me with joy during that Thursday night of drinking. I knew I'd had an exultant, rollicking good time, that I'd met people I believed I loved at the moment, that I'd needed no reminding to practice kindness with them. The hangover that still persisted on Saturday permanently curbed my interest in getting falling down drunk, however—but I still had other interests.

Despite my father's parenting, I hadn't been a reckless youth. The most dangerous heights to which I'd climbed was on the moveable steps in our library at home. Though I slid down banisters as a child, once I got my driver's license, I never drove fast and avoided even *riding on* a motorcycle. In high school, I'd never had more than a beer or two, and that infrequently. Once I went off to college, I only had a few hits of pot; I was intrigued by its effects, but shied away from it. Hallucinogens intrigued me as well, but frightened me even more. Sexual promiscuity would have been fine with me, of course; I was always on the lookout for that. Unfortunately, this was never an option.

But given my newly lengthened life span, I changed my tactics for a time. Despite the social joys of uninhibited expression, I'd ruled out excessive drinking as a pathway to happiness, but was prepared to give marijuana its fair chance to win me over. To that end, I splurged and spent what seemed at the time a scandalous amount of money from an "emergency fund" my father had provided for me and bought a full ounce of purportedly excellent marijuana. Life quickly became much more interesting.

Since I didn't smoke cigarettes and had no experience rolling joints, I bought myself a little pipe, the bowl of which was nicely fashioned into a tiny, smiling human skull. At first, I smoked it only in the evenings while listening to music, but before long I started after lunch and soon along with coffee in the morning. My classes were over but I stayed on campus that summer working for

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one of my professors in the art department: which meant that I taught one of his classes per week and was free to do as I chose in the studios whenever I wished. During the first weeks of my month-long marijuana spree, I fell in love with my own intelligence. I was even “brighter” than I’d ever imagined I could be, brilliant, really, and I had the impression that my instruction to the undergraduate sculptors was intuitive, original and captivating. It wasn’t until later that Professor Longfellow passed on comments regarding my “inconsistent supervision,” my “unrealistic expectations” and “self-involvement.” This was both a humbling and eye-opening experience.

That fascinating four weeks wasn’t wholly unproductive, however. Every morning, of course, I’d been repeating my affirmation concerning my life span, but it was only after I introduced a steady flow of cannabis into my bloodstream that the extraordinary implications of that became apparent. Every time during the day when I thought of what my life might become, I was struck by the stunning potential of such a radical outlook, and with a new and profound vision of what it meant to be human. Unfortunately, these perceptions did not translate back into my unaltered consciousness. Even when I wrote them down, the words that seemed so charged with meaning later seemed ordinary, even empty.

Time opens with concentration as the self dissolves.

Truth can be reflected, never possessed.

The difference between looking and seeing..

Still, everything was immensely interesting to me, even though I frequently couldn’t remember what had begun to be so very interesting when something else even more arresting caught my attention. I was particularly moved by textures and shadow. I doted upon the texturing of the surfaces in the beginners’ work in Professor Longfellow’s Introduction to Sculpture class and even went so far as to suggest that the students consider the shadows cast when assessing and developing their projects— I was never certain whether that latter was included in the category of “unrealistic expectations” or “self-involvement.”

It was in my own work during those four weeks that I made a theoretical breakthrough. *Theoretical* in that any practical

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attempts I made during that time failed utterly due to my inability to maintain a linear train of thought. I was unable to follow through on any of the brilliant schemes I'd come up with because within ten minutes of inception, what was circular became spiral and what was parallel had converged—though always *brilliantly*. Among all this, however, I believe that true value of the cannabis-induced mind state made itself known to me. It was as I attempted to design my first mobiles that I remembered Calder's "Streetcar" and the unexplored possibilities of musical kinetic art first dawned on me. I could do nothing with it at the time; the simplest problems of balance were beyond my abstracted brain, but the visionary idea stuck, the vision was surprisingly complete and would play itself out through me in the coming years.

Unfortunately, those four weeks of being perpetually stoned was followed by another four of being perpetually depressed. In retrospect, this makes sense. Having expended and enjoyed certain amount of *unearned* psychic energy for a period of time, it seems only fair that one would spend an equal period of time deprived, with a pronounced lack of psychic energy: not unlike a hangover in which a headache and general malaise is replaced by a vision of the world in which nothing awakes one's interest or evokes emotional involvement. But only for four weeks. Once the ounce and its aftereffects was gone, so was my interest in marijuana—not my respect for it, mind you, just my personal interest. But there was still a little summer left. And yes, there was still peyote.

Having heard tales of "acid trips" both revelatory and terrifying, and having no way of being certain of just what chemical had been absorbed by that tab I might buy, I chose to seek out peyote rather than LSD, since it was both naturally occurring and a revered tradition among some native peoples. Of course I didn't know squat about peyote. I had no way of knowing whether the little cactus-like growth I was given was actually peyote, nor did I know anything of the protocol and meaning of the ceremonies accompanying its ingestion. All I knew was that the slightly disreputable neo-hippy, named Ace, who sold it to me claimed that it was "good shit" and that it would (what else?) "Blow my mind."

I shared it with a new friend named Anita. I'd met her at a party. She'd walked outside to the back yard to get away from the noise and drunkenness at the party—both of which diminished once

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she walked outside. I'd only had a beer or two, but was outside taking a hit on my smiling-skull pipe, having still one week's supply left in my stash. She looked overwhelmingly lovely to me (women tend to do that) and I almost told her but settled for a more conventional introduction. She put her hands on my shoulders, and drooped her head.

"I probably won't remember meeting you tomorrow," she said.

"Oh, I'll remember," I said.

"But I've seen you around the department. So you remind me, okay?"

"Okay..." I said tentatively, not certain what was coming next. What was coming next was this: she went over behind some bushes, but barely behind them, pulled down her jeans, squatted down and peed, after which she came back around looked at me a little sheepishly, kissed me and walked unsteadily back into the party. I reintroduced myself to her the next Monday at school, reminding her that we'd met, but skipping the peeing part. We'd talked several times since, mostly about art, but smiled at each other a lot. When I told her I was planning to get a hold of some peyote, she asked if she could join me.

We knew something of what to expect; getting sick was part of the peyote initiation. But the taste was overwhelmingly foul, so bitterly alkaline that Anita had to hold *my* nose and clasp *her* hand over my mouth so that *my hands* were free to grasp the sofa cushions while attempting to swallow! I did the same for her until we ate it all. Then within twenty minutes we were violently ill, and there was only one toilet in my ratty little apartment. There's nothing like vomiting in the same toilet with a woman to take the romance out of a first date—for me, at least—but somehow, once we washed ourselves off and changed shirts, we found ourselves back on the sofa sipping Pepsi and smiling very broadly. Apparently we already sensed the power of what we were to experience because we decided we'd better stay together for the rest of the day.

Then we went outside, and that's when I was swept by a wave of dazzling perceptions: everything, as a matter of fact, was generating waves, visible only in the blurring between frames, as if movies were being slowly projected at me from all directions. I

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picked up a stick and threw it across the street: a chain of diminishing, toppling tracer sticks followed it. I kicked a stone down the sidewalk: a ping pong ball-cascade of stones followed. Anita had a brilliant blue aura around her, and looking in her eyes I saw back into the depths of a starry sky; the feeling was overwhelming. She too seemed wholly overtaken by some unnamed wonder. I didn't understand what she was trying to say to me; the immediate history of everything flipping past in supernaturally vivid color consumed my attention. It was an onslaught; a pleasurable one, but an onslaught nonetheless.

As we walked slowly toward a little shaded park, a sense of the interdependence of things came on me in waves. When I looked at trees, I *saw* their root systems. I saw the root systems drawing moisture out of the soil and I saw the trees releasing oxygen and several indefinable kinds of bounty off the surfaces of their leaves, ethers of supernatural meaning that intermixed with the atmosphere and squirrels and crows and the grass beneath the trees and sidewalk that ran next to them and seeped through the glass windows of the cars parked close by. When I looked down at my hands I saw that I too was absorbing the manifold goodness that was emanating from the trees, which no longer seemed to be great green plants with thick trunks but bio-mechanical condensers and dispensers of essence of life itself. But not like in science class. Nothing like that at all. I got Anita's attention and pointed to the trees, and told her what I saw, but in strange, hollow sounding words, like in a tinny house of mirrors. Then I noticed that the inanimate objects around me were emanating as well, though very slowly, almost oozing: the pavement, stones, the cars, buildings were giving something back to the world around them, something which had faint colors and tended to puddle around its source and then somehow disperse.

An afternoon of similar wonders unfolded around us, but we didn't talk much because our words continued to ring with a false tone. Even that evening, I couldn't remember much of what I experienced—maybe because there were no established thought-tracks to contain the memories of such extraordinary perceptions. I do remember what happened later in the afternoon, however, and I remember twilight.

Somehow Anita and I got separated. We had been in a book store, where the contents of the books had seemed as empty

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and brittle as our words, and I remember that as I left, I believed we would meet later back at my apartment. She remembered no such arrangement. I have only a vague memory of walking to the railroad tracks. The tracers and immediate past of all moving things around me had diminished, so did my profound sense of interconnectedness, but in its place everything took on an unmoored, melting fluidity. This was captivating at first, but before long it became distracting and then disturbing.

Anita and I had walked to Groverton's little business district, and the railroad tracks I found myself on led back in the same direction from which we'd come. I don't know how far I actually walked when I began to sense a looming danger in the buildings and empty lots on both sides of the tracks, but I soon believed that stepping off would be perilous, given that everything around me now melted if looked at carefully. Even my own fingertips melted I spread my arms wide. So I held my arms pressed close to my sides as I walked on, trying to keep my eyes fixed on the tracks diminishing toward the horizon. I knew that eventually I'd have to make break for it; that I'd have to risk running off into the collapsing world if I was to get back to my apartment, but I'd lost track of time and distance. There were fewer buildings around me by then and the empty lots opened into farm fields.

That's when I first saw him. I don't know why I turned around, but he was there, walking along behind me on the tracks. The first thing I discovered was that when I tried to run away from him, he ran after me. When I stopped he stopped. He was very, very tall—over seven feet, I was sure. He was dressed in black clothes. I thought he was wearing an animal mask; then I realized it was his face, and the fear I felt was paralyzing. I knew I couldn't leave the tracks. The effects of the peyote had not diminished: I was breathless with panic. My terror was wildly amplified just as my perceptions of the world around me had been. The tracks were blazing hot and the ties smelled strongly of tar. I realized that if I remained stationary the huge man would stop too. So I sat down cross-legged on the burning railroad tracks and forced myself to stare at him. There was an imposing, almost regal air in his diabolical, menacing look. He was no more than forty yards from me. I couldn't turn my back on him. I could see his eyes; they were

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animal eyes, fierce ones, and it seemed that they themselves were holding me captive on those tracks. The rest of his face was shrouded in shadow. The sun was going down. I glanced at it once but the dozens of spheres that spun off of it made me feel dizzy and small. The shadows of the telephone poles around me were suddenly eerily long; the landscape seemed deserted, and when the low sun shone on the huge man's figure standing there, he seemed to swell in size: if he approached, he'd tower above me; I knew that. Then he began to walk. He came down the tracks toward me and I couldn't move. My muscles were cramped and rigid. It seemed my blood had ceased to circulate. When I closed my eyes I saw his diabolical face as a cascading specter. The world around me was collapsing so forcefully I felt it would crush me. I thought I must have ended up in Hell.

I don't remember the rest. I know he chased me. I must have run a long way and through rubble of some sort, because my pants below the knees were nearly shredded as was one of my sneakers. My shins and calves were deeply scratched. When I found myself back in town, it was dark and the effects of the peyote were wearing off, but when I looked at my reflection as I passed a window, I saw that I looked like a wolf. I didn't want to be seen, so I stayed in shadows, creeping like a fugitive, like an escaped madman, the world throbbing around me. I was soaked in sweat when I arrived back at my apartment, where I found Anita looking out the window as if she were waiting for me as I walked up. She seemed perfectly normal and she looked at me as I if were too. When she asked what happened to me, I suppose I told her but don't remember anything about that.

It's unclear to me whether or not I considered my resolution during my initiation to both the light and dark sides of the hallucinogenic experience. But my vision of the interconnectedness of all things and subsequent meeting with something I didn't want to be connected to in any way marked the beginning and end of my acquaintance with peyote, the end of that summer's romance with mind-altering agents on all levels, and the conclusion of my first few steps into the world beyond the norm. Once that was out of the way, I began to seriously address the business of slowing down. That's when Anita moved in.

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Anita was nothing like Trixie. Trixie was a musician, a musical historian and theorist. She loved the arcane; she tried to recompose the music of the ancient Greeks; she believed in its power of music, in the mysticism of Pythagoras; she dreamed the music of Orpheus. Brown curly hair, mysteriously dark blue eyes, a mischievous smile, but an ethereal woman, somehow translucent: the kind of woman (if such a class of women exists) that's likely to unaccountably vanish.

Anita wasn't the vanishing type. She was a sculptor; a creator of assemblages with shiny pieces of scrap metal, like the shiny bumpers and trim from old cars. Anita collected junk. And most tellingly, Anita welded. It's difficult to imagine Trixie welding anything at all. Anita wielded an acetylene torch as comfortably as she brushed her hair—which was a luxuriant, creamy brown. It framed her broad face: hazel eyes, ivory skin, a full mouth, but with a sad look, and a shyness that always surprised me.

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The peyote may have bonded us. Or maybe, given Anita's down-to-earth nature, all it took was our vomiting date in the grubby little bathroom of my apartment.

"We've got to clean this place up, Jason," she said after we'd been roommates for three weeks.

"I didn't think you cared much about that," I said, surprised.

"You mean I'm a slob?"

"No-o! I'd never call you a slob, Anita. You're a beautiful woman."

That wasn't the brightest thing to say, and I could tell she didn't like the sound of it. It sounded as if I felt her beauty compensated for the fact that she *was* a slob. Maybe that's what I did mean. She scowled at me. She was wearing a threadbare white tee shirt, bib overalls and work boots. These were the clothes she wore when she was working, but sometimes she just wore them. She wasn't working that day. She'd just come back from the laundromat. In her basket, I saw a number of other white tee shirts and pairs of bib overalls. We hadn't yet slept together; we hadn't even kissed. But her lovely breasts were always loose under those tee shirts of hers, something that never failed to hold my interest.

"We need a schedule, Jason," she said, smiling a little now. We were sitting at the pink Formica topped table in our messy kitchen. She reached across to touch the back of my hand.

But my life had already begun to change. It had only taken a few months.

Even on that first day when I awoke in jail and still drunk, I remembered to confirm my longevity resolution; and I continued to do that faithfully every day throughout my month-long marijuana festival, the month of depression that followed and the weeks following my encounter with the black and white magic of peyote. It dawned on me only gradually through those months that for some reason—either my new expectations, my experience with mind expanding drugs or both—my perception of time had begun to change. There was more of it.

The simplest explanation of this was that a twenty-one-year-old scheduled to live to a-hundred-and-fifty had no need to rush. It felt like each moment was becoming *bigger*; as if each contained more *material*, but even then, I realized that another possible explanation for this *widening of time* was that I was becoming more

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conscious, more highly aware. I hadn't read much about expanding one's consciousness at the time, but the little that I'd gleaned or overheard made it clear that it was no easy trick, and like quick weight loss, one shouldn't trust easy results.

So what was going on? It hadn't taken me long at all to become a fervent believer in my plan. Maybe I was just born gullible or stupid; or maybe it was because I was reared by a dedicated, loving oddball who (like Chiron?) convinced me that it was my birthright to become a hero. Maybe it was that or something I'll never fully understand. But whatever it was gave me an infinitesimal edge on time, on the procession of events, and made it possible, for example, to know that Anita was going to reach over and touch the back of my hand a nanosecond before she did it, enabling me to turn my hand over and clasp hers, leading her, to her own surprise as much as mine, to lean across the table and kiss me lightly on the lips.

"How did you do that?" she asked after we finished kissing, a more thrilling experience than I expected. "With your hand?"

My reply was the first of the many white lies I'd have to tell her. "I just sensed it," I said. "It was dumb luck."

"Hmmm," Anita said. "I have mystic powers of my own."

I looked at her curiously.

"Not really. I read the Tarot cards," she answered with a self-deprecating smile.

"How did you learn to do that?" I asked.

"From my red-haired great aunt Theresa. She was a fortune teller."

"With a turban and a crystal ball?"

"No. None of that. No crystal ball, no turban, no flickering neon hand on the front window of her basement shop. She didn't even have a shop; she worked out of her apartment. She was respectable; she had a real gift, but my parents couldn't deal with her. She embarrassed the hell out of them. They considered her a charlatan, but I talked to her every chance I got."

"At her apartment?"

"No. My parents wouldn't let me. I was only in that place a few times. We had lots of family in Minneapolis though, and she had a way of sniffing out gatherings even when she wasn't invited, so I saw her at those. And you know what's so crazy, so

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hypocritical? Even though supposedly no one *believed in* what she did, everyone always managed to sneak in little conversations to talk to her about it, to get a leg up on the future—and tried to hide it from everyone else. What a stinking load of crap!”

“Do you have your own cards?” I asked. I’d been holding her hand across the table ever since our kiss. Her hands weren’t delicate; her fingers were strong and broad; her fingernails like a working sculptor’s, short and rarely clean, but it seemed that a potent animal warmth had been passing through her hand into mine. And of course there were her breasts. I was practically drooling; I’d asked that question distractedly.

“Of course I do,” she said to me across the table with that morning’s empty coffee cups and plates with toast crusts pushed over to one side. “So?” she asked, eyebrows raised. “Aren’t you going to ask?”

I was still too distracted to respond to this intelligently, so she went on without me. “This is where you’re supposed to ask me if I’ll read the cards for you... And then you’re supposed to be disappointed when I say no.”

Anita had let go of my hand, and my attention snapped back into place: the moment widened. “I won’t be disappointed once I know *why* you say no,” I answered.

She seemed surprised.

“My aunt told me that there were two kinds of people a wise reader never reads for. The first was themselves. The second was a person they cared about, I mean... you know, romantically.”

This time I reached across for *her* hand. When I took it, she placed her other hand on the back of mine as well. This made it official. And again I saw what was coming next; but *heard* or *felt* might better describe how I knew. It was as if I knew where a fly ball would land the moment it left the bat and had run to wait under it, but instantaneously: I *caught* what she was going to say.

“My great aunt told me some things are too important to know about,” Anita went on. “She told me that when it comes to the most personal things, ‘intimate matters of the soul,’ a person should never the read cards or any omens at all. It interferes with ‘the exquisite dilemma of choice,’ she used to say. How about that? ‘The exquisite dilemma of choice.’ And she called the Tarot cards ‘the vowels and consonants in the alphabet of eternity.’ Impressive,

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don't you think? She said that if a person wanted to make the cards a force in their lives, then fine, it should be a privilege to help anyone who sincerely asks. But she told me that anyone wise enough to read the cards for others should never do it for themselves. They should be wise enough to find direction from within. And I guess great aunt Theresa felt that romance was an intimate matter of the soul." Anita shook her head. "Don't think for a minute that I really know anything about *the alphabet of eternity*, but I still try to follow what she told me, because she was by far the coolest person I've ever known." Anita paused for a moment, seeming to marshal her courage. "And that's why I won't read the cards for you. So I guess we're going to be ...you know..."

"Lovers?" I said reluctantly. "I hope so." I was lost cause. My head was swimming. "But that word's uncomfortable for me too. What is it? A little too...? European? But boyfriend/girlfriend seems sort of..."

"Like high school?"

"Uh huh," I said, feeling radiant.

"How did you know I was reluctant to say *lovers*?"

I shrugged. "Maybe we're just on the same wavelength."

"You think so? I don't. I think you brought some peyote magic back with you from the other side. That you're secretly some kind of shaman."

I shrugged again; she was getting too close to home.

"But you know what?" I said, feeling again like I was half an instant closer to the glowing core of things and free to say what I hadn't dared say before. "Just because we're going to be lovers doesn't mean that we can't take our time."

"I know," Anita said, "we can just let it flow."

That was a liberating way of looking at things for us at that moment. That old hippie parlance worked perfectly for both of us. Anita looked at me with a sweetness tinged with the sadness that so often underlay her expressions. "Thank you for what you're doing, Jason," she said. "Whatever it is. I love you for this. Let's clean up this mess, okay?"

Was that the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me? I thought so. But along with my world-class hard-on, I also had a

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passion for housecleaning. I told her we'd tackle the insides of the cabinets first, then the windows, then the surfaces, then the floors.

"Did your mother teach you that?" Anita asked.

"No. I've made a lot of messes in my day, and eventually I had to figure out how to clean them up. The last thing you do is mop yourself out the door," I said as I began to open all the kitchen cabinets and remove the contents, hoping I wasn't acting like too much of a know-it-all. There wasn't much inside: some unmatched dishes and glasses, paper plates, peanut butter, a jumbo jar of instant ice tea, cans of Campbell's and Progresso soup, Chef Boyardee ravioli, a shit-load of ramen noodles, Kraft macaroni and cheese, popcorn, some instant pudding and other student foods. Anita seemed impressed as I pulled everything from the cabinets and with a little soapy water, sponged off the slightly sticky shelves.

"You can help, you know," I said. Anita was still observing intently.

"Your mother didn't clean up after you?" She asked, taking another sponge and scrubbing a little more vigorously than I, using her strong sculptor's hands and forearms to her advantage.

"She died when I was three," I explained. "She must have cleaned up after me when I was a baby, because my father certainly didn't. But then our housekeeper, Mrs. Bindle came to work for us and she cleaned up after me and my father. I guess I watched her, because when I was ten, she let me know that it was time I started cleaning up after myself and I pretty much knew what to do. She had great moral authority. My father always let me make as much of a mess as I wanted to, and she worked as a perfect foil for him. She was always very formal. 'Yes, Professor Finch...Of course, Professor Finch.'"

"Your mother died when you were three? Are you okay?"

"I've had eighteen years to recover."

Anita scowled at me. "That's not what I mean."

"I know. I'm sorry. And I am okay. I don't feel damaged... I don't think I am. I couldn't have a more wonderful father. You've got to meet him."

Anita didn't seem wholly convinced or willing to drop it. We'd begun to take things out of the lower cabinets: pots and lids and frying pans, some Tupperware, a metal colander with one of its

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legs broken off and not much else. Anita had made a clean batch of soapy water and added a tub of rinse water to our system.

“So this woman stayed on as your housekeeper even after she stopped cleaning up after you?”

“I’ll say! She wore a starched maid’s uniform. She was plump. She cooked every day and cleaned and did the laundry. She mowed the lawn; she shoveled snow. But things changed when I went away to college.”

Both Anita and I were on our hands and knees now rinsing down the lower cabinets.

“I didn’t know things had changed, though, not until I came home that first Thanksgiving. I got back much earlier than I was expected. I walked into the house around nine in the morning and found my father and Mrs. Bindle in bed together.”

“No shit!” Anita blurted out. “What did you do? Did you run out of the room?”

“I was going to, but before I could move, my father composed himself and said, ‘Welcome to the new order, Jason. As you can see Birdie and I have become amorously engaged. You may call her by her first name, but continue to appreciate her superior homemaking skills.’”

“You’re kidding. He talks like that?”

“All the time.”

“Birdie Bindle?” Anita asked.

I nodded.

“So let me get the picture. You’d always known her in her maid’s uniform, calling your dad ‘Professor,’ and then you find her in the sack with him? Naked?”

“Naked and very fleshy and very pink.” I said.

“Were you embarrassed?” Anita asked, as she poured the dirty water down the sink drain.

“Sure, but she held up the sheet over her... well, I guess in a woman her age and girth you’d call it her *bosom*, and said, ‘Welcome home, Jason. Would you like eggs for breakfast, pancakes or both?’”

Laughing again, Anita was wide-eyed. “Nothing like that *ever* happens to me,” she said. She was standing at the sink wringing out the rag I’d been using to clean, and I was struck with a powerful urge to hold her beautiful face in my hands and kiss her

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again, so I dried off my hands and I did. That I'd been living in close proximity with her for a month already, made this intimacy all the more breathtaking, and we continued to kiss each other as we backed out of the kitchen, through the living room and into what had been my bedroom. (Unlike in the movies, however, we did not shed clothing behind us.)

Anita and I were to become very close, but nothing was ever to match how we shyly opened ourselves to each other that afternoon. Nothing was needed to remind me to practice every kindness that day, and time passed in the perfectly ordinary extraordinary way it does when young lovers discover what Great Aunt Theresa had told Anita: that the only thing as sacred as the soul is the communion of two.

§

Days later our little apartment was clean and orderly, but despite the sense of well-being induced by that tidiness and the euphoria induced by young love, I didn't sway from my commitments. For four months I reminded myself upon awakening that I would live for a century-and-a-half, but also honored my father's admonition on "Be Kind to Butterflies Day," resolving daily to practice kindness as if my life depended on it. Although I was surprised that I'd already seen a change in myself, I kept my expectations for future progress in check. Maybe again it was because I had nearly thirteen decades ahead of me to unfold the mysteries of my soul that I didn't feel much *need* for expectation. I'd learn one day that some very "bright" people have taught that prolonging the past and anticipating the future are the greatest cause of human suffering, and maybe I'd begun to sense that. My own moment had begun to expand only slightly, but whenever I remembered to focus my attention in it with the exclusion of the future and past, a sense of serenity came upon me, as if automatically. And there was more. Just before leaving for my freshman year at college, my father impressed something on me no less memorable than "Be Kind to Butterflies Day"—something I felt free to share with Anita and which seemed to touch her as deeply as it had touched me. We were sitting over coffee in our very clean kitchen when I told her

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about it. She was looking particularly lovely that day with her great mane of brown hair cropped above her shoulders.

It was the summer of 1985. I was a precocious sixteen and my father and I were taking a walk. It was a warm day, and Mrs. Bindle (she didn't become Birdie until Thanksgiving of that year) had insisted that we each drink a glass of her excellent raspberry ice tea before we set off. Hawthorn Street was very shady, and my father didn't care much for direct sunshine, so even as we set off, chances were that we'd simply walk up and down the cool side of the street until we'd strolled ourselves out. But Mrs. Bindle insisted we drink our cold, sweet ice tea; and when Mrs. Bindle insisted...well, she had impeccable intentions, as my father used to say.

"I would have told you this when you were younger," my father began, "but I didn't wish to overwhelm your *Porifera*-like brain with more than it could absorb, but absorbency is precisely what I wish to speak to you about today." Except for the weathering of some of the old homes, Hawthorn Street had not changed in the eleven years since my father stood on his hands exposing his fire-engine under-shorts.

"I don't think it will be necessary for me to disrobe to impress you with the significance of what I have to tell you today, my boy, since this is the last talk we'll have before you leave home. You may not realize that the pursuit of your so-called *secondary education* in the hinterlands of Iowa may parallel your namesake's journey to across the Aegean in pursuit of the Golden Fleece, but I assure you, if you choose to make it so, it can be. But whether you choose to heap up knowledge, riches or wisdom in your life, I'll ask that you remind yourself of this, my parting advice to you, frequently—if not monthly, quarterly."

"He really talked like that?" Anita asked again. "Like... an actor? Playing a part of... I don't know.... A professor?"

"His still does. He really does. But there's less Latin now than when I was younger."

"He doesn't have to write it out first and then refer to his notes?" Anita suggested. Anita's parents owned a grocery store. They were disappointed that she used the education they provided for her to learn to weld pieces of scrap metal together. Anita

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admired my upbringing, but not having met my father, couldn't quite believe it. She also may have may have been a little intimidated.

My father continued. "You've been reminded to practice kindness for the last eleven years, and as far as I can judge, you've done your best to take it to heart. I'm aware that at school you've been less than magnanimous with your peers and hope my advice today will help on your way. Maybe you've noticed that in these last years, I've tried to make my reminders mild, soft-spoken and gentle, in the manner of kindness itself. What I have for you today, however, is something new."

My father looked at me keenly then, as if weighing possibilities in his mind.

"The kindness I hope you learn to practice as a budding adult requires more diligence than the occasional reminder can supply. You already know how I feel about what organized religion has wrought upon civilization, but in my opinion, Jason, no wiser exhortation has ever been made to humanity than to *love your enemy*. But to love your enemy requires an act of *intentional* love, Jason, not one that comes without effort."

I remember that my father stopped walking at this point, and though I knew it was ludicrous, I believed that he was again going to take off his clothes and stand on his hands even though he said he wouldn't. My father looked at me keenly again, and then he looked up and down the street.

"What I have to tell you may sound deceptively simple," he said then. "So, you'll need to mark this moment in time just as I marked *Be Kind to Butterflies Day*. You can stand on your hands, can't you?"

I looked at my father with concern. "Yes, but I don't have anything on under these jeans."

"The gods have too much to worry about to make sure that people dress properly," he said, sounding slightly peeved. "Go ahead, son. Disrobe."

Though reluctant, I had no choice. After I stripped, I recognized the shriek I heard as I kicked myself up on my hands. It was wacky old Mrs. Fritzell who lived alone in a house across the street that had seen better days. So had Mrs. Fritzell. In fact, it wouldn't be long before her children put her in a home due to her

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late night wanderings up and down the street—at times improperly clad; her tendency to invite squirrels and sparrows into the house; and, not the least of her problems, a propensity for shrieking, provoked and unprovoked.

I suppose my father had concluded that no one would take Mrs. Fritzel's complaint about my nakedness seriously, but I did slip back into my jeans and tee shirt with extraordinary speed. The moment I was dressed and upright, my father spoke to me with great earnestness.

"When practicing kindness," he said, "first, remember that everyone always does their best, their best according to their experience and according to what they know. Never blame anyone for anything.

"And second, Jason, and foremost, remember that when you make yourself *permeable to the goodness of others*, a force passes between you that is as strong as gravity. It draws love out of your heart and out of theirs as well. This may indeed be a secret of a virtuous life."

Anita's expression was wide eyed but slightly puzzled. "He sounds very wise. Like my great aunt," she said after a moment. "Just like her, but maybe... a little bit *stiffer* than Theresa. I'd love to meet him, Jason. As long as I...you know. I wouldn't have to take anything off?"

I laughed. I reached across the table took her hand. "Oh, I need to tell you more!" I said. "Much more."

§

During the next months, I did tell Anita a great deal more about my father. I told her about his background; how he'd grown up in a household with a Theologian father no less eccentric than he was; how he'd delivered a lecture on the Peloponnesian Wars to his little friends at his sixth birthday party; how he'd been an All America high jumper in college. I told her how he was beloved by his colleagues and students; how he wrapped his parrot in a red cashmere scarf when he took him to the university on cold days, and how he had eaten the same breakfast every day for thirty years. I told her he was a gifted story-teller, and had even begun to tell her

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the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece as he had told me when I was young.

It was the day after Thanksgiving and the weather had suddenly turned cold. A front had swept in from the west, first bringing drenching rain and then what weathermen like to call “plummeting temperatures,” which covered the trees, utility poles and wires, streets and sidewalks with an inch of ice. Groverton became beautiful but treacherous for pedestrians and motorists alike. And the freeze was prolonged. Tree branches broke and fell with the weight of the ice; cars skidded into other cars, into fire hydrants and stop signs; people toppled, bruising wrists, elbows and tail bones. Anita and I had gone out for a walk.

We’d become lovers in the truest sense of the word. We were each other’s first love with all it implies. We loved having coffee together in the morning; we loved walking each other to class and meeting each other afterwards. We loved setting the table for each other for meals as simple as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and milk—and of course Anita loved it when I sang the “Peanut Butter and Jelly” song for her. We loved to read poetry aloud to each other—mostly Rilke; we loved the way we looked as we listened to each other read, particularly if it was late in the day and long shadows fell across us. We loved learning every detail of each other’s childhoods; we loved pretending we were ourselves as little children, and kissing as little children and thrillingly playing “Doctor.” We loved telling each other about our closest friends so convincingly that each felt we’d gained new friends ourselves; we loved giving each other tiny gifts: hearts carved from melted red candle wax, stars cut from foil, bits of mica, rose quartz, deep blue marbles, bright yellow canary feathers. We loved leaving notes for each other, notes that led to notes that led to other notes; we loved holding hands in public, combing each other’s hair. We loved to cry for each other; to clean the house for each other, to draw each other, and to walk and walk and walk.

That the moment often swelled for me and I *caught* what she would say before she said it blended so well with our intimacy that I ceased to notice the difference. That I was already a slightly different animal than those around me was subsumed in my lover’s contentment. I didn’t feel *brighter* than anyone at all—I didn’t need

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to be. In only four months we'd become everything to each other. We were holding our mittened hands as we walked the icy streets that day; at times keeping ourselves upright and at times bringing us down together. We were walking in a grand loop around the town. I'd already told Anita much of the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. She already knew how once the Argonauts gained entry to Colchis, King Æetes challenged Jason to penetrate his sinister magical guardians if he wished to return home with the Golden Fleece. She also knew that Jason could not succeed by himself, but only with the help of the Medea, the king's beautiful daughter and sorceress to boot.

"So," I said to Anita, "I've done some reading about this story. And Medea kind of reminds me of you. She was a sorceress, and you're fluent in 'alphabet of eternity...'"

"Hey! Stop it!" Anita said, jerking my mittened hand enough to nearly send us both toppling. "I haven't even mentioned the Tarot since... since I don't know when."

"Fine, but listen. Let me back up a little. The way Medea helped Jason was to make a potion for him to rub on himself and his sword and shield. This made him invulnerable. He could harness King Æetes' terrible fire-breathing bulls and plow the fields with them; he could slay the magical warriors that grew up out of the dragons' teeth he'd planted, and eventually, with more help from Medea, pluck the Golden Fleece from atop the oak tree in Ares' grove, a tree which had, incidentally, a monstrous serpent coiled around it. Okay? Now that's a lot, but what I read was that this myth is about how the masculine force alone can't fulfill its quest. It needs a partnership with the feminine. What do you think about that?"

"So you *are* on a quest, aren't you?" Anita asked. "I always thought so."

Just then, a car driving a little too fast tried to brake and skidded up onto the curb not far from us. With some effort, we braced ourselves against a mailbox and helped push the car back onto the street, wheels spinning. The footing had become slicker as we'd walked. There was a bench close by in front of a drug store. It was icy, but we sat down.

I'd only told my father about my quest, my resolution and its startling effect on my life so far. He was the only one I knew I

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would always trust. I did love Anita. I didn't necessarily expect to live out my life, or at least the first seventy-five-years of it, with her at my side, however, so I withheld my secret to her. This hurt me at the time.

"I am on a quest to achieve kindness," I said to Anita, more than I would have said to anyone else.

"Really? It seems like more than that to me. I mean, that's a righteous thing to seek." She furrowed her brow. "You know, this *does* remind me of a Tarot card."

"Oh, really?"

"Um hm. An important one. The seventh of the Major Arcana. But you probably don't know what that means. There are twenty-two of those, the Majors, they're high powered cards, the big boppers. The Major Arcana are a book of wisdom. They're the prototypes. This one's called 'The Chariot.' It shows a charioteer driving a chariot that's drawn by two sphinxes, or horses in some versions, but one is black and one white. That's what's important here. The Chariot's a quest card, but the thing is, his quest can only be successful because the chariot's drawn by both a black and white sphinx, by the dark force and the light force—which is an old fashioned way of saying feminine and masculine forces, *love and will*, like my Great Aunt liked to say. That's a message for all the ages. Nothing great can be achieved without love and will. It's like Jason needing Medea to capture the Golden Fleece."

"Tell me more," I said.

"No, no. That's all you get, babe. You can think about that for the rest of your life. It should be enough. That's my little High Priestess act as far as you're concerned... as long as *you're* keeping secrets. And I think you've got one. Like you have contact with beings from outer space, or maybe you're one of their agents."

Anita was smiling, but I knew she was one of those who took the presence of extraterrestrials seriously. I rolled my eyes at her.

"I just want to learn to love life," I said. "And I suppose that's even selfish." At this, feeling like I was taking a cue in a performance, I slid closer to Anita on the bench, put my arm around her and kissed her. But just before our lips met, she spoke.

"How did you know that? Did you hear me?"

"What?"

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"I asked you to kiss me. In my mind, I mean. And the moment I did, you..."

"But do I still get to kiss you?"

"I don't know," Anita said, shaking her head. "I mean, yeah, of course, but..."

I did kiss her then. Her mouth was a warm pleasure cave to me, but I was a little distracted. "We must just be on the same wavelength," I said, feeling my solar plexus constrict with the lie.

"That's what you always say. I think you're from Sirius."

"I love you," I said. Then I said it again, looking in her eyes, always an experience that made me feel like I was going to swoon. "Say that to me, will you?" I asked, and when she did, we slid even closer together on the bench, our heads tilted, resting together, making the two of us form a perfect triangle.

"I know," I said to her as yet unspoken: "*It doesn't get any better than this.*"

She looked at me in astonishment. "You're scaring me, Finch," she said, an edge of tension in her voice.

"I was just expressing how sweet the moment was. I..."

"Don't lie to me, Jason. I can always tell."

"You can?"

"Didn't you know that? You think you're so smart and you didn't know that?" Her brown eyes flashed darkly. But as I was searching for something to say that was honest but didn't sell her short, she laughed.

"Hey! Maybe *I am* your Medea," she said, offering no explanation for her brightening mood. "Let's walk, okay? Or ride our Chariot or whatever the hell we're doing."

We had to be very careful standing up. Our first attempt failed. I lost my footing on the glassy surface of the sidewalk, and holding hands, we both plopped back down.

"We'll have to skate," she said. And that worked. As a matter of fact, we assumed the skater's position, hands held in front of us, and slowly slid on down the sidewalk for several blocks as if around a rink. Someone passing in a car opened the window and cheered us. Again I nearly lost my footing, and if it weren't for the strength in Anita's welder's arms we might have both gone down.

When we came to the town square, we had to sit down again, this time on a bench that had been considerably chipped of

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all its ice. The square at the center of town was very much small-college-town-American. There was a statue of “Grovey,” William Covington Grover, the city father—who was almost always draped and wearing a hat of some sort; a tradition permitted, even encouraged by the town council as long as the head gear was not offensive, sexually, culturally or otherwise. During football season, he often wore the helmet of our small school’s typically ineffective football team, the “Porcupines.” On this particular November day W.C.G. wore a “Porky” helmet that was impaled with a large ax, commemorating the last Saturday’s 49-3 defeat.

“So whatever happened with her? Medea?” Anita asked.

I put my arm around her. “Well,” I said, “once Jason got the Golden Fleece and was set to leave with it and Medea, who was his other prize, there was all sorts of intrigue with her father, King Æetes, and then a problem with her brother, Apsyrtus, at the Temple of Artemis, and...”

Anita looked at me curiously. “Æetes, Apsyrtus, Artemis... How do you ever remember all these names, Jason?”

“Some of them are simple. The Gods are. There are Greek and Roman names for them all. Like Artemis, she’s the Goddess of Hunt; the Romans called her Diana. And Poseidon, the king of the sea; the Romans called him Neptune. And there’s Zeus, the king of them all, who they called Jupiter; and Aphrodite, love goddess, who’s Venus; and Hermes, the messenger, who’s Mercury; and Ares, the god of war, that’s Mars; and Hades, god of the underworld, that’s Pluto, and on and on. But beyond that? Like Æetes and Apsyrtus? Hey, I don’t remember those well at all. I’m not sure if I pronounce them right and have no idea how most of them are spelled, but still, I guess when you learn something when you’re very young, it sticks—or is absorbed, maybe, like with a *Porifera*...”

“What is that, anyway?”

“A sponge, honey cakes, a plain old sponge.”

For a moment then the two of us took in our surroundings, absorbed them, one might say. A cold sun had broken through the overcast, and since nearly ever surface was covered with ice, nearly everything sparkled. In the Midwest, ten, fifteen years can pass without such a meteorological coincidence and such delicately spectacular vistas. The tree-filled square showed off the icy

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extravaganza beautifully. And at least a dozen students had ventured out onto the hazardous wonderland. Some wore skates and were cruising around the square on the newly replaced, smooth sidewalk which ran along the square's perimeter; some on the three winding concrete paths that weaved among the stand of oak, which shimmered as if electrified. Other students skated in street shoes, and a few like us, who'd had enough, sat on the benches here and there around the square. There was very little motor traffic; when a car did slowly pass, most skaters stopped expectantly to see if it would skid into something.

"So what happened to Medea?" Anita asked.

"Okay," I said, pulling her a little closer in the chill. "What happened was King Æetes was willing to let Jason leave with the Fleece as long as he left Medea at home. But Jason would have none of that, he was in love with Medea, and the king ended up commanding Medea's brother, Apsyrtus, to see that she didn't leave. This led to an unfortunate scuffle in Artemis' temple in which Jason slew Medea's brother, splattering our beautiful enchantress with his blood in the process. This pissed-off Zeus no end, and as the Argonauts and Medea sailed off, he issued one of his godly proclamations: They'd sail the seas *forever* unless Medea cleansed herself of her brother's blood."

"I'm not sure if I want to keep being Medea," Anita said.

I couldn't disagree, but I just kept talking, my breath frosty in the winter air. "So they did end up sailing around for a time like heroes do in Greek Myths, encountering all sorts of mythic and, as my father would say *fabulous* things like sirens and a terrible ogress that turned men into swine, but eventually they met a queen, named Arete, who told Medea the only way she could redeem herself in the eyes of Zeus, was to give up the practice of magic and never use her enchantments on anyone again.

"So, fine. Medea agrees, and the Argonauts sail toward home in Iolcus." I stopped for a moment. Most of the other people who were braving the freezing weather there at "Glove Square" had turned their attention to a car, a red convertible with the top down, no less, packed with what looked like about ten male students, moist shirtless: frat boys, maybe, possibly drunk. They were driving the route around the square and braking sharply to cause spinning skids just for the fun of it. Anita and I watched for a

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few moments. It did look like it might have been fun, but the stupidity of the pack of testosterone and/or alcohol crazed boys stood out as clearly to me as if they were trailing a banner that read: IDIOTS.

“So they sailed toward home,” I continued, still watching the car. “But of course there were problems, mythic problems. The Argonauts were blown off course, ended up in Africa where they were guided by Poseidon’s magical horse who came out of the sea, and there were nymphs galore, and there was a tree that bore golden apples guarded by a dragon, and more problems, but they finally managed to get away.

“The ending isn’t all that happy, though. I should warn you. The Argo was built with a beam in the prow hewn from a tree in the sacred grove of Zeus, remember? Well, as the Argonauts approached Iolcus, the beam rang out and told them not to return home. After all they’d been through, it turned out that King Pelias still ruled there, that he’d slain Jason’s parents and defended the city with a mighty army. This was heartbreaking news to Jason, and it was then that Medea, out of love and devotion to him, decided to break her vow and once again use her sorceress’ powers to win entrance to Jason’s home. And, Anita, as you might imagine, things didn’t go well at all. And not just because Medea had broken her vow; no, but because Jason ultimately betrayed her. And after that...”

“What?” Anita said. “How could you?”

It sounded to me as if Anita was taking this news personally. Her mittened hand, which I’d been holding all the while we’d been sitting on the bench, stiffened. And so I began to explain that in summoning up her powers to kill King Pelias and break his rule over Jason’s homeland, Medea had transformed herself into a fearsome person, a sorceress who could aid Jason in his quest to return to Iolcus with the Golden Fleece. But this was not the same Medea Jason loved; there was nothing loveable about this sorceress. She was indomitable; she was fierce. She drove around, for example, a terror to all who saw her, in a chariot drawn by a pair of hideous dragons, and meanwhile Jason’s head had been turned by Glauce, the lovely young daughter of the King Creon of Corinth. And then, of course, there was the infanticide: the terrible ending to the Medea myth created by Euripides (poet, not parrot)—but

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Anita's attention had been drawn away from this story of betrayal and mine had as well. It was the whooping from the idiot car packed with male students who were careening around Grovey Square that interrupted the story. They had increased their velocity, their spins were becoming ever more reckless and they were coming in our direction.

Anita's eyes widened. Mine did as well, along with the breadth of my moment. But even in my heightened state, the events of the next few seconds rushed by too quickly for me. The red car went into a spin just as it was approaching our bench from behind, and in the instant before the world changed forever, I foresaw the impact. The driver would lose control; I knew that. The car would jump the curb, coming straight at us, so I clutched Anita's hand and leapt off to the right of the bench, pulling her along behind me. But something went terribly, terribly wrong. The car did leap the curb, just as I had foreseen, but my instinct to pull Anita to the right had been dreadfully misguided. The car missed the bench where we'd been sitting, only by inches, but it missed it to the right. I was unscathed, but according the paramedics who arrived on the scene, Anita was dead upon impact.

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They had to pry Anita's body out of my arms. It took three men to loosen my grip. It was weeks before the bruises on my arms incurred in that struggle faded away. My body was sedated and taken to the hospital. They said it was the shock. That's what they called it: shock, an inadequate name for such a crushing, unrelenting weight. They didn't know that I already felt so much more, a deeper sense of loss, that every moment had gained the force of a driven nail. They didn't know about the betrayal: that my foresight had betrayed us both; that in believing I could save Anita, I had pulled her into the path of the car.

Then there was the murderer; the young man the public and press so willingly called "murderer." He was not injured in the collision that occurred between the red convertible and the oldest, tallest oak tree in the square—the second collision, that is, after the collision that broke Anita. All reports of the tragedy made a point of

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mentioning the distance her body had been thrown in the air after impact: “fifty feet in the air” read one report, “forty feet” read another. Did someone measure this? What did it matter? Why would anyone care? Several of the students who were thrown from the convertible were injured. Was this another oak grove of the great god Ares? And the tree? Did it match the one from which the Golden Fleece had hung? Like that tallest oak from which Trixie’s sky-blue quilt would fly nine years later? Nothing was said about how far the students were thrown.

There were nine students in the car, fraternity bothers. All four who were ejected suffered fractures; one serious enough to leave him paralyzed from the waist down. Four of the five others were only bumped, sprained and whip-lashed. The driver, who owned the car and whose idea it had been to go for the joyride, came out of it with nothing more than a bloody nose—or so it seemed. His name was Billy Young.

I had never met Anita’s parents, although I knew that she’d maintained that the two of us were simply roommates. I’d had no objection to this charade; I understood her parents were conservative people. It was this consideration beyond all others that snapped me out of my sedated state. It was this too that temporarily relieved me of my guilt and lent conviction to my argument that I be cut loose from the hospital and allowed to return to my apartment, where I frantically removed the heap that had collected in Anita’s vacated bedroom. There was an unfinished assemblage, which included a chrome bumper, a large, interlocking set of gears, and a number of old-fashioned, hand operated egg-beaters. There were two fans in the room, a coat tree, a piano bench, a space heater, a trunk and assorted things that probably should have been thrown out. Most of this I crammed onto an already crowded enclosed back porch. I dusted off the assemblage and put in the living room. Then, heartbroken, I moved Anita’s dresser out of my bedroom back into her former one, along with all her coveralls and other clothes from the closet. These clothes would be stained with tears of the greatest sorrow I’d yet known.

Then I moved her lamps, her bedside table, and her lovely little blue and gold Oriental carpet. Then I reassembled Anita’s old bed frame, remade the bed, tacked up several posters (of works by Robert Rauschenberg and Alberto Giacometti), arranged

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knickknacks as I remembered them: antique cobalt blue Bromo Seltzer bottles on the window sills; the select best of her polished antique doorknob collection on her dresser; her small reproduction of Michelangelo's David on her bedside table—as if still available as fantasy material. After that, sobbing, I tossed some of her clothes around the recreated room and took everything else of hers out of my room (like her watch, some earrings, some socks from under my bed) and replaced it for her parents who would certainly be going through her belongings lovingly and very carefully. Despite the volcanic surging of my own remorse at having betrayed the love of my life, it was essential that I accurately recreate her room, leaving nothing that might suggest the wrong kind of cohabitation to her parents at this dreadful time of their lives. During it all, I forced myself to go through the motions of undoing what our love had left behind. I felt as if I was burying Anita back into the past, dissembling her, irrevocably. I don't think it was more than a few minutes after I slumped on the worn living room couch then that the phone rang.

“Yes,” I said to the tremulous voice of Anita's father. “Ten minutes will be fine.”

§

After the funeral in Minneapolis, I was faced with a long, sad drive home. A little over an hour on my way, I realized that an old black sedan had been fixed in my rearview mirror ever since I'd left Minnesota. There was no reason to believe this car was actually following me, but it wasn't long before I was convinced that it was. Under ordinary conditions, the seven hour road trip would have given me ample time to continue grieving my loss. I had no reason to expect a more deeply disturbing experience.

By the time I'd been on the road for two hours and the old black car had not passed me or turned off, I pulled off into a rest stop to see if I could shake my pursuer. I began to panic when the car followed me off the interstate. It did not pull all the way into the rest stop, however. The car waited just outside the parking area. I was trembling as I went in to use the men's room, but when I came back to my car, the black sedan was gone.

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It wasn't long after I was back on the highway that the car was behind me again, and there it remained for hours until I finally approached the northern outskirts of Chicago. When I slowed down, it slowed down; when I accelerated, it did too. Never once, however, was I able to see through the windshield to get a glimpse of the driver, not until just before I approached my exit at North Avenue. It was then that the old black car sped past me and I saw that the driver was a huge man, dressed in black, whose face was ominously in shadow, but so clearly resembled the specter that had followed me down the railroad tracks that I missed my turn-off and nearly sideswiped a maroon minivan on my right as I panicked at the wheel.

I came home to Hawthorn Street depleted and depressed.

I decided not to say anything about what may or may not have happened to me on my drive back from Minneapolis. There had been more than enough to disturb me before my trip home. I hadn't seen a smile on anyone's face at the funeral or at the reception afterwards. The atmosphere there had seemed like another death in itself. I felt as if something had been torn out of me, and, of course, it had been.

And I was angry. I'd lost my mother so soon I hardly remembered her, and now my first love was gone after only four months. Shortly after I arrived home, my father took me out for a walk. I had to be led like a child. The same ice storm that had swept through Iowa had struck Chicago as well, but an unseasonably warm spell had followed, so the streets and sidewalks were puddley and the lawns spongy under an overcast sky.

"I think I may be able recall something of what you're feeling, son," my father began. "It was eighteen years ago that your mother vanished and the sorrow I felt may resemble your own, though Emily's death was, compared to your beloved's, immaculate."

At this I sobbed. I wanted to tell my father why I was so moved but couldn't. It was the formality of his speech that made me weep. I wept because Anita's incredulous question seemed so close: "He talks like that?"

"But remember," my father said then, "let your grief flow freely. It's a living thing with a way of its own, Jason, and like all

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living things, it has a right to exist and thrive no matter how it may affect us. Honoring grief honors life. Doesn't that make sense?"

But he stopped and looked at me with a pained expression. "A foolish question," he said, shaking his head. "Forgive me. Sense has nothing to do with it. Sense, to the heart, is like arithmetic to a flower." My father's voice was trembling. "I'm sorry, son," he said. "I've always been more a man of the mind than the heart."

We walked silently for a time. Nothing he'd said made me feel any better. As we approached home, I put my arm around him, something I don't believe I'd ever done before.

§

I was nervous as soon as I started my drive from Chicago to Groverton. I repeatedly searched my rearview mirror and more than once saw a black sedan. None of these, however, followed me for an inordinate distance. The memory of that huge man, however, that evil man with his frightening face shrouded in shadow was enough to shake me again. The ride was exhausting.

Back at school, my apartment felt unlivable for all the reasons one might expect. Despite feeling torn apart and frightened as well, I'd maintained my ritual resolutions: that I would live, healthy, to the age of a hundred-and-fifty; and that I would practice kindness and strive to make myself permeable to the good in others. A home bearing reminders of loss at every turn might provide opportunities for spiritual discipline, but there would be plenty of time for that in my life, I reasoned. What I needed then was a fresh start.

Anita's parents had also returned and I helped them load a truck they'd rented with their daughter's belongings they'd been unable to take on their former visit. I also helped them with her assemblages from the sculpture studio. This was an overwhelmingly sorrowful occasion. But quite unexpectedly, on that sad day as I moved those reminders of Anita's life, my moments swelled even further, and once I'd carried her bedside table down to the truck, I foresaw the surprising thing her mother said to me well before she said it—thus I was able to prepare myself.

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“Thank you for everything, Jason. And it was very kind and considerate of you to try to disguise that you and our daughter were...” here she hesitated. “...were lovers. But we knew it from the joy in Anita’s voice whenever she spoke of you.” I thought I was prepared, but apparently I wasn’t, because I broke down completely then, right there on the street at the back of the U-Haul with Anita’s parents on either side of me. Anita’s mother embraced me, and once my sobbing subsided, wholly forgetting myself, I replied to her father’s invitation before he spoke it.

“Of course,” I said. “I will.”

With her hands on my shoulders then, Anita’s mother looked at me wonderingly. “Our daughter told us that you read minds. Now I see why.” Then her face brightened. It was the first time I’d seen her smile, and with it, my feeling of awkwardness melted away.

As they drove off, the certainty that I’d begun to transform into a new kind of being was verified as surely as they mistakenly turned left rather than right at the stop sign, just as I foresaw.

When I returned home, I felt myself slip into the first sense of wellbeing I’d had since Anita’s death, and I dialed the number I’d looked up several days before.

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THE GOLDEN FLEECE

My aversion to anything that smacked of sanctimony made me question my motives once I'd called Billy Young and made arrangements to meet him. Yet still, my intention to forgive him felt genuine, free of high-mindedness. I wholeheartedly felt that nothing could fill Anita's absence from the world more creatively than kindness to her so-called "murderer." It wasn't my intent to *save* Billy Young: for all I knew, any self-loathing he felt as a result of his recklessness might have been exactly what he needed, but it did occur me that at this point in his life, he might need a new friend. I know *I* did, and I saw this as an opportunity that might be good for everyone involved.

Billy's parents, a well-to-do couple from St. Louis, had refused, on principal, to bail him out of the county jail, where he'd been for nearly a week. They had not abandoned him; they had hired an expensive defense attorney, but his father had told him he should "sit in his own shit" until the trial. At least that's what Billy told me over the phone. I was thinking about that, that his father could have actually spoken to him that way—in fact, I was imagining how sick I'd feel if my father ever spoke to me like that, the horror of it—when I drove off the road that Saturday morning. It was early December, 1990.

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

I've often considered the metaphorical meaning of that, of *driving off the road*. And I've wondered just how and why it is that the circumstances of life cast reflections across other contexts, how meanings translate. But once I saw that rosy wooden door, I left most of my wondering behind me, withered and lifeless. Now it wasn't the wood that was rosy; roses of some sort—wild ones, I suppose—were climbing on and clinging to the door. The fact that the roses were blooming in December didn't surprise me. And yes, the door was outside, and in the country, where wild “winter roses” of whatever sort apparently grow under special circumstances. So I was in the country when I *drove off the road*. I was headed for the jail in the Williston County Seat where Billy Young was imprisoned. And yes, this may seem difficult to understand. I suppose that's inevitable, but I've learned that understanding is a very limited thing. The wholeness of things can't be understood; only little slivers of things, like names. Important things are too big to fit in our little minds. What you and I really *are* cannot be understood any more than God or Time or Infinity can be understood. That we are inseparable cannot be understood either: *we* being you, me, God, Time, Infinity or anything else worthy of serious attention. Like that rosy door.

The door was not freestanding; it was attached to a wall of a building of some sort, but I didn't notice what sort. The roses that had over-grown the door had attached themselves to the building as well; it looked like the door hadn't been opened for at least one growing season, so when I did pull it open, some of the stems on which the roses grew ripped free—with a sound like brittle pages flipping in an old book—and some snapped. With some of the roses peeled back down from the top of the door, I saw that a name plate was affixed there. The letters were almost entirely faded away; I couldn't read them but could tell that they had been applied in gold leaf and that bits of that material remained. I didn't look carefully at the sign's faded letters but had the impression that one of the words itself may have been “Gold.”

When I opened the door, I noticed nothing dramatic about the place: there was no theatrical lighting, no clearing mists, no eerie music or other special effects. I had entered a coffee house. It was the kind of place that might like to call itself a *café* because of

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the old world romance the word sometimes conveys. But there wasn't much that distinguished the décor of this coffee house itself from others of its kind, except for the books. There were easy chairs there and small sofas as well as little tables, but rather than daily newspapers and current periodicals, the place was supplied with books, like a casual reading library. There were a number of gleaming coffee dispensers on the counter in front near a glass display case with baked goods. And there was a blackboard behind the counter, of course, with the names of all the coffees and accoutrements written out in several colors of chalk in a very neat, feminine hand. There were no prices listed. At the top of the blackboard, in larger lettering and in yellow-orange chalk, was inscribed the name of the place, that same name which had faded from the rosy front door: "The Golden Fleece," and just below that in smaller lettering "Member of THE BIG PICTURE family of establishments."

Besides the presence of the books, what did set this coffee house apart from all others I'd visited were the patrons, two of whom I recognized. At a round table in the back of the room sat Anita and a woman I recognized to be my mother. Along with them was an old, rosy cheeked man who was wearing a modest crown, and who, with the exception of his plumpness, bore an odd resemblance to my father.

Before the reader draws any conclusions of his or her own, let me point out that I am not describing a dream, a hallucination or a vision induced by a severe blow to the head incurred in an automobile accident. Without the any intention of being rude, let me also point out that I stated that I "drove off the road;" no mention was made of any impact or accident of any sort. I drove off the road intentionally. And let me add that when I found that I'd had entered a coffee house called "The Golden Fleece," of course my mind was flooded with the associations one might predict—but only on the surface.

"Well, sit down, silly" my mother said to me. I'd approached the round table, and she spoke as if there were no reason I should be standing there looking unsure of myself.

"Don't you want some coffee?" she said, seeing I had no cup in my hand. "You still like coffee, don't you?" She must have

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sensed my question at her use of the word “still,” because she laughed out loud but offered no explanation. Anita reached up and touched my hand.

“I’ll get you some, sweetcakes,” Anita said, standing up and putting her warm hand on my shoulder, gently—and looking perfectly uninjured.

“Thanks,” I said, not nearly as confused as I might have been.

Back outside that rosy door, where my vanished mother and Anita were both deemed *dead*, I remembered hearing from someone I’d probably considered a flake that ghosts were departed souls who couldn’t accept being dead or didn’t realize that they were. But even in these extraordinary circumstances, I felt embarrassed about giving credence to ghost stories. I didn’t want to ask my mother, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Umm,” I said. “I’m not, uh... dead, am I?”

At this, two things happened simultaneously.

First, after only the briefest hesitation, a hesitation that indicated to me that all the patrons and staff of “The Golden Fleece” had been listening to my question, everyone simultaneously burst out in to gales of unrestrained laughter. Second, and synchronized so perfectly with the outburst of laughter that it had to have been rehearsed, a three piece ensemble—consisting of a piano player, a drummer, a trumpet—chimed in in a well-known march by John Philip Sousa, the title of which I believe is “Stars and Stripes Forever,” but the words, or a children’s version of the words, I knew for certain:

“Be kind to your fine feathered friends,
‘Cause a duck may be somebody’s mother.
Be kind to your friends in the swamp,
Where the weather’s cold and dhamp.”

Then, just as these first bars of music ended, the laughter ended as well, and all the customers went back to their coffee, books, conversation or any combination thereof, and the staff to its business.

That’s when Anita returned with my coffee. I was relieved that she hadn’t vanished; I felt comforted by her presence. She was the only one there that I felt I knew, and I was, after all, deeply sorry

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for causing her death and deeply in love with her, though neither of those two emotions seemed to apply any longer.

“So-o...” I asked my mother as Anita put my steaming, sunshine-yellow cup down on the table and I sat down along with it, “should I take that response to mean that I *am* or *am not* dead?” I braced myself for another orchestrated outburst, but none followed.

Anita looked at my mother. She laughed. “Neither,” she said. “Neither.”

This made only the most arcane kind of sense and I was looking forward to an explanation from someone. But none followed; the rosy-faced old man with the crown, however, politely cleared his throat.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” my mother said, sounding genuinely contrite. “Jason, dear, this is my friend Old King Phineus. I’m sure your father’s told you about him.”

Before reacting to meeting a five-thousand-year-old mythical king, I wondered just what my mother meant by the word “friend.” And there was a great deal else I also wondered about, but my questions, though flocks of them circulated on the surface of my consciousness, took no foothold. They didn’t stick. They seemed of no real substance, as if one question could be substituted for another or one answer for another without changing a thing in THE BIG PICTURE. Was that were I was? Really? In THE BIG PICTURE? Or was it The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party?

Wherever I actually was, I was sitting snugly between my mother and Anita; the king was across from me. Both my hands were being held; this made drinking my coffee problematic, and given that I was still somewhat bewildered, I felt I could use a good jolt of caffeine. Not wanting to bruise any feelings, I approached the matter obliquely. “This isn’t decaf, is it?” I asked Anita.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Jason,” she said, releasing my hand from her warm grip. “And no, I don’t think they serve decaf here.”

At this, another question circled my awareness but didn’t bother to land. Then I tasted my coffee and wasn’t surprised to find it was the best I’d ever tasted. One may wonder at this categorical assertion. How is it, one might ask, that I didn’t rate this cup of coffee merely *excellent*, *superlative* or even *among the best*? How was I able to distinguish it from all the other cups of coffee I’d consumed and designate it *the best*? Truth is, this bright boy didn’t

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have a clue. What's even more daunting, however, is that when I tasted this particular cup of strong black coffee, I was able to compare its taste, body and aroma not only to all the coffee I'd drunk by then, but to all the coffee I was to drink in the future! This being the case, I did what was beginning to become natural to me over the last six months: I intentionally slowed my perception in order to enjoy my experience even more fully. It was at this, this moment of heightened awareness on my part, that everyone in "The Golden Fleece" again fell silent and looked in my direction. No laughter followed, however, and no orchestral punctuation, but a chorus of long, satisfied "Ah-h-h... 's."

I raised my eyebrows. This seemed corny to me, lame. But even as I started to question this mass response, I thought better of it. If, as I'd begun to suspect, there was trickery afoot, I'd do best to keep my questions to myself. But Anita seemed so sincere and so warm and so very much herself, and my mother so serene and loving that I didn't entertain my these doubts for long—and even if I had been tricked into playing the back end of a donkey in some cosmic farce, one doesn't get that opportunity every day, so I played on.

"So, King," I said to the rosy cheeked old man across from me, "you're looking well. Healthy, well nourished. I take it the efforts of Zetes and Calais have held up after all these years."

"Kind of you to inquire, young man," said the king. "This history of my life and times is fading away...but everything fades away, doesn't it, my dear," he said to my mother, patting her hand and smiling in a somewhat disturbing way. King Phineus' eyes twinkled brightly, as if electrically charged. (But wasn't he blind? Hadn't his eyes been snatched out by the Harpies? Had he been cured?)

"But it was not by the efforts of Zetes and Calais alone that I have thrived, young Jason," the king went on. "No, no." he wagged an old, crooked finger. "Remember that those young heroes were the sons of the North Wind, hence their wing-ed heels, but the vile Harpies whom they drove off were of a higher station still. They were in reality the *Hounds of Zeus* disguised..."

I couldn't help breaking in, and it was with an unaccustomed sense of propriety that I did it. Interrupting the king at this point felt like a natural force which I couldn't control and for

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which I felt no need to apologize. “So, King, you’re saying that the sons of the North Wind are trumped by Zeus’ dogs?”

“*Ho-u-n-ds!*” King Phineus said very dramatically. “Not the *dogs* of Zeus, young man. The *Ho-u-n-ds* of Zeus.” As if that clarified the issue. Then he continued.

“It was Great Zeus himself who punished me for my vainglorious aspirations. Thanks to the fortuitous arrival of the Argonauts, Zetes and Calais were able to drive off the wing-ed executors of my torment, but only as far as the Floating Island where they were met by Zeus’s fair messenger—Ah! The golden wing-ed Iris. Yes! It was upon *her* commandment that the hideous, hook-nosed, taloned snatchers of my sustenance never again returned to my splendid city of Salmydessus!”

It seemed that King Phineus resembled Phineas Finch in more ways than his appearance.

Maybe it was the shock of finding myself in such unforeseen circumstances that affected my powers of observation, but I had no memory of seeing two plates with pastry crumbs in front of the rosy-cheeked king. Nor had I noticed that two books lay shut in front of Anita. The title on one spine read: “The Twelve Faces of Illusion and the Creative Means of Utilizing Each,” the other, “Dreaming Backwards.” Both sounded very interesting to me, particularly the later, but it was then that a powerfully built man dressed as an English butler appeared at my left shoulder.

“The Admiral will see you as soon as you wish,” he said. “Do finish your coffee. Do you want me to freshen your cup?”

I said yes, but as a stall tactic as much as anything else. I didn’t feel I’d begun to orient myself to newly departed Anita’s presence yet, and certainly not my long-lost mother. King Phineus, or whoever he was, seemed a curiosity and nothing more.

“So who’s this Admiral?” I asked Anita, whose hand was on my shoulder again and who had a distinctly heavenly air about her. She smelled of roses. She looked like an angel. For a moment, I wished my mother was absent. But just for a moment.

“I don’t know, Jason,” she answered. “I’ve never heard of him until just now.”

The questions: What is this place? Why am I here? Why are you here? circled my mind in a tight little formation but then drifted off unanswered, leaving me perfectly unconcerned. I knew

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this was peculiar, and also that it was deeply comforting. I looked at my mother. It was only then that I realized how strikingly beautiful she was in person, and why a man like my father might have mistaken her for a goddess. The old king, I noticed, was still holding her hand.

“Do you know who this Admiral is?” I asked her.

“Oh, yes, Jason. Of course I do, but I wouldn’t want to deprive him of the pleasure of telling you who he is. He *loves* to introduce himself.”

This sounded interesting, but something else was welling up in me of its own accord, and I couldn’t help but change the subject. “Mother,” I asked abruptly. “Are you happy here?”

She didn’t seem as shocked as I was at my interruption, not shocked at all, in fact.

“Oh,” she said, “that’s so sweet of you to ask, dear. It was sad, wasn’t it, that we were separated so early? It was wonderful having you with me, dear, even for such a brief time. But, you know, you were such a shining little tyke and I knew you’d do well under your father’s tutelage—and I think I gave you nearly a lifetime’s worth of love in those three years.”

It sounded as if she was concerned that *I* might have been unhappy. And a wave of remembered melancholy did sweep over me at that moment: a forgotten feeling rekindled, and with it a surge of love. “Thank you, mama,” were the words I heard myself say, but in a faint, fragile voice. *Mama* must have been what I called her when I first learned to talk. I didn’t remember that. I’d always thought of her as *Mother*, so I didn’t feel quite myself, and that along with the powerful swell of emotion made me lose track of my original question.

My mother’s eyes were so radiant and her features so perfectly symmetrical that I might have taken her for a goddess myself as she sat next to me, holding my hand at that round table.

“But let me answer your question, sweetheart. It was dear of you to ask, but I don’t think I can answer it in quite the terms you expect, because what I think you mean by *happiness* is something I don’t really feel—I’m happy to say.”

Old Phineus laughed a very old man’s laugh at my mother little joke’s and poked her gently in the shoulder. She glanced at him benevolently and then disentangled a fork that had somehow

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been ensnared in his long, white beard. Then she smiled back at me.

“The kind of happiness I’m happy without is the kind that can turn into unhappiness when you lose something you’re fond of. *That* happiness is never secure, Jason. By your age, you’ve probably felt that. That kind of happiness doesn’t come from true love of anything; it comes from what those dreary sounding Eastern religions call *attachment*, and I only mention that because you might have read about it.”

Here my mother cupped her hand at the side of her mouth and whispered to me: “I never trusted people with turbans who starved themselves.” There was an elegant looking gentleman at the table next to us sporting a pure white turban, hence the whisper. Judging from the burning intensity of his eyes, he may have had supernaturally acute senses, however. But if he did, he didn’t let on.

“It’s really quite simple, dear,” she went on, unconcerned. “If you love everything equally, then there’s nothing to lose, right? But loving everything feels different than your run of the mill happiness. Some people call it serenity, but that sounds boring, doesn’t it? Some say bliss, which sounds just ridiculous to me. *Bl-i-s-s-s-s... Bl-i-s-s-s-s...* Oh, it seems so, so effete, so pretentious, like spiritual sex. Perfectly awful. I like *good*. You know, as people sometimes say these days when asked how they are and they answer: ‘I’m good.’ I like that. And I *have been*, sweetheart, I’ve been good. But you wanted to know more about ‘The Admiral,’ didn’t you? Before you interrupted yourself? And thank you again for asking.”

“I guess I did,” I answered, but I was distracted. What my mother said made a deep impression on me.

“Well,” she continued, “you’ll find out all about ‘The Admiral’ when you meet him. Knowing the future’s unhealthy.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. It always muddles things up. Phineus here wanted to know the future—among other things,” my mother said in a half whisper and rolled her eyes. “And we know what happened to him. That was meant to be a lesson for everyone.”

I was about to ask the king for a first hand account of his abuse by the Harpies, I’d been wondering about that for fifteen

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years, but I saw his head had drooped and his bearded chin was on his chest. He was snoozing away soundly.

Here again my mother whispered, but judging from old Phineus' snoring, she might have shouted. "Five thousand years old," she said of him. "This has been happening more and more—the dozing off, I mean." At this she removed one of the pastry dishes from under the king's long white beard, swept a few crumbs from the beard itself and smiled over at me. "He's not one of the immortals, you see—just very, very old."

What "old" meant in the context of wherever it was that I walked into seemed more germane than the other questions that had been whooshing past me, and so did the subject of the "immortals," but there was something in the twinkle in my mother's eyes that dispelled my curiosity. Hers was even brighter than the twinkle I'd seen in the king's eyes. And in some way I connected those star-like twinkles with my diminished desire to ask questions. The twinkles were changing me. And at this thought, the room again fell silent, and as before, there followed a unison chorus of long, satisfied "Ah...s"

Again I rolled my eyes.

Anita pulled me close and whispered in my ear: "You should go meet this Admiral guy and then come back and tell me all about him," she said, looking positively excited and actually bouncing a little in her chair as she spoke.

"But wait," I said, noticing that her fingers and nails no longer bore any signs hefting heavy metal junk and welding. "I haven't even talked to you yet, not since the..." And I was about to try to cover my feelings with words, but I couldn't. "I feel, I mean I *felt* like I betrayed you," I said. "Like I caused your death. I was trying to help but I pulled you right in front of that car. Or maybe my mistake was *presuming* that I *could* save you. I don't know. I'm so sorry... Or I mean I *was* sorry. I don't think I am anymore..."

"Of course you're not," she said, smiling a smile that was both bewildering and comforting, and twinkling herself now. "You don't need to feel that way anymore. And don't be worried about hurting my feelings."

"I tried to cover for you with your parents," I said, "But they..."

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“Babe,” she interrupted. “I’m good.”

“You are?” I asked, shocked. “So soon? I thought that took lifetimes to achieve.”

“No,” Anita smiled. “I mean I’m good about you, Sweetie. Because you’re here. I know you’re okay.”

“But what about you?” I asked. This was the woman I still deeply loved—just hours before. And I still did, but there was more, something else.

Anita looked at me from that place in her that once looked sad to me, but now looked wise. “I’m about to come out of my cocoon. That bump in Glovey Square cracked it open. I don’t really know myself yet, Jason, but I’ll be fine. I’ll be good. I even think I’ll be wonderful. Now you go meet the Admiral. Something tells me that’s what’s in store for *you* right now.”

How could I ever have taken that look for sadness? I wondered. I was about to tell Anita that I really *did* love her, but she looked like she knew that, and just then the man dressed as a butler returned with a full, steaming yellow cup. Seeming to grasp the dynamics of the situation, he suggested that I take the coffee with me, and feeling like circumstances were compelling me in that direction, and not wanting to be contrary, I agreed, hesitating only a moment.

“Oh, they’ll be here when you return,” the muscular butler said, sensing my concern. “I assure you of that. And so will those books.”

Still a little uncertain, I glanced at my mother, who winked at me now. But this was a wink of celestial dimension. The accompanying twinkle sent waves of illumination through me, body and soul. The twinkle seemed to say, “You’ll always be safe,” but she only smiled; her lips didn’t move. Bedazzled, I offered to take the coffee from the butler, but apparently he wanted to carry it for me. This left both my hands free, which was convenient, since both Anita and my mother reached and grasped them as I stood.

“Come back soon!” and “Don’t forget about us!” they said at once and in such a way that I couldn’t quite distinguish which of them said what. I wasn’t even certain that other patrons of “The Golden Fleece” hadn’t chimed in as well; and for that extra fraction of a second I’d learned to call my own, it even seemed as if everyone, everywhere was saying it—as if all of humanity was

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asking not to be forgotten. In any case, the overall effect of their hand grasps, smiles, twinkles and that ocean of words left me feeling much loved and very secure as I followed the butler off through the crowded coffee house.

§

The tables in the room were close together and all were occupied to capacity, as were the armchairs and sofas. It was as the butler led me on a snaking path between these that I noticed the other patrons. Some of the faces I saw then looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place them. Perhaps I'd known them in dreams. Some of were drinking coffee; some reading books; some were engaged in lively conversation. Many were dressed in modern Western attire, but some wore monk's robes, some turbans, a few wore scant garments of woven leaves, some wore archaic military uniforms, one wore robes and a modest crown like Old King Phineus, one a great headdress of feathers, and one woman with very long brown hair, appeared to be wearing nothing at all. Most I saw there were human, but two centaurs had somehow folded themselves up onto one of the sofas, and I noticed a griffon (a lion with an eagle's head) reading what appeared to be an unabridged dictionary. Everyone I passed as I followed the butler through the room, including the griffon, looked over at me and smiled warmly—and with a raptor's beak, a smile is hard to come by. All eyes, of course, twinkled.

I entered a room through an inconspicuous door at the back of the coffee house. The word "Office" was inscribed on the door, again in faded gold leaf. Inside, an unusually tall, powerful looking, smiling man was seated at an elegant wooden desk that had the striking lines of a design by Frank Lloyd Wright. After putting my cup directly on the desk's polished surface, the butler quietly left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Nice of you to think of it, but we don't require coasters here...Achilles knows that," the huge man said, reading my mind. Then he stood up. He was at least seven feet tall, but rose out of his chair with uncanny grace. He was dressed in modern clothes: a light grey linen suit with a pale green shirt buttoned at the collar. He wore no necktie. His hair was stunningly silver, as was his modestly trimmed beard.

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“Poseidon,” he said, extending a huge hand. “Lord of the Deep, Retired. But feel free to call me Neptune... or Admiral, if you like, which is sort of a joke around here...or Bubbles, but not if you want to stay on my good side.” He smiled broadly at this, and let go my hand, which was tingling at his touch.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve had any actual *marine* administrative duties,” he went on. “You see I have no trident, no crown with strands of seaweed clinging to it, or to my beard... and I really never cared much for that fishy smell. My porpoises are history! I’m a thoroughly modern god these days! Doing my best to get caught up, at least. Quite taken with your popular culture. It beats the Old Blind Bard hands down. No contest!” Poseidon beamed me a quizzical look at his last remark, as if to check its authenticity. The brightness of his eyes exceeded that of his hair and made Old King Phineus’ bright eyes seem clouded. His smile flashed as well as his eyes.

I nodded politely. “*No contest*,” had been perfectly appropriate, but I’d made no decision whether to call this retired god of the sea, “Poseidon,” as the Greeks did; “Neptune,” as the Romans did, or the “Admiral.” “Bubbles” wasn’t even a consideration.

“Before I discuss business with you, Jason,” he said to me then, indicating that I sit down, “let me congratulate you on your adaptation. I hear what goes on out there in the café, the walls are thin, you understand, and I heard only one what we fondly call here *the Stupid Question Refrain* from the crowd. They may seem judgmental, I know, but I assure you they’re not. And to have asked only one *Stupid Question* is most unusual. Nearly everyone who arrives here unexpectedly is brimming with them—stupid questions, that is, four, five, six of them—before they *get a grip*, if they ever do. But considering the reason you’ve been brought here, I should have expected no less.... Was that right?” he asked “*Get a grip?*”

I nodded. But I couldn’t help wondering what was so stupid about asking if I was dead. Just as the thought crossed my mind, King Poseidon responded.

“Would you like me to answer your question, or would you rather I keep my nose out of your mind?”

“Both,” I said, stunned at my assertiveness.

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“Very well,” he answered. Then in a whisper: “‘Am I dead?’ is the one question nearly everyone who arrives here unexpectedly asks.”

I wondered why the King of the Deep whispered the words *Am I dead?* But I soon understood.

“That question about being dead is rivaled only by ‘**WHAT IS THIS PLACE?**’” This he said in full voice, which, from such a giant of a man, was thunderous, and to which the crowd and musicians outside in the coffee house reacted again with peals of laughter accompanied by “Be Kind to Your Fine Feathered Friends...”

“They love doing that,” said Poseidon, shaking his head and smiling. “Listen: “**AM I DREAMING?**” he said, booming again. The response was immediate and the same but for one added detail: when the burst of laughter and musical accompaniment stopped, someone, presumably one of the musicians, played a shrill, sliding glissando—down and up—on a toy slide whistle. This absurdist exclamation point after the laugh also caused titters throughout the room and a brief rumbling from the Retired Lord of the Deep.

Meanwhile, I glanced around his office. There were no filing cabinets, no computer, no telephones, no clock, no calendar on the wall; none of the furnishings one might expect to find. There was just his beautiful desk, several comfortable chairs like the one I was sitting on and a tall floor lamp in each corner. On the walls, however, was an array of photographs, many of which looked like they were taken on movie sets of great historical epics, though I suspected they weren’t sets at all, but the real thing. One of the scenes was an aerial view of the Athenian Acropolis in all its glory, friezes painted brightly, with Phidias’ masterpiece, the twenty-five foot tall statue of the Goddess Athena, overlooking it, and glimpses of the gold-plated and ivory statue of the same Goddess shining out from between the pillars of the Parthenon, that masterpiece of Attic architecture. In another similar photograph of the Acropolis but from the back end, one temple was circled with a red marker of some sort. This, I recalled from my father’s stories, must have been the Sanctuary of Poseidon. But when I looked even more closely at this picture, it appeared that the great statue of Athena had been crudely blotted out, reminding me that Athena and Poseidon had struggled against each other for the rulership of Athens—and that

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Athena had won. Apparently the brother of Zeus hadn't taken the loss very well.

Other cities too were pictured there, cities with fantastic architecture, only one of which I recognized as Babylon. There were several photographs of a giant white horse; and one with that horse rising from brilliantly blue water amidst showers of foam. This, I supposed was Poseidon's own famous horse who showed the Argonauts the way out of the African desert. And hanging close to the picture of that horse was one that sent chills down my spine: it was a magnificent ship, *the* magnificent ship, blue and gold, undoubtedly the Argo itself with a full crew aboard at the oars.

Then there was a remarkable picture of Poseidon, with full beard and trident, in which he was presenting the brilliantly lustrous ram with Golden Fleece to King Athamas and Queen Nephele on the occasion of their marriage. Even in the photograph (or however the scene had actually been captured,) the fleece radiated dazzling light. The greatest number of photographs, however, were of nymphs, either scantily clad or beautifully and seductively naked. In many of these, I recognized my host in Attic garb with his attendant porpoises in among the nymphs. In several, he carried a nymph on each shoulder and one on his head—a different set of three nymphs in each picture. In others, only his smiling face showed within the sumptuous nymph-heap that enclosed him. I was hoping to get a closer look at these when Poseidon/Neptune/the Admiral/Bubbles recovered from his little laugh at the slide whistle.

"Oh, yes," he said, his composure regained, "you wanted an answer to your question about being dead. Yes. Well, briefly, the difference between *dead* and *alive* is of minimal consequence in 'The Big Picture.' Laughter is not. And yes, I will be happy to respect your privacy, though there may be times when I can't resist. When I *lose my cool*?" The god shook his head. "Now, as to why you've been summoned here..."

But here Poseidon paused. "Are you going to drink that coffee?" he asked. My cup had been sitting untouched on his desk, and it sounded, for the life of me, that he was asking if he could have the coffee if I wasn't going to drink it.

But again, I found it difficult not to speak the truth. "I'd like a little," I said, "maybe just a few sips... and I'd be glad to share."

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“Splendid,” he replied, at which, with a flick of the long graceful fingers on his right hand in the direction of the cup, the coffee let off a small geyser of steam, apparently having been in need of a little reheating. I cocked my head, nodded at his mastery and smiled my approval. I took a sip, then another. Then I pushed the cup across the desk to the god with whom I was sharing it: a very secure feeling, like walking through a playground of bullies with a tough-as-nails big brother.

“Ah!” Poseidon said, smacking his lips at the sublime blend. “Now. To the reason you’ve been summoned here. Or, as you moderns like to say: the reason *you decided* to come. It is this. On your sincere quest to better yourself, my good man...” Poseidon paused momentarily here, and I obligingly smiled at his choice of words. “...you have *stumbled*, for lack of a better word—*blundered* really wouldn’t do. No, *happened* upon, that’s better: you have happened upon a revered and secret technique utilized by mystery schools for ages. What you have done in your longevity resolution is to do what’s been called by one sage brotherhood ‘*Sipping from Noah’s Cup*.’ Noah, you may remember, was known to have lived a vast number of years—*Geezer Originalis*, you might say, or I might. But ‘Sipping from Noah’s Cup’ is a potent means of accelerated spiritual growth, for reasons I’m sure you’ve already begun to understand. I *see* that you understand. We gods see a lot. I can see that your moment has expanded and therefore risen in intensity. At times by your effort, but more often by the very power of your resolution.

“Now I hope you’ll excuse my use of the words *stumbled* and *blundered* regarding your discovery of this ancient technique. You might say I was kidding. Some of us with pagan roots have a fondness for poking a little fun at mortals. No ill will is intended. Not from me. I can’t say as much for everyone in my family. But I digress. You discovered the ancient technique because the sum of your experience led you to it; you earned it, but you didn’t realize just how powerful was the tool you took up. Now it would be a STUPID PRESUMPTION...” he said in full voice again, cocking his head to listen for a response from the crowd, which did not come, though the piano player did bang out a few bars. The retired god seemed a bit disappointed. “It would be a stupid presumption to believe that a resolution like yours would have any effect at all

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unless it was sincere, focused and wholehearted. Which brings me to my request.” Here Poseidon/Neptune/the Admiral/Bubbles took two more sips from the cup and passed it back across to me.

Again the idea of sharing a cup of coffee with a God made me feel like a five-year-old presented with a sumptuous birthday cake with a puppy inside, and it certainly wasn’t my intention to interrupt one of the immortals, no matter how rosy his disposition, but as seemed to always be the case there in “The Big Picture,” I couldn’t stop myself. “May I ask you a question?” I said

“Do you mean besides asking if it’s the nymphs who call me ‘Bubbles’?”

I was a little embarrassed but got a grip on myself with no trouble at all. “Yes, besides that one,” I answered.

“Fine,” said the Lord of the Deep. “As long as it’s not a stupid one.”

Was he joking? I wasn’t certain. “Well, it’s actually in regard to that, sir,” I answered. “Are there any questions that aren’t stupid?”

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “Excellent. You know it was Sir Isaac himself—bewigged old Newt—who first asked that question in quite those terms. “And yes, Jason, there are. There is one root question in particular—regarding the *m-y-s-tery* of existence itself.”

As he pronounced the word *mystery*, Poseidon drew out his voice in a theatrical way and waved his long fingers in the air to the accompaniment of a few *whe-e-e-w*, *whe-e-e-w*-like strains on a Theremin (an electronic instrument best known for producing eerie sound effects in 1950’s era science fiction films.) My stunned look must have reflected both my surprise at the corny tactic and my sincere appreciation of it, because he smiled, satisfied.

“That root question regarding the *m-y-s-tery of existence* (Theremin music again) is, simply put: ‘What *IS* this we find ourselves in?’ ‘How is it that this *IS* rather than *IS NOT*?’ That question, whether asked in deep contemplation, in the bathtub, while sitting on your living room sofa watching reruns of ‘Flipper,’ while making a tuna-salad sandwich or riding shotgun in the Weinermobile is never a *Stupid Question*. And though it’s one that can’t be answered in the terms in which it’s asked, as a question, it’s a force that helps to drive the cosmos on—or makes the world go ‘round, as you mortals like to say.

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“Several people have told me that the question strikes them suddenly, like a sudden realization. ‘Wa-a-ait a minute!’ They think. ‘Hold on here...’ they say to themselves, sensing themselves and the world in all their *particularness*. ‘What *IS* this? What *IS* all this? Why is it *like* this? Why isn’t it like... like *everything it isn’t*? What’s *outside* of this? How can infinity *be*?’ Or ideas to that effect. What distinguishes this *Most Intelligent Question* from nearly all others is the difficulty inherent in wording it, in putting it into the form of a coherent question. Which tells you something about the nature of nearly all other questions... Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!

I didn’t think what he’d just said was particularly funny, so I didn’t laugh. Under ordinary circumstances one might expect not laughing at a god’s joke to be ill advised, but it wasn’t a problem at all.

“Now I didn’t tell you’d I’d *answer* that root question, did I? But you probably understand the reason for that, which is the reason why music can’t be described to the deaf or why people residing in Flatland consider three-dimensionality a *m-y-s-tery of existence* (more Theremin music.) In order to know ‘what this *IS*?’ one needs to be consciously at one with *IT*, one needs to be existing on *ITS* terms, living by *ITS* rules, which don’t include asking stupid questions...” (No refrain from the crowd.) One needs to be playing on *ITS* team—and even if you’re only rooting for that team, the self-congratulatory plastic hand you hold up and wave must have an infinite number of fingers. To be at one with *IT* means to be in a state that leaves questions and answers, right and wrong, yes and no and the whole ratty pack of dualities on the rubbish heap along with life or death, winning or losing, mine or yours, Democrats or Republicans, Elvis or the Beatles, Leno or Letterman, and pissing or getting off the pot.”

He looked at me quizzically. “I’m trying to speak like a contemporary. How am I doin’?”

“Fine,” I said. “The Weinermobile reference was a surprise. But I kind of liked it.” And I was familiar with “Flatland,” a book describing a bizarre world of two dimensions with its obvious parallels to ours, and I enjoyed the rest of his little exposition, so I thanked him for it all.

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“Thank *you*,” he answered. “I’m happy you appreciated that...but now will you mind terribly if I get to the point?”

I didn’t remember there was a point. “Please do,” I said.

Just then, the one Poseidon called Achilles—whom I still thought was a butler of some sort—returned, peeked into the yellow cup that stood between me and the god on the god’s desk, and asked, “More coffee, gentlemen?”

“I’d love some.” I answered. “It’s the best coffee I’ve ever tasted.”

“I should hope so, sir,” Achilles answered, bowed slightly to us, and left the room.

“Is he Achilles of old, of *The Iliad*?”

“None other,” said Poseidon, indicating a picture on his wall. It was of a magnificent specimen of a man, posing with his bow in a typically Aegean setting, like a picture an American tourist might take when vacationing in the Greek Islands.

“But the way he’s dressed...” I answered. “I suppose appearances deceive.”

Poseidon’s eyes widened, brightened, and he spread and raised the graceful fingers of his huge hands. He cocked his head toward the wall of his office that bordered on the coffee house. And at this a long, drawn out “Ah...” issued from the other room.

“Ah...” he said himself. “That’s the *Good idea!* Refrain. I believe you heard it once before.”

“Twice,” I interjected, making a sour face, not trying to hide my reaction to what seemed an amateur theatrical device.

“Of course! Twice. I’m sorry. How could I have forgotten?” He shook his head. This response gave rise to a question that I didn’t think could be called stupid. How was it, I wondered, that the brother of Zeus himself had anything but a perfect memory? But I chose not to ask it, not aloud.

He looked at me with his mighty brow slightly furrowed. Then he smiled. “Where were we?” he asked, sounding confused.

I took the bait. “I’d just said appearances deceive...”

“Yes, they do, don’t they?” he said with an Olympian smirk. “The annals of reincarnational lore are full of examples of how those who have achieved near perfection in their—what shall we call it? Their *chain* of existence? No, their *sphere* of existence. Yes, that doesn’t really describe it but it’ll have to do; at least it’s

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three dimensional. So where were we? Oh yes: *Appearances Deceive*. The annals of reincarnation are full of examples of how those who have achieved near perfection in their sphere of existence may take on a very humble life to learn a needed lesson in humility or compassion, or maybe the life of a severely handicapped individual in a backward culture to learn what it's like to be an outcast. That of course, is if you believe in reincarnation. Don't tell anyone you heard it from me, but... DON'T TELL ANYONE YOU HEARD IT FROM ME, BUT...." he repeated at full, booming volume, at which a third, hitherto unheard response issued from the crowd next door: this, a full-lipped Bronx Cheer, blubbered in unison along with the honkings of what sounded like a half dozen bicycle horns. "So, (now he whispered) don't tell anyone you heard it from me, but reincarnation *ain't* what it seems; there's more—or less—to the principle than is known out there in that Flatland of yours."

I was starting to enjoy myself. "So *where* were we?" I asked.

"Hmmm," said the pagan god. "Oh, yes, you were going to let me get to the point."

But again he was interrupted, this time by Achilles who quietly entered with another cup of coffee.

"Achilles, meet Jason" Poseidon said as Achilles, once famous for his wrath, put down the steaming cup.

Achilles shook my hand. It felt as if I grasped a high voltage wire, but a *kindly* one. "It's an honor to meet you, Jason. I knew your namesake."

"Yes," I recalled. "You were both trained by Chiron, weren't you?"

Achilles looked at me with a sad smile. "Yes. Trained and fostered. Your world could use more of his kind," he said. "He's gone for now. I miss him dearly."

This triggered another flock of questions, which, mercifully, drifted off and away. They may have been stupid. But I didn't know how to respond to a great hero's lament; a wave of deep sadness swept across me. Achilles, however, graciously nodded to me and left the room.

"You are a tactful young man, Jason," the old god said to me, a serious note to his voice, "so I may not need to voice my

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request of you. But for the sake of formality, I must. It is this: that you keep the news that you're Sipping from Noah's Cup to yourself or only those you trust implicitly. The reason is simple. It's a valued technique for those who are ready to use it; useless to those who aren't, but its improper use will dilute its effectiveness. Simply put, if it were to become a fad, it would wear out. We invited you here so I might ask you to help us maintaining the potency of this gift."

Of course I agreed, but suddenly I was worried.

"Ha!" Poseidon said after just a moment. "I don't seem to be able to resist the workings of your mind, do I? And I appreciate your sentiment; and no, that's not the way it works. It's a two-way street. Once invited here, you're welcome to return, so don't worry. The technique depends upon the individual. You... how was it again?"

"I drove off the road, sir."

"Yes, I'm so sorry. I was entertaining a lovely trio of nymphs just before you arrived, so you can understand I was preoccupied..."

"There are nymphs *here*?" I asked, looking over at the photographs on the wall.

"Yes, but only for immortals and special cases. And I'm sorry that might seem unfair, maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it; and no, I can't divulge how one becomes a special case—we'd have a line around the world—but good luck on that one, one never knows. I'll put in a good word for you, if you like."

At this, I lost track of what we were taking about. "The Admiral," however, did not.

"Just do that again," he said. "When the time is right. Drive off the road if you feel the need to return here. And as you must understand by now, *the rule of honesty* is automatically in place on this level. Nothing but good comes of it, by the way. In fact, the vow to be always honest, called 'Speaking in Fire' is another of the long revered methods of accelerated growth. We have an even dozen of them. And there's a famously *stupid question* (here the god whispered) closely associated with 'Speaking in Fire.' You can probably imagine: 'What if I need to tell a man with a weak heart that his house just burned down with all his money in it and his prize collection of souvenir spoons?' Well, the answer to that

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stupid question (again whispered) is that anyone with the will and understanding required even to successfully *begin* that arduous undertaking has the intelligence and tact to grapple with such unlikely situations. And furthermore, such a person understands full well that the purpose of the exercise is to establish self-honesty—an exceptionally hard won quality—from which honesty with others develops. It's the honesty with the self that causes combustion.

“So, regarding the rule of honesty that automatically applies here and pertains to all who visit here: you should know when there's an actual need to return. But be careful of your motives. Don't presuppose anything. Come back for the sake of *being here*. That may be for a good laugh, just to say hello, for instruction regarding Sipping from Noah's Cup or anything else regarding your quest that's available only here. Of course, you can't know till it happens and when it happens you'll know. If you come with ulterior motives you may stumble into a thorny thicket. Any... questions?” Poseidon laughed.

“I do have one,” I said, trusting its intelligence, and knowing I couldn't conceal it if I tried. “May I ask about your retirement?”

The god nodded. “My retirement. Yes. Poseidon, Lord of the Deep, of Earthquakes, of Horses—Retired! Poseidon, father of Pegasus—with that shrew Medusa, no less; father of Orion; of the Cyclops, Polyphemus; of that old king in there, Phineus, of scores of others, kings, nymphs; father of Arion... Do you know that story?”

I'd heard my father tell it, but this was a chance to hear it from *the horse's mouth*. “Not your version,” I said.

“Well,” Poseidon began, “back in the day, as you mortals like to say, I lusted mightily for Demeter, a true beauty. You moderns might believe I fell in love with her, but that would be grossly inaccurate. I didn't love her; I lusted for her. You should have seen her! A goddess in her prime! The haunches on that woman, the intoxicating scent of her, her golden hair—she carried that sickle. Ah, that sickle! So she happened to be my sister! With Gods that's nothing unusual; it heats things up. Hera's my sister, and she's *married* to my brother! Hestia's my sister too, of course, but she's a professional virgin. I've had her in mind during many a romp with a nymph. But sweet Demeter, she didn't want to have

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anything to do with me—sisters can be that way, you know. I was in hot pursuit, though. I had a reputation to uphold! I *never* gave up on a woman, be she a goddess, nymph or mortal, and when she saw that I wouldn't back off, she went and changed herself into a bloody mare! Can you imagine? What in the world do you suppose she could have been thinking? Would you think a goddess—one of the originals—the Goddess of the Harvest, the Bringer of Seasons would be so tedious, so unimaginative?" Poseidon laughed.

"Needless to say, her chicanery had no effect. I turned myself into a stallion. Her mare's haunches were no less compelling, her scent no less provocative. I had my way with her in a ravine, repeatedly. And our offspring—here's the kicker—was none other than Arion—a talking horse! That even astonishes me!"

I was speechless. And I'd forgotten my question.

Apparently the lusty god had not. "Yes," he said. "When the Christian era dawned, it was apparent to all of us on Olympus that our popularity was about to plummet. Just like any 'stars,' we depend on our 'fans.' Paganism has deep enough roots and makes enough sense to survive; it always will, but those of us willing to face the truth knew it was time to step back and let the new bunch—Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad, Lao Tse—have their few millennia in the sun. After our reign, the world needed them. And most of us are doing fine. I do like the hospitality industry. The ill-tempered Sea God who had his hand in so many earthquakes, shipwrecks and drownings: he's a thing of the past. My brothers, one the other hand, Zeus and Hades, aren't doing so well."

The old god paused. "We had to put Zeus in a home. It's the very best, of course—regal accommodations, but talk about denial! He delivers proclamations and they deliver him his low-fat meals on a tray! And Hades, well, he's still at it; he's managed to hang on. Mortals do like their villains. But there's no future for him, his style's outmoded. Compassion's the new wave, retribution will be out with the trash in as soon as that stuffy bunch of karmic accountants sorts through their shelves and shelves of ledgers—if there ever was a place where a couple of mainframes could do the trick! But until then, my surly brother will keep meting it out. *Mainframe*. Is that the right term?"

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"I think so," I answered. I didn't know much about computers myself. "But Zeus," I said. "I'm sorry to hear about him. He was always so... so vital, wasn't he?"

Poseidon looked at me sadly. "His condition is something we— his wife, our sister, Hera, and I—like to keep in the immediate family. Zeus' reputation is very important to him. We wouldn't want anything said to blemish that. He will always be our king." At this the retired god's eyes emitted a possibly cornea-damaging twinkle. A feeling of supernatural buoyancy came over me.

"I look forward to coming back here," I said as I stood, taking the powerful twinkle as a cue to take my leave.

"I do too, Jason Aeneas Finch," Poseidon said, standing again to reveal his full height, which seemed to have increased several inches since I arrived in his office. He was pushing eight feet. "Feel free to stay in the shop as long as you wish. When you're ready to leave, ask Achilles and he'll escort you out to your car."

But before the God took me to the door, he pointed me over to the photographs on his office wall. "These go way back," he explained, walking over with me. "Most of those cities are Atlantean, but this one here is Lemurian—you know, that great epoch before the days of Atlantis. You'll note the peculiarity."

There were no people in the picture. That was not what he was referring to, however. I was so taken with the marvelously bizarre architecture that it was a moment before I realized that the trees, which resembled modern palms, were very small.

"Yes," he said, reading my mind. "But those trees are not small. It's the buildings that are big. This was a race of giants from which few relics remain. But there are some. You know those enormous, silly looking heads that still stand on Easter Island? The ones your archaeologists believe to be statues of *Gods*? Hah!" He raised his eyebrows and nodded. "But look," he said, pointing to another picture. "Here's the one I wanted to show you."

This was a picture of a huge man with an elongated Easter Island-like head who was sitting on some brilliantly green grass along with a group of animals. Whether they were working animals or his pets was unclear to me. In any case, they were small, and looked like an undifferentiated version the modern dog and cat. Like cats with dog's heads, actually.

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“Now understand this was very, very long ago, Jason. It was before your own strain of humanity came into existence. This individual,” he said, indicating the giant man with the goofy head, “is yours truly, inhabiting that body for personal reasons. And this little pup,” he said, indicating the smallest cat-dog in the group, “is you.” He paused. “Remember?”

And at this, he laughed, joyously and thunderously, and shook my hand as he led me to his office door. Shaking hands with a laughing God, of course, is a uniquely exhilarating experience.

§

Back outside his door, I returned to the table where my mother, Anita and Old King Phineus had been sitting. My mother and Anita were there but the king wasn't.

“He's gone to the little boy's room,” my mother explained when I asked about him. Once again, a question circled my consciousness but gained no foothold. I was feeling splendid.

“You look just wonderful,” Anita said, pulling her chair closer to me, putting her arm around me and giving me a sweet little rose of a kiss. “You're radiant.”

“You seem a little flushed,” my mother countered, putting her hand on my forehead. But apparently sensing no fever, she said: “So... Aren't you going to tell us all about it?”

I trusted that my promise to not to speak of “Sipping from Noah's Cup” was in regard to the world outside the rosy door, so I felt free to tell them about my visit with “The Admiral,” but wondered if I shouldn't wait for Phineus to return.

My mother laughed. “He takes quite a long time, dear,” she said, her voice lowered. “You know, being five-thousand years old and all. He might not be back for an hour.”

This sounded unfortunate to me, but going in to check on a mythic figure in the crapper seemed inappropriate. Both my mother and Anita had full cups of coffee again; Anita offered to get me some more, but I declined. I felt as if the energy supplied by my handshake with a laughing God would alleviate the need for coffee for the remaining hundred-and-twenty-nine years of my earthly existence, so, as they wished, I began to tell the two of them about my meeting with the Lord of the Deep.

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This took some time. Before I could begin reporting my conversation with “The Admiral,” I had to fill them in about my resolution.

“I’m not at all surprised,” my mother said, after I’d gone into considerable detail about it. “You are protected, and under your dear father’s influence all those years, it only makes sense that you’d come up with such an excellent idea.”

I wondered what she meant by protected, but the thought quickly drifted away without causing any disturbance, but before I could respond, Anita chimed in.

“Tell your mother I suspected something, Jason,” she said, sounding proud of herself. “Tell her I did.” Then to my mother: “But I never would have guessed what it was, never in a thousand years.”

“Well,” my mother answered, “he’s always been a very bright boy. I’m sure you knew that.”

At this I began to sense a slight tension between the two women, so before anything else was said, I plunged back into the story of my meeting with the Sea God. Anita seemed far more interested in the difference between *stupid questions* and the *root question* Poseidon posed than my mother did. Perhaps it was Anita’s study of the mysteries of the Tarot that sparked her curiosity. But when I told them how Poseidon asked me not to divulge that I was “Sipping from Noah’s Cup” to anyone I didn’t trust implicitly, my mother looked at me curiously.

“Had you told anyone?” she asked.

“Just father.”

I saw a slight shadow of hurt cross Anita’s face. “It was just too soon,” I explained to her. “I mean for me. I had to let the changes settle in a little before I could talk about it. My father’s been with me forever.”

“Well, of course,” said my mother. “That’s not the kind of thing you tell just...”

But I interrupted her and took Anita’s hand. I was about to tell her she would have been the next one, but I couldn’t form the words. Apparently, the rule of honesty was in place outside the Admiral’s office as well as within, so I simply told Anita that I would have told her when the time was right. This seemed to erase the shadow from her face, and both she and my mother listened

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without interjecting until I finished my story. I went on to tell them about the pictures of the Acropolis, of the Argo, and of Poseidon's magnificent horse. I even told them about the picture of me.

"So, did he tell you about his sisters?" my mother asked.

"Demeter, yes. And Hestia and Hera, too."

"Yes," she answered. "In particular?"

"He told me about Demeter turning herself into a mare... and what, uh... he did then. And about Zeus marrying Hera who was his sister. And that Hestia's a virgin goddess. And that's about it."

"I see," my mother said. "Anything else interesting?"

And of course, I *had* to tell the truth. "Yes. Just a little more, but I'm not going to tell you." It was about the nymphs, of course. Not just the pictures, but Poseidon's promise to put in a good word for me about becoming 'a special case.' But since this matter had sexual content and Anita and I had been as intimate as any two can be, she immediately picked up the sense of what I was saying—whether by lover's intuition, animal magnetism or ordinary familiarity, I don't know. But she smiled slyly and warmly at me. My mother noticed this, of course, and got a little defensive.

"That's just fine," she said. "You two keep your little secrets. I think I'll go check in on Phineus."

It was in somewhat of a huff that she left the table, but a regal huff, or for all I knew, maybe even a divine one.

Anita and I stayed alone at the table for a few minutes. I told her how I'd rearranged the apartment for her parents' sake, but that it turned out not to have been necessary. The sparkle in her eyes decreased slightly when I told her about that. But that was fine. "Let's just say goodbye as if we're going to see each other soon," Anita said to me when it seemed to both of us it was time for me to leave.

"Which is probably true," I answered. And I believed that. If I hadn't been operating under the rule of automatic honesty, I might have said the same thing—even if I didn't think it was true—just to avoid the tumultuous feelings of a last farewell. We didn't want a last farewell. But still, we didn't embrace before I left; rather we looked into one another's eyes searchingly. I didn't have to search far at all to see that, indeed, Anita was "good." I don't know what she saw, but I felt a great, wide love for her at that moment,

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and believed she felt it as well. We were both *good*. Then, with Achilles at my side, I turned to walk in the direction of the rosy door. I realized then that I never found out why Anita was there. Was it because she was destined for greater things? Was it only for my benefit? I wondered. And my mother? What about her? I might have felt that I was being an ungrateful son walking away without saying goodbye to her, but I didn't feel that way at all. And I didn't wonder why. The question didn't even try to land. I suppose I'm a quick study. I did go off to college when I was just sixteen.

It seemed Achilles and I had only walked a short distance, but the patrons of "The Golden Fleece" were suddenly far, far behind us. The hum of their conversation was barely audible. The aroma of coffee was gone. I suppressed my urge to turn around, and as Achilles held the rosy door open, I stepped out into the much smaller picture of the world to which I'd grown so accustomed. It was a beautiful, clear, cold day.

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PART II

THE YOGI FROM SKOKIE

My car had been turned around. The front was facing the highway, and this courtesy moved me more than I would have expected. Had Achilles moved my car? I was a changed young man—not nearly as “bright” as I’d been accustomed to thinking, but maybe a little *brighter*. I felt compelled to mull over all the extraordinary things that had happened to me, and knew that I wasn’t about to go visit Billy Young in jail—not yet, at least. I needed to go home.

When I got into my car and looked in the rearview mirror, I wasn’t surprised to see no rosy door or door of any kind behind me there—just some ordinary looking juniper bushes and two bare maples. I had to drive a little way down the highway before I came to an exit where I could turn around. Once I was headed back home, I looked across the road at that place where I’d driven off—just to check. There were only shrubs and trees: no coffee house or building of any sort.

I felt blazingly conscious as I drove on. My visit to “The Golden Fleece” propelled me into that state where there was more of *everything* at *every* instant: more meaning, more possibilities, more love for it all, whatever *it* was. I felt that channel through

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which my thoughts and feelings ran had been widened, without my having exerted any effort to achieve it. As I drove back to Groverton, I realized that I'd have to realign all my experiences, plans and hopes. What Poseidon/Neptune/The Admiral/Bubbles told me, meaningful and intriguing though it was, paled in comparison to his touch: it had *electrified* me; it charged me with awareness and good will. I wasn't sure how long it would last, but that didn't seem to matter at all.

I was certain that I wanted to get home and lock myself in my apartment as soon as I could, however. Since it was still Saturday—still Saturday morning, actually—and I had no classes until noon on Monday, I had plenty of time to settle into being whomever it was that I'd become. It was with a sense of comfortable certainty that I periodically glanced into my rearview mirror, assured that no black sedan containing a huge, forbidding man was following me. And it was not.

As I drove, I saw myself unlock my front door, lock it behind me and retreat to my bedroom, where, sitting back on my bed, I'd calmly contemplate what it all meant. Or *how* it all meant, that was more the issue, because, difficult though it may be to believe, I still wasn't curious at all about that whole slew of things any reasonable person might wonder about. I didn't wonder if I'd had an hallucination. I had no curiosity about *where* I'd been or how I *got* there. I didn't wonder if all deceased people went to places like that or even if what it meant to be *deceased*. It was evident that something of my mother and Anita had obviously not *ceased*. It was also clear that "The Big Picture" somehow coexisted with what I'd formerly thought of as reality and that different rules applied there. Who knows, maybe the experience of having been there was so cathartic that it numbed or permanently dismantled the questioning part of my brain. (No such luck.)

It's funny, though, the way things turn out, the way priorities assert themselves, because the moment I unlocked my front door, I went straight to the telephone, called my father and told him that something extraordinary had happened to me and that I wanted to come home to talk to him about it right away. He'd reacted joyfully when first I'd told him about my longevity resolution, and I expected my news about the wondrous goings-on in "The Golden Fleece" would elicit a similar reaction. He was the

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only person I trusted implicitly, and as far as I knew then, he might turn out to be the only person I'd ever tell about the reality of my life. Being the man he was, he didn't ask me what my news concerned or for any hints about it. Not on the phone. He just said he'd be happy to see me again so soon and that he'd ask Birdie to make something I liked for dinner. Even though it had been five years already, I still routinely forgot that my father and Birdie Bindle were actually a couple, and I had no intention of telling her about my experience. I hoped that wouldn't lead to an awkward situation or any bruised feelings.

It was dinnertime when I arrived at Hawthorn Street, and Birdie had made chicken and dumplings for me.

"You look much better, Jason," she said as we sat down for dinner. "Much better than... When was it? Just a week ago yesterday, wasn't it?" It sounded to me that the plump woman was suggesting that I hadn't taken long at all to mourn someone I supposedly loved, and I didn't know how to respond to that. I knew I had to be careful.

"I feel much better today," I said with no trouble at all forming the words—I was, after all, telling the truth.

She nodded, with some sincerity but not a lot. "I'm happy for you," she said.

I had no desire to read minds, and hoped my assessment of Birdie had been speculation. There's a difference between knowing what someone was going to say a fraction of a second before they said it and knowing their thoughts. I shuddered inwardly at the possibility of knowing Birdie's mind, and praised her dumplings, which I sincerely loved. The mind/dumpling question didn't seem a complex one to me. I told her I could eat them forever. Apparently that kind of lie was permissible.

Not much of significance was said during dinner. At one point, Euripides repeatedly called out from the library: "*Don't let the bedbugs bite!*"—which seemed to wrangle Birdie, as if it were a comment on her housekeeping. Customarily, the parrot's words were ignored. We went on to talk of my studies, of the upcoming holidays but not much else. After my father and I reminisced about Christmases past, he told me he was tired, and at that, a disabling wave of fatigue swept over me as well. I should have expected as

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much, considering all that had happened since I set off that same morning to visit Billy Young in jail. Seeing me suddenly wilt, my father suggested we have our talk the next morning. I fell dead asleep with my clothes on in my old bedroom.

After breakfast with Birdie, my father and I went to the library, and once I began my story, he didn't say a word for the hour it took me to finish it. I told him everything: about the rosy door, about Anita, about the best coffee in the world, about the stupid question refrain, about "Sipping from Noah's Cup," about Zeus's sorry fate, about the Easter Island-headed Poseidon and me as a little cat/dog cub. I had expected him to interrupt when I spoke of meeting my mother or when I described the photographs of the Acropolis in the fourth century B.C., but he didn't; he sat nearly motionless the entire time, taking only an occasional sip of his peppermint tea.

He smiled weakly at me after I finished. "I wasn't ready to have my life changed so radically at this late date," he said, not sounding quite himself.

His tone upset me and I asked if he was feeling all right.

He looked over at me, his strong features drooping. "Actually, son," he said, "I think I'm going to need a little nap. Would you please call Birdie?"

My father was only sixty-one years old at the time, but he seemed suddenly drained of all his vitality. As I opened the library door and shouted for Mrs. Bindle, I felt I'd made a dreadful miscalculation in disclosing so much at once. I felt like a willful fool. I was clearly *not* a brilliant new version of myself!

"Whatever did you say to him?" Birdie asked crossly as she took my father by the arm and led him out of the library. I didn't answer. My father insisted that it was nothing I'd said and that he'd be fine, but his voice was tremulous. With Birdie's aid, we made our way very slowly upstairs to their bedroom, and only once she'd left the room and he was lying down did he take my hand and close his eyes. For terrifying moment, I thought he was going to die on me, and only after I watched his chest rise and fall rhythmically for several minutes did I warily leave the room. I knew my father had an aversion to doctors, so I decided not to call for one unless he still showed signs of being ill after his nap.

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Once back downstairs, Birdie looked at me accusingly and said it was a good thing she hadn't gone off to church like she usually did on Sunday mornings. Concerned as I was for my father and the blow I might have dealt him, I couldn't help wondering what on earth he saw in this bossy, dumpling-shaped woman, particularly compared to my goddess-like mother whom I'd seen so recently. But I'd been well trained, and before long I felt unfair in my judgment; and out of respect for my father, I tried to open myself—to become *permeable* to everything that was good about Birdie Bindle, though somewhat grudgingly. Moments later, as if by the action of some weird immutable law, she emerged from the kitchen and apologized to me.

I was stunned. I hugged her, something I hadn't done since I'd been a small child. I needed to get out of there, and feeling undeserving, I put on my coat and went out for a walk in the cold morning air.

It all happened so suddenly. I had presumed too much. I was no longer the exuberant young hero I'd been when I drove away from the Coffee House of the Gods or whatever it actually was. I hadn't been properly prepared. That sense of triumph was history. The conclusion I came to while walking south down Lake Shore Drive with the wind whipping off of Lake Michigan was that I wanted to get off the speeding train that I suddenly found myself on. If things were changing so rapidly for me that I inadvertently delivered a near knock-out blow to my father and caused the short-tempered Birdie Bindle to apologize to me, things were changing *too* rapidly. Yet even as I thought these thoughts and smiled at a dour looking woman who passed me by, her face erupted in such a brilliant smile I felt *she* was going to hug me. I wanted to back away from everything. I continued walking south then and kept my eyes to myself, but to no avail. I was frustrated and coming to no conclusions at all, so I turned around abruptly and strode back north toward Hawthorn Street, hoping that a change in directions—or *polarities*—might lead me to some understanding about what I could do to grow into my new self. But the magnetic magic didn't work: no understanding was forthcoming and the wind off the lake was worse. I walked back through the front door of my father's house fifteen minutes after I left, colder, more discouraged, and no wiser than I was when I set off.

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“He wants to see you in his room,” Birdie said to me as soon as I entered the house, which felt hot as a sauna to me. Birdie seemed emotionally neutral. When I entered the bedroom, my father was sitting up in bed with a cup of tea on his bedside table. Outside the window, the maple tree that so nicely shaded the house in summer stood stark-black against the frigid winter sky. He looked like a different man.

“Feeling better?” I asked, hoping he wouldn’t notice that I wasn’t.

“Much,” he said. “I’ve begun to put this trove of information in some perspective. I’d always suspected you might have such a destiny, being your mother’s son...”

“So you believe me?”

“Implicitly,” he answered. “Why, did you leave anything out?”

“I don’t think so... but if you have any questions...”

“If you told me everything that he...” Here my father stopped and shook his head, smiling. “Everything that *Poseidon* said to you... You see, I have difficulty saying *his name* without a numbing sense of wonder.... But if you told me everything *he* said to you, I don’t feel any need for clarification. I’m somewhat dumbfounded, but I think I feel as you do—and as *he* explained—that questions won’t bring me any closer to the truth of what you experienced.”

My father paused for only a moment. “But Jason,” he said. “I think you might have a question for me.” In contrast to the frailty he displayed earlier, he seemed snappy, even mischievous. And of course, he was right.

“Yes,” I said. “I have a question and I have a problem. I suddenly don’t know what to do with myself. I didn’t see this coming. I feel like I’m wearing clothes way too big for me. I’m lost inside.”

“Ah hah! In that case, you’ll need to see Goldberg!”

He took a sip of his tea and gazed back out at the bare winter tree again. For a moment I thought he was joking, but my father rarely joked. “He’s an acquaintance of mine,” he finally said. “Goldberg. I’m sure he’ll know just what you need fill out your clothes. He’s a yogi.”

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“Goldberg?” I asked. “I didn’t think yogi’s had names like *Goldberg*. Is he a Jewish Yogi? How do you know him? Is he here, in Chicago?”

“I believe Goldberg, like your dear mother, is of Jewish heritage, but I doubt if he practices that religion, though I can’t be sure. I met him at a conference on Mythic Archetypes at the University of Chicago. He’s a well known figure but in rather arcane circles. He seems to be a strong willed man and very direct. He goes by Goldberg, no first name or title—make no mistake about that. And no, he’s not in Chicago proper. He lives and teaches in Skokie.”

At the time, Skokie was not known for its urbanity, and hardly as a center for Hindu spirituality. I had a feeling there was something about this Goldberg my father wasn’t telling me. “He teaches?” I asked. “Does he have an Ashram?”

“I don’t believe so, but it’s said he’s the best in his field. He speaks compellingly and intelligently about the power of meditation, he has piercing eyes and... an... an *unconventional* manner.” I believe my father looked skyward for a moment. I couldn’t imagine him rolling his eyes.

There was something in my father’s lively presence in his bedroom that morning that made me feel like he might absorb the lesson I learned at “The Golden Fleece” more readily than I; that perhaps I was a conduit through which the wisdom might be conveyed to him; that my father was as much the recipient of my gift as I was. He was clearly more deserving of it, and I was about to say just that, when it seemed he plucked the idea out of the air and completed it.

“When you first told me of your entrance into that realm where gods have offices with pictures on the walls, I was frightened. I felt I wasn’t prepared. I wasn’t ready to reassess myself and my world so radically at this stage of my life.”

My father looked at me earnestly.

“I didn’t feel I had the strength to recast myself,” he said. “But it didn’t take much more than a good nap to realize that just as I dedicated my heart to your upbringing, I’ve received a great gift from you in return. It’s very simple. You see, it will be my privilege to savor everything you’ve told me, son. It will be my privilege to reexamine my knowledge and experience in this

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startling new light, but it won't be my responsibility. You see? It's not I who will carry and wield the power implied in such a new way of being! It will be *no burden to me*—that's left to you in your youth and strength! I'm home free! Even if the features on my face don't show it, Jason, I expect to live the rest of my life smiling."

At this my father popped off his bed. He hadn't been under the covers; he hadn't even taken his shoes off. As we walked out of the bedroom onto the second floor landing, he looked at me in a way I remembered seeing only seen twice before. The first time was when he stripped to his red shorts and stood on his hands on "Be Kind to Butterflies Day." The second time was when he instructed me to strip and stand on my hands and remember to always be permeable to the good in others. But no one was going to go outside and take off any clothes on Hawthorn Street that winter day.

My father was grinning. "I've never tried this," he said. "In all these years."

And at that, he hoisted himself up on the banister and slid down, his arms reaching up above his head. I gasped. But his slide was perfectly executed. His dismount was even more impressive. It was a move I'd successfully pulled off only a few times when I was light-weight child. When my father reached the end of the banister, he seized the newel post and with legs spread wide, vaulted over it and landed firmly on his sixty-one year old feet in the front hall. Then without a word to me, he went into the library, shuffled through a desk drawer, and finding the phone number, called the Yogi from Skokie to set up an appointment for me to meet him. Birdie Bindle had entered the hall just as my father executed his dangerous dismount, and her jaw was still slightly slack when my father returned from the library, limping only a little and told me that everything was "falling precisely into place."

Oddly then, and for the first time, I heard Birdie Bindle giggle.

"Ignorance is bliss," called Euripides. *"Ignorance is bliss."*

§

I only had one semester left in the graduate program in sculpture, but even before my life changing Saturday, I'd become ambivalent about the work I was doing and the students I was teaching. The

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work seemed academic and the students seemed, well... not very bright. And now I didn't know what to think. I was worried that I'd inadvertently start reading my first year sculpture students' minds—not an appealing a possibility—and I had no idea what place art held in “The Big Picture.” And anyway, ever since my four week romance with marijuana, I'd wanted to explore the design and construction of musical mobiles more fully, and I'd assumed I'd find a teaching position somewhere on some level to hold the ends together as I explored my creative future. But not now. Not yet.

There was a lot of traffic on my drive out to Skokie. I'd called Professor Longfellow with plans to lie to him, to tell him I was tied up in Chicago with a family crisis and wouldn't be able to take my Introduction to Sculpture section that day but would be back on Tuesday. But I stuttered so badly I had to change plans mid-conversation and tell him I needed to get some psychological counseling before I came back to school. He wasn't pleased, but what I said was true: I needed to at least talk to *someone* before my everyday life could regain its everyday status—particularly in light of my newfound doubts.

Goldberg's house resembled the others on the block in many ways. It was small, it looked like it had been built in the 1950's and designed by the same architect who'd done the whole block. Still, the Yogi's managed to stand out. Whereas the sidewalks, driveways, front walks and steps of the other homes appeared to have been swept, Goldberg's was littered. Whereas the windows of all the other homes showed either neat draperies or Venetian blinds, the blinds on the Yogi's windows were either crooked or broken. Very few cars were parked in the driveways of the homes on this block since their owners were probably off at work; those that were there were modest: Chevrolets, Toyotas, Fords. In Goldberg's driveway was a rusted yet enormous and ostentatious aqua-marine blue Cadillac with prominent tailfins, dating from late 1950's. Most of the other lawns on the block were tidy and undecorated; on the Yogi's lawn, among the scraps of paper, debris and un-raked leaves was a fierce looking bronze statue of a many-armed deity. I wondered about Goldberg's status in the neighborhood. I also felt a tinge of fear at what I might find inside the house.

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A short, swarthy, middle-aged man in a pink bathrobe and black slippers answered the door.

"Mr. Goldberg?" I said.

"Who told you to call me Mr.?" he asked, annoyed.

"Actually no one, sir," I answered. "My father told me not to. I guess I couldn't help myself."

"Stop talking nonsense," he said with withering disdain. The he looked me over. My father was right about his eyes. They were piercing. But nothing else about him was impressive. His hair was uncombed; his beard a few days old; his pink bathrobe had what appeared to be coffee stains on it. He looked like the kind of man one might expect to find in an untended place like that. Yogi Goldberg gave every impression of being a slob.

"I see you've got a lot on your mind," he said, wearily.

"Can you read it?" I asked, feeling a need to back out the door I'd just entered.

Goldberg made a dismissive gesture. I was still standing in the open door; cold air was rushing into the room.

"I said, *Stop Talking Nonsense*, didn't I? Any idiot could see you've got a lot on your mind." He looked at me suspiciously and shook his head.

Without a word then, he reached around me, closed the door, and with little more than a grunt, he gestured that I put my coat on a chair. There was already a grease-stained, empty pizza box open on the same chair. The living room of Goldberg's house was as littered as the exterior. I saw another pizza box on the floor, this one with crusts and crumbs still in it. I saw empty cartons of Chinese take out, a few dirty plates, a few half empty coffee cups, one ashtray full to overflowing and numerous articles of clothing, including underwear. Along with several photographs of an attractive young woman, there was only one other picture on the wall, a crookedly hanging scene of someplace that looked like India. And though it was a bright day, two lamps were on, giving the room a pallid cast.

The place was a rat hole.

"Take a good look." Goldberg said emphatically. "A good look. This *is* what it *is*." He glanced around the room. "Follow me."

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The exhilarating effects of my cosmic handshake had begun to reestablish itself once I'd decided to visit the Yogi, but in Goldberg's living room my heightened state didn't seem to make much difference. I felt like a clothed potato; like a bag of something that didn't smell quite right. He led me up a few stairs and to the back of the split-level house. Following him, I saw a particularly unattractive round bald spot on the back of his head, which seemed to sum him up well enough. He told me to wait then while he went into a room, closed the door and came out no longer dressed in his ratty pink bathrobe but in a long white robe, simple, like a monk's. And then he opened another door: this one to a different world—not different as in “The Golden Fleece” coffee house, but in a way that made it seem unconnected to the rest of Goldberg's depressing home. He announced that this was the “sanctuary,” and told me to remove my shoes and my beliefs before entering.

“Beliefs are *worthless*,” he said quietly, as if no further explanation was needed, and at that, I saw a remarkable change in his bearing. It wasn't the monk's robe alone that accounted for the transformation. His posture changed; it became relaxed and alert rather than careless. The musculature of his face firmed up; he looked keenly intelligent instead of dull, and the piercing power of his dark eyes increased considerably in wattage.

This room *was* a world of its own. The walls and ceiling were painted a rich, deep blue. The wall to wall carpeting was immaculately white. The two windows were draped in a translucent, pale blue material, azure, like a clear sky. There were a number of small, flat pillows on the floor, light blue like the draperies, and a stack of maybe a half-dozen of them along wall across from the windows. Also along that back wall, in the two corners, were low, grey granite pedestals with a white globe lamp on each, presumably to be turned on at night. The overall atmosphere of the nearly empty, deep blue room with a white floor and diffuse light filtering through the windows was one of engulfing serenity.

“In the midst of chaos...” he stated, his voice clear, even resonant.

He invited me to sit down on one of the flat pillows, which were hardly more than mats; and then, seemingly out of thin air, but more likely from the pocket of his robe, he produced a small, thin

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little dark blue book which he handed to me. “Patanjali’s Yoga Aphorisms” was the title. He indicated that I open it to the first page after the preface. Then, with no introduction or indication that the lesson was about to begin, he recited from it. His unshaven face that had looked slothful in the living room looked ruggedly distinguished in the sanctuary.

“Concentration,” he said in a resonant voice, “or *Yoga*, is the hindering of the modifications of the thinking principle.”

Then he paused, as if to let me consider what he’d just said. Then he said it again.

“Concentration, or *Yoga*, is the hindering of the modifications of the thinking principle—that’s the modifications of the *mind*, to you.”

Before I drove out to Skokie, I’d looked up a few references to yoga in my father’s library and learned that in Sanskrit yoga means *union*, and that though there are many forms of the study of yoga, primarily two stand out. *Hatha* Yoga, the discipline of the body; and *Raja* yoga, the discipline of the mind—sometimes called meditation or as in Patanjali’s Aphorisms, concentration. *Hatha* Yoga, and many shortened and simplified variations thereof, has become widely popular in the west. The more serious form of Yoga has not. And from the little I read about Raja Yoga, I gathered that “hindering the modifications of the thinking principle” is a profound commitment, which involves quieting the mind, settling it down, contrary to its natural, unbridled nature, so that it becomes an unblemished, clear lens through which to perceive reality.

Goldberg didn’t explain anything however. He went on reading from Patanjali’s Yoga Aphorisms:

“At the time of concentration, the soul abides in a state of a spectator without a spectacle.

“At other times than that of concentration, the soul *is in the same form as* the modification of the mind.”

Then he paused again to let me ponder what he said.

The difference Goldberg pointed out to me seemed fundamental and vast. In the little blue book, there were explanatory commentaries by the Theosophist, William Q. Judge. That vast and fundamental difference, Judge wrote, was between the

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soul on the one hand *“being wholly devoid of taint, of impression by any subject,”* and its condition in ordinary life, where the soul *“as a marble statue of snowy whiteness,”* when seen under a crimson light *“will seem to the beholder crimson.”*

Once I finished reading, the Yogi went on.

“The modifications of the mind are of five kinds. They are Correct Cognition, Misconception, Imagination, Sleep, and Memory.”

This was coming at me hard and fast, but I’d recently shared a cup of coffee with a god, hadn’t I?

Goldberg continued. “The hindering of the modifications of the mind is to be effected by two means: Exercise and Dispassion.

“Exercise is a firm position observed out of regard for the end in view.

“Dispassion is having overcome one’s desires.”

Again Goldberg allowed time to follow along and read the commentaries on each of these aphorisms.

Regarding overcoming one’s desires, Judge wrote:

“Dispassion, carried to the utmost, is indifference regarding all else than soul, and this indifference arises from a knowledge of soul as distinguished from all else.”

Well, that’s pretty heady stuff, but it did make sense to the modifications of *my* mind—at least up to that point, it did.

Then something in the beautiful blue room changed. The frequency in the room changed. Goldberg thrust out his hand in my direction. I felt electrified when I saw what he was holding.

“This,” he said in that same resonant voice he apparently reserved for the sanctuary, “is The Seventh Card of the Tarot deck. It’s called ‘The Chariot,’ and it bears the key to success in meditation. You see that ‘The Chariot’ is drawn by a black and a white sphinx. This symbolically indicates that to achieve success, in this case to achieve a quiet mind, one must harness both the positive and negative forces within oneself. In order to banish

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thought and create a quiet mind you must create an engine. You must learn both to concentrate *and* befriend the very thoughts you wish to eliminate, thereby rendering them harmless. Or in the words of Patanjali, in order to hinder the modifications of the thinking principle you must make use of just those modifications.

"This, in short," Goldberg said, "*the harmony of will and love* is what I have to teach you. The rest will be practice."

I was stunned. Hadn't Anita's Great Aunt Theresa used the same words?

Then Goldberg sat down on a light blue mat across from me. He explained that his method of teaching the yoga of the mind was not traditional: he made use of Patanjali's ancient aphorisms but *activated* those with the principle set forth in 'The Chariot,' and that he did this according to his students' aptitudes and needs.

Then he told me to go away and come back when I was ready to start.

"Can I start next June?" I asked him.

"Shush!" he said, nodding toward the door. I followed him out. "No stupid questions in there," he said gruffly. His posture had reverted to its careless mode; his voice lost its resonance, and his eyes dimmed from *very high* intensity to *moderate*. He led me back down the few stairs into his pig-sty of a living room. "What do I know about June?" His look was scathing. "You may be dead in June. We all may be dead in June. I may be in Timbuktu in June. Tomorrow or the next day?"

"I'm still in school," I said. "So I don't know..."

But before I could finish, Goldberg laughed haughtily at me.

"You're not in *school*," he said. "There are no *schools* out there—just nonsense. Drivel for slackers. Idiocy for idiots. None of it works. None of it changes anything. *This* is a school. You come back tomorrow or you come back the next day. If not, don't come back at all." And at this he handed me my coat with a sour expression on his face that silenced any possible reply, opened the door and immediately closed it behind me as I walked out.

To achieve success, one must harness both the positive and negative forces within oneself. It occurred to me that in saying that, Goldberg had reaffirmed the central lesson of my life.

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AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

As I was driving back to the city, I felt an aching need to talk to Anita. I wanted to tell her about my plans: to put off finishing school, to study yoga. Not the Anita I'd talked with in "The Golden Fleece," but the sexy, living Anita with welder's hands and a sad look whose absence had begun to leave me aching deeply. Perhaps not as deeply or painfully as I might have ached if I hadn't seen her in Heaven's Coffeehouse where she assured me she was "good," but the ache was there nonetheless. No matter how much space my astonishing experiences took up in my emotional world, there was room enough for longing: for her body, for her mystery, but mostly for her companionship. I wanted to tell Anita there was a yogi in Skokie named Goldberg, a yogi named Goldberg in Skokie who lived like a slob and told me that what I learned in school "didn't work" and was "drivel for slackers." I wanted to tell her about stilling the modifications of the mind. I wanted to tell her Goldberg told me the same thing her Great Aunt Theresa had told her. I

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wanted to tell her that when my father said everything was falling precisely into place, Euripides said “*Ignorance is bliss.*” I wanted to undress her; I wanted her to tell me that she loved me, repeatedly. But mostly, I wanted to be with her in a perfectly ordinary way.

It was when I’d nearly returned to Hawthorn Street that I was shocked by the sight of a black sedan in my rearview mirror. For several blocks I believed that the menacing man was trailing me again. I was shaking with fear; I’d suddenly begun to sweat. Someone huge was driving that car. Just before I turned onto my father’s street, however, I saw that the large, looming figure in the car was a hefty, smiling woman wearing a black straw hat. The fear alone was enough to darken my day, however.

As I expected, the next phone call to Longfellow was a disaster. He rebuked me for running out on him and berated me for falling short of his expectations and my own. He told I was making a terrible mistake. This abuse paled, however, compared to what I received on a daily basis in Skokie. Even on the first day back, Goldberg spoke harshly to me, telling me that my slack will would hold me down and make his job doubly difficult.

I, personally, felt I was doing quite well from the start, but every time thoughts of this nature crossed my mind, the Yogi seemed to know it, and if he didn’t call me a slacker or a lout, he smacked me across the back of my head with his slipper, just like a proverbial spiritual disciplinarian. I soon realized that only two acts of mind were permissible in the sanctuary: strict, pure concentration on a pinpoint of white light with the exclusion of all else, and the welcoming of any intrusive thoughts as useful obstacles on the path to pure concentration. These two acts of mind might seem contradictory, but in practice they were not. By befriending the intruders and offering them no resistance, they tended to gradually give up and fall away.

I don’t know how he knew when I failed to follow either of these instructions. Since I had no reason to think he lied when he told me he didn’t read minds, I came to assume that he could *see* the activity of my mind—not the content, but that he could read my aura. He became such a fearsome and disagreeable presence in my life, however, that I never came close to asking him about this. And

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besides, I soon realized that he was beginning to do me a world of good.

I drove out to Skokie five mornings a week usually wishing Anita was in the car with me and often talking to her as if she were. I had to knock on the Yogi's door at seven A.M. sharp. He raged at me if I was either early or late by as much as a minute. On my first visit, he insisted that I synchronize my watch to his living room wall clock, an old, turquoise, plastic electric model in the shape of a starburst that hung on a nail. If I arrived early, I sat in my car and waited for the top of the hour—and of course I always arrived early; traffic wasn't predictable and being late brought on a degrading lecture about my sloth. During the first few weeks, my greatest challenge was managing to sit in the traditional lotus position for the required time, which rapidly grew from around twenty minutes to an hour-and-twenty minutes. I suffered greatly during these weeks, from a stinging sore neck and back; aching shoulders and hips; and from repeated smacks on the back of my neck and head by Goldberg's slipper. I never asked for any advice to alleviate the pain brought on by this unaccustomed position. I assumed that finding my own way to cope with it was a lesson in itself. Perhaps I was making use of the Charioteer's black sphinx. In any event, once my body became comfortable with this enforced posture, I found concentration began to come easier and that a simple act of smiling inwardly at thoughts that popped up in my mind dispersed them. This reminded me of the way that questions circled my mind but didn't land and take hold during the time I spent in the friendly confines of "The Golden Fleece."

During period of study with the disagreeable Yoga Master, I continued to repeat my resolutions every morning. I resolved to try to see the good in others and never blame anyone for anything, and by then, I had no doubt that I'd indeed live to a-hundred-and-fifty. But things had begun to change. Whereas I'd felt afloat in psychic clothes too big for me, now it seemed my daily resolutions coupled with the power of a laughing god's handshake were aiding me in learning Raja Yoga. Looking back on the experience, I realize that I was naïve about just how much that brush with divinity had done to aid me. It had made all the difference. I remember a peculiar expression on the Yogi's face I occasionally saw after particularly deep meditative sessions in which I attained an at-one-ment that felt

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galactic to me. I believed it was awe touched with envy. It wasn't long before I began to entirely ignore Goldberg's railing at me and beatings with his slipper. I knew when I made my mistakes. I knew when I lost sight of the inner star, as I came to call it; and I knew when I tried to quiet my mind by force rather than by kindness. Maybe it was part of my discipline to learn to be impervious to his abuse; maybe that was his plan. I never found that out. After five months of practice, Yogi Goldberg relented a bit in his harsh criticism: an indication that I was making progress in his eyes as well. But then things took a surprising turn.

It happened first on a Friday morning in early May in the Yogi's placid sanctuary. I'd been sitting in meditation for God knows how long, since in that state of intense concentration, the passage of time takes on a transparent, distant quality. My inner star was beaming at me beneficently, when someone suddenly spoke.

"Well, what a pleasure!" she said "Thank you for dropping by!" It was my mother.

It was as if she were in the room with me, but I knew the only person in the room with me was Goldberg, armed with his slipper. But I answered my mother anyway.

"Yes," I said, inwardly—an inward whisper, actually. "But I'm a little surprised. I... don't know exactly where you are..."

"Now, Jason," she scolded, "let's not take up space with silly questions."

Take up space? I thought, but that question didn't take hold; it circled without landing, just as questions had done when I last visited my mother in "The Golden Fleece."

"Stop it!" I heard then, in a voice close at hand by vastly distant from my mother's. "Stop it! Slacker! Focus!" And then SWAT! went the slipper on the back of my head.

"What was that dear?" my mother asked.

"That was Goldberg," I said, wondering what is was she *did* know, but decided to drop the matter before I was scolded for three-dimensional thinking.

"Who?"

"Goldberg, my yoga teacher."

"Well, tell him not to be so intrusive, will you?"

"Stop it! Stop! Focus!" came the heavy voice behind me.

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It was a hard and fast rule that all instruction taken from the Yogi while sitting in meditation was to be responded to inwardly with no outward disturbance.

“I think it’s something out of my control, mother,” I answered her, tensing slightly for the expected blow to my head, which followed instantaneously. “I’m sorry, but I can’t talk now,” I said to her then, as if we were on the phone. I knew there was nothing to say about *where* she was in relation to *where* I was, because I believed we were together in “The Big Picture,” a state where relational prepositions did not apply. I was also fairly certain I was able to *be* with her because of the meditative state which I’d attained, and which I was about to leave, so I just said, “I love you, mother,” and *hung up*—by which I mean I opened my eyes, stood up and walked across the snow white carpet and out the door of the sanctuary.

“Thug!” Goldberg shouted at me as soon as he’d closed the sanctuary door behind him. “Slacker! Tramp! Sluggard! What’s your explanation for this?”

“I’m sorry, Master (a title I had been saving for just such a dire situation), I don’t want to waste your time, but I have a crisis to attend to. It makes it impossible for me to focus.”

“Which is precisely why you must! Don’t squander the opportunity! Overcome your sloth! Return to the sanctuary at once!”

I could see Goldberg was rattled. Ordinarily, he didn’t go on like that in his white monk’s robe. Whenever he had to deliver one of his harsh lectures, it was not only outside the serenity of the sanctuary and in what he called “the persistent, chaotic illusion”—the rest of his house—but in his dirty pink bathrobe as well. He was so incensed that I’d stood up and walked out of deep meditation that he shouted at me and began to take off his white robe as he was opening the door to his bedroom where he changed back into his “chaotic illusion” garb. If his unsightly, sagging belly weren’t enough to disturb me, the sight of his own fire-engine-red boxer shorts was. How could it possibly be that this powerful but wholly unpleasant man could resemble my own father in such a personal way as his taste in underpants? Was this a crude cosmic joke? Or a lesson?

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But the Yogi, dressed in pink and belted up, had emerged from his room, looking particularly grim. I knew that any further apology would incur his ire, so I simply said, "It won't happen again."

As I put my coat on then, Goldberg looked at me in a way he never had before. "Yes," he said, but his face and tone of voice expressed disappointment, even sadness at...? At my failure? Or was it at my departure?

As surprised as I was at this unprecedented show of emotion, my greatest concern was for my mother, or more likely for me—for having lost contact with her. If it hadn't been necessary for me to shut my eyes while meditating, I would have meditated while driving back to Hawthorn Street, on the chance that once I snapped into that rarefied state, I could continue my conversation—that she's still be waiting by the phone.

During my first week with Goldberg, he had told me repeatedly, solemnly and forcefully, that any powers I might gain as a result of learning to quiet my mind were to be used exclusively for the benefit of all living things. Did speaking with my mother fill that bill? It certainly wasn't harmful to anyone. And besides, I hadn't *gone looking* for her. But that was just what I intended to do once I'd shut myself up in my room. The benefit of all living things was fine. Good for all living things. Good for Goldberg! I wanted to talk to my mother.

My father and Euripides had left for work and Birdie was gone when I walked into the house, so I could retreat to my room without any small talk. In the months I'd been practicing, I'd gained enough skill to settle in quickly, but I was shocked at how soon my mother took up where she left off. It felt as if she'd been hovering over my shoulder, knocking on the back door of my brain. If it had been anyone else I might have felt violated, psychologically abused. "So it's agreed?" she said. "No foolish questions?"

I thought it was charming that she called them 'foolish' questions rather than 'stupid' ones, and I agreed to her terms, which were, after all, perfectly intelligent as intelligence was being redefined for me. It was already spring and my next birthday wasn't far off, so it had been nearly a year that I'd been living by an *expanded* set of rules.

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“Will you tell me about the last time you saw me?” I asked. “When I was still a child? Before you vanished,” I was careful to relax my instinct to ask her to explain *vanishing* to me or to ask about the dynamics of her presence there in my bedroom.

“Very good, dear,” she said. “I appreciate that. You’ve always been a quick learner. And that last day is something I’ve wanted to talk to you about. Isn’t that nice?”

Nice? “Yes, it is. It’s *very* nice.”

I was wondering about the conversations my mother and I must have had in this same room. The wallpaper would have been different, but I could imagine sitting back against the headboard of my bed with her next to me. Maybe my head was on her shoulder. This was a comfort I’d wholly forgotten. It embarrassed me a little. If she was reading my mind, she didn’t let on.

“It was a lovely little cottage we used to go to up in Wisconsin, dear. It was near Friendship. Friendship, Wisconsin. Isn’t *that* nice? This was late summer. The cottage was on Castle Rock Lake, and there were similar cottages all around it, but spread out, so there wasn’t a feeling of being crowded there. Our cottage had a lawn in front of it with a swing set for children, and a barbeque pit, and just beyond that, its own little strip of beach. Your father and I used to sit in lawn chairs and watch you play in the sand and shallow water and climb into the rowboat that was beached there for us to use if we wanted to. You loved to pretend you were rowing. Your father was quite a good oarsman and probably still is.”

At this, questions about what state my mother was in, what she knew of my father and his current life and how she felt about him threatened to disturb both my meditative state and maybe my mother. Fortunately, I was able smile them away.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, as if I’d adjusted the aerial on top of an old television set to improve the reception. “It was in the afternoon and your father and I were drinking ice tea watching you dig in the sand, when you walked up to us and asked if you could go into the woods. There was a deep woods behind our cabin, but just a little bit on each side. That’s where you wanted to go. It wasn’t dense but it did separate our place from the neighbors.

““What do you want to do in the woods?” your father asked you.

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“‘I want to search,’ you answered.

“‘Search for what?’ your father asked you then. And I remember how seriously you answered him. I had to laugh. ‘How do I know?’ you said. ‘I haven’t found it yet.’

“Well, dear, you were three years old, quite an old three, so we had no objection if you went off in the little woods for a while, as long as you wore shoes, promised not to go near the water and to come back soon. So I put your little shoes on and your father helped you pick out a big stick for a staff, and off you went into the little patch of woods. Your father was reading as usual and I was gazing out across the lake. There were typically a few sailboats out there, small ones, and with the bright sky it was a picture postcard scene. I don’t recall just how long it was, dear, but after a little while had passed and you hadn’t come back from your search, I decided to go in after you.”

“Why did you go in and not father?” I asked, feeling that this question was admissible since it had no metaphysical overtones.

“Oh, I was always the more adventurous of the two of us, and he was reading. It was an old book he’d found in the cottage—it was furnished, you know. Every summer we were there, he’d pick up something randomly from the book shelf and read it straight through—no matter what it was, because he believed in destiny. So, I went off hunting for you but didn’t find you in the patch of woods between our cottage and the next one down. There were no vacationers at that one, so there was no one to ask if they’d seen a cute little boy in a sailor suit came walking out of the woods with a big stick in his hand...”

“A sailor suit? You had me dressed in a sailor suit?” I felt a slight shudder pass through my meditative calm as I said this, but only slight. This was reassuring. Apparently I could conduct a perfectly normal conversation with my mother under these conditions, whatever these conditions actually were.

“Yes, a little blue sailor suit,” my mother answered. “It was adorable. And you loved it, Jason. You wanted to wear it every day. But I was getting a little worried. So I went on through the patch of woods just past that cottage, but when I came to a thicket that would have been very difficult to pass through, I decided to go back and get your father’s help.”

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Anticipating my question, she laughed and went on to explain. “I was worried that you’d gone so far you couldn’t find your way back, Jason. Not that you’d vanished.”

I felt slightly stung by this response, but not enough to shake my concentration.

“So I hurried on back and found that your father had fallen asleep in his chair with his book open in his lap. ‘Phinny,’ I said to him, ‘I can’t find Jason.’”

“I remember he opened only one eye. ‘Maybe he doesn’t *need* to be found,’ he answered me, which seemed a bit too philosophical for the occasion. ‘He’ll be fine. He’ll be back. Our son isn’t going to disappear today.’ And this also seemed peculiar response to me. Inappropriate, don’t you agree?”

I made no attempt to censor my response. “Very. But not in light of what happened later. It sounds as if he knew.”

My mother was silent at this, but I couldn’t contain myself. “Did *you* know?”

“No, dear. Not yet. I didn’t know. A little later I did, or maybe I should say I *remembered*. But at the time, I was a little annoyed at your father for not taking what seemed a serious situation seriously. Then he got up from his chair and began to walk toward the woods as if he was going to help me hunt for you, when we heard a motorboat pattering toward our strip of beach. And sure enough, there you were. It was so cute. It was just a little rowboat with an outboard motor and it was coming very slowly, because you were standing up in the prow with your sailor suit on and you were holding hands with the darling little girl—and oh yes, the cutest part was that you were wearing one of those raccoon hats—you know, with the striped tail.”

“The little girl?” I asked.

“Your second little girl, as I recall. But just wait, dear. I’ll explain. You’d apparently climbed right through the thicket that turned me back and ended up on the family’s lawn. The family in the second cottage down. The father of the little girl—she was just about your age—recognized you and where you belonged and drove you back in the boat because he thought we might be worried. I don’t know why you and the little girl were holding hands, but it was just adorable. It’s a memory I treasure. You wore that hat so proudly. But you had to give it back. It belonged to the girl’s

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father. She had been wearing it when you appeared on their lawn and she loved to play with it, even when it was hot and sticky like it gets in Northern Wisconsin, but he told you you could come visit whenever you wanted and share the hat with the little girl.”

“What was the little girl’s name?”

“Why Jason, that was the first thing your father wanted to know too. Her name was Maria or Melina or something like that, something that started with M. Yes, and I know why you and your father would be so interested. She was one of your earliest Medea’s but not the last! There may be no end to them! But I do find it telling that that episode was the last adventure of your life that I witnessed. After you returned from your search, I took you inside for a nap because you looked tired. Ordinarily I sat with you until you drifted off. I and told you little stories or sang to you, but not that afternoon. You truly fell asleep as soon as your head hit the pillow, so all I did was kiss you on the forehead and tiptoe out of the room...

“Jason?” my mother asked when I didn’t reply at once.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s how I feel right now. Suddenly very sleepy.” But there was so much more. There was the uncertainty I felt, concern about leaving her, finding her again, but as I already knew, this uncertainty would knock the foundation out from under the serene state I’d achieved through meditation. And it did. I didn’t even have a chance to say goodbye.

I slept for longer than I expected. When I awoke there on my childhood bed, the questions I didn’t ask my mother bounded back into my mind: it seemed they wanted to be heard, at least on *some* level; and other questions, too, in a pack, as if they’d been circling as long as they could without landing. But I was torn; something in me was resisting, trying to be above it all. But then I thought of what Goldberg so persistently had taught me about “The Chariot,” and I cleared the way for them all.

Was my mother actually a goddess? How had she vanished? What did vanishing mean? How did it work? Did she want me to convey a message to my father from her? Did she know about his life with Birdie? How did she feel about that? And that question led to a host of others. Were she and the others there, wherever *there* was, able to look down on ordinary life as if from a

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great stadium in the sky? Did a person necessarily have to be dead to be permanent part of “The Big Picture,” even if *alive* and *dead* were insignificant distinctions, as Poseidon had told me? Was she there forever? Did being part of “The Big Picture” imply a certain wisdom? Was that wisdom a requirement for being there? And what about Anita? Was she still *there*? Could I speak to *her*? (And what did my mother mean: my *second* little girl? I liked girls, but my *second*—at the age of three?)

But I had to stop because I was feeling sick. Prolonged indulgence in that kind of thinking made me queasy. Those questions, as natural and sensible as they were to me at the moment, were about a realm to which they really didn’t apply; and I knew that as long as I dwelt in that part of myself I’d learned to call *natural and sensible*, those questions and others like them would raise themselves, but that I could no more answer them than I could describe Technicolor in black and white. The truth was, however, that I lived, and would probably continue living with a passport to both worlds, but without permanent citizenship in either. That, as I approached my twenty-second birthday, was my dilemma or more likely my blessing: the choice seemed to be mine.

It was that spring day, sitting up on my bed in my father’s house after hearing of my three-year-old enactment of an ancient myth from my vanished mother, that I decided to add another resolution to my morning routine: namely, to do my best to look at my life and everything about it as a blessing. It only made sense. It wasn’t trite or sanctimonious. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that that’s the most secure way to live. How can you lose if you embrace everything that comes your way? Huh? Think about it. Isn’t that what my mother said? And then I also decided it was time to get on with my life. Despite my uncertainties, I felt prepared.

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I hadn't forgotten about Billy Young, but had been distracted and hadn't attempted to meet with him until now. Six months had gone by since the accident and I didn't expect him to still be housed in the Williston County jail. So I called the number I had for his parents' house.

After I introduced myself, his mother asked why I wanted to speak to her son.

"I wanted to let him know that I didn't harbor any bad feelings about him, that I realized this had to be a terrible time in his life, and that I wanted to offer him my friendship—if he'd accept it. I'd planned to come see him just after the accident, but didn't get around to it."

"Well, that might have been a good idea, Mr. Finch, before Billy hung himself. Lord knows, with all the hate mail, it might have helped change his mind. I guess you don't read the papers. A good deed now won't win you any credits in Heaven, Mr. Finch, if that's what you're after. I guess you're a little late for that."

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I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. "I'm so sorry," I answered. "When did he...?"

"Can't say it? When did he kill himself? Three weeks after the wreck. That's when he went out in the garage and did it. I was going to go to the drug store when I found him. May I ask why you're just thinking of this now?"

I wanted to lie and tell her that I'd been grieving Anita's death all this time, but I knew I couldn't. Maybe I didn't really want to. "I suppose I just wasn't ready," I said. "I had some personal matters to clear up and... and I'm so sorry..."

"Well, that would be too bad, wouldn't it, Mr. Finch?" Mrs. Young said to me, and then, sounding like she was about to cry, she said goodbye and hung up.

I felt sick again—this time for a full day. I absorbed Mrs. Young's sorrow like a sponge. This had nothing to do with anything I thought or understood about workings of the cosmos. I felt like a baby mouse that'd seen its mother crushed in a trap. I knew it wasn't the time to drive back off the road to see Poseidon again, but I wanted to. I felt that the "The Big Picture" was just beyond the thinnest but most impenetrable membrane. I couldn't cross over for the same reason I couldn't walk through a brick wall. But a brick wall and I are each composed mostly of empty space, vast reaches of it between our inner atomic parts. We're not solid at all; nothing is, but there's something both simple and unbreachable that keeps us apart, a secret key. Fanciful as it may sound, that key may be love, love of the highest order, love that permeates all things. I knew then in my sorrow that "The Golden Fleece" was only a light-stroke away. I may have been there in there, rubbing shoulders with the immortals but for the dimness of the twinkle in my eye.

The next day I drove into the city to look for studio space, a place to set up shop for the next phase of my life. It was my plan to look on the near-west side of the city. I'd need a place with high ceilings, so I hoped to find loft or a storefront where I could both work and live. My father had lent me some start-up money, but once I found a studio, I planned to look for a job to support myself while I explored the world of musical mobiles.

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Events unfolded so effortlessly that day that they left me giddy.

(To those who might doubt the honesty of this report, I should point out that as everyone knows, on rare occasions things actually do “fall perfectly into place.” Most often, of course, they don’t; but as should be clear as this story unfolds, everything in my accelerated life took on a marked intensity—for better or for worse. But as my father told me once, a remarkable life feels no more remarkable to the one who lives it than flying five-thousand miles every year to mate does to a *Danaus Plexippus*— a Monarch butterfly. For sake of convenience, and to make a long story a little shorter, from now on, I’ll refer to this truth as the *Plexippus Principle*.)

That being the case, I was driving west on Armitage Avenue and hadn’t passed the most recently refurbished neighborhood by more than a few blocks, when I came to an empty storefront with a FOR RENT sign in the window. It was an old building with a limestone façade. The large plate glass windows in front were covered with brown wrapping paper to a height of about seven feet, but when I peeked inside through a seam between the sheets, I saw a man cleaning up with a push broom. I knocked on the glass front door and when he opened it, the first thing he said to me was: “That was quick.”

It turned out, he’d only put up the FOR RENT sign minutes before. The space that had been a neighborhood grocery store had a high ceiling and a great deal of north light streamed through the front windows even when they were partially covered. Behind the long room that had housed the store was a small apartment and one large storeroom. When I asked him about the condition of the ceiling, he seemed apologetic since it didn’t appear to have been painted or maintained for years and there were cracks in the old plaster. But when I explained that I was interested in setting some heavy hooks in the ceiling joists, he assured me that it was structurally sound and told me I could do whatever I wanted to it. He’d had three tenants in the last two years, he said, and his only concern was that I sign a lease and stick around.

The big room he was sweeping was very dirty and I wondered what had gone on in a place like that, and the apartment in back was dirtier still and very dark since all its windows looked

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out on the brick walls of the neighboring buildings. The stove and refrigerator in the dark little kitchen were old but looked serviceable, and the bathroom had a free-standing, claw-footed bathtub in it and a beautiful old black and white tile floor in excellent condition under the grime. The landlord, Mr. Lopez, a solid, no frills kind of man with an excellent mustache, told me there was a laundromat across the street and a few doors down, a Mexican restaurant in the same block along with a Vienna hotdog place. The Kroger was three blocks away. A large, heavy metal door at the back of the storeroom opened onto an alley and another door of the same size at the front of it opened into what would be my studio. I took a short walk with him up and down Armitage and around the block. When we returned to his building, I saw that above the front door the Greek letters **Ναυτιλία** were carved into the limestone. Mr. Lopez told me that according to the deed, the building was erected in 1921 by a man with a name that might have been Greek, but that he wasn't sure about the name or the nature of the original business. I didn't know what **Ναυτιλία** meant or even how to pronounce it and neither did he, but I was intrigued. The rent was a little higher than I'd expected but I signed the lease on the spot. I got back in my car to drive back to Hawthorn Street before eleven that morning.

And this time there was no mistaking it. The old black sedan was directly behind me as I drove east on Armitage. My panic was immediate. It was at the second stoplight that I saw who it was behind the wheel. A black hood covered his huge head. His features were no clearer than that day when he terrified me on the railroad tracks: only his menace shown out through the shadows that seemed to enfold his face. This was the man who had chased me down the tracks. He was still chasing me. I was clammy with sweat and trembling again. After a few blocks the car disappeared. Apparently, I'd seen enough.

One shouldn't have to wonder long why I chose to not to tell my father about this frightening apparition, even to conceal it from him. Perhaps I was being unfair to him, not giving him credit for the strength of character that he possessed, but clearly, I didn't want to distress this man who'd given me so much, particularly since this evil specter and the terror it induced seemed to be wholly my own, maybe even my own creation.

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So I had only one piece of news for my father when I arrived back at Hawthorn Street that day. As soon as I told him, he insisted that he and Birdie accompany me on a drive back down to see it. I warned Birdie that the space very dirty but that only seemed to fire her enthusiasm—which, I couldn't help but suspect, was as much rooted in having me out of the house as her happiness for me in finding something that pleased me. I could hardly blame her.

I successfully hid my repeated worried glances in the rearview mirror as we drove down to my new quarters. My father laughed as soon as he had a look at the front of my future studio. It was **Ναυτιλία** that he found so funny, but he refused to translate it for me. He said I'd have to do that myself.

Birdie's first concern was whether she could find rods long enough to hang light, translucent curtains in big windows just above passerby eye-level. The thought of the azure curtains in Goldberg's sanctuary came to mind, but Birdie had already decided the curtains would be white. With a couple of deft swipes, she tested the push-broom Mr. Lopez had left there and seemed to approve but said that we'd need a mop, bucket and an exhaustive list of cleaning supplies at once. When she entered the dark little apartment behind the storefront, she made several disagreeable noises but came out concluding that a good scouring, some nice lamps and a coat of paint could cheer it up. It was then that I realized that when it came to cleaning the place up and making it livable, I was slotted as Birdie's assistant. She let me know, in fact, that she would set things in motion by herself when I drove to Groverton to retrieve my few belongings. She also smiled broadly at me.

I'd managed to sublet my little apartment in Groverton, but my landlord threatened to sell my belongings if I didn't come pick them up immediately. This seemed an excellent opportunity for a test. A cosmic check-up, or not quite so pompously, a test of my luck. If things continued to fall into place for me, I'd be able to retrieve my meager furnishings at the last minute and rent a trailer to bring them back to my studio, "**Ναυτιλία**," which my father told me was pronounced *Nautilia*. If they did not, it would be a clear sign that my apparently blessed existence had some weaknesses in its foundation. This, of course, trusting that being intermittently

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followed by a demon of some sort was *personal* rather than cosmic. But for what it's worth, that's what I trusted.

Whatever I was to find awaiting me in Groverton, I seemed it couldn't hurt to clear my mind on my drive west. Though I'd stopped my regular visits to Goldberg, I'd continued my daily practice with the same rigor the Yogi had required: early every morning, just after my daily renewal of my vows. My meditations had gone on without interruption—that is, except for my mother. But she never “dropped in” until my regular hour-and-a-half session was nearly complete.

It was a velvety black, moonless night, blazing with stars. All my windows were open, and it took me a while to settle down in the warm rush of air. I had only just stilled that evening's excited *modifications of my thinking principle*, when I heard a voice, but it wasn't my mother.

“Where are you going?” the voice asked

“Going? I'm going to Groverton... Iowa,” I answered.

“No, no, no! Not where you're *driving*! With your life, fool!”

The voice was harsh and haughty. It sounded very much like Goldberg's, but it had an otherworldly quality to it as well, almost an echo.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I said.

“Then you can't be trusted.”

I felt like *hanging up*, and I guess that urge itself clouded me enough to lose the connection with whomever or whatever I'd been so briefly speaking, because I was alone again, surrounded by the whoosh of air through the windows and the deep dark of the countryside around me.

Intrusive and annoying though the speaker was, the import of what had been said to me lingered. I supposed that anyone in a position like mine, anyone who'd been “Sipping from Noah's Cup” and who'd gained admittance to “The Golden Fleece,” probably ought to have some idea where his life was headed, or at least had a responsibility to find out. This, however, was *my first consideration* of the responsibility attached to my gift.

What, after all, should someone who'd learned so easily to still his mind and who'd been taught to open his heart to the good in others *do*? Do about *things*? Whatever that might mean. About

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humanity's condition? Whatever that condition really *was*. I thought about that for the next hour-and-a-half as I drove through flat countryside and small towns and came to no satisfying conclusion. I was out of my league again. The idea of using my art for humanity's benefit seemed pompous and unrealistic, so I settled for a resolution to at least do what I could with my smile. My resolutions, however, were close to being stacked too high to remember.

I arrived in Groverton a little after midnight and found that my landlord, Mr. Hirsch, had done me the favor of stacking all my belongings neatly at curbside in front of my former apartment. I pulled up and parked alongside the heap—including my bed, my dresser, desk, lamps and among other things, a small library of books—and decided to spend the night in the car so I could do what I had to in the morning.

If I read signs correctly, and I think I do, the following morning proved that there were structural weaknesses in the foundation of my “blessed state.” The truck from the used furniture store arrived before I woke up, and by the time it was all over, between the driver and Mr. Hirsch, who'd been summoned to the scene, I had to buy back my belongings from *both* “Ferguson Furniture” *and* Mr. Hirsch—and at considerable cost. I doubted the legality of what the two of them managed to pull off, but met with such stubborn resistance that I accepted the inevitability of getting what was coming to me whether I understood the reason for it or not. In one way or another, it seemed I owed something to others. That conclusion jarred me in much the same way that Mrs. Young had in revealing my neglect and the unknown interlocutor had when he exposed my irresponsibility the night before. By the time I'd rented a trailer and loaded it without any help, I realized that for the first time in over a year I'd begun my day without my resolutions.

I was nervous on the drive back to Chicago, but no black sedan appeared to be following me.

Birdie wouldn't let me put things in order until the place was both cleaned and painted. Birdie was very thorough in her work. It was five days before I moved in. And after buying my home furnishings back from their captors and spending what was needed to paint the

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huge room and the rooms behind it, I had much less cash on hand than I'd hoped to begin my new, artistic life.

But the place was beautiful. The studio shown so brilliantly with its newly painted white walls, shelves and ceiling that it seemed to radiate light. Two handsome, old, eight-foot-long wooden work tables stood in the center of the room along with four wooden stools. These were gifts from my father, ones he'd somehow procured from one of the university laboratories. He also bought me two stunningly red and very comfortable canvas chairs, and brought an old wooden file cabinet from the house. These and my own drawing board and tool chest only accentuated the majesty of the great, high space itself. The floor boards were scrubbed down as they'd probably never been before and exuded a fresh lumber smell with a slight lemon flavor to it. The gauzy white curtains and the expanse of glass of the front windows above them let in a flood of light. Birdie had gone on a binge at a thrift shop, shopping for lamps, which softened the atmosphere in each of the little rooms. The bathroom with the claw foot bathtub and beautiful and intricate black and white tile floor was painted light blue, and Birdie had chosen pale pink walls for the kitchen, a color she assured me (with a wink!) that would always remind me of her and all the happy years she'd known me. All four windows in the apartment were curtained in the same gauzy white material used in the studio. The store room was painted white, which made it seem bigger than it was when it was dark gray with seventy years of grime. The room was empty but for an eight foot long, six by two inch beam, which wasn't painted and looked as old as the building if not older. I didn't understand its purpose.

I spent the next day shopping for groceries, household necessities and art supplies, which in my case included a new acetylene torch for light welding, a stock of sheet aluminum, rods, cables, pulleys, a balance, a two octave set of lightweight chimes and a variety of paints. It was only on my drive back to the studio, with my car loaded down with those supplies, that I stopped at a library to take a look at a Greek/English dictionary. That's when I found out why my father laughed at this manifestation of the *Plexippus Principle*. **Ναυτιλία** meant "Shipping."

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With my concerns about my responsibilities reaching a nearly hysterical pitch, I decided to brush aside my doubts about the value of my art and set to work in my new studio. The words “slacker” and “sluggard” which Goldberg used more than once to describe me, acted as additional spurs to prod me into a period of resolute activity. My plan was to design small mobiles first, and when I’d come up with something that seemed right, reproduce it on a larger scale. Though Professor Longfellow didn’t know much about mobiles, he’d taught me to start at the bottom and work up, ending with a balance point on the primary supporting beam.

And so I began. I’d already hung a half-a-dozen wire cables and pulleys from hooks spaced along the ceiling joists. In order to keep things simple, I chose to use perfectly circular pieces of aluminum, two inches in diameter, rather than rectilinear or irregular curvilinear plates as seen in so many mobiles. I planned to use six chimes in my first musical mobile which would therefore require no less than six of these circular plates (clappers) set on the same horizontal planes as the chimes. This rudimentary setup would, in one way or another, be the central to the final design.

It took a great deal of work and sweat to assemble this skeleton mobile. My tentative attachments led to an exasperating series of collapses and entanglements, and when I finally worked out the problems of balance, the result wasn’t pleasing at all. It was ugly, visually and musically.

When the whole surfaces of the circular plates struck the chimes, there were rebounds, rattles and mutings caused by sustained full contact. I’d chosen the pentatonic scale, the scale made from five successive black keys on the piano, which even when played randomly suggest “Oriental” music, an arrangement not disharmonious but unexceptional. I knew I could always change the pitches to something more intriguing; the problem was in finding a way that the chimes would hit the very tops of the moving plates so that each of the ringing pairs would not interfere with motion of the others. Many other variables and infuriating difficulties came into play as I worked on. My own hands became obstacles in the delicately balanced structure. The technical problems continued to multiply, and three months had passed before I had a working mobile that was visually pleasing.

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As frustrating as this process was, the bright atmosphere of the studio itself—"The Ship" as I thought of it—made life pleasant for me. By the end of that first three months, however, I'd faced what was to be a major issue in my life for a number of years: an issue I call *The Conflict between Creativity and Tranquility*.

In short, I discovered that the state of mind required to create art is not conducive to tranquility; and that the meditative state in which the mind is a clear lens and the heart free of attachment is not conducive to making art. To create art one must be engaged in passion; to abide in the wholeness of God or Truth or whatever one chooses to call it, one must rise above passion. But clearly, it was just this to which I'd committed myself: to live in both worlds since I couldn't achieve permanent residence in either. My resolution to look on everything in my life as a blessing helped me to navigate between these two states, but that help went only so far, because no matter how satisfied I felt when I'd completed that first, simple working model, it was immediately evident to me that the artist's life, even when mitigated by daily meditation, is not a happy one. And whether or not I jumped too quickly into what I believed was my duty, I had selected a life for myself and was not about to turn back because of irresolution or personal discomfort. So, cosmic overtones or not, I was, to an extent, screwed. Screwed: a well-intentioned, porous being, a light-stroke away from paradise. Screwed.

Of course I had another duty as well, and that was to start supporting myself. I had to find a job to pay for groceries and the rent. I'd never had a job in my life, and never again since the three months I remained employed. I was aware that with my moments expanded slightly beyond those of everyone around me, I had a potential edge in my dealings with others. Though I didn't ask for it, I could, to a limited extent, read minds. While shopping, for instance, I often knew what people were about to say an instant before they spoke. If I asked the produce man if the apples were from the Midwest or Northwest, I knew the answer just before he said it. The reason for this was never clear to me. I saw no logic to it: it never made sense to me why a longer moment should include added *powers* rather than simply *more perceptions*. But even though I could somehow slip into the flow of other people's

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intentions, I objected to that idea and resisted doing so for my own personal benefit. That's not to say I wasn't tempted; of course I was, particularly with women. Who wouldn't be? I assume if I didn't become a rapacious seducer, I could have made a fortune as a con man, a poker player, in sales, or in many other ways I hadn't thought of. That's why I chose to deliver pizzas.

The work was all at night, which left my days free to immerse myself in my project, and of course, there was minimal personal contact. Minimal, but contact nonetheless. When I returned to the restaurant after my first night's work, the manager, a big, round man, asked me how much I'd made in tips for the evening, and when I told him he seemed incredulous.

"A hundred-and-eleven bucks? No way, kid."

"Do you want to count it?" I asked. I knew it was a lot but it hadn't seemed extraordinary to me. I showed him the bulging wad of singles with fives and a few tens thrown in. I knew he was going to ask me if I was selling drugs along with the pizza but wasn't certain if he'd be kidding or not. He was.

"I'm just polite and I look them in the eye."

He shook his head. "I dunno if that's good for bizznezernot..."

He was concerned that if the net amount people dished out was excessively high, they might be deterred from ordering from "Joey's Famous" again. But apparently he didn't feel this would be a serious threat to business.

"Good for you, kid. It's probably a fluke, but maybe you got a magic touch."

I concluded it was the eyes—and the *Plexippus Principle*, of course. I noticed that if I avoided eye contact, my tips were small or nil. But avoiding eye contact was unnatural to me and oddly uncomfortable, so I simply stopped telling Jimmy ("Joey's" son) how much I actually took in. But I made bundles, which was fortunate since my hourly wage was minimal. And I did enjoy driving around the city at night. I found that Goldberg had taught me more than I realized, because I soon found I was able to get into a meditative state with my eyes wide open—whenever I chose, even driving the little red pizza car.

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Of course, there was some joy in making art as well, fleeting though that joy may have been. Although I'd been creatively active through all my years at school, it wasn't until I set out on my own that I realized that there are essentially two purely happy moments in the creation of a work of art. The first occurs just after the piece is conceived; when the archetype is clearly in mind but none of the limitations and difficulties have shown themselves yet. This is a brilliantly lucid moment. The second occurs at that time just before the work is completed; when it can be seen as a glorious whole; that one proud moment but before its growth and life have departed the artist's heart, which, empty again, inevitably seeks another repetition of the same cycle. It's certainly true that the completed piece of art may bring pleasure to others, but this is far less satisfying to the artist than those others might think, since at the time the others may be tickled pink, the artist is either struggling again or languishing in state of extreme self-devaluation until the next idea appears (or does not appear) out of nowhere.

My first finished product had six chimes and eighteen circular plates. The plates were two inches in diameter and painted incrementally from a deep red to a pale pink. The superstructure of the mobile consisted of gleaming polished aluminum rods, twelve of which I'd bent into shapes like the letter S, and which branched off of the four supporting rods, also S shaped. These resembled branches on limbs, to which the circular plates were attached, like buds or flowers. The six, lightweight tubular chimes, were suspended at varying places by high-test transparent plastic line. In many ways, the completed mobile resembled a tree growing down rather than up. Provided there were air currents available—which there nearly always were—the variously tinted red disks were all in constant motion like suns seen through a red filter, but arranged so that those with the smallest orbits, those that were also painted the deepest reds, struck their hanging chimes more frequently than those outlying pink ones.

Those most frequently struck chimes sounded the three notes of the E Major chord (E, G sharp, B: considered harmonious to traditional Western ears) while the outermost chimes, striking three other notes, sounded less frequently. Not being a musician myself, I could only do my best in choosing the notes and the probabilities of their simultaneous and separate soundings. By dint

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of my design, what I'd created sounded primarily familiar tones with less familiar ones interspersed. Harmony with scattered dissonance. I found the results intriguing, and it turned out others agreed.

When it came to the visual aesthetics of the mobile, I felt more in control. It fit into the space of one cubic yard, and was designed so that pleasing congruencies were in a constant state of flux between all the downwardly sloping and interacting S curves of the boughs and branches and their attached circular plates. This motion, which included the constant waxing and waning of all the approaching and receding red-pink suns, made the mobile a pleasant thing to see. One appreciative viewer compared it to skiing down a number of gently curving slopes at once; another said it looked like dozens of pink ping pong balls bouncing and rolling down a shallow, curving staircase. Both used the word "swoop" in describing the musical mobile's appearance.

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When I was still a little boy, my father told me more than the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece as I ate my peanut butter and jelly, ham on rye and American cheese sandwiches. He told me the stories of Prometheus, of Atalanta's race, of the trials of Heracles, of Demeter and Persephone, Theseus and the Minotaur and many, many others. One in particular, however, gripped my young imagination and refused to let it go. My father told me this story the first time I ate a sandwich (ham on rye with horseradish mustard, if I remember correctly) on top of the five step rolling staircase in the library. Ordinarily I ate at a table or on the floor. The new story, the story of Orpheus, a part of it, at least, was to commemorate that occasion.

Orpheus was the son of the Apollo, god of the Sun and of the arts, and Calliope, muse of epic poetry. When Orpheus was still a child, his father taught him to sing and play the lyre, and it was the power thus vested in him that intrigued me so, because Orpheus could charm men, wild animals and even trees with the sound of his music. Animals would lie down at his feet, and trees would uproot themselves and rocks *follow him* as he played. It was the image of uprooted trees and rocks trailing after Orpheus that charmed *me*

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when I first heard it perched on that rolling staircase in the library, and though I'd forget about it from time to time, the idea that art could work magic was one that would never leave me. I can't count the times when, as a child, I lay in bed at night picturing long lines of boulders, stones to pebbles, arranged according to decreasing size, rolling across the hills, valleys and plains of ancient Hellas; and among them, like the officers in an army, trees, great and small, marching on their roots.

I suppose that my father also told me how Orpheus' true love, Eurydice stepped on a snake, was bitten, died and was swept off the underworld, where Orpheus pursued her, and by the charms of his music, restored her life only to lose once again because he failed to follow Hades' prohibition not look back at his love until they'd arrived in the world above. But that's not the kind of magic that impresses little boys, not this little boy, at least. I wanted to make the sun come up. I wanted to make the trees uproot and march in line after me. The trees and the stones. I wanted to see them marching.

I thought of Orpheus the night I completed my first musical mobile. I slept in the studio directly under it in order to let its music permeate my sleep. As I dropped off that night, I felt like a composer. I gave myself up to the music and realized that I'd heard a number of variations of a strangely haunting melody, something captivating and elusive, which always appeared unexpectedly and vanished before I could hold it in my mind. I dreamed of musical enchantment. When I meditated the next morning, my mother interrupted just as I was preparing to "bow out." She sounded as if she was continuing a conversation we'd been having in my sleep.

"No," she said. "It would be misleading to say that I *see* you or *see* where you are or *what* you are making—not in the way you understand *seeing*. I can tell you're having some difficulty keeping up with me. Things aren't at all what they seem to you, dear. Didn't Posey make that clear? As long as you think of me as in *another place* you'll be confused and you'll frustrate me. You need to forget your idea of *place*, Jason. It's very limiting. And how many times have I told you not to try *to understand* things? There's only one way to truly *understand* something and that's to love it—unconditionally as you people like to say. But I'm sure you

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don't want to listen to me scold you any more, so I'll get back to the point. What you are 'making,' as you call it, is something that should be shared with many, many others—as many as possible. It should be close to them.”

“Mother?” I asked tentatively. “Help me out with this if you can. What I call *making*... what do you call it?”

She laughed. “I call it *being*, dear. You chew on that for a while. That should keep you busy. And by the way, you'll need a crew.” And she was gone.

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As I drove Chicago's streets at night, I wished I could talk to Anita and tell her everything about my life and my work. I wished I could tell her about the Conflict between Creativity and Tranquility, which reminded me of the subtitle of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons"—"*The Conflict between Harmony and Invention.*" I wished I could tell her that my mother called making "*being*" and Poseidon "*Posey*", but I didn't choose who talked to me. I couldn't think of choosing; the very idea clouded my lens. And on those occasions where I had to interrupt a conversation to deliver two large sausage and pepperonis, it was impossible to take up where I left off once I got back in the car. I felt sure that my mother understood, despite her insistent avoidance of any references to *place*; and my conversations with the mystery voice—who'd begun to sound and behave so much like Goldberg that I was thinking of him as "Goldberg's Ghost"—rarely lasted long enough to be interrupted. Nearly all my talks with him focused on the same topic.

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“You know, don’t you,” he typically began, “that it’s a universal law and a moral *duty* of all those on the path to help others coming along behind? That no step on the ladder may be taken without filling the place below?”

“I am aware of that principle,” I answered.

“Principle?” Goldberg’s Ghost said in his familiar, irascible tone. “It’s not principle, dimwit! It’s bone and blood, the stuff of mind and heart. And don’t suppose it’s automatic, like water seeking its own level, slacker. And don’t think for a moment there aren’t consequences for dereliction of duty. And don’t coddle yourself with the narcissistic notion that all souls necessarily get what’s coming to them, because even though they do, there’s a point when it becomes the aspirant’s duty *to take part* in the laws that govern us, to participate. Everything’s been handed to you—and don’t suppose that those... those *things you make* fill the bill. There is art and there is *Art*. Common art is no more than diversion. It’s nonsense, drivel. The satisfaction it brings is the other side dissatisfaction. It’s no better than a drug.” His tone at this point was vitriolic. “True art comes from knowledge of the laws by which the cosmos engenders itself. Now go away.”

I always found myself obeying this order, which ended most of our conversations—if Goldberg’s Ghost’s short lectures could be considered conversations. They felt more like turning on an aloof, very irritable, but wise old radio and turning it off at its command. It seemed any responses I made acted as catalysts for new instructive remarks delivered with the words and tone equivalent to Goldberg’s slipper. Thinking of this disembodied voice as the Yogi from Skokie’s *ghost* didn’t imply that I thought Goldberg himself was dead, but with detached reflection, I realized that this made no difference either way.

My mother would have been proud of me.

Despite the instructive abuse I was taking from some invisible realm, I continued to try to imagine my way through that impenetrable membrane. Driving in my red pizza car, I imagined Poseidon sitting so regally at his desk, and wondered just what activities were involved in a god’s management of a café.

Who knocked on his door, and for what possible reasons?

Did he have office hours? If so, where did he come from and where did he go? I came up with no answers to these questions.

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And what about Aphrodite and Eros, sitting at that little round table together? Did they draw up maps of future romances? Did they plot ruin? Did they talk about the coffee? The pastries?

Of course, again I couldn't imagine, and usually concluded that in the case of The Big Picture, questions and answers simply didn't apply. My questions probably meant no more to the reality of that realm than snapping my fingers at a thunderstorm—no, *imagining* snapping my fingers at a thunderstorm. Yet still, I pressed my ear up against the invisible membrane, and yearning, I heard nothing but the beating of my own heart.

Working late into the nights and then long into the following days began to take its toll on me before long. So did all the pizza. By the time three months had passed I lost the good eating habits instilled in me by Birdie as a child and was shocked by my gaunt look in the bathroom mirror. Nearly every night I took home a “mistake” pizza or part of one, and I'd begun to work so feverishly to combat the succession of collapses and entanglements in the prototype for “Swoop,” that I skipped cooking for myself and ate pizza, often cold, at least once but usually twice a day and often nothing else. This unrelenting pace coupled with the anxiety brought on by the “Ghost's” critical suggestions left me in a state so dismal that it tempered my father's enthusiasm when I unveiled “Swoop” for him. It was in the discussion that followed, that it was decided—or declared, really—that Birdie would take the role as my business manager. She also declared herself my “auxiliary mother,” until such time as I demonstrated that I could care for myself properly. I took this scolding without complaint.

“You're living as if you were in a hurry,” my father said to me with an ironic smile. Birdie, of course, knew nothing of my longevity resolution and its early results, but she concurred with my father that I needed to slow my frenetic pace. This exhortation on their part was well timed, because it was shortly after that discussion that the loan I'd applied for was approved and I gave Jimmy my two weeks notice.

“You're d'greatest delivery boy I ever had, kid,” Jimmy said to me at the end of my last shift. “And I knew you was rakin' it in—you weren't foolin' no one. Customers was callin' to sing your

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praises. Deyorderda pie justegetyatod'door! You wanna tell me what dat's all about?"

"Eye contact," I told Jimmy, unable to lie. "It's all in the eyes. I think it's the secret of successful business."

"Maybe y'got somethin' there. You come by anytime for a slice on me, pally. And good luck wityur balloon business 'r wadeveritis. Look yer customers rightin n'eye!" Then Jimmy clapped me soundly on the shoulder and told me not to be a stranger. I had tears in my eyes.

This was the beginning of the next stage of my life. A year later, I had two full time employees and enough money to buy my father and Birdie expensive gifts.

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I went into the musical mobile kit business. My first kit, the commercial version of "Swoop," had eight separate components to be assembled along with the six hanging chimes. It was not great a feat of engineering to design those pieces to screw together rather than requiring welds. Machinery was needed to cut and drill the threads and also to stamp out the two inch disks, but it wasn't very complex or costly; and just as I'd made simple forms to bend the rods for my prototype mobile, I had to design larger forms and clamps to bend a dozen at a time. A more elaborate frame was also needed to spray paint the disks, and I knew that a choice of color schemes would be desirable, so I offered seven—each gradient hues of one color. Once I'd designed my first musical mobile kit, I had no difficulty in charming the female manager of the gift store at the Art Institute of Chicago into hanging one in a back corner of the store where there was a semblance of quiet—another example of the *Plexippus Principle* in action. The banker I'd first approached with my idea had added one of his own: namely, that I supply a high quality audio cassette of thirty minutes the mobile's *music* free of charge to any prospective buyers. He also recommended that I should set the price high enough to make it a "gallery quality" purchase, but not too high to scare off those unaccustomed to buying art.

The 1991 price of "Swoop," a mobile with a primary tonality of E major, available in gradations of red, orange, yellow,

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green, blue, indigo and violet, with a limited repair warrantee and boxed attractively in a carton of my own design, was \$250 plus shipping.

Once the appeal of this kit was proven by bustling sales at the Art Institute Store, Birdy, acting in her official capacity as business manager, began to contact other museum stores. It was the increased demand this created that made it necessary to set up more work tables on The Ship and hire two helpers. The year required to launch this business, unlike the creation of art itself, did not have a few glorious moments and a greater number of abjectly miserable ones. There were better moments and worse, but the manufacturing, marketing and selling the product didn't compare in intensity to dreaming up and creating that product out of *nothing*.

My life began to return to order once my nights were free and Birdie had begun to spend several hours a day at my Armitage Avenue studio. Apparently she felt that her job description as my business manager and auxiliary mother included cooking, so I was again well rested and well fed. The Ghost's unrelenting criticism didn't let up, however, so I remained on edge. I got used to it. On my new schedule, I found that if I worked at a steady pace, I was able to produce, package and ship a dozen mobiles per day. At this time, "Swoop" was on display in museum stores in Minneapolis and Milwaukee as well as Chicago.

Monday through Friday nights I sat down, alone, to a fine meal prepared by Birdie. On Saturdays, I went to one of the neighborhood restaurants, where I became very popular, a center of attention, really, since I made eye contact with everyone I spoke to and left big tips. I usually went to Hawthorn Street for dinner on Sunday, but my social life had become virtually nonexistent. I'd had friends and girlfriends when I was away at school before I'd met Anita, but since her death or departure or whatever it was, my life had become solitary, solitary but for my mother and the Ghost, that is. But when Birdie, my father and I decided to extend the business further, all that changed.

The idea to hire from the homeless shelter was my mine. My father wholeheartedly supported my decision; Birdie had some reservations. The Western Avenue Community Shelter was within walking distance of my studio. I'd passed it frequently on my forays to the Kroger for groceries, and once I took the time to think

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about it, I began to buy a little extra and drop a few items off on the way home. When I did this, I usually stayed for a while and spoke with the director, a woman named Helen—who happened to look like a grown-up Anita and usually left me a little heartsick. I also talked with anyone who happened to be there during the day and felt like a conversation. I liked the place, and made a point of making eye contact with everybody I met and resisted my urges to respond before I was spoken to. It was during these visits that I learned what should have been obvious if I'd ever given it any thought. Not only was everyone interesting, but everyone was worthy and even gifted when taken seriously, particularly when their experiences were unlike those of most people in an affluent society.

Mason and Margo were both fifty when I met them at the shelter. Mason was a tall, thin man with a narrow face, a beak of a nose, and long, graying blond hair. Margo was in every way his opposite: short, squat, with soft features and dark brown curly hair. They had been married for twenty-four years and had been homeless on and off for twenty. They came from separate small towns in Indiana and had arrived in Chicago after they graduated from high school in 1959. Just in time for the 1960's, which had left its mark. They were married on the day they were both released from their first jail sentence (possession of a controlled substance) in 1965.

These were authentic hippies; authentic in their fervent politics, their *joi de vivre* and their appetites for a wide range of mind and mood altering drugs. Mason had marched, assembled and been knocked on the head with a Chicago policeman's stick outside the Democratic convention in 1968, and Margo had been with him throughout it all. Mason burned his draft card. The two drove to Woodstock together in a genuine Volkswagen bus, hand painted with peace signs, rainbows and cannabis leaves. They traveled with The Grateful Dead for a time. They were good willed, most often happy and utterly harmless, but by 1972 they were both addicted to heroin and began to live a murky life on the streets of Chicago and behind bars. It was in Joliet prison that Mason was beaten within an inch of his life by a cellmate. The degree of brain damage he incurred was unclear, but blows to his head along with the massive quantities of LSD he'd taken prior to it, left him with cognitive problems. Margo was abused in prison as well, but in her case, it was at the hands of a thug on the prison staff. Eventually the two

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joined Narcotics Anonymous. When I met them in 1991 they had each relapsed a number of times, but were, for the time being, clean and sober.

I'd put a small ad in the paper:

“Artist’s Helpers Wanted. Aesthetic sense required.”

Naturally, art students by the dozens answered the ad, many of whom I interviewed. I suppose they were all qualified, but I'd be working closely with whomever I hired, so I was looking for something beyond competence. I was looking for compatibility. All the applicants were ambitious—some of them were even “bright”—but though ambition might have been essential in their budding careers, it was a problem for me. It grated on me; it interfered with the smooth operation of my psyche.

Doing my best to live both with passion and without it was a balancing act that required very fine tuning. Working closely with anyone in the grips of a self-serving passion, like ambition, was a complication I wasn't prepared to accept. I smiled at these people genuinely and made eye contact whenever it was appropriate. Many of them were my own age. I tried to practice kindness and see the good in everyone but I wasn't entirely successful, since a number of them seemed... well, annoyingly dim. I still had a way to go on this front. But even if I'd loved them all to pieces, I was confronted with an awkward choice. Moments after each interview began, I knew hiring was out of the question. I also knew that the accepted protocol involved politely explaining that other appointments were scheduled and that I'd make my decision after I'd spoken with everyone interested in the job.

But I, lucky me, couldn't lie.

This was a condition I'd supposedly *earned*, though to my mind, *thrust upon me* described my relation the Rule of Honesty more accurately. In either case, the conditions of this Golden Rule didn't just discourage dishonesty, but prevented intentional falsehoods from passing through my lips like a gag reflex in reverse. Trying to lie was like spitting out a mouthful of screwdrivers. My role as an employer, however, left me in a shadowy middle ground.

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I was able to enunciate the words, “Thank you very much...” but the rest of the sentence, “I’ll give you a call in a few days once I’ve made my decision,” brought on a series of grotesque grimaces and tics, making it appear that I was deeply conflicted about what I was saying, had case of Tourette’s syndrome or was in the early throes of a Grand Mal seizure. The alternative, explaining that I didn’t feel compatible with the applicant, would require an explanation I wasn’t prepared to give and would probably bring on legal action. So I grimaced and gagged. Nearly all of the people I interviewed left my studio looking concerned or disturbed; a few, the ones I liked the most, laughed (or at least snorted) before they made it out the door.

Mason or Margo reacted humbly the day I brought them to the studio and showed them the prototype of “Swoop.” They had told me that they were both “handy” with tools, and Helen had confirmed this, recounting several temporary jobs they’d temporarily held down. I’d already known them for several months.

“Man, I’d do this for free,” Mason said.

“Me too... Every day but weekends and holidays, including St. Patrick’s Day, of course,” Margo added.

“If you were independently wealthy, that would be fine,” I answered. “But if you want to help me with this, I’m going to pay you. I’m even going to deduct for taxes and Social Security, which means I’m willing to listen to your diatribes about the government-corporate war machine.”

“No shit?” said Margo.

“None,” I said. “That okay with you, Mason?”

Mason was sitting on a stool. He nodded. There were times when he didn’t or couldn’t speak. The slightly pained smile on his face filled in his answer to my question.

“This could be the first job I’ve ever liked,” said Margo, who was standing behind Mason, did a little dance.

“I liked a job once,” Mason offered.

“Yeah, sure,” said Margo.

“No, with the old people. Remember? Mrs. Meyer.”

Margo nodded and patted Mason’s cheek as he went on. Her love for him was palpable.

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“It was at an old folk’s home,” he said. “I was high on speed and very persuasive and talked them into hiring me as kind of a vocational therapist, I think you’d call it... but not really. There was nothing vocational ‘bout me.” He rolled his eyes. “They had a big room where the old people made stuff like pot holders and shit—to sell. They were into it, because otherwise they were bored out of their skulls. They’d have to just sit there, or wander around. It was disrespectful. But some days there wasn’t any work or not much...”

Mason shook his head. “And then I was supposed to just have ‘em sing songs like ‘The Hokey Pokey’ where they’d move around some, like kindergarteners. It was pretty pathetic. And some of them, the ones who’d lost it and didn’t get what was going on, thought *I* was responsible for their not having any work, so they got pissed at me and said stuff like, ‘You give us medicine off the corner of the spoon, Mr. McGee.’”

Mason frowned. “I didn’t think I was going to like being around all those old people, but I kinda did. Some of them were wise. Wise old people—no shit, but not like you’d think. No wise sayings or anything like that. It was simpler. It’s how they react. Not all of them. Some of them were completely fucked-up or zoned-out and a lot of them were selfish or stubborn or just plain stupid. The ones who were good people when they were younger got wise and not the ones who were smart—they could be the real assholes. But the wise ones, like Mrs. Meyer, had a way of seeing things. It inspired me. It was like they’d seen things so many times, they couldn’t kid themselves about how it was going to turn out. Being wise is about being *honest*. It was accumulation, man. I call it ‘Mason’s Law of Accumulation,’ but it only works if you’re straight with yourself. A hundred percent straight. You ever tried that? That’s hard shit...”

Here Mason stopped. He looked as if he hadn’t even been talking. Margo gazed at him affectionately. “You’re right, babe. You’re always right.”

Mason smiled at this, but it was obvious he’d forgotten what he was talking about mid-sentence. This time he’d come to his conclusion. It wasn’t always that way.

At first, I was worried that Mason might lose track of himself mid-task—while he was operating the stamping machine,

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maybe; but it turned out that his particular deficit affected his thinking as connected with speech only. He didn't lose track of what he was doing, and like Margo, he worked well. I did all the welding, however, and all the fiddling with the stamping machine and the bending frames. But there was still a lot for the two of them to do: from painting on through preliminary assembly, wiring, testing, packaging, and eventually shipping of the orders that were flooding in as my first year at the helm of The Ship came to an end.

It wasn't long after I hired the two of them that Mason noticed that eight foot long beam propped up on a corner of the store room and knew what it was for. There were brackets bolted in place on either side of the studio's front door. Apparently when the *Ναυτιλία* business opened in 1921, the front door wasn't primarily glass as it was in 1991, and the beam and brackets were there to bar the door. But when Mason put the old bar into the brackets to demonstrate its use, a truck passed on Armitage Avenue outside. The resulting vibration, undetectable before, caused the beam to shake slightly in its brackets, resulting in a clearly audible hum. You might say it rang out. If my father was there and had a bladder control problem, he might have peed his pants.

"That's sort of a pretty hum," Margo said, and at that point, any lingering reservations about my choice of employees evaporated. My little business was thriving. Orders for "Swoop" showed no signs of slacking off. It might have seemed that all was right with my marvelous world described by the *Plexippus Principle*, but of course that wasn't true. Something was a little off.

I still repeated my many resolutions every morning when I woke. They now numbered six: 1) To live to the age of one-hundred-and-fifty. 2) To practice kindness every day. 3) To remember that everyone is always doing his or her best. 4) To make myself permeable to the good in others. 5) To look upon the conditions of my lifer as a blessing. And finally, 6) If I couldn't serve humanity in any greater way, at least smile. Beyond this, I also meditated for ninety minutes every morning in the manner passed on to me by Yogi Goldberg. Whenever summoned, I spoke to my mother and Goldberg's Ghost, by what metaphysical means I neither understood nor tried to understand. And still, no matter how distracted I'd become, I longed to be back in The Golden Fleece and tried futilely to wish my way through that gossamer, brick wall

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membrane. I also continued to experience an expansion of my moment and a corresponding intensity of awareness.

But if the reader's led to believe that I felt the sum of my accomplishments made me worthier than the next person, be assured that I had no such feelings. Hardly, I was just me. My life, like anyone else's, had simply been an accumulation of reactions to my own experience—which is to say, I'd never done anything above or beyond my own nature: a condition that left me as noble or ignoble as anyone else. My life had been unusual, yes, but considering the *Plexippus Principle* again, my part in it was unexceptional: I considered myself one very lucky screw-up. And within it all, I'd begun to feel something was wrong but couldn't identify it. Perhaps it was that specter-shadow man, whom I'd already begun to think of as "*my shadow*," but it seemed more than that, something bigger than that. So I named that something and resolved to pay it the respect it was due as a seventh on my list of morning resolutions. I named it Doubt.

"I'm happy to see you're with your friends again," my mother said to me one morning after Mason and Margo had begun to work at The Ship.

I didn't respond immediately.

"Thank you, dear," my mother continued, "for keeping up with me, it speaks well of you. I believe you have your father to thank for your ability to learn."

Again I said nothing. I knew I had my father to thank for a great deal, I'd just never thought my ability to learn was included—probably because I wasn't aware I had it.

"When I was with you," she went on, "you only had one friend, but for a three-year-old, that's saying something. Do you remember your little friend?"

"I don't think so. Maybe I will if you remind me." I was sitting on my bed, leaning back against the wall. The bedroom in my apartment behind the ship had become a comfortable retreat.

"It was a little girl, of course. Your first. I suppose she was your *first* Medea, she predated the little girl on the boat. This one was a year older than you."

Again I had an opportunity to respond but didn't.

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“She lived across the street in the big stone house—the one next door to old Mrs. Fritzel. Once you were up and walking, her mother and I used to visit while you two played—you didn’t play together at first, you understand, but next to each other, side by side. But when you were three and visiting across the street, you played together with her plastic tea set; and at our house, of course, you played together with any number of strange things your father brought home for you. I thought that was fine, but when her mother, Adele—her name was Adele Rosenberg—saw the two of you playing with your skull, she got quite upset, and I should have expected as much. I remember there was also a skeletal human hand in one of the toy boxes but Adele never saw that. As far as I was concerned, you could play with anything you wanted to when you were three, as long as it wasn’t something that you could choke on or that could put your eye out. But I guess Adele discussed this with her husband and decided that you and Lucy—that was her name, Lucy—couldn’t play together anymore.

“I don’t know what Adele told the little girl, but I told you the truth: that Lucy’s parents didn’t think a human skull was an appropriate toy. You already knew what appropriate meant. But of course you didn’t understand, or like it. And neither did Lucy. She used to come out on her front porch, point to our house and call your name. There was a gate there to keep her from coming out onto the sidewalk and across the street. Now I had to respect Adele Rosenberg’s decision to not let her daughter play with you; I didn’t agree with it, but she had the right to bring up her daughter any way she wished. But I wasn’t about to keep you indoors so you couldn’t hear the little girl calling for you. That would have given you a distorted impression of how people feel sometimes. So Lucy called out to you and you called right back. If there wasn’t something sad about it all, it would have been so cute. This went on for several days, Jason. And I saw her mother peering out the window at the two of you; and the two of you’d begun to shout little conversations across the street. I hoped Adele wasn’t going to go so far as the keep Lucy off the front porch entirely, but before long it appeared that’s what she did, because though I saw Adele and her daughter come and go, the little girl was never on the front porch alone again.”

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At this point in the story I felt a sharp pang for Anita. Apparently my mother sensed my distraction.

"Pay attention, Jason," she said. "I was about to tell you that your father and I always gave you a great deal of liberty and you usually respected the limits we set for you. We didn't have a gate on the porch, but I was nearly always with you when you were out there. At those times I wasn't, you knew that you were never to go down the front steps and certainly never cross the street. But apparently your feelings for Lucy got the better of you, dear, and one day when I was busy in the kitchen, you not only went down the steps but across the street to the Rosenberg's front porch. But you did it very quickly and I by the time I came to check on you, you were back on the porch, playing on your glockenspiel. I didn't know anything at all had happened... Until the next day, when there was a terrible uproar. Do you remember?"

"I don't remember any of this," I answered.

"The police were there, several cars, lights all flashing. The mailman had fled the scene in terror. He'd actually come so unhinged that he fell down the Rosenberg's steps and broke his thumb, but he did manage to run to a telephone phone and to tell police he found a human skull in the Rosenberg's mailbox! You explained that it was a gift. We had a Dickens of a time getting it back. The police confiscated it, and there was talk of the FBI becoming involved since what you'd done might have constituted *maliciously disrupting the delivery of mail*. But of course since there was nothing even remotely malicious about it, was there?"

I didn't know if a reply was expected. Apparently, it wasn't.

"Well, dear, eventually we got your skull back... and you know you were a very precocious three-year-old?"

"Not really."

"Your father had already taught you a great deal. You had a vocabulary larger than some adults, and already knew a good deal about science and philosophy. You see, your father believed in treating children like short people; he felt that children were capable of understanding far more than was generally accepted. So, a few weeks after you delivered your little gift, I had you over in the park and we ran into Adele and Lucy. You two kids acted as if you were the dearest of friends who'd been *maliciously* separated. Now, even

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though Adele was very upset with me, she couldn't very well pull the two of you apart, so while she and I stood there in an awkward silence, you and Lucy went off just a little way and chattered and chattered. And it turned out Lucy never knew why there'd been such a hubbub with the police. So you told her all about it. And soon there was another scene, where Adele took her daughter away from you in a huff. It was a very disturbing incident, even for me; and you, poor thing, simply could not understand it. So I explained that Lucy's mother didn't want her to know about the mailman and the police. And you simply couldn't accept that, dear. You wanted to run over to Lucy and her mother as they were walking away, but I was holding on to your hand, holding you back. So you shouted, Jason. Right there in Lincoln Park.

"‘Mrs. Wosenberg,’ you shouted, ‘Mrs. Wosenberg.... The truth will set you free! The truth will set you free!’ The expression on the woman's face was priceless, dear. Genuinely priceless."

"What happened next? Did I ever speak to Lucy again?"

"I couldn't tell you that, Jason. I was gone a week later. You'll have to ask your father."

I thought for a moment. "You know, mother," I said. "It's funny, but I'm not sure if I've ever really understood that—about how the truth sets you free? Can you explain that?"

"Me?" my mother asked. "All of us aren't intellectuals, dear; although I believe *the truth* in this case includes the truth about oneself. Honest self-knowledge. But the *self* isn't just you, of course, your true *self* is boundless—like those Oriental *Yogis* are always carrying on about. So chew on that, dear. *That* should keep you busy. It follows, doesn't it? Wouldn't the knowledge of boundlessness set one free?"

And then she was gone. Or I was gone—which seemed at the moment to be the same thing.

Was she still sitting at that table in "The Golden Fleece"? Drinking coffee with old King Phineus? That didn't seem quite right. But I *had* been there; I'd been at that table with her. Was that fantastic place open twenty-four hours a day? Why did that question seem so foolish? Because it was a question? Was my mother close, close enough to embrace me? Was she within me? Within *my boundless self*?

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Mason and Margo and I drank a dangerous amount of coffee together. Morning coffee with the two of them became a ritual I looked forward to. I postponed my own until they arrived, even if I was up and about long before they were due.

“You need to get yourself a woman,” Mason said to me one day.

This wasn’t the first time he’d made a remark like that. I looked at Margo and smiled. We were sitting at the worktable closest to the big front windows of The Ship. It was a very gray day, but as usual, the studio was luminous. The white half-curtains seemed to capture whatever light was available and amplify it. The potted azaleas that Birdie had set on the ledge in front of the windows were brilliantly red.

“But that woman’s taken,” Mason said, looking admiringly at his wife. “She’s a good example of one, though.”

“In just what way do you mean, Mason?” I asked.

Now he leered, looking Margo over up and down.

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“Besides the anatomy,” I said.

“But anatomy’s everything, man. Women have a chemical advantage over men, a better take on life, a better understanding. It’s not theoretical—Uh uh. It’s the result of years of observation. It’s another one of Mason’s Laws. Women have a natural instinct; they have a *greater compassion for living things*.”

“Are you talking about mothers?” I asked. “I once heard someone say that only mothers should have the power to declare war.”

“That’s got a lot to do with it, man, but there’s something about the whole hormonal thing they’ve got. Just *being able* to bear young. That does it to them even if they’re not mothers, and even if they don’t know it. They’re like a different species—a slightly superior one. I don’t mind admitting to that. Some women like the idea a lot; some don’t; they don’t like the idea that there’s any inborn difference between women and men, which is obviously bullshit. There’s a difference; everyone knows that. Not everyone knows women’re a superior species, though.”

Margo looked like she’d heard all of this before. She was looking at Mason indulgently.

Mason continued on as if he were repeating an argument he’d made often in the past.

“Women have a greater compassion for living things, they...” he said, but then suddenly, mid-sentence, he stopped. He looked at me as if I’d just walked in the room and said: “Man, you need to get yourself a woman...”

“I was in love once,” I said, as if nothing unusual had happened.

“Once?” Margo asked.

“I guess I still am,” I answered. “But she’s dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Margo said.

“No, no. I’m over the shock of it,” I said, honestly. “It’s okay now.” But I felt I wasn’t being fair. I didn’t react to Anita’s death the way one might expect. I’d *seen* her, after all.

“When did this happen?” she asked.

“Last year.”

“You sure recover quickly. How long had you been in love with...?”

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“Anita was her name, and we’d only been together for a few months.” Margo looked at me expectantly. “But we were very much in love.”

“What a drag, man,” Mason said.

“Maybe sometime I’ll tell you about her,” I answered. “She was a sculptor. Very grounded. Very compassionate.”

“I wish I knew her,” Margo said. “You’re not your average Joe, you know, Mr. Finch.”

“She read the Tarot,” I said. “She was beautiful. She collected junk.” I was pouring Mason another cup of coffee, adding half-and-half for him and an unreasonable amount of sugar, just how he liked it. “But I want to hear more about my not being an average Joe,” I said.

Margo immediately made a sour face. “Will you give us a break...?”

Mason made the same face.

This stung. I was being scolded. I was out of my league: socially naïve, retarded, even. Margo and Mason were way too street wise to tolerate any false modesty—which I stupidly expressed. At times like these, they scared me. There was no bullshit with these two. I felt *I* was working for *them*. I didn’t know how to respond. Mason was assessing the preparation of his coffee. Margo saved me with a wink.

“You make great coffee—way above average,” Margo said. “How’s that?” And that was the signal for beginning to work.

“Swoop,” with its branching S curves and circular plates in graduated hues, continued to sell well in Museum stores around the country, but the urge to design something new had snuck up on me from behind until suddenly one day I couldn’t think of anything else. A number of store managers had asked if I had a follow up in mind, and Mason and Margo had developed the skills to produce “Swoop” entirely on their own. Margo, it turned out, like Anita, was a natural welder, so I was free to follow my creative impulses—though calling myself *free* might be polishing something that doesn’t deserve it, because except when I was meditating, my condition didn’t resemble freedom at all. I was driven. And it was nothing new.

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Once production of “Swoop” began, I’d become *so* driven, so goal oriented that even my expanded moments became fleeting and unappreciated. If it weren’t for Mason and Margo’s laid back approach to life, I might have worked myself sick. We were producing at a rate far greater than I’d anticipated. Birdie had to repeatedly convince me not to increase my undeclared but keenly observed “quotas” for weekly production. I was making a surprising amount of money and was surprisingly pleased about that—but for purely altruistic reasons, I believed.

I increased Mason and Margo’s wages as soon as I saw the profit I was making, and with Birdie’s help, soon drew up a profit sharing plan for them. I bought them lunch every day. Birdie occasionally shared the take-out we ordered, but more often than not, she nibbled as she prepared stews, soups and salads to stock my refrigerator. Even though she always shooed me out of the kitchen when she was at work, she frequently giggled at my mock-offended responses. I wondered if she was doing my father as much good as life with him seemed to be doing for her. She clearly enjoyed having a hand in my successful enterprise. Birdie was a significant contributor to its success. It had been difficult to convince her that as my business manager she should be well paid, and even more so to convince her she should share in my profits, a large part of which I spent on presents for her and my father. Even though I didn’t care much for spending money on myself, I began to look at increasing profitability as an indicator of the *health* of my business. And who could quibble with good health?

Creating my second musical mobile was, like the creation of the first, exciting and disturbing by turns. My plan was to for it to be composed of ever widening, descending concentric circles, but with the musical component inverted: the lowest notes sounding in the smallest, topmost circle, and other notes becoming higher in pitch as the circles descended and increased in size. A very simple plan. Maybe even a simplistic plan. Certainly not an arrangement that had much inherent beauty like the graceful branching pattern repeating itself in ever varying combinations in “Swoop.” My initial challenge was to make this mobile beautiful to the eye; and the means to that end lay in the shapes of the revolving pieces themselves. In this design, simple circular plates wouldn’t do.

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But it didn't work out. I'd found a very graceful shape: like a 9 or a comma with a slender, extended tail, but lying on its side, with the tip of the tail the highest point, but only just a bit, by less than a quarter-inch. With this design, when the tip of the tail struck a hanging chime, the whole plate, the whole reclining comma, would spin on the thin line suspending it, and when rotating more quickly and forcefully, would blur into an image of a solid form, like a slightly flattened sphere. But no matter how I tried and how frustrated and tense I became, no matter how I cursed, I could find no way to create a concentric design that would fit into an appropriately small space: one cubic yard. The first working model was huge and boring.

Unlike in meditation, where one can return to the same serenity day after day after day, serenity in art making (and probably most of everything else) depends largely on success; and so my state of mind after the creation of a large, ungainly failure was bleak.

Every morning, of course, I reminded myself to consider both realms I inhabited as blessings in themselves, but I quickly became so entangled in my cycles of hope and disappointment—momentary, hourly and daily—that I was mired and pessimistic.

Riding high on the *hope* component of the cycle, however, I found the solution to my problem. Instead of creating a mobile with seven descending concentric circles, I decided to make two systems; one with three circles, the other with four, with the smaller one offset above the larger, overlapping to nearly its center. This arrangement didn't require the outer circles of the lower system to be nearly as large as in the original model. This looked like two overlapping solar systems, the upper one being somewhat smaller than the lower. Using notes of the bright key of B flat major and the overlapping darker key of B flat minor, the upper and lower orbits of this mobile created an atmosphere which, to the Western ear, resembled a day with both sunshine and rain, but more of the former.

In order to pull this off, however, I had to address many more problems of entanglement and rebound than in "Swoop." I had to have small chimes custom made so that they could fit into the complexity of circling parts. It took six months to produce the prototype, six months during which my own mood was far more stormy than sunny. I used darker hues for the comma shaped plates

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of the topmost orbits, and descendingly lighter ones for the plates in the lower concentric rings. The plates in the top and smallest ring were three shades of very deep green; those of the second were three slightly brighter shades of blue; those of the third, three shades of an even lighter indigo; and on down through the violets, reds, oranges and finally, the yellow plates, the lightest and brightest of them all and also sounding the highest notes on the chimes.

Once all these elements were fit together in such a way that they would always move freely, the visual effect was of concentric rainbows of graceful shapes that were set spinning when they struck the hanging chimes. It looked like luminous whirlpools wishing to embrace. Every time a chime was struck, a blur of whirling emerald-green, or ultramarine blue, or peach, or silvery lemon-yellow was ignited: sparkling color combustions tuned to the ever changing pattern of the mobile's *song*, arising like fireworks scattered through its orb. The number of notes the mobile could play was steadily reduced as the months passed. My first designs had been too ambitious for a mobile that fit into three cubic feet. Still, the melodies this mobile produced were again haunting and evanescent; and since the darkest colored commas were set spinning every time the lowest notes were sounded and likewise up through the registers, its look mirrored its music, something that "Swoop" didn't achieve. But by the time I finished the prototype, I was hardly the man who'd been fit to speak to the brother of Zeus. The Conflict between Creativity and Tranquility had taken a heavy toll on me. My meditations had become so distracted, in fact, that I rarely spoke to Goldberg Ghost or even my mother.

Rarely, but not never.

"You're missing the point entirely," Goldberg's Ghost said to me, just as I was finishing a morning meditation in my bedroom. "You're music is ineffectual nonsense."

"I don't claim to be a composer, but it sounds pleasant to me," I said in my defense. A mistake, I knew. Defending myself against the Ghost's rebukes only exposed more errors in my perception.

"Feh!" said the disembodied Yogi. "Who cares? The music of most *so-called composers* is ineffectual nonsense—and *pleasant* has nothing to do with it. Nothing at all. I told you: there's art and there's Art. There's music that reaches all levels of

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an individual, including the divine ones, and then there's music that only stirs up the murky lower ones—and that's most of what you listen to. All music has corresponding forms, you know. If the vibrations of the music humans most often listen to were transposed downward into material vibrations...Ha! You'd be surprised at what you'd see!

"Take yours, for example, which is no better or worse than the common lot, even though you're not a musical *artiste*." He pronounced this last word with particular distaste.

"What the sounds of your original *creation*—'Swish' or 'Poop' or whatever you call it—would portray if they were materialized is approximately this: A donkey, or maybe I should say *jackass* walking with a wicker basket in its mouth containing engraver's tools and several bottles of mayonnaise. The jackass also has part of a nautical military hat on its head and something resembling a wedding dress trailing from its right rear hoof. That's it. That's your masterpiece! That's what happens when unaware people make art! It may be pleasant to some, unpleasant to others, but in fact it's utterly random and entirely ineffectual beyond the moment it's heard, and then only effective in a wholly superficial way. To go a step further, the opening phrases of your famous National Anthem, if materialized, would appear to be a barrel of fish, a gunny sack of owl feathers, and these amidst a heap of shattered pieces of lacquered furniture (possibly Oriental) and ladies' riding boots. A pretty song? A rousing song? Perhaps, but only *momentarily* and *superficially* because the arrangement of notes is, in the big picture, again random and meaningless, and in no way related to the content or intent of the song.

"And don't ask me for an example of High Art, Orphic Art or Objective Art as it's sometimes called, because on the level of your perception, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. That *difference* is that Objective Art supports and strengthens the bonds between the human and the divine; and like true meditation, it serves to realign inner chaos with the perfect clarity of the Cosmic Mind. One does not create Objective Art by accident. It is intentional and doesn't yield jackasses carrying mayonnaise on any level of transposition. But that is precisely what you will continue to *create* and will be the only sort of thing you'll be *able* to create as long you remain mired, like a jackass yourself, in the murky levels

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of awareness that breed the desire for success. Failure is far more useful to the soul than success. Now go away.”

But that didn’t stop me. It didn’t even slow me down.

Nor did my mother’s cautionary words.

“You know, dear, you’re getting more difficult to reach,” she said on one of the rare mornings when she came through. “I wouldn’t want you to think I’m taking any less interest in you, but you’re always so... well, it’s what you euphemistically call *busy*, but it’s what we call *lost*.” I wondered who she meant by *we* but didn’t ask. “And I hope that doesn’t sound cruel, dear, but you are neglecting your nourishment, and you know how important...”

“Nourishment? What do you mean?” I asked.

“You probably think of it as meditation, but I call it nourishment, and in your case, *breakfast*. It’s feeding, dear; your morning feeding. On light. Without that nourishment, you remain at the mercy of”

“Mother?” I asked. “Mother?”

But she seemed to be gone. Or more likely, I was. What she said was true. During my first years in the business of producing art, my morning meditations suffered more and more intrusions of thoughts and feelings from my everyday concerns—either artistic or commercial. Whereas in my days under Goldberg’s direct tutelage and the first months following, I rigorously maintained a ninety minute daily bath in the white light I’d been taught to envision. During these periods of unclouded serenity, I’d learned to welcome any renegade modifications of my thinking principle (stray thoughts, we non-yogis would say) that chose to intrude with such good heartedness that after poking their little noses in around momentarily and finding nothing but empty space, they naturally backed off, leaving me free to receive whatever blessings I could. But as my art making business became more and more important to me, my will to meditate slackened. And when I encountered problems, I couldn’t keep myself from engaging them, wrestling with them, trying to wrest a *solution* out of them, to achieve exactly what Goldberg’s Ghost had proscribed: *success*.

This change in the nature of my morning routine came about gradually, of course. There were days when I felt the call of my training so fully that I reverted to my better habits, but those days became less and less frequent, and by the time two years had

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passed and I'd completed "Orbits," my practice and my state of mind had woefully degenerated. I did still recite my litany of resolutions after waking up every day, but those alone, without the discipline and nourishment of meditation, left me feeling again like I was dressed in spiritual clothes far too big for me, I was swimming in them—but unlike earlier, when I had similar feelings while isolated, I was now fully engaged with the world. *Engaged*, however, only begins to describe my relation with the world and others: entangled is a better word.

Despite all this, it had become an established fact in my mind that I would live to be a-hundred-and-fifty, and the corresponding changes in my life showed no signs of disappearing. I was no longer the same kind of being as everyone else around me. I'd become a different animal; but in my own estimation, a more encumbered animal than those with whom I lived; more encumbered, more stressed and often less companionable—maybe like that jackass: forced to carry a wicker basket of heavy jars of mayonnaise and hard steel engraver's tools in my mouth while dragging a wedding dress from my right rear leg, a dress that was weighed down with muck and mire. Maybe that was *me*.

My father expressed his concerns in his own unique way. His peace of mind was of the greatest importance to me. I felt I owed him eternal gratitude. The joy he expressed when he learned the secrets of my life was a deep source of happiness to me, and it was my intent to keep his joy untarnished. In order to do this, however, I tested my limits under the Rule of Honesty to the utmost. I couldn't lie to him about my degraded state, but I could avoid mentioning it.

We were sitting on the sky blue sofa I'd added to the furnishings of my studio. It was close to the windows facing back into the room so that the mobiles hanging from the ceiling joists could be seen in full light. "Orbits" had been in stores across the country for a month and was selling even better than "Swoop" had done at its best. It had been offered in a variety of color schemes, but all variations on the original. Despite my battered psyche and the disparaging words of Goldberg's Ghost, a stock model of "Orbits," which hung in the studio still looked and sounded resplendent to me. In it, the comma shaped plates were all in hues

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of green and blue. Apparently it looked and sounded resplendent to my father as well.

He'd just arrived at the studio. He was holding the cup of peppermint tea I'd brewed for him in both hands to warm them. It was a cold and snowy winter day, but the big room was warm and steamy and at its optimum brightest. Birdie, knowing as she always did when my father and I wanted to talk privately, was watching game shows on television in the little living room of the apartment; a place she'd made cozier and cozier over the last years until it was positively homey—even a little frilly.

"I could watch and listen to this for the rest of my days," he said, glancing up. "You have outdone yourself, my boy." His expression was bright but I knew something was on his mind.

"One's life is one's own to know," he said, "and given your own extraordinary circumstances, yours is even more inscrutable than that of the average man. But if this," and here he pointed to "Orbits," which just played something sounding particularly dreamy, "if this is an accurate reflection of your inner life, it would seem that it's noble and fruitful..."

He looked from me to the mobile and back to me again. The mobile was far more attractive than my inner life.

"It's often said that the eyes are the windows to the soul," he went on, taking a sip of his tea from one of my sky blue mugs. "But I have never seen a soul through another's eyes. I need a more heartfelt indicator to know a soul. I rely upon the smile; and yours has enchanted me for nearly twenty-four years now. There are times when you needn't say a word to me, my boy, because I understand the vocabulary of your smiles. There are joyful smiles, serene smiles, mirthful smiles, comic smiles, contented smiles, ironic smiles, melancholy smiles and many more, but the most telling are always the *intentional* smiles; and by this I don't mean insincere, though some might choose to use that word. Your *intentional* smiles are sincere, but not regarding that matter at hand. They are sincere in their intent to please, to please *despite* the matter at hand. And I've seen many of those in recent months, Jason; and though I appreciate the sentiment, I'm concerned nonetheless. Because such smiles reveal a great deal to one who knows how to read them. And I've been reading smiles for many years, so I've become an expert of sorts. I've seen intentional smiles that reveal

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hidden sadness, hidden loss, hidden worry, hidden fear or torment; and each has a different nuance, a minutely different set to the lips, cheeks and eyes.

“And do you know what I’ve seen in your smile, Jason? Your smile that reflects all of your most recent accomplishments?” My father reached over and touched my shoulder in the gentlest of gestures. “Shame,” he said kindly. “Shame.”

§

Two-and-a-half years later, the morning after my twenty-sixth birthday, I climbed into the new Toyota I’d bought for myself and set off for rural Iowa. The new car wasn’t a luxury model, but was a considerable upgrade over my first, the bare bones but ever-reliable one my father had given me when I first went off to college. Margo and Birdie had planned a birthday party for me the previous evening, and having drunk more than my share of Champagne, I was a little hung over as I drove due west from Chicago.

It had been several years since I’d seen the image of that man who’d first followed me down the railroad tracks at the end of my college days, “my shadow,” as I still called it. I always noticed when there was an old black sedan in my rearview mirror, and I’d had a number of scares. Some of these alarms turned out to be false, some unsubstantiated, but as the years passed, the memory of this huge, looming man with animal eyes became more and more frightening to me—insubstantial shadow or not. I still never said a word about it.

The years since the “Orbits” appeared in museum stores across the country had not been good to me, or perhaps I should say I hadn’t been good to them. To all appearances, I was thriving, and Mason and Margo were as well, but in their case, genuinely so. They were no longer homeless. They had rented a modest apartment close to The Ship and had saved enough money for a down payment on a very small house in the city several miles further west. They were planning to buy the house soon. They had remained clean and sober since they’d begun to work for me, and credited my influence as their saving grace. I credited their own strength of character for that accomplishment, and I’d occasionally tried to dispel the notion that

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I had anything to do with it, but eventually decided not to meddle in their success—*success*, in their case, being the real thing.

The two of them were aware that I was struggling during this period, but I managed to conceal from them the fact that I was *losing* the struggle. I felt right in doing this. My single source of untainted happiness as I drove away from the city that day in late May was that I'd given Mason and Margo the opportunity to thrive. Had they believed that I was failing in a struggle not unlike their own, they might have lost some of the momentum in theirs: and they needed to maintain themselves on a daily basis.

After "Orbits" there had been "Cloud Song" by far the greatest commercial success of the three musical mobiles I produced during that five year period. Composed of long, graceful, horizontal wisp-like plates, some straight, some curling upward at one end or the other, some curling downward in a similar way, they were meant to represent cirrus clouds. The arrangement and selection of the chimes, however, differed from my other mobiles in that it contained the notes from the opening phrase of the famous and beautiful Joni Mitchell song "Clouds," and on occasion played those notes in the same order they occur in in the song. But only on occasion, and rarely, if ever, in tempo. The possibility existed, of course, of an exact rendering of the song's opening. I'd meant to consult a mathematician to calculate the odds but I never got around to it. It had to be one in millions and millions; but fragments of the melody did occur with enough frequency to give the mobile an extraordinary quality—extraordinary enough to compel me to pay Ms. Mitchell small but not negligible royalties on the sales.

The success of "Cloud Song" created a sensation. It isn't difficult to design a rudimentary set of chimes and moving plates that plays a succession of notes when powered by currents of air. It is also easy to control the frequency of the sounding of the individual notes. All this considered, quite a number of copy-cat rudimentary mobiles were manufactured. In itself, there's nothing inherently beautiful about the physical design of such a *wind* instruments or "tunemobiles," as they were popularly called. It takes an artist's gift to make a musical mobile. But once the possibility of a device that could play *around* a song, *fragments* of a song, and even at times an approximation of the *song itself* became widely known, a frenzy of commercial production began.

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There were songs for every taste. Soon bits of “God Bless America” were being heard on mass-produced tunemobiles in various permutations in patriotic living rooms and kitchens; “Stand by Your Man” was being sounded in fragments and in full wherever rural mind-sets flourished; “American Pie” and “Imagine” were drifting through the airwaves in the homes of aging Baby-Boomers; and Classic Rock, R&B, Motown and Latin favorites were glutting the indoor wind currents with the tinkly tones of chimes. Before long, small table model tunemobiles equipped with built-in, silent fans were on the market. The musical quality of these bizarre products was predictably tinny, but my own name, as the so-called *inventor* of the musical mobile popped up in newspapers, magazines and talk shows with disturbing frequency when the fad reached its peak in 1994.

I tried to ignore this whacko popular explosion, and when I couldn’t, I tried to see the best in it, whether the song fragments I heard in the hardware store and carwash accorded with my taste or not. After all, people were being pleased, and when people are pleased they are less likely to kill each other or otherwise express negative or destructive emotions they may have been harboring. Somewhat more bizarre were the Tunemobile Vigils that were informally and formally organized across the country. These were supposedly group *meditations*, which were really nothing more than group *silences* coupled with various degrees of group *hoping* that a complete fragment of... say, “Silent Night” would sound on a “Silent Night” Tunemobile. Specialized “Jumbo” Tunemobiles were utilized for the larger of these gatherings; tunemobiles the size of large cars, often in huge facilities, which lasted hours and sometimes days, and always took on the character of the awaited song: either patriotic, religious, political, sentimental, sensual, frenetic or ironic.

Some were even televised. I happened to catch the end of a politically conservative Tunemobile *Rally*, as the sponsors chose to call it, in which the zealous crowd in an indoor sports arena awaited the spontaneous chiming of the opening bars of “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” In hopes of inducing the huge revolving contraption to fulfill the crowd’s wishes, a brass band was on hand to prompt it by blaring out those first bars of “Be kind to your fine feathered friends...” every five minutes or so. I couldn’t help but

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make the connection. On another occasion, Margo called to alert me to a locally televised Tunemobile Fest at a prestigious university, where the post-modern crowd booed when any familiar sounding progression of notes was heard and applauded only when the musical offering sounded entirely random. Cases of muscle cramps, dizziness and dehydration were reported frequently at many of these long, still vigils; and of course at some, drug use was common and abuse predictable.

Again, I did my best to react to these events, nationwide and, indeed, international, with my best, most welcoming inner smile. As far as I knew—which Goldberg’s Ghost reminded me in no uncertain terms, wasn’t much—the music of the Tunemobiles was ineffectual and the vigils made no particular stir in the rarefied ethers. But of course, I wasn’t sure.

As the Tunemobile craze spread across the country and world, however, sales of my own truly musical mobiles decreased. Those potential customers whose interest in art hinged on the ownership of something unique, something that set them apart from the masses, simply stopped buying my work, which, due to these circumstances for which I was in part responsible, became associated with poor taste and crass commercialism. My art making business didn’t seem in danger of failing, nor was there any need to lay off Mason and Margo or reduce their hours; core sales to true art lovers held steady, but it didn’t seem advisable to any of us that I introduce a fourth mobile to the market at this unsettled time. This was far more upsetting to me than anyone knew, with the exception of my father, perhaps.

As unsettling as the creation of art could be, it was preferable to the prolonged routine of daily production, which had taken on a hellish aspect for me, the *Plexippus Principle* assuring the exaggerated intensity of my low points. True, this work paid my rent, bought my groceries and other necessities. And it did so for my friends as well, but without some greater purpose attached, some elevating vision, this didn’t seem a life I was cut out for, particularly in light of my *expanded moments*, which were now so packed full of tedious, humdrum repetition that I felt I’d be crushed. My father had taught me early on that boredom is a failure of mind, not of opportunity, but this knowledge only made me more irritated with my failure. Or as my father understood: more ashamed of myself.

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Despite my daily resolutions, there were many mornings when I skimmed through them and considered simply staying in bed.

So as I drove west toward the Iowa border, I was discouraged and confused. It had occurred to me more than once that I'd run steadily downhill since I stopped my daily visits with the Yogi from Skokie. At one point, I tried to convince myself that it wasn't Goldberg who continued to visit me disembodied. I even tried calling him on the phone to ask for some brush-up sessions. The rebuff I received on his answering machine was so harsh, however, that I was certain he'd been expecting my call. It wasn't the prerecorded words, "slacker," "sluggard," and "lout" that convinced me of this; it was his direct accusation of "artistic hooliganism" that made me realize the message was made for me.

And I was so sorry about it all: my lack of resolve, my lack of honesty, my degraded state. That's why I was driving west to Iowa. I needed to be recharged, and I knew only one place to do that. Once I came to that place on the highway again, I planned to drive off the road.

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It was the previous evening, a Sunday. I was having birthday dinner with my father, Birdie, Mason and Margo on Hawthorn Street. Since the original dining room of the old house had been converted to my father's library-study years earlier, dinner was served in the former sun porch, a large room with three walls of windows—and it was balmy enough for most of these to be open, letting the fragrance of lilacs that grew in nearly every yard on the street waft in. Without divulging my true purpose, I had told everyone I was planning a drive in the country the next day. Euripides had chimed in as soon as I began to speak: "*Here today, gone tomorrow*," sounding, as he often did, as if he understood the context of conversations.

When Birdie first came to work for my father, she accepted Euripides' outbursts indulgently, but once she attained the status of mistress of the house, she let her true feelings show. She made the mistake of repeatedly shouting "Oh, shut up!" at the parrot's remarks, not realizing that "*Oh, shut up!*" would soon become part of his repertoire. It took several years to cure the bird of this habit, though it was never entirely eradicated, nor was it ever explained

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how it was that after this command, Euripides frequently added "*Fatso!*" (Who on earth?) On the evening of my birthday party, he repeated "*Here today gone tomorrow*" several times, and when Birdie finally shushed him and asked me where in the country I was going, I answered, "West."

"I miss Iowa," I'd said. "Right now. When it's just burst out, when it's so green and lush."

My father, of course, knew what Iowa meant. "I hope it meets your expectations," he said.

"He's always telling me he doesn't have expectations," Mason said, winking at Margo, then at Birdie, who never knew quite how to take him. He'd so lavishly praised her chilled cucumber soup and lightly curried chicken salad this evening, however, that she was putty in his hands. And she'd just served dessert, served it elegantly, on the round, intricately inlaid maple table I'd given her the previous Christmas.

"You mean because the road to Hell is paved with good intentions?" Birdie asked Mason.

"*The road to Hell paved! The road to Hell is paved!*" called Euripides from the library.

"Now how would you know anything about the road to Hell, Birdie?" Mason asked.

"Never underestimate such a strong woman, Mason," my father interjected. "She shows no signs of wear. You never know where she might have been. She only came into our lives when she was thirty, didn't you, dear."

I still found it disconcerting when my father called Birdie "dear." He said it the same way my mother did when she spoke to me. But Birdie was too flattered to answer. Margo answered for her. "And I understand there's no telling how you two men got along before that. In this big ol' house. Things were what...? Topsy-turvy?"

"I remember sliding down the banisters," I said smacking my lips after tasting Birdie's Linzer torte.

"I couldn't stop that, Jason," Birdie exclaimed. "And your father here was as much of a rascal as you. You've still got that little scar, and once your hairline recedes, it'll be there for everyone to see. And it's started to thin. Bald by thirty?" she asked, looking around at everyone. "If he doesn't slow himself down?"

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Whether she intended it or not, there was a more serious note to this question than had previously sounded that evening.

“That’s what I’m going to be thinking about in the lush green countryside of Iowa,” I said. Since this was a partial truth, I was able to smile at Birdie. “And this is great,” I said of her pastry; this, a whole truth. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

Everyone concurred. Birdy knew how to accept complements gracefully, but that didn’t mask her concern. I tried to reassure her.

“I’m going to confer with the Corn Field Gods of Iowa about mending my ambitious ways.”

“Uh oh!” said Mason. “He becomes a Buddhist monk and we’re out of our jobs.”

“I doubt that,” I said, shaking my head. “You can *have* mine.”

I didn’t know quite what I meant by that. I was sincere, however, even though I didn’t feel my job was worth much anymore, not since the Tunemobile craze struck. Margo read my mind.

“Oh, your Ship will sail again, Jason. It’ll rise like a Phoenix from the ashes of the tinkle-toons. We’ll keep rowing until it does... Does that make any sense?”

“Metaphors may be mixed at this table, my dear,” my father said, smiling at Margo, as he always did. She was nearly of his generation but he always acted fatherly toward her, protectively, which Margo, a cum laude graduate of the school of hard knocks, particularly appreciated.

“So you’ve finally come around?” Mason asked me. But when I looked at him curiously, he stared for a moment and cast his eyes down. A signal I knew. Margo was very good at covering for him. She looked around at us all.

“Mason’s been after him to let up on the gas for years now, haven’t you, babe?” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. Everyone at the table knew that Mason lost his bearings every now and then; he knew we knew, and we also all knew how kindly Margo rescued him.

“Yeah, man,” he said. “You don’t want to end up like me.”

Margo and I laughed at this; my father and Birdie knew it was meant in jest but couldn’t laugh. They were just ten years older

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than my classic hippie friends, but those years crossed a great natural divide between the 1950's and the 1960's. They'd always laugh at different things.

"Actually, I'd love to end up like you," I said to Mason. If it hadn't been for my father and Birdie, I'm sure he would have embarrassed me by telling me to give him a break, to lose the pretense, but he didn't and I that's what I expected. And I didn't push it. But I had to say something. So I just opened my mouth.

"I'd like to formally declare here on my birthday—being among good friends and family—that I am looking to bring my life back into balance." At this I raised my Champagne glass. I was already a little drunk. "And that I have all of you to thank for pointing me back in the right direction."

Everyone raised their glasses at this, and more toasts followed.

"*The road to Hell is paved!*" Euripides excitedly added from the library.

"I can't remember the rest of the lyrics, babe," Margo said to me, "and you already know how bad I sing, but in the words of the great lady Joan Baez: 'Forever Young. May you stay forever young!'" At this all glasses were raised again (along with my father's eyebrows, but only slightly, and only to me.)

"No, you don't want that!" Birdie chimed in, with a little laugh. "Maybe old in a young body, or young at heart. But young's no way for a respectable person to be... or an unconventional person, that fits better for you and your dad. Stay that way. Old but vigorous!" at which she raised her Champagne glass to me, and again my father raised his eyebrows. With the exception of Mason and Margo—who always drank a lot—the rest of us had already put away more than usual. The stress I'd been feeling on a daily basis had melted away. The gentle lilac breeze continued to waft through the open windows

After a few moments of silent appreciation for the harmony of sweet raspberry jam with a buttery walnut crust, my father tapped his teaspoon on his wine glass and began a series of toasts. Everyone praised me; everyone except Euripides who repeated "Dead men tell no tales" among the "Here! Here's!" and claps on my shoulder.

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I couldn't quite quell my tears at all the attention, or my thirst for Champagne, which went down easier by the glass. The festivities were nearly over before I realized that no toasts had been made to Anita's memory at my birthday party. I rarely thought of Anita anymore. That may have been my greatest loss. I fell asleep in my old bedroom that night, my head swimming. It wasn't until noon the next day, once I'd crossed over the border into Iowa, that my head began to clear.

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I realized my tank was nearly empty just as a Shell station came into view in the small town of Averno, Iowa. I needed more coffee too. Rural Iowa gas station coffee probably wasn't going to do it for me, and after filling up and cleaning my windshield, a glance and sniff at the coffee pots inside confirmed my expectations. But there was a café across the street. The word was painted on the big glass window in front, that word alone. There was even an accent mark over the E. Iowa, of course, is home to a many very literate people. That state produces bumper crops of good writers. Actually, there are said to be silos full of them, so there was no good reason for my surprise at the accented E.

The café's big front window was steamed up: a good sign on a snowy day but not necessarily so on a beautiful day in the end of May. If it was too hot in there, I'd get my coffee to go, but on the whole, I loved sitting in small farm town cafes. I liked listening to the locals talk. I remembered that Anita and I used to drive out to

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rural cafés together just to eaves-drop on conversations—conversations about milk prices, swap meets, combines and manure spreaders, but often about matters exotically unknown. I felt a tinge of sadness as I opened the steamed-up café door, but before it swung shut behind me, I realized that this was no rural café I'd walked into. Everyone turned to look at me, but it was a young woman who walked up, took both my hands, looked me in the eye and embraced me. She had a subtly unpleasant odor.

"I knew you'd come!" she said, her face close to mine.

"Excuse me!" I exclaimed, pushing her off. "You knew? Who knew...? What...?"

But then at second glance at her clothes, things began to come clear.

"You didn't recognize me?" she asked.

"Recognize you? What is this?"

"It's just me, babe, Anita."

"No! You aren't Anita! You look a *little* like her... but no! No-o!" I backed away. She certainly didn't smell like Anita.

The woman put a hand on her hip in a half aggressive, half seductive pose. "Anita," she said. "That's me."

I glanced around the room. There was an older woman sitting at the table in the back of the room. She was smiling broadly at me. That woman looked something like my mother. I felt sick. Then I looked back at the woman who had greeted me so affectionately. There was no way she could be mistaken for Anita. Her eyes were the right color but her skin and hair were course; she was about Anita's height but didn't have the hands or arms of a welder. And there was something crude about her manners.

"So?" I said to her. "Why are you impersonating Anita?"

"Well, listen to you, fancy Dan. I don't call this an impersonation. I'm an actress. I'm *playing* Anita. I'm acting."

"No!" I protested. "That's ridiculous! Why would you be *playing* Anita? And if you don't mind my saying so, you're not convincing at all."

And if I wasn't already disgusted enough by this imposter, what she did then completely repelled me. She spat. On the floor. She spat like a baseball player, informally, as if it were an habitual gesture. Not tobacco juice, not that I could see, just spittle—on the floor. Then she did it again.

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"I been hired to play Anita, mister, and I'm sorry if you find my person so offensive. I've done a lot of modeling and I've been told I've got a classic bone structure."

At this she turned her face into the light. There was nothing classic about her bone structure. She had a ski-slope nose. She was Anita's age and wore coveralls over a threadbare tee-shirt and work boots, but that's where the resemblance stopped. Her hair looked dirty to me. That, however, was a trivial detail among the observations I made at that moment.

The older woman who vaguely resembled my mother, still sitting at the table—she spat as well. Again routinely, like a ball player. I noticed that a man at a table close to her also spat on the floor, and then someone in a far corner; and a flood of impressions entered my mind, convincing me that I'd again driven off the road, but apparently the wrong road. This was not a rural Iowan café that served hot turkey sandwiches on white bread with mashed potatoes smothered in yellow gravy. This was a coffee house. Its layout was similar to but not identical with the coffee house where I'd seen the real version of Anita. There were no books in this coffee house, but just as in "The Golden Fleece," there was a counter with several canisters of coffee and a display of pastries; in this case, however, the offerings were Hostess "Twinkies," Ho-Ho's" and little, chocolate covered doughnuts, unwrapped and so stale they were dusty. As in the Shell station across the street, a bitter burnt smell issued from the coffee canisters, but unlike that gas station, which met conventional sanitary standards, the coffee mugs piled for use on the counter here were stained with coffee drips, lipstick, something dark green, and caked with a granular substance. Behind that counter sat a man; a counterman, I suppose he'd be called, but dressed in a dirty apron and a rumpled white hat with blood stains on it, and who, despite activity around him, was not only fast asleep but drooling slightly from the right side of his mouth. Above him a blackboard on the wall listed the prices of the Hostess products and read: "THE GLUDEN FLOOSE" and below that: "Member of the BIG PICTURE family of establishments."

"***THE GLUDEN FLOOSE?*** I was thinking. What *the hell* is this?"

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And the atmosphere of the place *was* distinctly infernal. It was not only hot and steamy in there but all the dim lights had a reddish tint to them. As in “The Golden Fleece,” the tables were all full, again with individuals varying widely in dress and appearance, but here, all of them seedy, slovenly or sinister. The two characters I saw wearing turbans looked particularly diabolical to me. One’s turban was sweat-stained and partly unraveled, one was missing his entire lower lip, and both had deeply furrowed faces, angry mouths and dangerously piercing eyes. The man at the next table wore a feathered headdress, and judging from the wildly disturbed look on his face and the words he hurled at the empty chair across from him, he appeared to be in the throes of a powerful hallucinogenic drug. Other patrons were less threatening, some more so.

There were a number of exceptionally depressed looking clowns. One of these, a severely depressed female clown, spat on the floor routinely, like the actress portraying Anita and the one whom I believed was impersonating my mother. This female clown appeared to have only one tooth. One of the male clowns at her table was so emaciated his skeleton stood out clearly beneath his sagging skin. He carried a partially deflated helium balloon, its string hung slack as the balloon hovered just above his shoulder. There were also several giants in “The Gluden Floose,” one of whom, whose garb looked Attic, had only one eye on his brawny forehead, and may have been Polyphemus, the original Cyclops—the offspring of Poseidon and the terrible Medusa—the Cyclops whom Odysseus encountered in the Odyssey. His eye was glazed over, however, and he looked more demented than threatening like the other two giants, who were asleep.

There was one giantess at another table sitting by herself, though perhaps she was more of an ogress than a giantess, judging by her classically grotesque features. She also happened to be topless, exposing six... well, in her case what probably should be called *teats*. At another table I saw two very unhealthy looking, wrinkled old women who were dressed scantily and whose gaunt faces were painted like prostitutes. There were a number of severely disfigured patrons in the place as well: one in particular caught my eye. This one, of indeterminate gender, had no face, only scar tissue on which he or she had drawn a hideous smiley face in red lipstick and topped it with a curly blond wig. There were also a

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two men in antique military uniforms, both seemed remarkably irresolute, perhaps because that they were seated at a table with two authentic looking, hideously squawking Harpies: these with grotesque female faces, drooping female breasts, dirty looking bird wings and powerful, forbidding talons.

No one seated near the table with the harpies paid them any heed though; apparently the cruel beasts were satisfied carping at the military men, who appeared to be officers. Though these evil bird-women held my attention at first, I couldn't help noticing the woman who seemed to be the only waitress; a woman who held a tray of full coffee cups above her head, a tray of hot coffee that sloshed and spilled on every patron as she lurched by. But it wasn't her brash manner of making her way through the room or the yelps of the scalded customers that initially caught my attention: it was her hair. At first glance, she appeared to have dreadlocks, but I soon saw that the gleaming ivory baubles that decorated the ends of these locks were in fact fangs, the fangs of living serpents that sprouted from her head in the place of hair. Apparently Polyphemus liked to frequent the coffee house where his mother worked, because this was undoubtedly the terrible Medusa herself, who, I remembered, not only had snakes for hair, but had a gaze, that when met, turned the beholder into stone. And I did notice that unlike in most crowded restaurants, none of the patrons were trying to catch this particular waitress' eye; in fact, they appeared to diligently avoid it. And she was headed in my direction.

"You don't wanna look at her, sweetheart," the actress portraying Anita said to me, as she took my hand and led me towards the back of the room. "Let's go talk to your mom."

As the actress and I walked toward "my mother's" table, Medusa careened close enough to splatter some very hot coffee on my neck. My yelp was sharper and more prolonged than the others I'd heard; I supposed they'd grown accustomed to being scalded, or were thicker skinned, or... well, there were any number of possibilities since I hadn't yet established *where* I was, if positional adverbs applied there, that is. In any case, I'd already realized that I wasn't likely to run into Lord Poseidon in a place like this, despite his daughter Medusa's presence—more likely I'd encounter Hades, brother of Poseidon and Zeus, who bore the same name as the place he ruled.

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I soon saw that the actress waiting at the table didn't resemble my mother any more than the other one resembled Anita, particularly since she was missing one of her upper front teeth. (Perhaps she'd given it to that severely depressed clown.) Only someone with poor vision, perhaps even legally blind, could mistake this woman for the real thing.

"Hello, dear," she said with what sounded like genuine feeling as she stood up to greet me. But then, apparently unable to restrain herself, she spat, though somewhat discretely. I didn't let the woman embrace me as she was attempting to do. I backed away.

"So you're an actress too?" I asked, glancing down at the wet spot on the floor next to her and not trying to mask my irritation and disgust.

"You don't recognize your own mother?" she asked.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, stop it!" I said. "Who hired you? And what are your names. Your real names?"

The actress impersonating Anita was trying to coax me into a chair; her hand was on my arm and she was tugging. My impulse was to slap it off, but then I thought better of it. There was no need to be rude.

It was she, the Anita impersonator, who looked at the other, older woman then and shrugged. "He ain't fallin' for it," she said, frowning.

"No." I interjected, deciding I might as well sit down. "I'm not falling for it. So don't bother with this... this pathetic charade! I don't want to be here, wherever it is that I am, so I'd appreciate it if you told me what's going on. And guess I'm sorry if I've been impolite."

"Well ain't you the sweetheart?" the younger one said as she sat down next to me and put her arm around my shoulder, which didn't exactly make my skin crawl, but close enough.

"I'm sorry," I said, moving away, "but I'd really appreciate it if you didn't do that...or that..." I added as she turned her head and spat behind her chair. "What's with the spitting, anyway?"

"Harmless habit, mister," she said, sounding a little miffed, though I saw that even though she wanted to spit on the floor again, she restrained herself.

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“Okay,” I said, trying to sound conciliatory. “First things first. What’s your name?”

“My name’s Anita, mister. That’s the truth. That’s one of the reasons they hired me.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No. My mama named me Anita. I’d tell you my last name, but that’s not allowed.”

Not allowed? This detail impressed me as too absurd to even address. “And I suppose your name’s Emily like my real mother... Or maybe not. Maybe you were chosen to play her part because your name is ‘Mother’?”

“You don’t need to get huffy about it, Jason. If that’s *your* real name...” I nodded. “And yeah, my name’s Emily,” she went on. “That’s the way they hire. Don’t I look like her at all?”

She didn’t. My mother was an elegant, raven haired beauty with features off a statue of a Greek goddess. This actress Emily’s hair had been dyed black; I could see the lighter roots, and her face was not statuesque. She looked like she’d had a very hard life, perhaps on the streets. But I wasn’t about to tell her how disagreeable she looked. And I didn’t know what she knew about my mother’s actual appearance. “Well,” I said, “she is a very pretty woman and you look something like her, but you didn’t expect to fool her own son, did you?”

“I was told that the party was deceased,” she answered by way of explanation. “Hey, you want some coffee?”

“From her?” I asked in alarm, pointing back over my shoulder to where I heard yelps that indicated Medusa’s presence. “I don’t want coffee from *her*. I don’t want anything from her. Who would? She’s a monster. Do you know who that is? Or is she an actress too?”

“I wouldn’t know who she is,” Emily said. “Just that she’s one nasty bitch. She’s got a look that kills.”

“Has anyone ever looked in her eyes?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t know, mister, but what I had in mind was *my* getting’ you a cup. She’s none a’ my business.”

“Beeswax,” said Anita, at which they both giggled.

“Private joke,” Emily said.

I didn’t roll my eyes, but as I thanked her and asked if she’d please wipe off the cup she used, I looked deeply into hers. As I

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suspected, there wasn't much there, all I saw was my own image reflected back to me. And I couldn't help noticing, however, that my gaze had no effect on her. If she'd been a pizza customer, she would have stiffed me.

It was then that I realized that ever since the door of this dismal place slammed shut behind me, my moment had shrunk back down to its pre-resolution size and quality. Ordinarily, this would have interested if not alarmed me, but as things stood, I didn't care, because I'd just noticed that the door through which I'd entered had been barred by several heavy beams, not unlike the beam once used to secure my place of residence. Along with these heavy bars, a heavy man was sitting on a stool next to the exit, a very heavy man, in fact, another of the giants, dressed like Heracles and wielding the limb of a small but sturdy tree. It appeared that for the moment, at least, I wasn't going anywhere.

Soon Emily returned with my coffee. "I had to use my blouse...to clean it like you said," she told me, showing me the brown stain on its lower hem. I didn't ask if she'd spit on it. But once I took a sip, I believed I knew what was at the root of the spitting problem.

"Oh, my good God! **WHY DIDN'T YOU WARN ME?**" I cried, not trying to mask my irritation. "This is the worst coffee I've ever tasted! The *worst*! How could you give this to me? How could you do this? Can you get me some water?"

Emily shook her head. "Sorry boss," she said. "No can do. No water here."

"That's impossible. How do they make the coffee without water?"

It was after I asked this question that I discovered a way in which "The Gluden Floose" resembled "The Golden Fleece"—though in form only, not content, because no sooner had my question left my lips than a terrible cacophony arose from a trumpet, a tuba, a piano and a snare drum. As before, in the incomparably better "member of "THE BIG PICTURE family of establishments," musicians played the opening bars of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" but so disastrously out of key and out of time that it was painful to the ears. Also painful to the ears and to the face, scalp, neck and any other exposed area, were the objects flung in my direction, including cups, spoons, Twinkies, Ho Ho's and rock hard

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little chocolate doughnuts. These were meant to hit me, but none did. Only Anita was hit, and she, fortunately, by a Ho Ho—just one, so I guess only a by Ho.

“I suppose I asked the wrong question,” I said, scraping my tongue off on my teeth, trying to rid myself of the taste in my mouth without the benefit of water. “Maybe a *stupid* question?”.....

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Emily answered, picking a few crumbs out of Anita’s hair. “I never seen that happen before.”

“Really? How long have you been here?” I asked.

Emily looked troubled at this question. “What exactly do you mean by that?” she asked.

With the taste of that coffee, that *worst possible coffee in the world* still lingering in my mouth, I had to no choice but to spit on the floor before answering her. I excused myself and then explained. “I mean how long have you had you’re the job of portraying my mother? How long have you been here?”

Emily looked at Anita. Now they both looked upset.

“Anita?” I asked. “What about you?”

Before she answered, I heard a scraping of chairs and series of yelps behind me. I took it that Medusa was back in my vicinity so I ducked and put my hands over my head. By the time I looked up, Anita was crying.

“We weren’t trained to answer any questions like that, mister,” Emily explained in Anita’s behalf.

“What does that mean?” I asked, irritated again, but before I went any further, I saw that both women had pitiful, trapped expressions on their faces, like animals being punished for something they didn’t understand. “Is there someone in charge here?” I asked.

This question too had a disturbing effect on them. “I’m your girlfriend, don’t you remember me, babe?” Anita said, pleadingly, as if she had a stake in my believing that was true. .

“I’m your *mother*,” Emily added desperately.

Whatever they were scared of scared me a little too. “Okay ladies,” I said. “I’m sorry. I... I guess I didn’t recognize you at first. It’s okay. And I’m sorry I shouted at you about the coffee. But it *is* the worst coffee I’ve ever tasted. It has an indescribably bad, permanent aftertaste. But maybe you were trained not to tell people about it.”

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Shockingly, they both looked relieved. I had to spit again, so I did, again excusing myself.

"You don't have to bother saying excuse me," Anita said kindly. "We all do it here. Can't help it."

"So everyone's drunk the...the coffee?" I whispered, afraid that it was the question about the coffee that brought on the terrible music and the barrage of Hostess products. But nothing happened. I could hear the sound of people spitting, however.

"Yeah, I guess everyone has," Anita answered. "We have."

I glanced around the room, dim as it was with its red-tinted light. Was this all a charade? Presented on my behalf? Were these women, these so-called actresses, real people? Did they have a history? Where were they before they played their parts? Unlike in my visit to "The Golden Fleece," here, in "The Gluden Floose" I could ask any questions I wanted, but whatever they actually were, Emily and Anita seemed troubled by questions about themselves. Even if they weren't real people, but only props of some sort, I didn't want to cause them any undue distress; I didn't want to hurt their feelings. I guess I couldn't subvert my father's kindness training, even here in "The Gluden Floose." Maybe I *had* learned something. But it seemed to me that there might be other questions that wouldn't upset them; that maybe I could get clues about the nature of the place I found myself in.

"Anita, Emily," I said, looking both in the eyes. "You're being very decent to me and I'd never try to upset you, but maybe you can help me out, because I'm confused." They both looked surprised at this, not a reaction I expected. "Can you tell me anything about this place?" I ventured, and then managed to curb my need to spit. I'd spit a little later, not immediately.

Anita, however, did spit. "It's against the rules," she said, as if there was nothing unusual about that. Emily nodded in agreement.

"Okay," I said before spitting. "Let's try this. Do you *know* anything about this place? There are giants here; there are those terrible bird-women at the table over there with the soldiers; there are those awful looking clowns; there's that horror of a waitress. I see a three-headed dog over there in the corner; I see a man with a bull's head right there; I see some terribly unhappy looking people here, one person dressed in a full suit of armor, who must be

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awfully hot, and... you know, all sorts of peculiar things. I'm not asking you to tell me *what* this is, just if you *know* or not."

They looked at each other, back at me, and then Emily nodded to Anita. "What's to know?" Anita asked, sounding disturbingly genuine. "The only thing that's *peculiar*, like you say, is you. There's no one else like *you* here."

Like me? I thought. And indeed, the *me* that was here felt different than the *me* who'd been in the presence of a god in "The Golden Fleece." Even so, I was hoping the older woman would have more to offer, but she only shrugged.

"Okay," I said, concluding that they in fact didn't know anything or wouldn't say. "That's fine, ladies. But you said there were rules. Did someone tell you what they were? Is there someone in charge here?"

At this both women froze with particularly distressed looks on their faces. And then, almost robotically, Anita smiled and said: "I knew you'd come! It's just me, babe, Anita..." which happened to have been the first words she spoke to me, precisely. And following immediately after Anita spoke, nearly cutting her off, Emily chimed in:

"Hello, dear. You don't remember your own mother?" Again, her first words repeated verbatim.

These women obviously had their limitations; one might say they revolved in very small orbits. They weren't going to be able to clarify things for me. If they hadn't shown what seemed genuine emotion, I couldn't have resisted teasing them. But now they seemed frightened—maybe they'd been forbidden to speak of whoever *was* in charge. So I just turned, faced the crowd and shouted: **"HEY! WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?"**

A hush fell over the room as the giant guarding the front door stood up and lumbered in my direction. All resemblance to the great Heracles vanished as he approached. This was not a hero carrying a stout limb of a tree; this was an oaf, a dolt. He towered over me and squinted down.

"You're gonna wanna follow me," he said in a voice so deep that sounded like muffled thunder. Then he placed an enormous hand on my shoulder, lifted me out of my chair and put down behind him. I felt no brutality in this gesture, only tremendous strength; he'd held me in the air as if I were a stuffed

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toy. And everyone in the place had watched. No one spit. Even Medusa had ceased bashing her way among the tables to see what the giant did with me; and she, along with all the others kept their eyes on me (in the case of Polyphemus, his eye) as I followed the club bearing brute to a door in the corner that I hadn't seen. The actresses portraying Anita and my mother hadn't said goodbye. When I glanced back across the room, I saw them looking at me, worried.

The word "MANAGER" was painted on the door in neat black letters, a surprisingly professional looking touch for such a wretchedly dismal place. Then the giant knocked on the door softly with his tree limb, this gesture, too, surprisingly genteel, when taking everything else into account. The voice that answered the knock was disturbing, however. It sounded like it was accompanied by a sneer.

The room was murky. The man seated behind the battered metal desk—which resembled a piece of used office furniture—looked somehow familiar. Perhaps it was the striking resemblance he bore to Poseidon, except for the sneer. With the slightest of nods, he dismissed the giant who had accompanied me into the office, and stood, extending his hand to me. He looked as tall as Poseidon, but was dressed in a black suit with a black silk shirt, open at the collar. There was a polished elegance to his demeanor.

"Hades, Lord of the Underworld," he said as I reached across his desk and shook his hand. "Glad to make your acquaintance. You can call me Pluto if you prefer," at which he smiled and pointed back over his shoulder with the thumb of his right hand, where, tacked on the wall with a thumb tack, was a black and white picture of Disney's Pluto, the cartoon dog with a big head and the slick, snake like tail. The picture appeared to be torn carelessly out of a newspaper. I noticed that when the Lord of the Underworld smiled, however, his sneer remained, as if it were permanent, and that there was something else disturbing in his face, though his fraternal resemblance to Poseidon had become even clearer.

"But not Satan, please," he continued. "I don't care for that. It feels disrespectful. *Satan* That refers to *Saturn*. And Saturn's what those dog-headed Romans called Cronus, my father. And

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there's bad blood there. So sit down... And I don't mind if you're speechless at first. Most mortals are."

And I was. Hades, Lord of the Underworld was the son of Titans Cronus and Rhea, in the same brood as sisters Hestia, Hera, Demeter, and of course brothers Zeus and Poseidon. When the three brothers divided up the universe after deposing their father, Zeus chose the earth and heavens, Poseidon the seas, and Hades was awarded the underworld, where, with his queen, Persephone—whom he had abducted from the world above—he ruled over the Kingdom of the Dead. But Hades, or Pluto, seemed a decent enough fellow at first blush, despite his perpetual sneer. He was the king of the underworld; not the Devil. He had no horns, no scales, no barbed tail, and seemed to have very good manners; this surprised me, thus my speechlessness.

"So," I finally said, "is this... Hades?"

"Gracious, no," said the Lord of the Dead. "This is where those souls condemned to Hades take their breaks. No one's sentenced to eternal damnation without intermittent relief. We have lawyers down here, too."

"So couldn't you serve better coffee?" I asked, surprised at my forwardness.

At this, the Lord of the Underworld burst into diabolical laughter which seemed perfectly fitting in the deep gloom of his office. Though like with his sneer, I didn't sense ridicule in his laugh; it just seemed his way of expressing himself.

"Better coffee!" he said. "That's a good one! You're the first to suggest that! But immutable laws rule here, I'm afraid, so even if I wished to serve better coffee, I couldn't. We do have ping pong and billiard tables, some electronic slot machines too, but you see, these folks are reaping what they've sown. It's like that cockamamie 'Karma' everyone's prattling on about these days. I don't care much for Eastern thought, though, do you? No one in my family does, except my sister, Demeter, maybe...you know she's also my mother-in-law and sister-in-law too?"

I did know that. Demeter was the Goddess of grain and the harvest, and with her husband—Zeus, her *brother*, and Hades' brother as well—she bore a beautiful daughter, Persephone, with whom Hades fell in love and wished to marry. Zeus, being of generous nature, consented to this marriage but Demeter did not.

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Hades, therefore, seized lovely Persephone as she was gathering flowers and carried her down to his realm. This caused quite a stir in the Olympic family. Demeter wandered the earth vainly search of her daughter and became so devastated at her loss that she neglected her duties, leaving the earth barren and desolate. But her husband and brother, Zeus, couldn't successfully rule a famine stricken world in which all vegetation had died, so he sent his messenger, winged-heeled Hermes, to negotiate with Hades and return Persephone to the surface. Hades agreed, but before he would let her go, he forced her to eat pomegranate seeds, at the time deemed The Food of the Dead. But Persephone would only eat three of them. Those three seeds, however, compelled her to visit Hades three months out of every year. Demeter was so joyous at her daughter's return that she caused the earth to burst forth with flowers and succulent fruit and a bounty of grain, but her godly joy had its limits, because during those three months every year when Persephone had to return to the underworld, Demeter mourned once again and barren winter came upon the earth.

So I knew the story of how Demeter was Hades' sister, mother-in-law and sister-in-law at the same time, but had no idea why she among the siblings had an interest in the Eastern religions. And I told that to my host.

"Beats me," he answered. "Maybe it comes from watching the cycle of seasons. Gives her a greater compassion for living things. Women, you know..." He looked at me quizzically. "So what do *you* think of Eastern thought? Sort of effeminate, don't you think?"

But I didn't answer. "Why am I here?" I asked.

Hades grinned, a facial feat, I thought, while still sneering, and he pounded on the wall to his right with his fist; and just as when I asked about the coffee earlier, the cacophonic rendition of "Be kind to your fine feathered friends..." began, brutalized my eardrums, and ended abruptly.

Hades looked at me, reading my mind. "I like that. It happens whenever I *wish*, or 'command' as they say out there. And I like to listen through the wall. So when you questioned how there could be coffee and no water here, I was just putting on a little show for you. Had nothing to do with the question..."

"A show? Like with those pathetic actresses?"

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“Those two? Clio and Chloe? They’re former nymphs—got into some kind of trouble with a weary traveler at a waterfall—but I thought they’d be more convincing than they were.”

“They claimed their names were really Anita and Emily.”

“That’s *acting*,” the Lord of Darkness proclaimed. “*Acting!* But to address your question: why are you here?” He went on, hesitantly. “Maybe not yet. I don’t get to mingle with the undamned very often, so let’s just talk.”

“So I’m not damned?”

“Well, that depends on you,” he answered, leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. He had been smiling through his sneer during much of our conversation up to that point, but no smile accompanied “That depends on you,” and I sensed that prodding him for further information would be a costly mistake. Informal and companionable as he’d been, this was a god, after all: one with a very bad reputation.

“So how would *you* judge your life?” he asked. “Not that there’s much credulity to that *Final Judgment* story those weepy Christians are always whining about. I’m just curious how it’s all seemed to you, because, as I said, I don’t often hear the other side of the story. And I care.”

I was surprised that he hadn’t been barraged with the other sides of stories for all eternity, with souls pleading their cases, but let that go. I was nervous about giving a self-assessment.

“I feel I’ve been blessed,” I began. This was sincere, though I worried that it didn’t sound that way. “I’ve been blessed but I think I’ve gotten off track. And I want to find my way back... to dedicate myself to... to the good of all living things.” I nearly gagged as I said this. It sounded absurdly pompous to me. “Trying to, at least,” I added. But I was still gagging. “I feel like I’ve screwed up, okay? That’s what I’m trying to say. And I don’t want to screw up any more. Which I think has something to do with why I’m here.”

Hades raised his eyebrows, a disconcerting gesture. “Of course, you know there are many ways to look at what you call ‘screwing up’—more generous ways and more severe ones,” he said, sneering as usual but not sounding at all malicious. “Some say that no matter what the consequences of a life, all human experience

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is a facet of the Universal Mind coming to know itself. What do you think about that?"

I wondered why he was he asking; wondered if there was a right and wrong answer, but responded nonetheless. "That's very generous," I said. "That's the way I'd like to be judged."

He nodded. "Of course," he answered his tone enigmatic.

He stared at me for a moment. I squirmed.

"But you haven't asked about my pictures," he said. "I can understand why. I keep it dark in here, and the pictures are in black and white. Over there on the wall."

I hadn't noticed the pictures in the gloom and I turned and leaned in their direction to look at them more closely. Hades, meanwhile, kept on talking, about himself.

"I love the underworld," he said. "The dark side of things. I know that some mortals believe I got the short end of the stick when it came to passing out realms. That's simply uninformed. There's a lot more here than dissatisfied dead people. This is the realm of dreams, of magic, of the deepest mysteries, and all the treasures of earth are in my purview. I love diamonds and gold, and rubies. Emeralds, silver too, all of it, actually. Dead people, yes. Dead ones who weren't deserving of any rewards, yes. But no more than, say...twenty percent of my time is spent keeping them unhappy, and they mostly take care of that themselves. Those immutable laws again. Can't beat 'em!"

"My famous brothers, you know, the Big Z, whom I'm not crazy about, and Posey who's probably my best friend—they've got terrible tempers, nasty streaks in their dispositions; wrath. But not me. They'd probably crack up down here; throw the whole system out of whack. It takes a good natured God to mete out punishment fairly. You've probably never thought of that, have you?"

I hadn't and I told him that. I didn't tell him, however, that I detected a certain tone of self-justification in his remarks, as if he believed he needed to defend his position. But then I realized he could read my mind.

"Typical mortal reaction," he said. "Perfectly okay. I'm not judgmental. The immutable laws take care of that too."

It seemed he relied on "The Immutable Laws" for quite a bit. The Lord of the Underworld paused. "So... Any questions?"

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Visitors are free to ask questions, not like in my brother's shop. It's bad coffee here, but all the questions you like."

The broadest possible smile yet crossed his perpetually sneering face.

"Are you still in love with Persephone after all these millennia?" I asked, apparently feeling enough at ease to make such a personal inquiry.

"I am. Have you ever seen her? She's exotic even by my standards." At this, Hades winked at me. I tried to shake off the effect. "And the arrangement's ideal. With the divorce rate what it is, it's beyond me why you mortals don't give it a go. Three months out of every twelve? I've tried suggesting it to the Judeo-Christian big wigs, but coming from me...a pagan, and *this particular pagan*... Hah! I might as well have suggested goat worship..."

"So what else have you been wondering about?" Poseidon's brother asked, seeming like he wanted to continue the conversation. I wasn't brimming with questions; maybe it was the gloom, but I managed to dig one up. "Is it true about the fire? The eternal fires of Hell?"

"Hell is what you make it, Jason. Of course there's fire. Lots of mortals fear fire, and it's picturesque. It would be hard to depict crippling shame or humiliation. Fire's colorful. I've actually endorsed it. It's a legally registered trademark. *The Fires of Hell*? You don't see your fast-food chains using it, do you? Or your Funeral Homes?"

"You're kidding me," I said, feeling a little too at ease, it seemed.

"Only a little. Trademark. Archetype. Same sort of thing."

"What about the pain?" I asked. "The agony? The *perpetual* pain of burning in the fires of Hell? Isn't that a bit much? Overkill, maybe?" I felt like I was talking to my college roommate.

"All I'll say about that is be careful how you think about the word *perpetual*. It pertains to another dimension. I'd drop it, if I were you—do yourself a favor. And besides, don't you want to look at my picture gallery? I'm sure you'll have some questions."

From where I was sitting, I could make nothing out of the black and white pictures on the shadowy wall to my right. It was only when I walked over to look closely that I was shocked. There were several pictures of each of my three mass produced musical

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mobiles, pictures of them from different angles. But in and about each mobile, viewed from every angle, was a kind of shadow image, partly transparent, floating, hovering, somehow attached to each mobile: a second identity, one for each of my creations; a different one for each.

"Are these... *always* there?" I asked, feeling timid now.

"Yes. Always. There are thousands and thousands of them out in your world now."

If I ever had any reason to doubt Yogi Goldberg's word, that reason was summarily invalidated. For there it was, clinging to, hovering above, permeating the graceful S-shaped limbs of my first musical mobile, "Scoop." There it was: that donkey, that *jackass* with a nautical military hat on its head and some sort of muddy wedding dress trailing from its right rear hoof. And just as Goldberg had indicated, it was carrying a wicker basket in its mouth containing engraver's tools and several large bottles of mayonnaise. That was indeed my unintended creation: the material *translation* of my music. I closed my eyes and shook my head. But I needed to see more.

A different kind of apparition hovered in all the pictures of "Orbits." Again, this was apparently the actual result of my blind, unknowing creativity; the concrete form of my brilliant compositional ideas. In and about "Orbits" hovered a rusted, dismantled automobile, and perched on the engine block, the side panels, the back seat, the bumpers and other sundry parts were baboons eating corn on the cob and flinging the half-stripped cobs at one another. In the midst of them, however, standing atop a neat pile of tires, was a man I recognized as an exceedingly depressed Johannes Kepler, the 17th century mathematician and astronomer, famous for his discoveries about the planetary orbits around sun. The sight of the great Kepler looking so miserable amidst those unruly baboons made me feel ashamed as well as stunned. I didn't want to see the reality behind the next series of photographs, the ones of "Cloud Song," but I felt compelled.

The *facts* of the calculated musical motifs in this mobile were as follows: a naked man and woman were sleeping in what appeared to be a pig sty. Also sleeping there in the sty were several dozen dachshunds with tomato sauce on their muzzles. The dogs seemed to have emptied the contents of several dozen cans of Chef

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Boyardee Ravioli, which were laying there in the mud along with them. And yes, a woman was singing in the apparition. She was disturbingly thin, perhaps anorexic, was dressed like a ballerina and was sitting on the fence of the sty making dramatic gestures with her arms. But no sound escaped her lips: she was apparently lip-synching to no music at all. That was it. That was the materialized reality of the vibrational patterns I had created in form and tone. That is what started the Tunemobile craze: thousands of unseen pig sties, sated dachshunds and mute, anorexic ballerinas hanging in people's living rooms, dining rooms, dens and bedrooms all across the country and indeed the world.

"You see," Hades said to me. "There's a lot to see down here. Understand why I chose this realm?"

I nodded, but weakly. I wasn't feeling myself at all. I'd understood from Goldberg that I was not alone in my unknowing, unintentional creations. This, he'd explained to me, was art with a small "a"—art created by unenlightened humans. That truth was of no comfort to me, however. I can't remember feeling so small.

It was then it occurred to me that there was *a cause* of some sort, a hidden root from which all these so-called creations of mine had grown; something in particular that they shared, and just as I realized what it was, the Lord of the Underworld confirmed my conclusion.

"Yes," he said, the sneer on his face reflected in his voice now, and disturbingly so. "Sloth. Carelessness. Unconcern for Truth. Negligent Unknowing. Yes. And it's a quality found in nearly all your companion, human artists; they're all slothful, but in their case, not sinful. They're pitiable powerless drones, you know. You, on the other hand... Well, you're altogether another thing."

For the first time since I'd opened the steamed up door of what I thought was a rural café, I felt a sick foreboding. I backed away from the black and white pictures on Hades' dark wall, and at that moment I knew that everything had changed.

"You," he sneered accusingly, standing now and revealing his frightening, full height.

"*You* are a dangerous weak thing possessed of power beyond your scanty wisdom," he continued, venomously. "*You* are a slothful thing! And are you aware, O mortal with a Hero's name, that of Sloth's companions, one sits at the torpid beast's right hand?"

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And what might that be, you ask? What might that be? Sloth's handmaid?"

Hades paused. "Gullibility! Ha! Ha, ha,ha,ha,ha,ha,ha!
GULLIBILITY!"

He laughed cruelly, and as I began to understand him, a sick wave drenched me in sweat.

"Everything," he said, "everything I have told you was a lie. *Everything*, you fool! You wretched fool! You believed I *welcomed* you here? You believed I was your *friend*? I despise you. Do you understand? I have always despised you! *Everyone* here despises you! Clio and Chloe *despise* you!"

It was then that his face changed before my eyes. He no longer resembled Poseidon. He was grotesque. His animal eyes burned through me. It was he. He was the one who'd been following me all these years.

"Good!" he said his voice crackling with malice. "You recognize me! It's good that you dared to look, because now I can inform you that unspeakable horror awaits you here. For you will *never* leave this place, *never*! **YOU WILL NEVER LEAVE!** And to multiply your torment, you will never know *why* you are here, because no one will answer your questions, because no one will hear you and no one will care! **NO ONE WILL EVER CARE! NO ONE! EVER!** Now get out of my sight."

As I stood and turned, I toppled. No room for thought. The air was sucked from my lungs with tremendous force. I fell forward to the door, slamming against it with my head. As it opened, someone spit, then all eyes turned away. Someone spit. That was the last good thing. I took only one step to reach a table where I sat with my head in my hands, and it began.

"You go in your own shit!" my father says to me. "You're no hero! Ha! Go sit in your own shit!"

This is the last I hear before my father, now bent double in agony, opens into my mind. I see it is *I* who have broken my father, *I* who have *tortured* him in my rage, and I see with a sickening certainty that I will continue to torture him, to pummel him with a metal bar, in the groin, in the face, and with relish.

Then, just as it had arrived, this image, this reality, rolls up and across my mind as if on a spinning drum, giving way to

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another: this of a man in blood red pants who beats me as I'd beaten my father, viciously, rending my face, my cheeks torn loose, my eyes hanging on bloody strands, still seeing.

Then I exhale and it rolls up and over my mind, and as I inhale it is supplanted by another reality: this, my own insanity, my raging, searing, screaming insanity and the certainty that it will never end. And then with another breath, I am abandoned: a child, shamed, cast away, bereft of comfort, undeserving of hope, forever, undeserving of love. "Go sit in your own shit!"

As I breathe in then, I am cramped under a metal bench, in a cell, cringing. The man is horridly obese: I smell him, I taste him, he sucks me in, he splits me open, and then I roll up and away.

Then I am staggering back, and my hateful, naked friends are watching as I try to hide the shameful thing I've done. It is white, putrid, translucent. It reeks, but it rolls up into my insanity, my insane head on my insane neck in my insane hands at that table; I am cursing my broken father, abandoning him, forever, as the drum spins.

I am held down, paralyzed but brutally aware. The filthy surgeon slices me open like a fish. Breath by breath my insanity implodes in me, raging. I already know: it will never end. I am a dog, tearing at flesh; I am beating Anita with my fists until her face is blood red and black; I am dragged by my intestines, clotted with dirt for an agonizing moment, until I exhale, engulfed now by my friends, my hideous, naked friends who spew hatred upon me like acid until I breathe again, draped in my father, pleading with me for mercy, which I will never grant him, never in all eternity, never will I cease to break his bones, one by one, with my hands now. I am the man in the blood red pants; I am the terrified child, alone and without hope; and this, all this, searing across me, boiling in *my first minute in Hell!*

Then I am consumed with shame for the horrendous thing I have done with my filthy hands. Everyone knows. I am covered in feces and blood, and gagging and gasping, I draw another breath and spin up and away, sick dizzy and fall ever backwards, until again I breathe and strip my mother of her skin as she shrieks until I gasp for air once more which is my insanity forever, unceasing, like a fever of hatred coursing through my brain. And then I find my father again pleading for the mercy he'll never know until my hatred

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for him explodes and boils erupt from my cracked, splitting skin, forever; black beetles and centipedes crawl from my fissures until my next breath leaves me a stinking dog again, dumb and hopelessly unknowing, and then risen, naked to ridicule, my body is white and sickly until I draw in my next splinter of insanity. Every moment forever.

“Go sit in your own shit!” I drop sick with the nausea of blackened blood, the terror of falling endlessly again, and knowing all along and all throughout that at every breath another horror will fill me until bursting and then another and another, and that a minute is forever and forever would never cease. For had their been *but one instant of relief* there would have been *hope*, but there was never hope, never even a remembrance of hope in the fevered, eternal insanity that rolled within me like damnation in a spinning drum.

Then there is no table where I sat; there were no hands that held a head; there is only that endless burning spew. Everyone knows my shameful secret; all eyes that fall upon me know what I have done. I beat my father until he can no longer beg, and then beat him further, until it is I whom *he* is beating, beating and telling me that he has never loved me, he has always despised me.

And then with my next breath of life, I thrust myself into the vile stink of that bestial man who rapes me, and then I defile Anita with blood, with feces, with puss; Anita whom I despise, Anita whom I castigate, whom I ridicule; Anita whom I smear with bile, whom I never loved, but only until I breathe in the next abomination that possesses me entirely. I am hatred. I am eternal, spewing anger.

Unceasingly. Falling backwards into the abyss. No end. No possibility of hope. Not like *this*. Nothing like *this*. No thought. No seams. Only spinning, sick full and full again with the promise of no hope. No memory of it. No stopping. Only shame. Only cowardice. Only agony. Only hatred: my meting it out. My insanity. Blind by blood. Split like a fish by the surgeon with shit on his hands. Forever falling backwards, naked in my soft, pathetic bones, and then vomiting until my bowels hung from my open mouth like a stinking string of sausages. Every moment forever. Will no one comfort me? No one?

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And then alone on a desolate plane. The smallest child crushed by abandonment. Damned by those who should love me. Spat upon. Blamed. The smallest child consumed with shame. No horizon. No seams. Begging for mercy, but finding the promise of no hope. Only shame. Only hideous women with talons. And then I kill that white, pale child. I kill him, rend him into shreds, until I am stripped of *my* skin, *my* viscera; stoop as a skeleton, wobbling on a scaffold, pummeled by hoots of abuse, by daggers of recrimination from my shrieking, hideous, naked friends. My hideous, stinking, naked friends! But that's *only two minutes in Hell, three at best!*

What about three hours? A hundred-eighty minutes, each forever, each sealed with the promise of no hope. What about three days? Four thousand and more of those minutes of torture and clots of stinking blood and abandonment and nakedness and insanity. Four thousand and more with no respite, not for an instant, an endless reel of rape, committed murders, intestines dragging in the dirt, limbs pulled from sockets, of anguish and damnation. And what about three weeks? But what does it matter? In eternity every moment is forever. What does it matter: three minutes, three hours, three days, three weeks? What does it matter? It matters forever: with each spin of that terrible drum, my brain seethes hotter. Not like this. Never ceasing. No seams. No punctuation. Not like this. Not like anything. All me. Just Hell.

Then again: my father, bent double in pain. I am the man in the blood red pants. It is my insanity, my raging, searing, screaming insanity and the certainty it will never end. And again and forever I am cramped under that metal bench. Again it is he, horribly obese, spewing mucus, who rapes me until I split, bleeding black until it rolls up because I've hounded and killed the perfect child, the son of God. Everyone knows. I am white, putrid, translucent, it is searing across me, everything searing. I watch myself in my insanity: my insane head on my insane neck in my insane hands at that table again. I am the man I in the blood red pants. I am held down. The bloody dentist fills my mouth with filthy drills; the filthy surgeon slices me open like a fish. Like a bloated dog. Breath by breath it implodes in me, raging insanity. I am a dog, tearing at flesh; I am devouring Anita's flesh; Anita who despises me, who has never loved me. I am beating her with my fists, with a claw hammer until

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her face is blood red and black, her lips hanging loose; I am dragged by my intestines, clotted with dirt, I am draped upon in my father who pleads with me for a son's mercy which I will never grant him, never in all eternity.

Never will I cease to break his bones in my hands, one by one; to relish in his agony. "Go sit in your own shit!"

Then I am pleading again, pleading for comfort, for love; begging him for mercy he will never grant. Boils erupt from my cracked, splitting skin again, seething now with lizards and wasps, forever, until my next breath leaves me that infested dog, crawling with vermin and parasites, forever, dumb and hopelessly unknowing until I rise up on a great cross, naked to ridicule: my shameful body white and sickly.

"Go sit in your own shit!"

And not for a moment is there any respite. Not a breath, for if there were, there would be hope, a remembrance of hope. But hope is impossible. My head is insane, my neck; my hands are insane, my fingers are insane. Reason is impossible; time is impossible, forever falling backwards, naked in my soft, pathetic bones, vomiting until my bowels are hanging from my open mouth. Only filth is possible. Only the fingers and the spittle of the hideous man. Only the grinding. The spew.

Then again I am on the desolate plane with no horizon. The smallest child taunted, pinched and bitten; crushed by words of rebuke and blame and utter abandonment. The smallest child pinched and bitten and burned; bitten, burned and blamed. Then I stoop as a skeleton, bare but with sagging genitals, shivering alone with my grotesque grin, wobbling on that scaffold, pummeled by hoots of abuse and filth, by daggers of recrimination from my monstrous friends. Murderer! Murderer of God! ***But what's that? Four minutes in Hell? Five at best?***

What about five hours? Three hundred minutes, each sealed with the promise of no hope. What about five days? Seven thousand and more of those minutes of torture and suffocation and clots of stinking blood and vomit and abandonment and insanity?

"Murderer of God! Go sit in your shit!"

Seven thousand and more with no respite, not for an instant, an endless reel of cowardice, of betrayal, of treason, of terrified flight, of strangulation, intestines dragging in the dirt, the fingers of

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the hideous man invading me, the insane filthy fingers of the hideous man. But what does it matter: five minutes, five hours, five days, five weeks? It's not like this. No punctuation. It's never ceasing, not for an instant. Will no one comfort me? **WILL NO ONE COMFORT ME?**

No seams. Not like this. Not like anything. All me. Just Hell. All me. And again... And again... **AND AGAIN!** The infernal promise: the promise of no hope. Will no one comfort me?

The dog has long since ceased being a dog. The heaving bull is empty. It has long since collapsed and only bones and horns and slack skin remain. The half-crushed crab that tried to escape has been trampled and crushed. The man was not even a memory; *not even forgotten*. But there was one last thing: someone spat.

Someone spat. Now there is one hard thing. Some fragment, some chip, some shard gains force to fling itself against wall. Some unknown hard thing, perhaps with a shell, gains force unto itself.

The story was told that the thing once called "I" or more often "He" had never come back from the country. Simple as that. Vanished? Not known. His new car was found. The one called "my father" or more often "his father" grieved but was not surprised. He said he'd known things like this before. He talked for nearly twenty minutes. Twenty minutes? How many breaths are in twenty minutes? When each moment is eternity? Twenty minutes here, twenty there. Twenty minutes, maybe more when Mason first felt his heart would break? But nothing was broken about Mason. He had no idea. No strangulation. No filthy surgeon. Nothing like this.

The story was told that the thing once called "I" or more often "He" had never come back from the country. After the vanishing, "my" or more aptly, "his" business ran as smoothly as it had before; perhaps more smoothly. Birdie Bindle took executive control while Mason and Margo manned production in a seamless transition—though they wept daily. For how many minutes did they weep? In a day? Twenty, perhaps? No notion of what can happen in twenty minutes. None. Nothing like this: twelve-hundred separate, eternal moments of torture, of perpetual rape? Of drowning in a soup of

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vomit and bile? Of brutalizing children? Of self-mutilation? Of unnaesthetized surgery... forever? Of abandonment? Humiliation? Treason? Calumny? A wracking kaleidoscope of insanity and shame. Without a moment in between? And only for those twenty minutes did Mason and Margo weep?

In light of the Tunemobile craze, it was Margo's idea to pull the mobile called "Cloud Song" from the market temporarily and reissue "Swoop" and "Orbits," these at a reduced price to attract a wider range of shoppers. But the news that the one called "I" or more often, "he," had vanished leaked out, and there was such a run on "Cloud Song" that none of "my" or more aptly "his" mobiles were available for several weeks. During this time, Mason and Margo worked industriously to build up enough stock to supply all the museum stores across the country—while weeping twenty minutes a day. Twenty minutes? Twenty minutes of a child, once called "me" forever abused, pinched and bitten, whipped, forever lost, forever blamed, forever ashamed?

"My" or "his" father, meanwhile, refused to organize or sanction a memorial service of any sort, not because he believed "I" or, more reasonably, "he" would return: no, because the father insisted the disappearance was a *vanishing*, something he did not wish to announce. He refused to read newspapers during this period, although Birdie did not change her habits. Margo and Mason, however, sensing veracity in "my/his/the" father's beliefs and position, also refrained from reading or listening to news of the "resourceful young artist's apparent demise."

Every morning Birdie read the paper along with her coffee. While she first glanced at it, I raped and tortured my mother. Birdie did not read the whole paper, just the front page and enough to keep her mind occupied as she drank a cup and a half. About fifteen minutes. Every morning. Fifteen eternal minutes every morning of brutal child abuse, live burial in feces, slow strangulation, betrayal and vindictive beatings at the hands of once beloved, naked friends, now freaks; sickening horrors of nameless beasts approaching in utter darkness, forced feeding to the point of rupture, abandonment and shame, crushing shame, and of course, the perpetual promise of no hope, no ceasing, not for a moment, not for an instant, no hope, no memory of hope. All spinning backwards across the brain, so long insane that nothing else will ever be remembered. And that, of

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course, is just a cup and a half of coffee. Fifteen minutes, every breath forever the same but for which picture of damnation it awakens, the kaleidoscope of damnation.

But good news! Once the inventories are exhausted, demand grows beyond all bounds. Hundreds of back orders pour in from every location for “Swoop” and “Orbits” in every shade of every color in the visible spectrum. For the first time, museums themselves put in orders, perhaps not because either “Swoop” or “Orbits” were *fine art*, but because they were *important* art of an artist (once called “I” but now called “he”) cut down in his prime. Cut down in his prime: suffocating in feces, murderer of God!

The artist’s father wishes he could speak to the artist’s mother, but of course doesn’t have the inner means or gifts of fate to do so. He pretends to speak to her, however. In his mind he speaks to her and supplies the answers as well. And he wonders, as many do, if this *imagination* is in fact *communication* with the world beyond.

“I’m doubly bereft, Emily,” he says. “My joy in life is gone, and with him my window to the miraculous. I am undone.”

“You will wait, my dear,” his imagined, vanished wife replies. “Only the unexpected inevitably arrives. Only what has *never been imagined* can come to be, my dear.”

What she says appeals to his reason, and that helps a little. But only for a few minutes, during which atrocities are committed and endured, without end or respite and the fever of insanity rises and rises until it can burn no hotter. There are the prison guards, shouting in that hideous language of hate. There is the gagging and the splitting orifice, and then that surgeon again, the man in the blood red pants.

Though Mason and Margo believe that their friend and employer has “stepped off the edge of the ordinary,” as the father explained, their daily lives, despite their busy routine, are so shaken that they eventually break down. They’d done enough and seen enough to know that when pressed to their limits they’d find security in one of two places: in what they called “The Great Spirit” or sometimes “Higher Power” and others devoted to it, or in heroin. They choose the latter, and for the first day, they are comforted.

A whole day of comfort. How many breaths is that? A whole day: that’s a whole *seamless* day of that Drum of Hell still

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spinning, still forever spinning. Not one interruption. Not one. Not a crack of light. Not a pinpoint crack between endlessly falling backward into a black abyss. No interruption. Not like this. No punctuation. Not like anything we know.

§

When the small, hard shelled thing repeatedly flung itself into the wall, both the shell and wall began to crack. In untold agony, the thing turned the cracked edges of its shell to the hairline fracture and thrust itself against it with all its strength. The break in the shell widened, exposing grey-white flesh that never before felt the air. The chipped fissure in the cement wall widened too, but hardly as much as the break in the shell. The hard-shelled thing continued to push itself into the cracking wall, (for what else did it have but itself?) using its shattered edges like chisels, every thrust tearing the flesh away below the shell. Agony but no screaming. A hard-shelled thing with no voice.

By the time a pinpoint of daylight shows through the hole the hard-shelled thing has caused to open in the wall, only fragments of its shell remain. Two pieces; like broken toenails, already loose and dangling. With these, the moist thing drying out digs away, widening the fissure in the concrete. It isn't long before the first piece tears off, leaving rent tissues, like shredded lips. With only one shard of its shell remaining, it squeezes into the hole, and stiffening the muscle still moist enough to live, it scrapes away until piece after tiny piece chips and cracks away, enlarging the gap through which the daylight shows. But then the last fragment of shell tears away, a hunk of bloody tissue tearing with it, leaving a barely throbbing thing, drying in agony. How it squeezes itself through the small hole will be forever unknown. Was it the hand of God? Was it a miracle, a breaking of the immutable laws? Was it the dimmest remembrance of faith? It certainly wasn't hope that pulled and pushed itself through. There was no hope, no possibility of hope. Perhaps it was a memory of faith. Perhaps under extraordinary circumstances, faith remains dormant until exposed to light.

§

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The metal thing he called “his car” was nowhere in sight. What he called “his clothing” had been drenched in sweat but it was stained and dry now. For the first several minutes he stood leaning against that thing, that wall of that café, he felt it all recede: the sphere of damnation. He felt its reverberations dying through him as he stood there and knew that nothing more terrible than that can be. Not for one soul. Multiple souls would be needed to know Hell more completely.

He felt again like that skeleton on a scaffold, white, exposed, wobbly, but he could move. He could move those things he once again called his *limbs*.

He could... *I* could. *I* could walk. *I* could see... and I looked at the thing I called my watch. I looked at the time. I looked at the date. It was three in the afternoon. It was the fifteenth of June. I had been in Hell for three weeks. One million eternal moments of it.

§

Eternity is not a *length* of time; it’s a *kind* of time. Three minutes of eternity is *as long as* three weeks, because *as long as* doesn’t apply to eternity any more than shades of red and blue apply to a drawing in black and white. And by the same token, eternity cannot be *remembered*; only events in time as we know it can be truly remembered. One can have a sense of eternity; one can remember the feel of it: but eternity is not *this*, nothing like *this*—and as long as we *are this*, eternity forever eludes us.

So though *I* was wholly shattered and barely reassembled, bitterly and profoundly wounded (as bitterly and profoundly wounded as one can be), and though I would never be the same again (having done what I’d done and felt what I felt), I functioned much as I had before. Hell remained in its own dimension; not mine, and in light of the *Plexippus Principle*, it’s not as remarkable as one might suppose that once I saw the time and date, I walked back over to the gas station across from the infernal café and called my father. What else does one do upon returning from Hell intact?

Birdie answered the phone. When I said hello, I *heard* her cross herself.

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“Jason, my good Lord in Heaven, is it really you?”

“It is, Birdie.”

“You don’t quite sound yourself. Your voice, it’s... Are you injured? Were you in an accident? Were you abducted?”

I wondered if I could lie about this; if there was an exemption for damnation and other *paranormal* experiences. It turned out I could lie—with no problem. “I’m not certain. Maybe... I’m suffering from amnesia. My car’s not where I left it. I’m at a gas station in Averno, Iowa. Is my father home?”

“Dear God, I’ll go get him.”

I looked across the highway at the front door of the café, the gate of Hell. Here in eastern Iowa, the entrance to the underworld was not surrounded by rivers as in classical times: The Acheron, the River of Woe; The Cocytus, the River of Lamentation; The Phlegethon, the River of Fire; The Styx, the River of Unbreakable Oath by which the Gods swear; and the Lethe, the River of forgetfulness—though these rivers may have indeed been flowing invisibly.

I didn’t even know if Hades and his “consorts” were still in there, across the road. I felt foolish for being taken in by what had seemed a ludicrous setting and what appeared to be a good natured God—more than foolish. Slothful. I’d never fully overcome that weakness; I knew it. But I was out. That fact overrode all memories and regrets, no matter how indelible. If, for example, I’d been tortured for months as a prisoner of war, my memories would have remained brutal and unyielding for the rest of my life, but my experience in Hell had been outside of time: my soul was forever marked by it, but not my little self. My little self was... relieved?

“I was dreaming you returned,” my father said. “But Birdie said you don’t sound well.”

“I’ve been through a lot,” I answered. “It must have affected my voice. But considering everything, I’m fine. Don’t worry for a minute. I’m sorry if I frightened you. It was out of my control. I told Birdie I had amnesia. I’ll tell you the real story as soon as I see you. But my car’s gone. Can you come get me? I’m in Averno, Iowa. It’s just across the border. Or maybe I can take a bus. I think I’m on the route.”

No, no, no,” my father said. “No bus. Birdie will drive, I assure you. Your car’s right here in the driveway. The Iowa State

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Troopers brought it.” There was a momentary pause. “Averno? That’s the name of a sulfurous lake in Italy, Jason. The Romans believed it was the entrance to the underworld. You’re in Averno? Is there somewhere you can wait for us?”

“There’s a little café right across the street, but it’s a very unsavory place. I guess you can imagine. I can sit here in the Shell station—or go sit on stump I see out by the road. Take your time, please. I’m content.”

Content? Looking back on that conversation, I wonder at my exceptionally placid state of mind—which makes it all too clear how looking back on things can distort them. I’ll never truly remember how content I actually was after an eternity in Hell. Apparently, it’s no longer any of my business.

After I gave my father directions and the phone number of the gas station, I went out and sat down on the stump, which turned out to be comfortable. Moments later, I saw the bus stop in town, about a quarter mile down the road, discharge a passenger, and drive on past me in the direction of home. But the near miss was fine with me. It was actually a beautiful day, I had a lot to think about, and I was no longer in Hell. But of course I realized then, as I would forever, that that most terrible of places with all its torments and hideous personifications was still there, intact within me. It came with the package: it was standard equipment.

THE SONG THE BIRDS FORGOT

PART III

BEATRICE ANGELET

Newborn? No. Purged? Possibly. Dry cleaned? Infused with poisonous chemicals, leaving me fresh and renewed? That's a more accurate approximation of it, more like the way I felt sitting on that stump—dry cleaned, or beaten out like a rug; but clean either way. But what about my gifts? Had I been stripped of those? Would I ever make my resolutions again? I supposed that was up to me. But what about my moment? The last I remembered, just before that giant who wasn't Heracles led me into Hades' inner sanctum, I was the same ordinary kid as I when I was twenty years old.

And then, unceremoniously, it was back. It happened as I looked across the highway at a copse of cottonwoods just west of the very ordinary looking café. As I looked at the trees, they brightened, as if a second sun, colorless but brilliant had risen in the sky. The trees had become slightly more radiant and so had I. I felt that loosening of time I'd known before, as if I were watching, keenly, half a beat before the moment unfolded. I played no part in this transformation.

BEATRICE ANGELET

I sat there motionless for several minutes. Two flies buzzed around my head; one landed on it, but that didn't make any difference to me. I stood, walked around a little, and sat back down on the stump to see if my renewed awareness would *fall off*. It didn't. I closed my eyes in the sun and knew that if I chose, I'd be able to meditate again; not grudging and fitfully as had become my habit, but as if walking out of a stuffy room. But something was different, something *had to be* different. There was no way I could have been scorched and scoured, bathed in acid and returned to that pristine self I'd known way back when I first walked through the door of **Ναυτιλία**. That was four years earlier. I felt restored but I didn't feel the same. I can't say that I felt better, but I didn't feel worse either. The black sphinx had been leading my chariot; that was clear. Had I been expected to embrace that darkness? To befriend Hell or simply accept it as a part of myself? Maybe I needed to get to know myself again.

This wasn't the time to meditate. It seemed that later would be more fitting; at the end of the day, particularly if my mother was going to join me. So I just sat there and watched the traffic and clouds pass. I didn't feel hungry or thirsty, but I hadn't had anything to eat or drink for three weeks—three weeks in *eternity*, where mortal physiology obviously didn't apply. I hadn't even lost weight; but still, I thought I should at least have something to drink. So I went back to the Shell station and bought a bottle of cold spring water.

The moment I put it to my lips, I knew. The rush of cold water into my parched body was salvation... no, truly, SALVATION! The salvation of dust and bone, the salvation of blood and flesh, of root and sap. In that moment, I knew the joy of multitudes and of forests and fields. Before I could finish it, I heard myself burst forth with a laugh like a celebration of bells. I stood by the side of the road, peals of laughter rolling off of me, rising up; laughter so full and round it must have shaken the little café across the street, because the patrons came out to see who it was that was laughing like a god. The western sun threw such shadows from the cottonwoods on them, however, that I couldn't see their faces or even make out how they were dressed. I had no way of knowing whether they were the creepy denizens of the Land of the Dead or

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the humble citizens of Averno, Iowa and its environs. But I didn't care. I had multitudes to quench and bells to toll.

When I saw my new Toyota approaching and slowing down, I stood up from my stump and walked toward it. Birdie was driving, as usual, my father next to her, but their faces froze with identical expressions of shock. Birdie pulled the car over close to me very slowly, as if I were delicate or prone to being blown away. Once the car crawled to a stop, her expression remained aghast as my father got out of the car.

"Jason," he said, approaching me slowly. I thought it was my smile that surprised him. "Jason, your hair. Have you seen yourself?"

I ran my fingers through my hair. It didn't feel different in any way. But then I knew. It had to be. "Is it white?" I asked.

"Like snow," my father said.

"What about the rest of my face?"

He cocked his head just a bit, looking me over. "Maybe a new wrinkle or two, but hardly discernable. You look... very distinguished."

I could tell that my father was trying not to upset me; he was doing an adequate job, but I excused myself to go into the men's room at the gas station to have a look for myself.

And it *was* white. White as snow. Every last hair. But I didn't find this new look disturbing at all. If anything, I preferred it to my former, typical twenty-something appearance. Shouldn't I have something to show for my eternal damnation? My season in Hell? I thought this "very distinguished" look more accurately reflected the condition of my soul. I was a very young man with a wealth of experience, wasn't I?

My father was standing next to the car.

"I love it," I said to him under my breath, not yet having decided what I'd tell Birdie: my amnesia story might need to be revised in light of an appearance suggesting I'd seen the dead rise from their graves. "...And I feel fine," I assured him, trusting that he knew I'd tell him the truth, no matter what I said to Birdie.

"I don't think I want to let you drive in that condition," Birdie said out the open passenger door, "so why don't you sit in back so you can stretch out if you need."

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Even from outside the car, there was no mistaking that Birdie had lost some weight in my absence, but it didn't seem an appropriate time for a compliment.

"Surprised by the new do?" I asked as I got in.

"You don't mean to tell me you had that done, do you?"

To lie... or to lie: whether 'twas nobler to lead Birdie to believe I'd become a vain man with a warped self-image or tell her that I knew nothing of the cause of my old man's hair? *My old man's hair*... That suddenly struck me in a new way, but whatever it signified, I knew what was nobler... or at least more prudent. I expected to be around this woman for the rest of her life.

"I remember pulling over to get gas," I said. "And then heading over to the café across the road for some coffee. But I don't think I ever got there. I have a sore spot on the back of my head, though; I think I must have been knocked out. The next thing I remember after heading toward that café was suddenly realizing I was standing outside it. Right next to it there; then looking at my watch, discovering I'd been *missing* for three weeks and then calling you. But I feel fine, Birdie. I really do. Whatever it was that happened to me, it's over. I feel just fine."

"The police believed your car was abandoned," she said, sounding as concerned as one might expect after hearing such a story. "You never got back in it. You're going to talk to them, aren't you?"

"Give the boy a chance to regain his bearings," my father said on my behalf. "It can put undue pressure on the psyche to delve into recent trauma with amnesia patients. They forget because they *need* to."

I had no rational reason to think my father was lying about this, but I was convinced that he was. He went on: "And I've read that in certain cases, it's palliative if not therapeutic to leave the unfortunate victim permanently undisturbed."

"Palliative, Phineas? You know I don't like it when you do that."

"I'm sorry, dear. It means *soothing*."

Birdie made a low grumbling sound before she reprimanded my father by lightly swatting him on the thigh. I never seen her do this before. They were taking on the look of an old married couple.

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“It bothers me when he does that too,” I lied, to which Birdie gave a little nod without taking her eyes off the road. I couldn’t tell if she was concentrating on driving or just avoiding a look back at my shocking white hair. My father nodded too, as if contrite. Hardly another word was spoken during the next few hours. I never even thought of looking back to see if we were being followed. That was over. I’d *met* him; accepted him. I’d had no choice.

Only when we arrived at Hawthorn Street and my father invited me into his study for our private talk, did Birdie ask him if he was going to tell me about Mason and Margo—thereby insuring that he would. I could tell she was feeling slighted, but my interest was peaked. I hadn’t thought of my two friends that day, or at least not once I’d returned to the Upper World.

“They have relapsed,” my father said, once we were sitting down in the matched, wingback leather chairs. “It was ten days ago, when I went to visit them at their apartment to see how they were faring that I discovered they weren’t faring well at all. It’s to their credit that they didn’t attempt to disguise their condition. They’d injected themselves with heroin several times the day before and were preparing to go purchase more. They were unabashedly ashamed of themselves, Margo more than Mason, I believe, but felt they didn’t have the power to resist. They said that they’d been to an N.A. meeting early that morning—just prior to my dropping in, they claimed—but lost resolve soon after that. I asked if there weren’t someone they could call, and judging by their reactions to my question, it seemed there was but they weren’t about to do it.”

“Maybe I can help them out,” I said. “They’d gone years and years...”

“But there’s more, Jason,” my father said. “They disappeared. The next day. Not vanished. Disappeared.”

“Does anyone know? The police?”

“No, son. We decided not to inform them. That may have been a mistake, but I was certain their disappearance was not related to yours... your vanishing; and for the sake of appearances, we elected to wait. We spoke to your friend Helen at the shelter, but she hadn’t seen them either. And there were orders to be filled, dozens of them, so Birdie did what she could. She notified the

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shops that there would be a delay, offered refunds, and put a stop to any new orders. That's how things stand at the moment."

I could see my father's patience wearing thin, so I didn't ask about my friends any further. I needed to tell him the whole story. Euripides was uncharacteristically silent; maybe he didn't recognize me.

My father and I hadn't been speaking for an hour yet, when Birdie knocked softly on the door. I'd already told my father much of what Hades told me, and how I'd been surprised that the Lord of the Dead had been convivial, so it seemed an appropriate time for a break. We didn't need to be told that Birdie had prepared dinner. The round maple table on the sun porch was set with Birdie's best linen, and a salad with Romaine and bib lettuce, sliced tomatoes and avocados, black olives and garlic croutons was set out in a gleaming glass bowl. Along with that, Birdie served ham and Swiss cheese sandwiches on rye with horseradish mustard. As I'd grown older, I learned to love Swiss cheese on that particular sandwich, even though the last line of the song required a slight alteration.

"Bird's foot pie and frog's foot custard
Aren't half as healthy or half as good
As ham *and Swiss* with horseradish mustard!"

Birdie didn't sing, but we all remembered the song. I however, didn't remember that I hadn't had anything to eat for an eternity (strange thing, the human psyche), and when I first tasted the salad (with a forkful of tomato slices, avocado, romaine and bib lettuce with a creamy vinaigrette) and swallowed it and was about to spear another mouthful to include an olive and croutons, I involuntarily duplicated my godlike reaction at the Shell station that afternoon.

Indoors, however, even on a sun porch with the windows open on all three sides, what had been peals of laughter in the great lowan outdoors, translated to a thunderous bellowing, startling Birdie so that she spit (propelled) a mouthful of raspberry iced tea across the table. It was a direct hit. My father's face was dripping, but I'd just tasted what seemed best food I'd ever tasted in my life. I felt that I'd fed those same masses whose thirst I'd quenched

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earlier. I couldn't stop laughing. The joy got the best of me. My father, good sport that he was, joined in as he let Birdie towel off his face with a generously large napkin.

The poor woman was bewildered and humiliated, and though I did stop laughing before too long, she categorically refused to buy my *true* story that I laughed because her salad was far and away the most delicious food I'd ever tasted. This was too bad, because I'd hoped to placate Birdie at dinner, to show her the attention and respect I felt she was due, but I failed miserably. Several times, I noticed that she was eyeing my snow white hair, but averted her glance as soon as I looked at her. No words, no smiles, no eye contact, no amount of genuine, heartfelt praise of the delicious meal could shake her sullen mood. She felt left out, and in a way she had been; but she wasn't unloved. She was embarrassed, though, ice tea had spouted from her nose as well as her mouth; and she knew that I knew that, and she'd never laugh at something like that—Mason and Margo would, but not Birdie Bindle. Try as I might, the thought of her unhappiness couldn't quell my passionate reaction to her food. I suppose any food I liked might have elicited a similar reaction—I know a slice of Joey's Best sausage and mushroom would have done the trick—because as I ate, I felt a sense of wholeness come over me, a sense of unity. Maybe only a sense of unity with dinner, but such a powerful sense of it that I nearly had to leave the table.

My father joined me in the library later, looking a little worried. He told me that he and Birdie had been having a few "issues," but when I expressed concern, he told me that it was a "naturally arising problem," that he and Birdie were working to resolve. I could tell he didn't want to discuss it with me, so I took up where I left off in my story.

I was interested in his reaction when I told him how Hades had turned on me, how he told me everything he'd said had been a lie and that he despised me, because my father seemed as stunned as I had been. In an uncanny advent of synchronicity, Euripides, the grey parrot, called out "*Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!*" but then dispelled the mystique entirely with, "*Blonds have more fun!*"

After I told my father how the god had ordered me out of his sight and how I'd slumped at the table just outside his door, I felt

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a need for editorial discretion. In no way did I want my father to feel what I felt, and if I was going to provide him with any images of my damnation, I would certainly exclude those that included him. So I told him that the memories of that experience were too painful to recall and did my best to describe my new understanding of eternity as a kind of time rather than a length of time. I felt it was very important that he know as much as possible about what happened to me without suffering from it, but he had other ideas.

“You seem afraid of frightening me,” he said, sounding a little impatient. “You said you suffered abominations, and if you care for me, as I trust you do, I can only assume that I also suffered in your Hell, that I was debased, as were all things dearest to you. You’ve honored me with the accounts of all your other blessings, so why do you balk at describing this one?”

With that, a grand new meaning of “The Big Picture” began to dawn on me, and I went on to tell my father, in mortal time, every detail I could remember of my eternal agony. It was a terrible, heart-rending experience for me. It took an hour. He was pale when I stopped talking, and the scene ended with my sobbing.

“You may never want to tell that story again,” he said, once I’d fallen silent. “But for your sake, Jason, I hope you do.”

I may or may not have understood him. It was clear that he was not going to offer an explanation. I was sitting next to the large, floor-model globe I’d given my father for a gift. I put my fingers on the Northern Hemisphere and gave it a spin.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” said Euripides.

§

My feeling of separateness from eternal damnation lasted only a short time. Indeed, I lived my days brightly, carefree and optimistic, but at night the rules changed. At night I was vulnerable. More than once I dreamed I was in Hell... or, more accurately, my dreams *were* Hell. I never knew how I got there, only the suffocation, the strangulation, the incisions, the villainy, the insanity: seamless, hopeless, eternal, for longer than waking time allows until my eyes snapped open against the vice of sleep. The numbers were on the clock: **3:37** or **4:15** or **6:01**. Trembling and

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sweating, my eyes locked on the numbers. The digital clock. Deliverance.

Not every night; infrequently enough to never expect it, but always then with the indelibility of eternity. And when a wave of waking had set me free, I slept again and awoke in the morning remembering the numbers on the clock, whatever they might have been: **2:21** or **4:45** or **5:33**. The numbers on the clock and the reality behind the terrible door.

Yet every morning I meditated as I'd learned to do. Every morning I resolved to live a century and a half, and to be kind. Every morning I remembered that everyone does his or her best; every morning I resolved to become permeable to the goodness of others, and to look upon my life in both worlds as a blessing, and to smile, and to permit myself doubt. My awareness of the eternal darkness within me took no resolve to summon up. I was living the principle; driving the chariot. Such was my life for the next few weeks.

§

I was just crossing the street when I saw her.

The woman was standing on tiptoe trying to peek through a parting in the curtains covering the front windows of The Ship. I just returned from the laundromat and approached quietly. I was standing just behind her when I realized I'd startle her if I spoke, and with the memory of causing Birdie to spew tea like a lawn sprinkler still fresh in my mind, I felt I should back off.

"I see your reflection in the window," she said to me after I'd taken my first silent step away. Then she turned. She was not only lovely, but mysteriously so. She was wearing cobalt blue, crystal teardrop earrings. Her face was wide and heart-shaped; her eyes were perplexing, her hair gleamed in the sun. She was not tall, but her legs looked long in the blue shorts she was wearing along with a black, unadorned tee shirt. Her breasts were full and her hips were nicely wide; and the look of those, combined with her lovely face, immediately struck me where it counts, and I was glad to be carrying a plastic basket of clean laundry to shield me.

"I'm Beatrice," she said, extending her hand, which I noticed was equipped with very long fingers. "Beatrice Angelet."

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“No middle name?” I asked as I edged forward to shake her hand, holding the laundry basket even closer to my body with my left arm. “Lucia,” she said.

“Jason Aeneas Finch,” I said, unlocking the front door. Remembrance of Hell couldn’t have been farther from my mind.

I saw how she sized up the room. Mason and Margo were still gone, and I’d been working busily there to fill the last orders Birdie had taken in my absence. There was an air of busy disorder to the place: the way I liked it best. Things were not stacked neatly on the worktables. The machines had not been brushed off and the floor had not been swept for a week. All three production mobiles were hung from the ceiling joists, but only “Swoop” was musically functional. The others were “loaded with blanks” as we said: muted so as not to create cacophony in the room.

“I need to sit down. Why don’t you?” I said, lowering myself onto one of the two red chairs in the front of worktables, close to the windows. I sat down with the basket of laundry on my lap, but settling in, plopped it onto the floor next to me. This woman was exceedingly attractive to me.

“So?” I asked her. “What’s up? Did you want to see me about something?”

She looked quizzical. “I think anyone would want to see a man who plans to live to be a-hundred-and-fifty.”

That was all she said. That’s what parted the waters; what shattered the edifice of my reality. Then she simply looked at me with a bewildering smile and what I could only describe as a fierce gleam in her eyes.

This, of course, was an impossibility. Only my father knew... and Poseidon.

I couldn’t look in those eyes for long, but I sat there for a while before I spoke. My moments passed huge and heightened, “Swoop” rang out in fragments of melody I’d never before heard. I was simultaneously thrilled and disturbed. There was no way I could say anything conventional, anything I’d say to someone under normal circumstances. I might have howled like a wolf.

“If you don’t mind,” I said, with no notion what was coming next. “I’d like to keep it like this.” She looked searchingly at me then. “This way. Impossible. Mysterious. No questions. No explanations.”

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She was about to ask a question, however.

I shook my head. “No. Just my father,” I answered before she could speak.

“Can you see through my clothes too?” Her tone sounded somewhere between amusement and mistrust.

My body suddenly returned to its state of high alert. I wanted to see through her clothes. “No,” I said, wondering if she could read my mind as well.

“Mystery,” she said, showing no sign of mind-reading either way. “That excites you? Mystery is the Alpha and Omega of the cosmos.”

I wasn’t sure if I could keep up. “It is? Then what’s the rest of the alphabet in between?”

“Love? Illusion? The unearthing of the light? Transfiguration? The endless cycle of suffering? Take your pick.”

What? What on Earth? Who was she? What did she know? I felt defensive, foolish, but there was a question I had to ask. I burned with it. I had to say the words.. After what I’d been through, I had the every right to say them. At the end of the twentieth century, yes, I had to say them—out loud. “Are you some sort of enchantress? A sorceress?”

She raised her eyebrows. Beautiful eyebrows. “A sorceress?” she laughed. “Like Circe? Who turned men into animals? Or Medea?”

This was too much. Too Damn Much! She glanced up at “Swoop” that had just played something bizarre yet intriguing. I closed my eyes, but the image of her face loomed in front of me. Her perfume too was beguiling.

“Would you even tell me if I asked?” I said, looking back across at her.

“I might,” she said. “That would depend.”

“Oh, really. It would depend? On what...?”

“On whether you choose to wear your tragic mask or your comic one.”

What? What? What was this woman doing? Was she *acting*—trying to be inscrutable—or if she *was* a sorceress, what sort? Circe or *Medea*—the *good* Medea. I was very suspicious but I was also intrigued. And when I added her beauty into the mix, I

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was bewildered. “The Big Picture” was one thing. This was the near west side of Chicago.

“I’m surprised at your hair,” she said then.

“Why?” I snapped. “Why would you say that? Because it’s unusual for someone my age to have white hair or because you’ve seen me before?”

She hesitated; this confused me. What possible reason could one have to hesitate at such a question? No. It was one way or the other. There was no need to ponder anything.

“It’s very becoming,” she said.

I thrust my head forward and looked at her. I felt like some sort of awkward bird. Considering I’d recently been subjected to the cruelest subterfuge, I wondered if I should entrench myself in a defensive stand against this woman. But I couldn’t; not entirely. I was struck by a wave of conviviality. And lust. This was beyond my control.

“Would you like some coffee or some tea?” I asked, stupidly.

“Thank you,” she said. “What kind of tea do you serve here?”

Serve here? Serve? “Darjeeling, Jasmine, Green tea, Peppermint and various other herbal teas. Would you like to see what I have?” I immediately regretted saying this. Despite my suspicion, there was no way I could walk back to the kitchen in that woman’s presence without a shield of some sort. Standing up and turning quickly, I could manage, but even that... Maybe she wasn’t an enchantress or a sorceress. Maybe she was just a seductress. If so, I was already seduced. Is that what she was? Was there such a thing?

“Green tea would be lovely... with a little honey, but only if you’ll have some yourself,” she said, sounding harmless, which in itself tweaked my suspicion. “And I’ll just sit here and wait, if you don’t mind.”

Her eyes were gleaming fiercely again, and as she glanced up at “Swoop” I took the opportunity to spring back in the direction of my kitchen. “I’ll be just a few minutes,” I said over my shoulder, now feeling inordinately happy and, given the torment I’d so recently suffered, worried at the same time.

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I couldn't observe her from the kitchen, so just after I put the kettle on, I tiptoed back to the door to the studio to peek in, only to find her looking solemnly in my direction. I smiled and waved foolishly but didn't wait to see her response.

Of course the reader will understand that only a young man who'd had a life as extraordinary as my own could seriously wonder *what kind* of enchantress had entered his life. Since my father couldn't possibly have told this woman my secret, she must have learned of it by psychic or other extraordinary means—which could bode well or evil. If she somehow knew of my plans through King Poseidon or was in some way his agent, I felt myself doubly blessed. If, however, she was an agent of Hades, I was doubly damned; first, since this disguised harpy was already sitting in my studio about to drink tea with me; and second, because of the very fact that Hades had the insidious power to reach me *so easily* in my mortal life.

Still, despite the *Plexippus Principle*, I paced around my little kitchen wondering how I could take either of those outlandish possibilities seriously. But I had no reliable way to react to this situation: the appearance of such a deliciously attractive woman who was...? Who was what? An emissary of Heaven? Or Hell? Or a Seductress? I felt stripped of my reason; there was no sensible attitude I could adopt, no stance I could take. Some remote part of my awareness noted that thus stripped of my "reason," I was as close to truth as I could get, but that was hardly a comfort, not with sex in the mix, which also stripped me of my reason, but from the bottom up.

There was a lovely reproduction of Seurat's pointillist masterpiece "Sunday Afternoon on the Grand Jatte" hanging on the wall opposite the stove, but it seemed bland and uninviting in light of my confusion. My life seemed bland and uninviting in light of my confusion. And if Beatrice Lucia Angelet had gained her knowledge in the cause of good, there was still a question if she was of or above my own ilk. Falling for a goddess or an enchantress or even an "Angelet" could present problems to mortal men. And I already knew I could fall for her without much provocation. But then... then there was her perplexing response to my question: that what she told me somehow depended on whether I wore my comic

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or tragic mask. What could that mean? Who *was* she? Had my eternity in Hell driven me mad?

Not watching the pot, it boiled before I expected, and having put four green tea bags in my teapot, I filled it full. I put it on a tray along with a plastic, bear-shaped honey dispenser and two sky blue cups that matched the tea pot. I regretted that I didn't have a nice little honey pot for my guest—my guest enchantress or sorceress or whatever—but as I regretted, I realized my acute-sexual-excitement problem had receded, for the time being at least, so I walked with some degree of confidence back to the front of the studio, where she was standing beneath “Swoop” and looking up at it as it moved in the air.

“Can you understand how this is disturbing to me?” I asked with a tone of irritation in my voice as I put the tray down on one of the work tables.

“Because you don't know what sort of enchantress I am?” Her eyes flashed. “The good kind or the evil kind? Is that it?” She laughed.

“Precisely. I've had a bad experience, okay? So I'm sorry but I'm wary. You're just too...”

And that's when the phone rang. It was my father. He told me Birdie had packed a suitcase and left. He explained that she called it “a trial separation,” and that she'd booked a flight to visit her sister in Massachusetts. He sounded sick. He sounded needy. I'd never heard that in his voice before, and I told him I'd be right over.

“I'm afraid I have to leave now,” I said to Beatrice Angelet, feeling like a wall of ice had fallen between us. “I'd like to continue this conversation... but I can't now. It's an emergency... Is there a number where I can call you?”

“You're very upset,” she said.

“Yes, I'm very upset.” I was a little annoyed that she could read me so easily.

She looked over my worktable. I gave her a pencil and paper. “Here,” she said, jotting a number down. “Call me soon... when you can. And I'm very sorry. I shouldn't have...” She sighed. “I mean...”

But I shook her off. I didn't want to hear anymore. I thought my father was going to die.

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LOVE CHIMED IN

“It should only take me a short time to adjust...” my father said as he opened the door to let me in. “...before I hire someone to cook and clean.” His voice was clearer now, as if speaking from a higher place in his heart, but his face seemed grave, its shadows darker.

“No, no,” I said. “I’ll do that. Don’t be silly. You don’t need to hire someone. I won’t hear of it... Are you...?”

He gestured for me to come in, though with less vigor than usual. “I wept,” he said. “Before I talked to you. I sobbed. But once I told you how I felt, I feel I’ve recovered some balance. A whole gamut of feelings has surged through me since I hung up, Jason.” He paused. We were just entering the library. He walked haltingly. “So I suppose I’m not stable yet...”

“Stable? I said. “You’ve just been abandoned!”

“No, no. I’ve seen it coming.” My father shook his head. Tears didn’t seem too distant. “I’m sure you’ve seen it too. We’ve had a wonderful bond between us, Birdie and I, but it’s been

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showing signs of weakness. Or perhaps I should say showing signs of being overwhelmed by our differences. The bond's not weak. The love's not weak. Only limited. I'll be fine. So will she. She might even be back, but I doubt it. Birdie's a new woman. She has new needs. She needs to go to Atlantic City and the racetrack with her sister..."

He looked into my eyes but turned away, sadly. "She fought a war with herself about leaving. She knew I needed her for practical reasons. She said she wished she could send her newfound footloose spirit back to Connecticut, so the rest of her could stay here and cook for me and clean and watch the sun go down." My father choked back a sob. "I understand that," he said.

That seemed to sum up good deal, but I didn't know what to say. My father had given to me so generously, so unflaggingly. Now that he was in need, I was speechless. "Would you like me to make you some tea?" I asked.

"No. I'm eminently capable of making my own tea. Would you like some?"

"I'll go with you," I answered as we stood and walked toward the kitchen.

"Such a great deal happens in a lifetime, Jason," my father said as he filled the kettle. In the absence of my own response, it sounded like he was comforting me. "No matter how we prepare, there are always surprises. The unhappy ones have a way of standing out, though. I really don't know why that is. When one's happy, there's no need to count the hours; but when one's grieving..." he stared at the kettle..."there's nothing but time."

I wanted to say something but still couldn't. I felt like a child. My father broke the silence. "You know, son, in a certain way, it might seem I've been spared. It's twenty years since I last wept. But I think if I'd practiced, this might be easier now. That's not as silly as it sounds. I've shied away from feeling all my life. I've taken refuge in ideas, in ideals. No one taught me to feel. No one educated my heart. Who knew that a heart required education? No one in my generation. Perhaps in yours."

He stared at the kettle on the flame. Again I didn't know what to say. Unlike that afternoon in my little kitchen, the wait for the pot to boil seemed interminable.

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“I hope you’ll excuse me for bringing it up, Jason,” my father said when we returned to the library with our tea, “but *you* seem ill at ease.” His look reminded me of my mother. “Is something bothering you?”

Was something bothering me? My father was heartbroken, wasn’t that enough? I hadn’t planned mentioning the seductress, but it occurred to me it might distract him.

He looked at me slyly. “You weren’t going to say anything, were you?”

I shook my head; a grudging indication that now *he* was reading *my* mind. “A mysterious and beautiful woman called on me today...” I began as dramatically as seemed appropriate.

Despite his bereavement, I paused to let him laugh. He almost did. He grinned. My love for him soared.

Then he listened, rapt, as I told him the whole story. I was embarrassed discussing my conspicuous arousal with my father, but managed to get through it discretely without minimizing it. He seemed particularly intrigued, even astonished at the mystery woman’s reference to Circe and Medea. He assured me he hadn’t said a word about my secret to anyone. He agreed that she seemed like an enchantress, wondered aloud if ever a sane son had told a sane father a story like that since antiquity, and eventually concluded that again he was among the most fortunate of men to observe my adventures without the stress of entanglement. I gave him a look. Apparently, my story of the beguiling, and possibly evil woman of mystery was just what my sad father needed that evening.

We talked well into the night then and he told me a good deal about his seven years with Birdie Bindle. He admitted to me quite openly that the initial attraction between them had been sexual, that it had been “smouldering” since shortly after she arrived. It made me squirm to imagine my father might have been smouldering while telling me the stories of Jason, Orpheus and Heracles, but I think I hid my reaction effectively.

It turned out, that it was among the small things in life that he and Birdie felt such rapport. They liked precisely the same foods, the same sorts of weather, the same temperature in the house, the same light, the same kinds of clothing, the same hours, the same daily routines. It never seemed to be a problem that they didn’t care for the same kind of books or art or music. They could sit together

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in complete silence without feeling a need to speak, and were often aware of each other's thoughts. They sensed each other's moods and reacted compassionately. In all their years together there was never a need for pretense on either's part. Their lives together were a model of honesty. My father was freed from his eccentric professor persona; Birdie was freed from her tight-laced New England upbringing. But eventually my father used one too many words that Birdie had never heard before, and Birdie's love of television sitcoms began to wear on my father's sensibilities. All in all, though, it sounded to me like they'd had a good run, that they'd found comfort in each other for as long as their love could keep them afloat. But for just that reason their separation was very, very sad.

§

I slept at my father's that night and planned to stay on until I felt it was time to leave. His closest friend at the university, a mathematics professor named Miller, was coming to console him later that day, so I felt all right about heading back to downtown. After I renewed my resolutions and meditated, I made breakfast for us and then called Beatrice Angelet. She said she'd like to meet with me again as soon as possible, so I agreed to be at my studio at noon.

My second meeting with the beguiling, possibly evil woman turned out to be more shocking than the first.

I arrived at The Ship at a-quarter-to-twelve and had a pot of green tea steeped for her arrival. So many conflicting thoughts and feelings bombarded me that I felt I looked out through a haze when I let her in the front door. She was wearing shorts again: white ones this time and an unadorned apricot colored tee-shirt. She looked at me with her eyes gleaming fiercely again, but her voice sounded contrite. We sat down in the matching red chairs facing each other again.

"I'm afraid I took advantage of you yesterday, Jason. I got caught up in the drama of it. I love drama as much as I love mystery. And I like the role of enchantress, even sorceress. I hope you'll forgive me..."

"Forgive you? When should I do that? I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

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The sky-blue teapot with its matching cups sat on the worktable forgotten for the moment. The air currents running through the studio must have been on hiatus because “Swoop” was uncharacteristically silent.

“You really don’t remember me, do you?”

This set my heart pounding. I felt a constriction in my throat. Had I met her in a dream? “No,” I said. “Should I?”

A smile unlike any I’d yet seen crossed her face. There was a shadow across it. “I can see why you might not. I suppose I didn’t make as strong impression on you as I believed... Can I have one of those cups of tea?”

“Yes,” I said, impatient but intrigued now. “Just take it.”

“It was a little over five years ago,” she said, squeezing some honey out of the plastic bear and stirring it with a spoon. “It was the night of your twenty-first birthday. You were very happy, and very, very drunk. So drunk, I guess that you forgot. We were sitting in that little beer garden, behind Riley’s? The one with the Christmas lights? And you told me your life story, remember? An abridged version, but you made me swear I’d never repeat a word of it. You made me swear with *your* hand on *my* heart. And you had quite a handful of my heart; I’d think you’d remember that! But that’s how I know,” she said, smiling broadly now.

“I’m sorry,” she went on. “I was playing with you yesterday, Jason. I couldn’t resist. I hope you don’t think I’m cruel. I didn’t mean to be. I thought you liked the drama of it all, but then when I was about to explain it, the phone rang and you seemed so upset and so anxious to leave that I... I just couldn’t.”

My hands were trembling but I managed to pick up a cup of tea for myself. I remembered nothing about meeting her and certainly not telling her my secret; I’d been sure I hadn’t told a soul. But after being so wholly taken in by Hades, I didn’t feel secure with what she’d said to me.

“Beatrice? Beatrice Angelet? I knew your name?”

“No, I don’t really use Beatrice. People call me Trixie.”

“Trixie?” I said. “Trixie? You’d think I’d remember a name like that!”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Musical, maybe. Bell like; a little percussive. Silly? Like from a cartoon? I don’t know. I’m not

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sure why I said that. I'm stunned. I'm stunned that I don't remember you. I more stunned that I told you about my resolution... and forgot about it! I hardly believe it."

Whatever I believed, I was staring at her beautiful dark blue eyes, so dark blue they nearly matched cobalt blue crystal teardrop earrings she was wearing again.

"I've followed your artistic success," she said, taking a sip of her tea and smacking her lips. "I'm a musician, you see, and I'm very interested in your work. And though I'm not an enchantress, I do believe in them, and I'm intrigued by the musical possibilities you've uncovered. I also feel strongly about the mystic power of music. I've devoted a serious year's study to the work of Pythagoras. So, before I got us both involved in my little drama, I was planning to ask you if you'd like to have a talk about that... possibly leading to a collaboration."

The light was pouring in the studio windows and illuminating her face. Her complexion was creamy-pale; her skin looked delicate, almost translucent. Many voices were vying for the right to speak next, most of them enthusiastic, many amorous. But discretion won out.

"And my secret?" I asked.

"Well, I've kept it, of course. You were right in putting your trust in me. That might have been a risky thing to do, so you're obviously a good judge of character. But I've been wondering how things are turning out for you. I remember you told me you expected your resolution by itself would have a... what was it? A transformative effect on your life? You were eloquently drunk. So...?" She raised her eyebrows.

I wasn't ready to answer that yet. It was too soon. I didn't trust her yet, and she seemed to understand. "So...?" she said. "So aren't you going to drink that tea?"

I was staring at her. My teacup was listing in my hand, about to spill. I put it back on the table, pulled my chair closer to hers, then retrieved it and took a sip. I leaned forward to look more closely into her fiercely gleaming eyes again and... and what happened? In the next few minutes what happened? How many doors slammed shut? What number of eternities passed? Are there numbers of eternities? How many souls suffered the torments of Hell? How many souls, how many spins of that terrible drum? How

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many abominations in that few minutes, how many forevers? I don't know. I'm sure I never will, because by the time those few minutes passed, that unknown quantity of forever, I was pealing again; laughing away as when I tasted that water that quenched the thirst of multitudes, as when I tasted that food nourished me to the core.

She might have thought I was crazy, and fled. But she didn't. And whether the power of my laughter created a whirlwind or the quiet air was disturbed by some other naturally occurring forces, "Swoop" rang out more fully and tunefully as I laughed than I'd ever known it to ring out in the past. I'd already spilled my tea, so I put my cup back on the table again; and very simply then, as if we'd known each other for ages, Trixie leaned forward, reached out both her hands and took both of mine. The *Plexippus Principle* had worked it greatest wonder yet. My laughter died away; and the two of us, beaming, sitting in matching red chairs, our knees touching, held hands as the chimes above us rang on.

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Trixie was still with me in the studio at seven that evening. We'd been talking nearly nonstop since noon, and I was decidedly in love again. It didn't surprise me at all. Perhaps people who return from an eternity in Hell fall in love more easily than others. Who knows? I hadn't told her I loved her in so many words, but my feelings were obvious, and so were hers. My father had been prescient. For the second time in only days, I'd spoken to a person with whom I trusted my soul. I told her everything—or at least everything in shorthand, or the outline of everything: from the *Plexippus Principle*, to the laughing god, to the forbidding figure of Hades who'd been tracking me for years, to my eternity in Hell. We had drifted into my bedroom in what felt like a lover's dream realized. She was my heaven on earth; the touch of her skin thrilled me, every way, every time. We could have spent hours there, but we had so much to tell, so much to lay down as foundation for

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everything that would follow—and we knew a great deal would follow.

Trixie came from a family of musicians, though she resisted all attempts to make a performer of her. Her father was a composer-pianist who taught at a Chicago music college, and was, according to his daughter, no less of an eccentric than my own father. He was a man who lived in a musical wonderland and who believed that he regularly communicated with the composers of old. He was often transported away by the music he could play in his mind, and while carrying on casual conversations, he was known to suddenly weep at the beauty of the music he'd been inwardly listening to all the while. For the time being, he in fact was transported away; he and his wife, on a year's stay teaching at a university in Sydney, Australia. Trixie suspected they'd never come back except to visit. Trixie's mother was somewhat more grounded. She was a voice teacher who had toured extensively in her early years. Trixie learned the piano when very young along with the cello. I told her I thought women playing the cello were very sexy, and she promised she play for me soon, out of practice though she was. I didn't ask at the time if she'd play naked, but that was what I had in mind. When I did ask, she told me that if I'd supply the velvet cushion for her chair, she'd be happy to comply.

Although Trixie had already sent her resume to universities nationwide in hopes of landing a teaching position in a music department, she didn't feel she had it in her to live the academic life. From an early age, Trixie believed in magical powers associated with music. In short, she believed in Orpheus. She told me how she believed that if she played certain chords on the piano and then asked her mother for cookies before breakfast her mother would oblige as if hypnotized, that playing other chords would cause her mother to relent on punishments, and that others would win her friends. Years later, in graduate school, after delving into the music of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and particularly the mystic musical-numerical notions of Pythagoras, she came to believe much the same thing: that music could have invisible powers to influence the psyche. Of course every composer knows that, particularly those who write for the screen, but the kind of influence that interested Trixie was more of the enduring, spiritual nature than the

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immediate sentimental, exciting or disturbing. Eventually I told her about what Goldberg's Ghost said about art that reinforces the bonds between the human and the divine as opposed to my own art, which in fact embodied a jackass carrying a basket full of jars of mayonnaise. But I didn't get to that that first day, even though we packed in a great deal, having so much to say that more often than not we interrupted each other and had to set a short time limit on soliloquy.

"You may be able to shut me up now, Jason finch," she said at one point while wiggling into her shorts, "but I'm not going to be satisfied until I tell you every and any little thing that comes to mind, every whim, every triviality. When you come to the end of this hundred-and-fifty year thing, I'll put you out of your misery and bore you to death. That'll be sweet, don't you think? And soon I'll be telling you my dreams, first thing everyday, before you can say your morning prayers."

"So you're going to live to be a-hundred-and-fifty too?"

"A hundred-and-fifty-one, Ducky. I'm going the whole route with you, but I'm a year older, and don't forget it. How soon do you have to leave?"

I'd already told Trixie a good deal about my father. She knew how much he meant to me, and why I'd had to leave so abruptly the day before. She also knew I had to return to Hawthorn Street that evening. Soon. Something had to be done about that.

I stood and struck a formal pose. "I truly love you, Trixie," I said to her then, for the first of the many, many times I'd say that to her in the future.

"Why are you standing at attention? Shouldn't you be down on one knee?"

"Maybe you're right." I went down on one knee. "I truly love you, Trixie," I repeated. "I know it. For sure."

"You can tell already?"

"You bet I can."

"Well, I truly love you too, Jason. But I think you already know that. Are you reading my mind again?"

"No, I promise."

"But you could have whispered it to me before—when you said those other wonderful things to me?"

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"I forgot that this was necessary," I said, goose bumps rising on my skin. "You'll see what I mean later. Trust me."

Apparently she did. "Well, it's been longer for me," she said. "It started that first night out behind Riley's. You were electric. I wanted to sleep with you, but I wouldn't have been able to slow you down enough for that. I was so moved by what you told me. I don't think that qualifies as love, but I was primed. It happened when we were holding hands before—once you got finished laughing."

"Me too."

"Really? That's kind of crazy, isn't it? Unbelievable? Love at second, or really third sight? Must be your *Plexippus Principle*." She looked deeply at me then. "But you're going to have to explain why you decided to tell me so soon—without giving it a while to set in. That was daring, some might say rash."

"Like telling you my plan that first night?"

"I guess so."

"You really don't know why?"

"No. And I've trusted you long enough."

"So who has the upper hand now, Enchantress Lady?"

She gave me a look that she'd use from that day on to get precisely what she wanted.

"Well," I said, "if you're going to insist on tagging along tonight, at least I'll be able to say: 'This is Trixie, father. We're in love.'"

"This is Trixie, father. We're in love," I said. We were standing in the front door of his house. He'd just opened it.

"Alchemy," he said, reaching out to take Trixie's hand. "Thank you."

As we walked into the library, my father politely explained that alchemy, the ancient science of transforming base metal into gold, is understood by the philosophically minded to represent the transformation of the worldly to the divine, or as it applies, the transformation of negative emotions into positive, inclusive ones. Trixie already knew this, but didn't let on. Euripides squawked. "I'm sorry," my father said to Trixie. "Trixie, meet Euripides."

The parrot didn't say a thing, however.

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"I'm disappointed," Trixie said to the big gray bird. He was bobbing his head up and down as he shifted from foot to foot on his perch. "I heard you were a font of wisdom. Actually, that you had an uncanny..."

"Easy come, easy go! Easy come, easy go!" he screeched.

Thus began the Trixie's first evening on Hawthorn Street. It soon came out that my father and Trixie's were acquainted. They'd met briefly twice, my father explained, at academic functions. It seemed that their eccentric circles overlapped. Once my father learned that Trixie had spent years studying ancient music, the two of them scarcely acknowledged my presence in the room. This went on for nearly an hour until my father suddenly sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry, dear," he said to Trixie. "I hope you don't feel uncomfortable."

"I don't," she said. "Really, I don't. If you want to know the truth, I'm honored to be here." Trixie looked at me and then back to my father. "As long as—you know—my being here gives you enough room to express yourself?"

"To grieve?" my father said to her. "Is that what you mean?"

Trixie nodded.

My father thanked her. His sad eyes twinkled. Trixie reached out and touched his hand. Then she left the library and I heard her go into the kitchen, the sun porch and out the back door, as if exploring. When she returned a few minutes later, my father and I still hadn't said a thing. I couldn't remember feeling so much at home.

Trixie and I lived on Hawthorn Street for the next four-and-a-half years. Early on, a decision was required regarding what Trixie was to call my father. He told her to call him Phinny. She flatly refused. He countered, telling her Mr. Finch was out of the question. For a moment there, I thought an argument was going to break out. They finally settled on Professor, with the caveat that she never add *Finch* it. Just *Professor* would be fine, he said.

From that night on, Trixie and I occupied my room. The first time we actually *slept* together was in my childhood bed.

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"I bet you had lots of fantasies about girls in this bed," Trixie said as we gazed up into the dark. "I can practically see them hovering there in the ethers."

"Yes," I said. "They're watching to see if you meet the standard."

"High standards?"

"Not particularly."

"Did Anita ever sleep with you here?"

"No, Anita was never in the house. She never met my father. I don't think she would have fit in."

"Really? Why not?"

"She was secretly a mystic but she didn't have an unconventional upbringing. She would have appreciated my father, but from a distance I think. She may have even felt intimidated. Maybe after a while she would have been comfortable but..."

"Do you miss her?"

"I didn't for a while. You know, because I *saw* her. But then I did again. And I do. I think I'll always miss her. Is that okay?"

"*Okay* isn't the word. It's real. And of course it's okay, don't be silly. But I'm glad you think I fit in." Trixie paused and turned to look at me in the dark. "How do you suppose we've managed this so fast? And that we both trust it? I can imagine something like this happening to two people, but with one or both of them harboring secret doubts or fears. But I don't, and you don't, do you, Ducky?"

I laughed. "Hey, I'm sworn to honesty. How about you? And anyway, I've begun to *accept* miraculous gifts."

"Like charming me?"

"Uh huh."

"And like the fires of Hell?"

"Those too."

"So... Where does that leave me in the equation? An artifact in your destiny?"

"You're kidding."

"No. I wonder. *I* didn't decide to live a hundred-and-fifty years. I didn't shake hands with a laughing god. I haven't learned to accept the miraculous—or maybe I have. But whose life am I leading now? Mine or yours?"

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"Yours. And ours. Just like me. You're creeping me out. Did I tell you about Mason's theory? About women being a more evolved species than men? Well, I will sometime. I feel like I'm the luckier one here. I don't know how all this works, why I don't worry that we're both impetuous fools and will inevitably crash. But I don't. Are you worried?"

"No. It's funny, but I'm not. Maybe my miracle is that I managed to track you down. You'd never have found me on your own, you know. You might have languished. Oh, poor soul. Or maybe walked in front of a truck on Armitage yesterday if you hadn't seen such a beautiful woman looking in your studio...."

"No, that's not right. I might have been run over crossing the street *because* I saw you there. Distracted, you know, by a bare-legged seductress, a temptress, a vamp. What does that do to your little theory?"

"You wanna fight?"

"I'd love to, but my father's just beyond that wall. We'll have to do that tomorrow."

"I can wait."

Tomorrow began early with Trixie and me in the kitchen preparing French toast breakfast. Then we drove my father to the University for a meeting at ten. After we dropped him off on campus, Trixie assured me that whenever we were in the car together, she'd take care of checking to see if we were being followed. This may have been the only time I didn't laugh at one of her jokes. Then we walked along the lakefront in Evanston until eleven-thirty, when we picked him up, took him out to lunch and went back to Hawthorn Street. Then we spent a few hours straightening up the house and then drove down to The Ship for the rest of the afternoon, where we made love repeatedly and then talked while I worked on the back orders for "Swoop" and "Orbits."

"Tomorrow," I told Trixie when she asked when I'd teach her to help. "We'll come in early. If we work together, we should have them all done in a week or so, and you'll have some hands on experience for when we tackle something of our own."

"I'll bring some instruments in," she said. "My synthesizer."

"What about the cello?"

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“That too, hotsie, but the synthesizer’s special. We’ll be needing to work with true intervals, not like on a piano. When Bach wrote “*The Well Tempered Clavier*” in the first half of the 18th century, he wrote a genuine *modern* masterpiece, but he brought an end to musical magic—one kind at least. He couldn’t use the seven tone scale that Pythagoras devised. In order to write those keyboard pieces in every possible key, major and minor, the genuine seven tone scale—it’s called the diatonic scale—had to be compromised, the spaces between the notes had to be rounded off a little, otherwise you’d need a piano with thousands of keys to play something like that. But it’s also a principle of esoteric science that the cosmos *is made of things* that don’t quite fit together. If they did, there’d be no wiggle room, nowhere for randomness. Like how our year can’t be divided into an even number of days. But there’s an important difference between the true intervals separating notes and ones that are adjusted so everything fits together. You can hear it. I can, at least. And there’s reason to believe that everything around us and within us is built on those exact vibratory relations that Pythagoras built into the diatonic scale. With those intervals there’ll be no more jackasses with wedding dresses for you...”

“But that can’t be all there is to it. Use the true scales and no more nonsense?”

“Hardly, but that’s a start. Scales all over the world, from every culture, make use of the most basic relationships we know, the simplest relationships that can exist in our world: the *octave*, which just means a 2:1 relationship, where the vibrations of one tone are twice the other one; and then there’s the *fifth*, which should really be called *the* 3:2 and the fourth, which means a vibratory relationship of 4:3. The names Octave, Fifth and Fourth are very misleading. It’s the ratios that count. The Pythagorean scale goes further though: all seven notes are derived according to that order of decreasing simplicity. The trick is to learn what the pure scale *does*. People have known, and I’m sure things can be rediscovered, but you need to learn how to use it. Legend has it that Pythagoras healed with music and purified emotions on a regular basis.”

I could tell Trixie could have gone on for hours and hours. “There’s sound theory behind all this,” she said. “Everything is the universe tends to follow the line of least resistance, to sort itself out to the simplest possible combinations. That’s why those simple

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musical intervals sound appealing to everyone; and that's the same reason why the most basic human relationships and activities would probably show in ratios like the octave, fifth and fourth—if it were possible to quantify them vibrationally. So I think there are correspondences between music and our lives. We respond so strongly to music. I believe we live in musical intervals. We move along musical scales—so it makes sense that music can be a touchstone, that it can be made to fit in like a magic key.”

I leaned back and looked up at poor little “Swoop.”

“Actually,” I said. “I have a feeling for what you’re talking about, but only a feeling. The story of Orpheus grabbed me when I was just a little kid. I’ve had amazing dreams of uprooted trees and stones marching to his music. My father told me about that, but it became even more real in those dreams. But I can’t remember the music. I still don’t know what magical art is like.”

“The Gothic Cathedrals are magical art,” Trixie said. “They have a predictable, uplifting effect on people; and they were built by people in guilds that had special knowledge of how proportional relationships could align the soul with the divine, regardless of temporal conditions. Proportional relationships are just ratios like musical intervals. That’s the way I learned it. There must be more art like that, but not that I know of—I don’t have any degrees from Mystery Schools. But I’m pretty sure nothing like that’s being produced today. We don’t have the knowledge, so the things we make today elicit subjective reactions: music, art, literature, architecture, all of it, even the greatest. Let’s call it *The Jackass Principle*. But then again, I’ve read that the music of Handel *caused* the Victorian age in Britain. *Caused*. And that the music of Beethoven *caused* modern psychology, which makes some sense to me. I think I’ve still got that book someplace. Who knows? But I’d like to see what we can do with a little knowledge—a little knowledge and the best intentions. I think we should give it a shot. Maybe we won’t know *what* we’re making, but maybe we can make a little dent.”

Many such lectures followed in the coming weeks as I taught Trixie the manual skills to produce “Swoop” and “Orbits.” She believed that if we could find a way to put together a mobile that played the natural scale and was controlled by natural forces—air currents—we could produce “living music,” never heard before,

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the effects of which we might discover if we did it correctly. She couldn't imagine it could possibly have harmful results. That sounded fine in theory, but it would be my job to engineer something that would be a *conduit* for natural forces, that could harness the air without distortion. But how? By making it beautiful? By modeling it after nature?

We did much more than discussing the possibilities of Objective Art—or *Orphic Art* as we decided to call it—during those weeks. We made breakfast for my father every morning and dinner every evening. We did the laundry, dusted, vacuumed and scrubbed the floors. We did the grocery shopping. We drove my father where he needed to go, and spent many evenings talking to him in the library. And during all this Trixie and I began to fill in the blanks attendant to a “Love at Third Sight” relationship. We talked and talked and talked. We talked about our childhoods, our dreams, our embarrassments, our struggles, our friends, our studies and on and on. And every morning I repeated my many resolutions and meditated as I'd been taught. During my meditations I spoke with my mother once and once with Goldberg's Ghost. My mother soothed me and Goldberg's Ghost rebuked me. My moment ebbed and flowed but had swelled to its greatest dimensions yet, in duration and intensity. I routinely knew what Trixie was about to say and routinely ignored it. In everything I did, I felt like a being of a slightly different sort: a blessed being, but also damned, because for a portion of every fourth or fifth night, my dreams were Hell. And now Trixie was there too.

Whereas in past nights it had been my father and mother and occasionally Anita who had been impaled, disfigured, degraded and cruelly betrayed, and who had impaled, disfigured, degraded and cruelly betrayed me; it was now Trixie too who was tortured and debased and who tortured and debased me. And this, of course, with all the accompanying villainy, hatred, scorn, betrayal, filth and cowardice. All this for that little forever of dream as deep and endless as infinity. Until **3:02**. Or maybe **4:21**. Or sometimes until **6:30** when the blessed alarm killed the night.

Then one morning Helen called to tell me that Mason and Margo had stopped in at the shelter. They both looked haggard, she said. Margo was functional but Mason was not. An unintentional

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overdose had left him glazed, dazed and speechless. Margo had asked Helen not to contact me. Margo hadn't said why, but Helen assumed she was ashamed of their relapse and the condition they were in.

I had gone looking for Mason and Margo at their apartment several times during those weeks, but the place seemed abandoned. I left Trixie working at the studio that morning and drove over to try again. This time, the door was open and the place had been cleaned out. The rental agent greeted me thinking I was the party interested in seeing the apartment. My questions about my friends drew a suspicious look from the woman. She claimed they skipped out on their lease, and that she was trying to track them down. Once the apartment was rented again, she said, all their belongings, now temporarily in storage, would be sold. She wanted to know who they were to me. Friends? Relatives? A little irritated and uncertain of how I was going to answer, I looked her directly in the eye, at which, with a look of shock on her face, she took a step backwards and apologized for asking. I left doubly disturbed.

When I returned to The Ship, Trixie was just finishing a polychromatic model of "Orbits," the comma like plates painted in a rainbow succession of colors. It was already pulleyed up and above the worktable for final adjustments.

"I frightened a woman by looking her in the eye today," I said. "That's not something I want."

Trixie looked over from her work, but didn't say anything—something she did when she decided I wasn't finished.

"I was irritated with her," I said.

"Because?"

"That doesn't matter. I'm committed to seeing gradations of good."

She shook her head. "Like I don't know that, Jason? Don't be a goose. That's not why I asked. I wanted to know what happened with your friends."

I told her what I'd learned and what happened, and that I was going to visit the shelter later to see if anyone there might know their whereabouts. "But I'm pissed at myself," I said. "Not just for my abuse of power, but for not preparing for it. For forgetting I'm carrying responsibility with me on this ride."

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Trixie rolled her eyes. “The incredible growing man!” she said. “Day by day more Fearsome, more Powerful, more Aware! Mild mannered Jason Finch, launching himself unknowingly on a Cosmic Journey! A fiery path! A Mission to Enlightenment from which he cannot retreat! You want a hug, sweetie?” she said, getting up and walking toward me.

She hugged me forcefully, bending back and lifting my feet off the ground. “You’ve got to lighten up a little,” she said. “Give yourself some slack. Try some forgiveness. You’re bound to screw up every now and then. Right? Maybe you should go in there and meditate for a while. Maybe you need to talk to your mother. The last time she mellowed you out? Remember?”

The last time my mother called was after one of my nights in Hell. She seemed to know all about it before I began speaking to her. She said it was a privilege to know the depths of human suffering and that it takes the strength of a “hero” to bear that witnessing. That was all, but her tone was so buoyant and bright that it cleared away my lingering darkness. I’d wanted to complain to her that when in I was in Hell, I was there *forever*, but sensed that in her world that was a well established fact, and if that weren’t so, enduring it would be neither heroic nor useful. These thoughts in particular were the ones I befriended and let loose as I began to meditate in our bedroom that day as Trixie worked on in the studio.

“Thank you for joining me!” my mother said enthusiastically just after I settled in. Never before had my hopes to speak to her been so immediately satisfied. “I haven’t congratulated you yet on your happy union,” she said. I’d wondered about that. Hadn’t she noticed? “The two of you have been circling each other for ages, you know. She’s been in every woman you’ve loved since the Moon was in diapers. I know her nearly as well as I know you.”

I easily forgot the great comfort of intuitive immediacy, of questionlessness—weightlessness, really. My mother spoke; I knew. “Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t let your aspirations get in the way here,” she answered as if I hadn’t said a thing. “Be passionate. Romance and high mindedness don’t get on together any better than high mindedness and making your beautiful things. Don’t try to purify your love, dear. That’s not what love’s for.”

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I didn't fully understand.

"You're going to have to lose yourself. And suffer for it. Just as you do when you create. Never mind what that bully of a mentor you have has to say. What your sweetheart says is correct. The days of the Gothic cathedrals are over. Excuse me for my philosophical parlance, dear, but the wall between Objective and Subjective must be taken down. If you want to get divine, get personal. That's what true love is for. That's what all the beautiful new Gods are saying. Take my word for it..."

And she was gone.

When I walked back out into the studio, Trixie looked at me: "Ah, your comic mask! It's so becoming." she said. "I'd love to meet your mother!"

"It sounds like you have," I told her. And then I told her everything else my mother said. And that's when the idea dawned on us. Simultaneously. As if the idea had been *percolating* since the moon was in diapers. Hadn't the history of aspiration had enough of the sorry *individual*? We'd drive off the road *together*.

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BRANCHES

From that moment on, it felt as if there were three of us: Trixie and I and our grand plan. Inherent in the plan, of course, was that we continue to love each other: we wouldn't arrive anywhere at all without that. That was the easy part. But our mission also depended on the completion of our project. That was a conscious decision, a goal we set for ourselves to be realized before we *drove off the road*. We didn't devote much thought to what that road would be or where we'd drive off, or even if the metaphor would play itself out in the most literal sense. To be committed to spiritual attainment as a pair rather than individuals, however, seemed both bold and brilliant to us, a wave of the future, no matter how inchoate a resolution it may have been. The completion of our project, on the other hand, was to happen in one way only: we'd construct a piece of "living art" using Trixie's knowledge, my artistry and our combined intuition.

Trixie knew a great deal about what she was doing. Much of it was too technical for a non-musician, but I did grasp some of it. The pure, Pythagorean scale could be begun on any note, and the

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pattern of whole tones and half tones, called the “modes” proceeded up or down from that, just like our modern “keys” do, but differently in that each mode was based on pure rather than adjusted intervals. It was Pythagoras’ belief and practice that these seven modes directly affected the four elements which may be seen to compose the psychological make up of humans.

Modern astrologers still base many of their understandings on that quaternity: Water, Fire, Air and Earth, which the Pythagoreans understood to be the four Humors: The element Water governed the Phlegmatic Humor, which gives rise to sleepiness and lethargy on the one hand, and detachment and equanimity on the other. The element Fire corresponded to the Choleric Humor, which on the one hand gives rise to courage, exuberance and passion and on the other, pride, rashness and violence. Air then corresponds to the Sanguine Humor: good cheer, optimism, love, song on the one hand, and on the other to anxiety, nervousness and folly. Finally, the element Earth is associated with the Melancholic Humor which imparts solidity, firmness and spirituality, or conversely, melancholy, pessimism and depression.

Thus it’s said that Pythagoras played melodies in one of the seven modes, called the *Dorian*, to awaken and clear the minds of his students in the mornings; in the *Phrygian* mode to invoke bravery and martial impulses; in the *Lydian* mode to stimulate good humor; in the *Mixolydian* mode stimulate to devotion to the divine; and the other modes for their particular curative properties—and perhaps all the seven modes were used in various combinations for purposes unknown to us today. This was all new to me; and as intriguing as this possibility seemed, it only hinted at what Trixie intended to apply to our “living art” project.

Meanwhile, we had to survive. The income from my three musical mobiles had dwindled down to nothing and my savings were nearly depleted. We believed it might take us years to accomplish what we wanted. Fortunately, the Tunemobile craze had begun to die out as quickly as it had arisen, largely due to several scandals at mass Tune Vigils. It seemed the promoters of these gatherings had been electronically rigging the huge musical mobiles to play the eponymous tunes at a far greater frequency than any laws of probability coupled with clever design could predict. So, for example, not only did the huge mobile at “Silent Night

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Vigil” miraculously play the entire tune in tempo, but did so at midnight on Christmas Eve in a sports arena packed with hopeful (gullible) souls, thus sparking a sales bonanza of “Silent Night” products, from table model tunemobiles (with a nightly *guarantee*), to pajamas to over-the-counter sleep aids.

In light of events like these, I believed we could design and produce new musical mobiles, market them as “authentic creations by the pioneer of the art,” and take advantage of the backlash against the recently exposed frauds. All I needed to do was to convince the managers of museum stores around the country that the idea was sound. This would be most easily accomplished in person, I realized, where eye contact could not be avoided. So Trixie and I decided a little sales tour would be in line. I estimated that sales to twenty of the busiest museum stores around the country would do. If those personal contacts were successful, I believed a new musical mobile boom would follow, perhaps even catalogue sales. Best of all, however, was the opportunity to work out Trixie’s musical ideas in these smaller, mass produced models. And all this with the two of us deeply in love, while I renewed my resolutions daily, communicated with my mother and Goldberg’s ghost, lived in an expanded world of time where I could read minds and influence people, and spent every fourth or fifth night in Hell.

First, came the new prototype. A simple, undisclosed, experiment in the ancient Lydian Mode: stimulating cheerfulness and optimism at best, anxiety at worst, or far more likely, stimulating nothing at all but producing some intriguing music with slightly unfamiliar harmonies resulting from true temperament. It sounded like a simple experiment. By then I knew it would involve a prolonged cycle of anguish and joy, but now there were two of us. This was a collaboration, so I trusted the disappointments, drudgery and false hopes would be tempered by companionship.

It had to begin with a design of course, one with two separate systems so that two streams of music, one an octave above the other (*octave: at a vibrational ratio of 2:1*) could move simultaneously, creating two melodic lines and harmonies (intervals) between them. Each moving stream could include more than one note struck at the same time, thus giving rise to more complex chords of three or four notes—all formed by the purely tuned Lydian Mode. And it had to be beautiful to look at, as

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beautiful to look at as it was to listen to, or perhaps even more so. In this project, however, the beauty had to have some link to forms naturally arising in nature—at least that was the plan.

What immediately came to mind was the Fibonacci sequence—0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, etc—a simple pattern in which the last two numbers are added together to generate the next, a sequence that occurs in nature; that governs the formation of spirals in sea shells, the branching of plants, the arrangement of petals on flowers, the family trees of animals, and more. This natural pattern, serving as a structure, a delivery system, so to speak, for music based wholly on the simplest, most basic vibratory relations, those building block ratios—2:1, 3:2, and 4:3, —might, in my mind, lead to something akin to “natural” or “living” art; to a wedding of two elemental principles. And if we pulled it off, this art might... might what? Might sound and look pleasing? Might resonate with something deeply embedded within us? Might awaken something latent in our natures? I had no idea. I was fairly certain of what it would not do, however: the grand parade of trees and stones would have to wait. But I trusted Trixie’s (my true Media’s) esoteric knowledge and my own sense of design, and didn’t our two contributions combined sound like my mother’s advice? “If you want to get divine, get personal.”

So it was decided; and as with so many creative projects, this initial vision was both easy to come by and thrilling. Then we set off to work.

The initial, skeletal design for the first new musical mobile came to me quickly.

Essentially, it was comprised of two systems. Each system had two beams (one short, one long) which moved independently. To each of these systems, seven circular plates were attached, three to the short beams, four to the longer ones, their spacing following the Fibonacci sequence in inches: The short beam had plates attached 1, 2 and 3 inches apart; the longer beam with plates attached 5, 8 and 13 inches apart.

The second system was arranged the same way but suspended several feet below the first. Each of these beams was equipped with a counterweight, so that they could be hung from a point close to one end. Two sets of seven chimes were used. One

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was an octave above the other, and both were tuned to the Lydian Mode and were suspended above these beams, one with the notes of the mode descending, the other ascending, so given identical air movements and inertia for each, one would play the reverse of the other. A simple little system. Inherent in it, however, was the fact that the plates grouped close together on the shorter beams would move in smaller orbits than the more far flung members of the sequence, and so would strike the chimes more frequently.

It took us several weeks to fabricate this model, and though in principle it accomplished what we intended, it was graceless and predictable. There was nothing attractive about two 33 inch beams with 7 plates attached at ever growing distances, with chimes hanging from identical beams above them, and the music made by the clumsy looking device seemed to *cancel itself out* by virtue of the beams' strict, symmetrically-opposed arrangement. The difficult and frustrating work was still ahead: to incorporate the principle of that design into something in every way artful.

As the days and weeks working in bright, white studio went by, I missed Mason and Margo ever more deeply. Trixie had picked up the skills and techniques for producing mobiles quickly, but the atmosphere my friends had created working beside me was unique. They diverted me with their stories and kept my sense of self-importance in place with their toughness. My conversations with several of the homeless at the shelter had yielded nothing, so I decided I'd begin walking the streets of the neighborhood where I thought they might be living and trust that the *Plexippus Principle* would draw me to them or them to me.

So Trixie and I stopped working an hour early each afternoon to search for Mason and Margo before we drove back to Hawthorn Street to make dinner and eat with my father. Unlike my search for a studio, which lasted only minutes that first day as I drove west on Armitage, this search had produced no results after a week of afternoon walks. The neighborhood we ambled through was dreary and disquieting. The homeless were legion, as were requests for spare change. Naturally, I made eye contact with everyone we spoke to, and happily—though through no virtue I worked to acquire—I left most people slightly more cheerful than when they first approached me. Most people; not all of them. Some

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of the women and men Trixie and I met needed to be taken in and cared for. It took no gift of vision to see this.

It was during the second week, while we were still putting together the artless model for our new mobile, that we saw Margo. She looked like an older, gaunt version of herself. She was pacing back and forth in front of a doorway of an abandoned building. Some of the windows were broken, some boarded up; the latter scrawled with graffiti. Across the street, a building had been demolished. The lot was strewn with bricks and debris.

“Hi kiddo,” I said.

“What happened to your hair?” she answered, hugging herself, apparently chilled on the warm afternoon.

“I stared the Devil in the face,” I said. “It gave me quite a scare.”

“Really?” she asked, glancing up and down the street nervously.

“Something like that. Margo, this is Trixie,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Trixie,” she answered after stealing a glance at me. Margo suddenly sounded utterly defeated. Trixie, herself, looked stricken.

“Is there anything we can do to help you?” Trixie asked.

Margo didn’t look surprised at this question. “No,” she said. “Not really. I’d take some cash—who wouldn’t? But I’m in deep shit and that wouldn’t help get me out.” She looked down at the sidewalk. “Man, Jason, I been hiding from you,” she said. “You’re breaking my heart here. Don’t ask me about Mason. He’s not entertaining visitors this afternoon.”

Feeling I’d been scolded by an older sister, I went on anyway: “You can come back, Margo,” I said, trying but not succeeding to catch her eye. “I don’t care what kind of shape you’re in.” She continued to look away. “Trixie and I are in love. Birdie left my father, we’re living with him on Hawthorn Street now, but we’re at The Ship most every day. Just walk in. I don’t care how. I won’t meddle. I won’t offer any help. I need you to work. I need help.”

“Man,” she said to me shaking her head, a sour expression on her face. Then she looked up at Trixie. “I could use twenty bucks,” she said. Someone was approaching from down the street. It was clear he was the reason Margo was there outside that

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doorway. My heart sank like a rock when I saw how tall the man was. Trixie gave Margo the money. "You guys better get outa here," she said to us. "I'll make my way. We will, I mean."

Trixie and I walked away. When I turned back, Margo was walking in the other direction. She seemed in a hurry. Next to her walked the tall man, who turned back and looked in my direction. Despite the bright sunshine, I couldn't see his face; it seemed swallowed up in shadow, but I knew who it was. When I told Trixie, Margo and the looming stranger had turned a corner. Trixie hadn't noticed that he was menacing. It didn't take me more than a moment to acclimatize myself to the dread.

The news about Margo saddened my father even more than I'd expected.

"Couldn't you do something?" he asked. "You just left her there?"

We were on the sun porch. I was still reeling. Trixie and I had just arrived and hadn't yet made plans for dinner. My father's reaction was disturbing.

"I'm sorry," I said impatiently. "I didn't feel I could impose myself on her life..."

"A life she's throwing away. I wouldn't think it would be an imposition, Jason. She needs rescuing."

"That doesn't work with addicts. They have to agree to it," I said.

"You're certain of that?" he asked. There was a tone of defeat in his voice.

"It's the conventional wisdom. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing conventional about Margo and Mason," my father answered. "They're practically family."

Trixie slid her chair over next to my father and put her arm around him. "Sometimes love's not enough. It's a sickening feeling."

"How would you know that, dear?" he asked.

"It's an observation, professor. You just showed me. Would you like us to leave you alone? We can go rustle up some dinner."

"So I can weep in here all by myself?"

"You know best," she answered.

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"I'll be sixty-six in a week. That's not old, but I feel like an old man tonight, drained of my vitality. At a loss." He searchingly looked at Trixie. "Am I like Margo? Beyond any help but my own?"

I'd never heard my father speak like that. Clearly, his helplessness to rescue Margo, reminded him of his loss of Birdie, a loss he still keenly felt. I'd felt my father's unhappiness in the past, sometimes keenly. I'd seen him cry, but his measured words had always hidden the rawness of his sorrow. I supposed that it was in his best interest to be so openly emotional. He wasn't speaking to me, however. That was just as well. The windows were all open and the first shades of evening had begun to show in the trees outside.

"*We* love you, professor," Trixie said, looking at him with her fiercely gleaming eyes. "And that *will* help. Your friend Margo's sick. You're not sick, you're grieving..." She paused. "You're *not* sick, are you? Can you still stand on your hands?"

"What hasn't Jason told you?"

"Jason's told me everything. Even about the red shorts." Trixie smiled, got up, took my hand and led me away in the direction of the kitchen.

"*Here today, gone tomorrow,*" we heard Euripides say as we left. Sometimes the accidental pertinence of the bird's comments angered me. I could have wrung his neck. He only said it once, and this was his first and last contribution of the evening.

Trixie and I set to work in the kitchen. Margo had been a companion, but Mason was a friend. I wanted continue searching. Trixie acted as if she already knew that. We made a simple dinner of a salad and pasta. My father didn't eat much and went directly to his bedroom after dinner. There had been no further conversation regarding loss. I fell asleep worrying about him that night; worrying about him and trying to do my best to welcome the recurring images of the tall man on the street.

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Two-and-a-half months after we'd begun, our new musical mobile, "Branches," was complete and it was time to begin my cross-country journey to sell it.

We never found Mason. After a few more weeks of searching with no results, we decided the time wasn't right. I didn't feel I'd given up hope, just postponed it. Trixie predicted that he and Margo would show up at The Ship one day when we least expected it. I wasn't a seer, at least not beyond the moment at hand. I didn't know how to react to Trixie's prediction, though she'd never given me reason to doubt her in the past. There were pressing matters immediately at hand, however.

With resources running as thin as they were, I had to make a trip to my friendly banker to finance my foray. He was delighted to see me; expecting me, he said. He *was* happy to see me, but it was evident that he was lying about his premonition. It wasn't any

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subtle facial expression or look of his eyes that made this clear to me: I knew it before he spoke. I couldn't help knowing it. I also knew that the best of people played loose and easy with the truth from time to time. That didn't bother me at all. The potency of my uninvited powers did, however. I walked out of the bank with a sizeable chunk of cash in my account and a hint of concern regarding the coming days.

Before leaving town, I visited two museum stores in Chicago equipped with "Branches" in a box bearing a prototype packaging design and a sample CD of thirty minutes of its music—the age of cassettes had ended. Though the mobile remained simple in principle, the shape and sound of "Branches" had undergone a transformation since its inception. The circular plates that had been directly mounted on each of the hanging beams at intervals following the Fibonacci sequence were now mounted on graceful branches aligned in the same sequence but arching away from the beams; and rather than simple circular plates, these were in the shapes of a waxing and waning moons, from crescent to full and vice versa. These moons were painted in graduated hues of green and yellow. The two sets of chimes tuned to the Lydian mode were no longer arranged in the simplest possible ways: each set was divided into groups of 3 and 4 chimes, which, like the long and short beams, were hung independently, thereby creating more varied musical motifs when struck by the revolving moons.

Visually, what was most striking and remarkable about "Branches" was the surprising effect the Fibonacci sequence had on the moving moon shapes. Perhaps it was the bit of reality captured by naturally patterned increase in distance between each moon, because when set in motion by air currents, the moons *appeared* to accelerate or slow down on their paths, independent of the mobiles actual movements. Somehow, this mobile contained a secondary *implied* motion, which made it appear to be a living thing with a spirit. The optical effect was intriguing.

The resulting music was intricate and varied. Certain sequences and chords repeated themselves but only occasionally and never exactly. Little motifs and rhythmic patterns did naturally recur in the ever-changing, two voiced song, however. These gave sometimes tuneful, sometimes edgy, sometimes mysterious qualities to the mobile's music. To me, there was a poignant familiarity to it

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all, though I couldn't imagine ever hearing anything like it before. Then it came to me as I was falling asleep to its music. It struck me gently from such a great, sweet distance: I had heard something like it before—my mother's music; the piano music I'd heard as a little child. The memory came back to me vividly as I drifted off: my mother at the piano; shafts of light streaming through the library windows; dusts motes suspended; the feel of the carpet under my bare legs. The next morning Trixie told me she'd dreamt of Orpheus. Was this the end of jackasses and mayonnaise?

The two of us continued to listen to "Branches" for several days at the studio and for several more on Hawthorn Street. We intentionally withheld its secret Lydian intent from my farther to see if he found the music in fact "stimulated good humor." It didn't take him more than a few minutes to recognize my mother's piano music in the mobile's ever-changing melodies. Her own improvisations, he explained, not the work of any of the composers she loved. After a week of testing, however, none of us found that "Branches" stimulated noticeably up-beat, sanguine emotions. We all agreed that we were intrigued, that we loved listening to it and didn't want to stop. That would have to do.

The managers of the Chicago museum stores knew me and my gaze, and even before I quickly assembled "Branches" for them, they (so to speak) rolled over to have their bellies rubbed. The assembly was simple. The two sets of seven moon-phase plates—which were painted in gradations of warm apricot orange and cool blue-green accordingly, were simply screwed together along with a counterweight to create the both the upper and lower branch system. The upper and lower sets of chimes, each in a set of two, were pre-wired and only needed to be hung from their own orange and blue-green counterweights. To me, this mobile was the most visually pleasing I'd made. Its movements were less predictable than the others. It seemed to jump quickly from one striking spatial arrangement to another; I never felt I could *figure it out*.

Neither of these store managers, both of them women, needed any convincing that the time was ripe to reintroduce my music mobiles into the market—nor, it seemed, did they need any convincing to smile at me and flutter their eyelashes. They both wanted to hang a model as soon as I could supply one. It also seemed they both wanted to touch me. The plan was for Trixie to

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produce as many mobiles as possible during my time away. By the time I returned, we'd be able to ascertain if or how many people we'd have to hire and train for production.

Excluding my journeys to "The Golden Fleece" and to Hell—if those could be considered journeys in the conventional sense—this would be by far the longest trip I'd even taken. My father didn't take me anywhere after my mother vanished in northern Wisconsin, and I didn't travel again until I went away to college in Iowa. I was excited and a little nervous about being on the move for three weeks, but Trixie called me a goose and reminded me that just like my namesake, hellish specters notwithstanding, I was blessed by the gods.

I'd decided I'd fly to the west coast for the first leg of my journey. I began in San Diego and worked my way north through Los Angeles, San Francisco to Seattle. My first visit set the tone for nearly all that followed. After I checked into my hotel, I acted like any art-loving tourist and looked at parts of the collection at the San Diego Museum of Art, where an outstanding Calder mobile called "Beastly Beestinger" was on exhibit, along with a magnificent El Greco, "The Penitent Saint Peter," and two wonderful Matisse's. Then I went into the store. The manager was a woman. My mobiles had sold well there before, but she wasn't certain what effect the Tunemobile craze would have on future sales. Of course I made eye contact with her, but not for any but the most natural reasons. Twenty minutes later she was wildly enthusiastic about "Branches," had begun to touch me at every opportunity and asked me out to dinner. This was a very attractive young woman; she seemed suddenly crazed and was about to follow me out of the store when I left. I had to explain that I was married.

Again in The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I looked through the galleries before visiting the store. No mobiles were on display, though I saw an unforgettable Rembrandt, "The Raising of Lazarus," and a classic candlelit Georges de La Tour, "Magdalene in the Smoking Flame." I found exploring the galleries distracting because everyone with whom I even accidentally made eye contact seemed compelled to strike up a conversation and walk along with me. Before long, some museum visitors took me for a tour guide. In the store at that museum, it was a very attractive young *man* who became inordinately enthusiastic about "Branches," who

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would have had his hands on me if I'd shown any willingness but nonetheless invited me out for drinks somewhere exotic in Hollywood. He too, had been skeptical at first, but once he'd seen the mysterious *apparent* movements within the mobile and heard its music, he believed that it would be a "smashing success." I had a similar experience at the J. Paul Getty Museum, where I only managed to get a brief look at Van Gogh's magnificent "Irises" before I attracted a following and fled to the store. Here as well, the young female manager seemed romantically inclined toward me and scarcely needed to look at "Branches" before she put in her order. There was a great Rodin collection at the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco, where I saw his "Kiss," "The Thinker," and felt that Anita's sculptor spirit was accompanying me. As I'd discover in many American Museums, Calder prints were numerous, but mobiles rare; though there in San Francisco, I saw several beautiful Chagalls. My eye-contact-induced Pied Piper problems in the galleries continued, though I was safe outside where I could contemplate the sculpture with sunglasses on. The middle aged woman who managed the store neither touched me nor invited me anywhere, but called "Branches" "spellbinding," wanted one hanging there immediately, and seemed reluctant for me to leave with nothing more than a promise.

Once outside again, I put my sunglasses back on and walked around the city undisturbed. Back in my hotel—where the staff, like those in the other hotels I'd visited, reacted to me like I was a visiting dignitary—I ordered a room service dinner to avoid going to a restaurant and possibly stirring the place up. I did stir up the Hispanic woman who brought my dinner, however. She had very little English but her touch was international.

Outside the Seattle Art Museum, stood Calder's huge red, steel, six ton sculpture "Eagle." Calder's fixed sculpture or "stables" as he called them, didn't interest me as did his kinetic art, but his lines alone taught me a good deal. I was getting wary of going into museum galleries at all, so despite the collection of Asian art I wanted to see, I regretfully refrained. But again I was faced with a very appealing young woman in the store: this one tall, dark-haired with green eyes. It would have been rude to have left my sunglasses on. We did our business quickly; she too was easily convinced that "Branches" would be a big seller. But apparently

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she was not as easily convinced that I didn't want to see her after she got off work. She told me she loved my hair; that white hair on such a virile young man "aroused her." She seemed genuinely upset when I refused her dinner invitation on the grounds that I was married, and I thought the matter was settled until she knocked on my hotel room door with a bottle of wine in her hand. She'd followed me back there. She told me they made great wines in the State of Washington. I would have had to use force to keep her out of the room, and once inside, she didn't hesitate to tell me that she felt a powerful "animal and spiritual" attraction to me, that it felt like love at first sight, and would I please drink some wine with her and just "see what happened" if we made love.

I didn't realize that was what happens when one shakes hands with a laughing God. I certainly never had this effect on women before visiting "The Golden Fleece." Perhaps the changes brought about by my disciplined meditation and daily resolutions contributed to this effect, but I doubted that. And even if I weren't already wholly in love, even if I were looking for it, I would have been reluctant to use this power of mine which I hardly understood and which clearly affected people in an unnatural way. I *think* I would have been reluctant. I *probably* would have been reluctant. There's no getting around the fact that I was tempted. This was the realized fantasy of a great percentage of psychologically hearty males. Her closeness and fragrance had me primed. Her shoes were already off. "Let's just drink some of this and see how it *feels* to be together," she repeated. Her name was Daphne. "The way *I* feel right now," she said, "I'd do anything for you."

Aroused though I was, and smiling, I was literally backing away from her

"You're a beautiful woman, Daphne," I said. This was true. "I'm flattered. And I'm sorry to disappoint you. Really, I am. I can imagine how that must feel. But I'm sorry, I'm in love and committed, so let's stop this before it goes any further... okay?"

I knew that wouldn't do it, though; I knew she would come at me and she did. She took a step closer, put her hands on my shoulders and her forehead against mine. There was one other point of contact too: her erect nipples through her blouse against my chest. The greenness of her eyes was shocking. Then she made a noise like a cat.

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“No-o,” I said as kindly as I could, pushing her away. She had a somewhat maniacal smile on her face now and I knew she was about to tackle me, so just as she lunged, I leapt aside. The result of this maneuver was unfortunate. She’d meant to tackle me onto the bed, but as I jumped away, the crazed woman tried to alter her course mid-air, landed on the edge of the springy bed and careened onto the floor, striking her head sharply on the corner of the bedside table on they way down. The nightmare events with Anita on the bench in frozen Glove Square snapped into my mind. Beautiful Daphne, store manager at the Seattle Art Museum, was unconscious and bleeding on my hotel room floor, her short skirt hiked up around her waist.

“Oh, my!” I heard in my head. It was my mother, who was apparently present. How often was *she* hanging around? But I ignored her and picked up the phone for the desk.

After the paramedics took marginally conscious Daphne away to the closest emergency room, the detectives who arrived had a number of questions for me. They in no way resembled television detectives: they were neither quirky, brilliant, nor ruggedly handsome. They looked like auto part salesmen, one tall, one short. At first they’d assumed Daphne was a high-end call girl, but once they were assured she was not, the short one said my story seemed “a little outa whack.” That I was *fighting off* such a beautiful woman who was “coming on to me” didn’t seem as likely as my *getting rough* and “knocking her around” because she wouldn’t “put out,” he said. When the tall one suggested they might “take me in” for further questioning, I felt I had no choice.

I fixed the two detectives in my gaze, one after the other, and very slowly and deliberately repeated my story adding a detailed account of everything that happened to lovely Daphne since she entered my room, uninvited. I also saw to it that I smiled whenever I referred directly to the detective to whom I was speaking, tall or short. By the time I’d finished, I was concerned for the men’s wellbeing. Not only did every indication of doubt at my story or mistrust of me disappear, but both of them, particularly the tall, slightly gawky one (Detective Snith,) seemed drugged, glassy-eyed, almost robotic. I was worried that I’d caused them psychological or even neurological damage. Never before had I consciously harnessed whatever it was that my eyes conveyed and

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focused it at anyone with a purpose. Never before had I used powers associated with “Sipping from Noah’s Cup” for manipulative purposes. Despite my earnestly troubled conscience, I couldn’t deny that I also enjoyed giving the two well-meaning men a little *zap*. If I had to pay; I’d pay.

When the detectives left, they told me that I was a model citizen, the kind they needed more of in Seattle, thanked me profusely for my concern about Daphne’s recovery, and the short one (Detective Trowl) assured me he’d contact me on my cell phone with any news. As soon as the door closed behind me, I sat down on my bed, closed my eyes and wished for my mother.

She didn’t answer, but I was relieved that Goldberg’s Ghost didn’t answer either, not yet. I didn’t feel prepared for any rebukes, however, so I called Trixie and filled her in about the events of the day. She didn’t seem upset by the Daphne story. She suggested that I claim to be blind so I could wear sunglasses indoors.

“But I’d need a white stick,” I said. “And a blind artist? How would I explain that?”

“You’d say you had an assistant. Your eyes. Me.”

“But wouldn’t it be more convincing if you led me around then?”

“Like a dog?” she asked.

“I guess.”

“If I were a dog, I’d travel with the luggage. That way we might be able to afford the extra airfare.”

“If you were a dog, there’d be other problems, though.”

“Woof! Not if you were a dog too.”

I didn’t answer right away.

“I’m staying here tonight,” I said. “I’ll go in the bathroom and hide when I order room service. Tomorrow I’m headed for Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. There’s a wonderful place in Dallas, The Nasher Sculpture Center with a whole mess of Caders. I’m pretty excited about that. I’ll have to go inside though. I hope I didn’t damage those two cops...”

“Why do you suppose so many of these shops are managed by beautiful young women who want to touch you?”

“Not so many, Trix. Just three out of five so far.”

“I have no suggestions for you, Ducky. Be like Ulysses; bind yourself to your mast. I can’t imagine it can get any worse.”

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“The east coast will be worse,” I said. “That’s where all the Calders are, and I’d really like to go in and see them all.”

Trixie said I had every right to see them, that I should just do my best, that I should remember to lighten up, that she was getting a lot of work done, and that I’d be amazed when I got back. Then we said good night, and I when I fell asleep, I went straight to Hell.

Experiencing this horror on a regular basis makes it no easier to describe. To be wholly paralyzed and unable to make a sound as the torments of excruciating itching rampage across one’s body is neither unimaginable nor indescribable. What can’t be brought to mind or put into words is that idea that as this happens it happens *forever*. Just like watching one’s true love tortured—and then being the torturer, endlessly. Just like being compelled to bathe in unimaginable filth while overwhelmed with thirst, without end; just like being closed in upon in humid darkness by stinking, shrieking animals, forever. Just like feeling one’s father endlessly crank a vice closed on one’s temples until one’s skull splits and sprays him with blood, again and again and again. Like that. Like the unbearable loneliness of a hopelessly lost child, a lost child who’s been blamed for his own tragedy. Waking then, still rigid in midnight black. No clock numbers. Hotel curtains closed to the dawning light. Then simply a shower and breakfast in that same room that hours before held timelessness with its stink and terror within it. Then, as on every morning of my trip, I repeated my longevity resolution along with my six secondary vows.

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Regretful though I was about it, I didn’t enter the galleries of the Phoenix Art Museum, the Tucson Museum of Art or the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History. No doubt these institutions housed excellent collections. In Phoenix, I was particularly interested in the 17th century Indian bronze “Shiva Natarajia,” the four-armed dancing God of Destruction I saw pictured in a poster in the store: it reminded me of the statue in Goldberg’s front yard. I also wanted to see the Pre-Columbian works in Tucson, but the store managers were quite enough to deal

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with—again young and disarmingly attractive. With both, I had to put my sunglasses on indoors to escape. In Albuquerque, though the city and Museum were inviting, the store manager was an ill-tempered middle-aged man, who in no way seemed attracted to me. I didn't think I needed sunglasses there, but again I felt physically threatened, because he (in all seriousness) wanted to wrest my traveling model of "Branches" out of my hands so he could install it immediately. He too, was intrigued by the perplexing optical effects it created. He said it looked to him like the mobile was "thinking" as it moved and played music, that maybe it was "composing."

But it seemed I faced problems of one sort or another wherever I went. This was no vacation. There were times when I had to remind myself that this journey and indeed everything else Trixie and I were doing was meant to prepare us for one thing: our great adventure, our pioneering quest: *Holding hands into eternity? Driving off the Road? Falling off the edge?* I was stretched very thin. The distance between my two worlds felt greater than ever.

Since it was perpetually sunny during my travels in the southwest, my decision to wear my sunglasses at all times didn't seem all that inappropriate. I eventually wore them everywhere during the days, outdoors and in, and in the evenings as well whenever eye contact was possible. My eyes—with their disturbing powers of attraction and persuasion—were exposed only when I was alone in my hotel room.

My visits proceeded successfully and without serious incident until I arrived at The Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. Anita would have loved the place. There was magnificent modern sculpture outdoors: a stunning piece by Mark Di Suvero, a gorgeous one by Naum Gabo called "Constructed Head" and a classic Henry Moore "Reclining figure." Indoors there were marvelously, tall, thin, lumpy figures by Giacometti—one of Anita's favorite sculptors, and the two most beautiful Calder's I'd yet seen: a standing mobile (a kinetic work on feet) called "The Spider" and a hanging one called "10-5-4." I was spellbound as I watched these mobiles move. I felt I'd been starving to see them. Ideas for my own work cascaded across my mind.

Unfortunately my passion caused an unexpected stir. In my deep concentration on these works of the one and only master of my

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art, I apparently emitted a slight glow—this according to one woman and her young daughter who saw me standing staring at the red, black and white “10-5-4” moving above me. The simple mobile seemed to arise as it moved, to defy gravity, to unfold upward. I could have watched it for far longer than I did, but both the woman and her young daughter standing near me shrieked. I immediately turned away from the mobile. Apparently my lack of passionate concentration extinguished my purported glow, and the witnesses to it were warned against another outburst by a museum guard, to whom I apparently looked normal, albeit wearing sunglasses in a museum gallery. The museum officials, however, took the incident more seriously, no doubt because the woman who saw the physical manifestation of my joy used the word “radioactive” as she recounted her impression of me. That her daughter said I was “a white-haired man from outer space” may or may not have influenced them.

I was sequestered along with a dumpster in a small enclosed area out of doors until the HASMAT team arrived. The search and scan with a Geiger counter by a man in a silver space suit was not the end of the investigation, however; because once the HASMAT squad was satisfied that I was not a radiation threat, an expressionless man with a flattop, black suit, white shirt and thin black tie began to question me aggressively about my background, my connections with the “research community” and the reason for my trip. This interrogation ended abruptly, however, when I took off my sunglasses and smiled at him—again with a certain relish, I should add.

“She must have been hysterical,” the agent quickly concluded, shaking my hand warmly. Then he winked. “Maybe it’s that time of month.”

“What about the little girl?” I asked, just to see how he’d respond.

“Monkey see, monkey do?” he offered timidly.

I didn’t press him any further. Yet those two shrieks—gasping shrieks, really—disturbed me more deeply than my brush with the authorities, particularly when I considered them afterwards. I felt like canceling the rest of my trip. Moreover, I felt my genuine concern regarding my future. I hadn’t bargained for this. Sure, I

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supposed I'd always be a bit of a smart-ass, but I wanted to be a *good* influence, a *benevolent* smart-ass.

"No, no," Trixie said when I called her from my hotel room. "There's got to be a way to mask it, or suppress it. You don't want to end up living like a hermit."

"I know. I'm upset."

"Maybe you should go back to Goldberg and ask him to check it out."

"I'd rather have all my teeth pulled out.... But actually I *have* had that done, repeatedly, but you know what I mean."

"Well..."

"I never want to talk to Goldberg again. That would be a last resort."

"What would be the first?"

"I have no idea. Maybe I'll ask my mother. Or Goldberg's Ghost. And I'm pretty sure Poseidon could help... if and when we get there... My god, Trixie! Listen to me! I'm still not used to this. I'll *never* get used to this. Saying I'll ask *a god's advice* the next time I run into him? Like asking a pharmacist what he'd recommend for a sinus headache?"

"Do you have sinus headaches?"

"No, Trixie."

"What about meditating?" she asked after a pause. "Maybe you could pull an answer out of the ethers."

I'd taught Trixie to meditate the way Goldberg taught me. She'd already had some experience with a different style of meditation, so she picked up the technique quickly—more quickly than I had, actually—and many mornings we meditated together. Goldberg's technique, however, was not goal oriented. Its purpose was simply to quiet the mind, to clear the lens, to open oneself to the divine—not to find answers to questions. Answers did occasionally arise afterwards; I'd had that experience more than once, but had no idea how to begin with a question in mind.

I told Trixie I could try.

"Or I could," she replied. "You ever think of that?"

Actually, I hadn't.

"We're *of one mind*, aren't we?"

We were. It sounded like a great idea to me. But I was still upset. By the time I got off the phone, however, she'd worked some

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kind of palliative magic, because I was eager to conclude my trip as planned.

Outside at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, I saw Calder's "The Spinner," a large standing mobile, and I peeked inside to see another one, far more beautiful, simple and all black. In Kansas City, I couldn't resist entering the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art to see a large, untitled 1957 painting by Franz Klein, an artist I love, whose work in black on white often resembles brush calligraphy blown up to an enormous size. The painting thrilled me, and I wasn't aware that I was observed. I conducted my business in the store successfully then, though uncomfortably. Trying to explain that I had an unusually sensitive eye condition requiring sunglasses made me grimace—perhaps again giving the impression I suffered from Tourette's or was simply deranged. It was when I left to head back to my hotel that I realized an elderly man was following me. Evading him would have been easy, but given his age and distinguished manner, I stopped and looked in his direction as he approached.

"Thank you for waiting," he said. "My name is J. Norbert Nash... You are?"

My sunglasses were firmly in place. "Jason Finch," I answered, doing my best to retain a neutral expression. "What can I do for you, Mr. Nash?"

"I am a member of the Omega Society. Are you familiar with our work?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"We are a society dedicated to the extraordinary in life, Mr. Finch. Something I believe you may be familiar with. You see, I am a sensitive. Are you aware of what that means?"

This well-dressed old man had a fringe of snow white hair and a mustache of the same color. Though he showed no visible limp, he carried a walking stick.

"Why don't you tell me?" I said.

"Would you mind?" he asked, indicating a nearby bench, painted red, white and blue with an ad for an insurance company across the back.

Mr. Nash sat down close to me. "A sensitive is one gifted with spiritual sight. The gifts may vary: sight is not restricted to

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seeing, though in my case, it is. It is a blessing I've carried since my early years. And in the gallery, I saw that you emanated a subtle yet vigorous aura, one indicative of considerable spiritual authority. May I ask how you acquired this gift?"

I knew the question before it passed his lips. My answer was prepared. "That isn't something I like to discuss, Mr. Nash. It's personal."

"May God grant you that reprieve," he said.

This surprised me. I wanted him to elucidate.

His expression was perplexed; but J. Norbert Nash may have been more gifted than he realized. It seemed he heard my request, or maybe he just made a lucky guess.

"Very well," he said. "I should inform you that one with powers like yours is in ever increasing danger."

I saw that he was not referring to the problems I'd already encountered on my trip. He had something very different in mind. I could taste it. Then he said it. "We in the Omega Society are an allied group of abductees. What makes our group unique is that all its members, like you, have natural telepathic, clairvoyant, mediumistic or other paranormal gifts. We have concluded that certain alien entities, perhaps organized, have focused their abductions on gifted humans like ourselves. Mr. Finch, there is reason to believe the motives for our abductors are sinister, and I urge you to meet with us soon in regard to your own security."

"You've been abducted?"

"I have."

"You mean you were taken to an alien space craft? And... probed?"

Mr. Nash looked troubled at this question. "Yes. I was examined invasively. I was."

"Who were they? What did they look like?"

Mr. Nash paused before he answered this. Perhaps he was taking the temperature of my aura. "A clairvoyant among us has determined they are of the Flutarian Race from a planetary system of the double star Regulus. They're looks fit the accepted alien mold seen since the first abductions in the late 1940's. If you wish to learn more, I'll give you an address for a meeting here in Kansas City. But I'm afraid there's more than your curiosity at stake here, Mr. Finch. I wouldn't have approached you if I didn't feel you were

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in danger. This is a ruthless race bent on galactic domination. A Flutarian can spot an aura like yours from light years away.”

“Light years... really?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. But there is head-gear,” Mr. Nash said. “And body armor—protective, you know.” Beads of sweat had formed on his pink, bald head.

“Which is available...?”

“Yes. An engineer among us has fabricated it.”

“An aura... deflector?”

“It’s called a PVD. A personal vibratory *diffuser*. It requires some individual tuning, but it’s sold on six continents.”

I looked at Mr. Nash carefully. “Wouldn’t an aluminum foil hat and coat do just as well? Maybe with a little spinner on top of the hat?” I asked.

Mr. Nash did not smile. He was hurt. He’d trusted me and I knew it, but I really didn’t care. The man was a lunatic. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve been having a hard time.”

“You have no idea,” he said. He handed a card. The Omega Society: J. Norbert Nash, Associate Member.

But of course I *did* have an idea. When we shook hands goodbye, I made it a point to take off my sunglasses and smile warmly at him—maybe zap him a little, but he showed no reaction at all. Maybe *he* was a Flutarian.

It was a long time since I’d been so unfeeling—and had enjoyed it. Perhaps it was the prolonged stress of this trip that so easily turned me mean. Of course, it wasn’t for me to judge whether Mr. Nash had it coming or not—or whether he was a lunatic, for that matter, which I was certain he was. The sensation of being unkind stuck with me for the rest of the day. So did the absurdity of his claim.

The incident with J. Norbert Nash intensified my feeling of how long this trip had become. St. Louis was ahead, Cincinnati, Cleveland, where at the Cleveland Museum of Art, I ventured inside and devoted thirty seconds of contemplation to one of Calder’s hanging works, called “Two Systems.” As soon as I felt my joyousness begin to percolate, I left the room. I wouldn’t want to expose any pregnant women, so I went directly to the museum store to conduct my business. Then on to the huge Detroit Institute of Art, where I did not see the Kline and the Caravaggio, but had the

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store manager sold within a minute. Then to Louisville, where I skipped the Henry Moore at the Speed museum, but the store manager said he'd seen me in a dream the previous night. Then to Nashville, New Orleans, Birmingham, Tampa with similar results. Then down to Miami, where I didn't see the two Joseph Cornels—the box and the collage. Then onto the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, where I didn't see the Rothko and the Monet, but was lauded as a genius by the elderly woman in charge of the store; and then to Charlotte, then up to Baltimore, and then, the most intensive stops. Every morning, of course, I renewed my longevity resolution, even though I felt it contributed to my unwanted effulgence. I also reminded myself of the unprecedented adventure Trixie and I had in store, though trying to imagine it was like trying to use a cauliflower to measure the distance to the moon.

But by the time I arrived in the Northeast, I was out of steam, so all my stops were brief. I didn't need much time to convince anyone; more and more people were taken by the mobiles apparent inner workings that were some way or other *caused* by the movements of the Fibonacci sequenced elements. I could have sold paintings of Elvis on black velvet in the stores I'd visited so far. I continued to wear sunglasses indoors to avoid eye contact with managers but no longer bothered offering an explanation. The facial contortions involved in lying had become too disturbing embarrassing for me to bear. I preferred appearing to be a drug addict hiding his tell-tale eyes. Sadly, the only place I relaxed was at the Rodin Museum at the Philadelphia Museum of Arts, where I lost myself in the deep, warm memory of Anita and her love for that Master French Sculptor.

It was while I was still invoking the comfort of Anita's presence, that my blood froze. There, standing a full head above the rest of a group of museum visitors on tour with a docent, was that hideous, venomous man—or god, or god's emissary, who had clearly *not* forgotten me. Again, his face was enclosed in shadow—all but his animal eyes. He looked directly at me. I recoiled. I could feel the penetration. And then he and the group were gone. There was no trace of them. Had I imagined this?

Washington and New York alone were packed with museums, a number of which had Calder mobiles. Exhausted as I was, these I

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had to see. The National Gallery in Washington had two I visited briefly, one hanging and one standing. The Hirshhorn in the same city had a simple, powerful standing mobile, "Six Dots over a Mountain," this, fortunately out of doors; and then indoors again the Phillips Collection, I saw his "Red Polygons." I must have emitted something there, however, because several people gaped and pointed at me before I rushed out. The Guggenheim in New York displayed Calder's magnificent "Red Lily Pads" with its exclusively horizontal, pad-like red plates, which I studied from directly below despite the risk. His famous "Lobster Trap with Fish Tail," perhaps the funniest of his mobiles, hung in the Museum of Modern Art. A standing Mobile, "Object with Red Disks" was at the Whitney. I escaped both these museums without incident. There was a Calder silk screen at the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, but no mobiles, so I didn't go in. My last stop was in Boston. It made me a little sick to leave the Museum of Fine Arts without even peeking in, but there were no mobiles there, just drawings, and I was peaked (peeked) out.

I'd learned a great deal from the Calder's I'd seen. Many of his mobiles had plates mounted on rising beams, creating upwardly sweeping, even bristling effects, effects in apparent defiance of gravity. This new knowledge alone and my intent to incorporate it into my own work made the trip worthwhile. Despite everything, I felt I'd come out on top.

I'd just left the venerable museum in Boston. I was standing on the semi-circular sidewalk outside, wondering whatever became of Daphne. Detective Trowl had never called me back to update me on her condition. Perhaps his memory had been affected by my "super-power." That's when the man who was looking at me suddenly approached. He didn't look like the flying saucer type, but one never knows, so I answered him cautiously when he walked up and spoke.

"Congratulations," he said to me. Sensing my uncertainty, he continued. "I'm here to congratulate you on your success... The success of your undertaking."

This man was slight, middle aged, with dark brown hair, a kind face and dark eyes. His features vaguely reminded me of someone. He was dressed in a grey business suit with a white shirt

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and colorful necktie. His black shoes were polished to a dazzling shine.

“Don’t confuse your surprise with concern,” he said, speaking directly to my questioning self. “Consider me inexplicable. Interested parties follow your progress. Unobtrusively... for the most part, at least. We try. You can take off your glasses. It’ll be all right. I’m only symbol.”

I stood perfectly still for a moment, inwardly and outwardly. I was fine. I was *good*. I understood. Then I took off my glasses. Not a trace of him remained.

I slept all the way on the flight back to Chicago. Then again on the cab ride from O’Hare back to Armitage Avenue. I never took my sunglasses off. When I walked into The Ship, both Margo and Mason were sitting at one of the worktables with Trixie, drinking coffee. There was a near empty box of “Joey’s Famous” on the table too. Only one piece was left. I didn’t even ask. It was as good as ever, even cold.

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Margo looked a little better than she had when I saw her three months earlier, not as worried, at least. Mason looked as if he'd enlisted in the ranks of the living dead. The studio looked like a bustling mobile factory. There were piles and piles of arched beams with moon plates at their ends. There were piles and piles of chimes assembled in their sets. Scraps of metal were strewn on the floor, along with dust and drops of paint. Parts of "Branches" in various stages of assembly hung from the pulleys and different heights, enough chime sets in the Lydian Mode hung close enough together to generate a stardust twinkling of tone like an enchanted set of back yard wind chimes.

After wiping the pizza crumbs off my mouth, I kissed Trixie, hugged Margo and sat down at the table across from Mason. He was staring into his empty coffee cup. "Do you want some more coffee?" I asked.

His clothes were clean but he looked like he hadn't finished dressing or that someone else had dressed him. He glanced up at

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me; his eyes flat and lifeless. I felt sick and angry at the same time, but then he spoke. "Hey, whatcha got goin', man?"

Margo was behind him in an instant, encircling him in her arms. She looked astonished. She was about to say this was the first Mason had spoken in months, and I let her say it.

"What is it?" I asked Mason. "About me?"

"You're lit, man. You're lit." he said, but then seemed to lose the connection he had. He stared back into his empty cup.

Trixie looked at me earnestly. "I invited Margo and Mason to stay here for a while until they got back on their feet again," she said. "I hope it's okay. I wanted to surprise you."

I remembered that she'd confidently predicted their return. I knew the two of them no longer had their apartment and needed a place to live. I also suspected that they were still using and had mixed feelings about providing them a home under those conditions. Mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were my friends and I'd give them shelter if they had leprosy; on the other, the residue of my conventional self was repelled and frightened by street drugs. If I were to have a third hand, however, on it I would implicitly trust Trixie, so despite my reservations, the matter was settled.

"How long have you guys been here?" I asked Margo

"Trixie just invited us yesterday. We spent the night," she looked at me tentatively, then smiled at Trixie. "Your sweet lady stocked the fridge for us, and I was starting to get back in the swing of assembly just as you walked in...with your... your laser vision."

Margo was thin; in light of her former bouncy self, emaciated. I smiled at her. "Time to plump you up," I said. "Just write out your shopping list, or come with to the store if you like." I looked at Mason, then back to Margo. "So how are you feeling?" I asked her, sensing that she had something other than an answer waiting.

"Jeez, Jason, why don't you just come out and say it? You're messing with me. I'm an adult. An adult drug addict."

It's remarkable how one can feel so powerful one day and so weak the next.

"So... what's the situation with the drugs?" I asked.

"My honey here can't have anything stronger than an occasional pharmaceutical. I've got a script for that. And I'm

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trying. I already promised Trixie I won't keep my stash in your studio...."

"Is that practical?" I asked. "Safe?"

"For me or the stash?"

"Both, I guess."

"It's safe for me but not for the dope. I told you I'm trying.... What else?"

"I'm that transparent?"

"To me, sweetheart, but I have vision."

"Would a program help?"

"Yeah. Sure a program would help, but the good ones cost. Bein' around you will help too...you remember that, and I can get paid for bein' here, and getting paid'll get us outa here! Meanwhile, I need to take care of my buddy." At this, she gave me a look that read, "*Don't ask about him when he's around.*"

"Jesus Christ!" Margo said to Trixie when I nodded in answer to her silent admonition. "Who we got here? The Great Kreskin?"

Trixie had heard everything about my trip except for the fleeting materialization of my hopes in front of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts the day before, but I repeated certain highlights for Margo and Mason's benefit as Trixie and Margo continued to preassemble sets for "Branches." It wasn't clear what Mason understood. He did look at me frequently, smiled once or twice, but appeared sadly disabled. Assembly work seemed out of the question. When he did look my way, however, I consciously called upon any powers I might have had and fixed him in my gaze. One never knows.

I'd promised the store managers I'd send them demonstration models of the new mobile as soon as I returned to Chicago, and the supply on hand greatly exceeded the twenty-one I'd committed to. The cardboard packing boxes hadn't yet been printed with pictures and instructions, but I had enough plain ones to pack the models we'd mail out the next day. Once I managed to stop talking, I packed some of them myself.

I felt fussy leaving Margo and Mason at The Ship and reminding Margo to lock up if they went out and when they went to bed, but she smiled at me indulgently (again like an older sister) and told me not to worry. Trixie and I drove to Hawthorn Street the

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long way so we'd have plenty of time to talk. But before she told me about the arrival of Margo and Mason—as soon as we got in the car, actually—she told me that I'd changed.

"You have a new look in your eye, Ducky. It's so bright that we may not need headlights; you just look out the front window. I'll check the rear for you, don't worry. I can see why you need to cover it up. You practically raised Mason from the dead. But you look cool wearing your shades; it'll be your new look." She reached across and took my hand. "We'll wait for your father to fall asleep... I want some of that *tonight!*"

"Is it really that obvious?" I asked.

"Oh, sweetie, is it obvious! You're look like...like those pictures of Masters of the Secret Brotherhood you see in old books on occultism—you know, with eyes that look right through you; or like something out of Japanese animation. I was already tuned to you, duck man; so was Margo, I guess, and it took *us* a while to adjust. I'm not kidding about the sunglasses in public. You could get arrested."

"What about the glowing?"

"I didn't see that... or haven't yet. It looked like Mason did, though. Maybe you should order one of those diffusers the flying saucer guy told you about."

"I thought you were going to meditate me an answer for that."

"I tried, but it didn't work. I'll keep trying. Maybe we'll have to meditate together. I did accurately predict Margo and Mason's return, though."

"They just showed up? Yesterday?"

"When I came down yesterday, Margo was lurking in the doorway. She startled me, but I recognized her, of course, and didn't have to act glad to see her, because I was. I invited her in and when I told her you were away, she got all apologetic and wanted to leave, but we got over that pretty quickly. I did my best to assure her that we'd talked about it and agreed that she and Mason were welcome to stay there if they needed to, and once I said all that, she dropped the apologies and said she'd go get him. You were right about how she doesn't prevaricate. She's great; I really like her. She told me that they'd blown nearly all the money they'd saved and that all the things they'd left in their apartment had been sold.

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Then she went on about what we'd already heard about the overdose, and how given his pre-existing condition—which she called 'burnt out-whacked-out-fucked up'—Mason was now 'totally fried.' I asked her if they'd seen a doctor about it, and she said only at the emergency room, where they said he was lucky to be alive, but nothing beyond that. I asked her if they'd like to see a doctor, and she said there was no place in her life for any more bad news.

"Well, about forty-five minutes later she comes back with Mason following behind her stooped over like a big, undernourished dog. He might as well have been on a leash. I don't know how far they came, but it might not have been far considering how slowly Mason walked—or plodded. I tell you, he moved like an old man. Like a zombie. Zoned out. Completely. But he came in when I opened the door and went right to that work bench where he was today and sat down, slowly, but as if he was comfortable there. He didn't shake my hand; he barely glanced at me. He did look up at the mobiles though. That was the only sign of life. And he ate—a sandwich—but I couldn't watch. He didn't miss his mouth or anything; it was just so slow and pathetic. I remembered what you said about his abstract mind, about 'Mason's Law of Accumulation' and his insightful theory about women, and I remembered how you said he worked so well on the mobiles, and it just made me feel sick. Like your father, I suppose, but this was losing someone I never really had.

"So what happened when you walked in was astonishing, Jason. It was like a statue rising and speaking. Maybe you can fix him. Have you thought of that?"

"I've thought maybe I can help. How's my father?"

"He's pining for Birdie, but I told him about Margo and Mason being back, and think it's getting easier for him. You being back will help a lot. He loved it when you called. Did you tell him everything?"

"No. I left out some things so I'd have a good story when I got back. And nothing about the apparition, of course. And there's something you don't know either. You'll have to wait."

"I told you I'd harm you if you did that to me again."

"It'll just be a little while, sweetheart. It'll make it more exciting for you."

"Does it come at the beginning or the end?"

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“At the end. When it really happened—or didn’t happen.”

“You scum sucking rat. I’ll stop the car. I’ll push you out. I really will.”

§

Fixing Mason, becoming a recluse (or ordering a PVD from whacko, Mr. Nash), filling orders upon orders for “Branches” while gradually working out plans for our piece of “living art,” becoming at one with Trixie, these concerns were swimming in my mind when Trixie and I entered my father’s house that October evening in 1995.

My father’s eyes widened when he opened the door. I was getting used to it by then, and I shrugged apologetically.

“My heavens, Jason! You look like Apollo! Are you well?”

I looked down at my feet and shook my head. “I’m fine. I just radiate a little light out of my eyes—and sometimes glow, too.”

Trixie took me by the arm and led me inside. She laughed.

“I told him we didn’t need headlights,” she said to my father. He laughed too. I was surprised.

“He’s lit up like a Christmas Tree,” Trixie went on. “Maybe we can use him as a back up generator if the power goes out.”

“Indeed,” said my father, looking at my face. “Can you feel it, Jason?”

Trixie had hung our jackets up in the hall closet. We went into the library where we sat in our accustomed places: Trixie and I on the little leather sofa and my father on one of the wing chairs.

“I haven’t tried,” I answered, somewhat petulantly. “I mean I don’t feel anything *automatically*, but I suppose if I concentrate on it I may feel something. But then again, if I concentrate, I might get brighter.”

Trixie was laughing again and I knew it was funny, but I was worried.

“Let’s check him out with the lights off, professor. What do you think?”

“Would you mind, son?” he asked. “If we turn off the lights?”

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“Go ahead,” I said, sensing defeat. “But then we stop, okay?”

I was disturbed by what I saw when the lights went out. Maybe it was what that woman and her daughter saw at the Museum in Dallas and what Mr. Nash saw in Kansas City. I did slightly illuminate the air around me. “Turn on the lights, please,” I said.

Trixie flipped them on. Knowing my mood, she stopped smiling.

“If everyone’s finished joking about this,” I said, “you could listen to how I feel about it. It’s more than I bargained for. I’m angry.”

My father reached over and took my hand. “But there must be some way to put this to good use,” he said. “I sense a great vibrancy here about you, a power to uplift.”

Trixie picked up my other hand.

“I saw signs of it back when I was delivering pizzas,” I said, shaking both their hands loose. “I told you about the tips. And I think it’s been gradually increasing since then—the eye contact thing, I mean. I’ve been able to charm people, but I’ve resisted. At first I attributed it all to having shaken hands with Poseidon... while he was laughing. Like there was some sort of transfer of power. But would that explain why I’ve gained wattage? The glowing’s new since I was in Dallas.”

I had been saving the “Radioactive Man” story for my father, so I ran through it briefly. He already knew about J. Norbert Nash and the Flutarians of Regulus II—or I, or whatever.

“So there are only a few things I can think of that might have made my aura visible or whatever it is that happened,” I went on. “It could be my daily resolutions. Maybe all people who are going to live to a hundred-and-fifty emit light. There just aren’t any others around to see. And my sense of time is still gradually expanding—or contracting—whatever you want to call it; so I’m getting more of a jump on things. But that doesn’t seem right. I’m making so many pure as gold resolutions every morning, you’d think I was someone saintly. But I don’t feel any more worthy, and I’m not *acting* saintly. I was really pretty shitty to Mr. Nash and not very thoughtful to other people either, even though every morning I resolve to become permeable to the good in others, and to practice

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kindness every day and remember that everyone's always doing their best! Jeez! Okay? So I don't think I've brought this on by anything I've done, but what the hell do I know?"

I stopped for a moment, hoping to exert some self-control.

"So what *do* I know?" I said. "I have *no* idea what's really connected to what in my life. Who knows that? And I sure as hell don't know what's connected to what in the Big Picture out there. So then I think maybe it was my visit to Hell. That'll change a guy! In a way it changed me entirely, but I can't see why that would make me glow. That kind of experience might make someone so humble they glowed, but it didn't do that to me. I'm not humble.

"Then there's the third possibility." I looked at Trixie and took her hand back. "Maybe it's love. Really. That's what might be doing it. Being in love along with everything else might make me glow—just like anyone who's in love glows but doesn't show it, because they're not a new hybrid kind of being whose life span is double the average, and they haven't recently shaken hands with a laughing God and been to Hell and back. Shit! That makes a lot of sense, actually."

I looked at them both. I was frowning but Trixie looked very pleased.

We discussed the matter further after dinner. My father suggested I look for the symbolic meaning of my "problem:" to see it as a hero's challenge in a myth. Trixie liked that idea. She made it sound simple. It wouldn't be until I stopped expecting the worst and resisting my gift that I'd discover its blessing. And that would be something that took an exceptional act of courage, given my fears of what might happen if I unleashed myself.

I told her that her theory sounded great, but reminded her that it was *my* courage she was playing so free and easy with, and that *my* courage was in short supply at the moment. Then my father offered a more practical alternative: become a recluse but focus my energy on fixing Mason or whatever worthy cause might reveal itself—and that a worthy cause would certainly would reveal itself given the nobility of my intentions. Now he was doing it.

"So then you'd have Trixie drive me out into the country for exercise?" I asked my father, who was starting to irritate me. "Someplace out in the country where no one was around and let me

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out of the car to get my sunshine and fresh air like a big, dangerous dog? I'd rather wear an aluminum foil hat with a spinner on top."

"What about that, Jason?" he asked. "Didn't your Mr. Nash say that protective gear was sold on six continents?"

"You've got to be kidding."

He frowned and shook his head. "No, not really. I think if you don't find a suitable solution to your problem..."

"Why is everyone calling it 'my *problem*'? Like its like psoriasis or... or herpes or something embarrassing? Jesus! I'm sorry, but I don't like this." I was being diminished. What was happening to me was too lofty, too cosmic to be called a *problem*.

Trixie apologized. She winked—with her left eye so my father wouldn't see. "You want to drop it for now?"

"Yes!" I said. "I do! But no," I added. "Where's Margo when I need her? I'm pissed, but I'm being a jerk. It *is* a problem. Okay? That's what it's called. That's what I've got. I admit it, okay? A *problem*. But you're not really suggesting I contact that nut case, are you?"

My father and Trixie looked at each other. "If nothing else," she said. "It might provide some comic relief."

It seemed like life was coming at me from all sides, because now I was sorry that I referred to Nash that way. I couldn't get out of trouble: if it wasn't with the world and its drudgery and Tunemobiles and the faceless man following me, it was with my damn conscience! And that, it seemed, was my problem. I was dressed in a suit too big for my psyche—again. Last time Goldberg had given me the tools to temporarily fill things out. But what now? Or who?

§

For a while, I lost myself in work. Trixie and I left Hawthorn Street early and returned late. My father's friend and colleague, Gilbert Miller—or simply Miller, as my father called him—lived nearby and was happy to shuttle him to and from work whenever we asked. This turned out to be good for all of us. Miller had called on my father a number of times during the days after Birdie left. He was in many ways a kindred spirit. A mathematics professor of some renown, he was a seriously abstracted man himself, which gave my

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father the opportunity to be the more practical of the two when it came to making arrangements and adhering to schedules.

Days at the studio—my modern day “Argo,” my father insisted on reminding me—were productive and companionable. The return of Mason and Margo was reassuring to all of us, I believed. Mason was showing signs of improvement: whether from my eye-beam therapy or not was uncertain, but though I felt slightly foolish about it, I did devote fifteen minutes twice a day to staring into Mason’s eyes. We went back into the little living room of the apartment and sat in facing, comfortable chairs. Mason seemed able to follow my instructions regarding a brief meditation to begin, though what he actually did when he closed his eyes for those few minutes I’ll never know. I quieted my mind according to the principles I’d learned from the Yogi from Skokie. Once prepared, I simply focused my attention on my friend, “loading” my gaze with as much light as I could muster. I never tried to give that light any qualities: healing or restorative or illuminating or anything of the kind; I simply beamed it across with open good intentions. I didn’t envision the lights perfectly clear, however; it always had a slight golden hue to it, like sunshine. Personally, I felt cleansed and refreshed after our sessions. Mason usually responded as well: sometimes just as we’d begun, sometimes half way through, sometimes just after we’d finished, but typically in much the same way: “Man, you’re cookin’ today,” or with a slight nod, “Your lit.”

As the days and weeks passed, he became somewhat more animated, his mood brighter. He smiled more, seemed more interested in his surroundings; though other than his pat responses to our eye contact, he didn’t speak. Margo was very happy with the way things were going, and so was I, but I couldn’t distinguish what to attribute to the golden light and what to the busy, friendly environment and good food.

We could barely keep up with the orders for “Branches.” Though this was tiring and somewhat stressful, we were securely on our way to meeting our first objective. The extreme emotional ups and downs of art making were softened by sharing the load with Trixie, and the cash was flowing in. We’d raised prices to give ourselves a little more of a cushion, and no one seemed reluctant to pay for what we were producing—maybe the Lydian Mode was having its cheerful effects.

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We only slowly began to consider our next model. Shockingly, it was one morning after I awoke from a horrifying series of torments that a vision came to me complete, as if the idea itself had been delivered from Hell. I'd been through a night with my mouth filled with razor blades; with beatings with fists and roasting in slow agony in a red furnace; with hideous accusations from friends as old as time; with aching, endless loneliness; with terror in the humid darkness again and more razor blades, and more—my mouth, every orifice crammed with them. And more and more these nights had left me enervated, anxious, sour and wary upon awakening. They recurred inexorably, at an even, unrelenting pace: every fourth or fifth night; never more, never less. I never succeeded in embracing these horrors, but on occasion, I was somehow able to remember and consciously force my eyes open, thus escaping from my agonies: *Open your eyes!* I exhorted myself, *Open your eyes!* but those occasions were very rare. And despite the eternity I lived those nights, or perhaps because of it, once my first minutes of awakening passed, these untellable tales remained detached—consciously, at least—at a safe distance from my world of love and resolution, of art and headlight-beam eyes, and a still at safe distance from that the day when Trixie and I would step off into the unknown together, a day that was approaching ever more closely.

At my lucid waking moments, I realized that in the most generous, most inclusive sense, I *did* embrace these horrors that visited me at night—these horrors that *were* me. They *were* me, so *I* must have let them in. This, in my lucid waking moments. Not those moments after awakening from damnation.

When I visited Hell in my dreams, Trixie often woke before I did and saw what was happening, even feeling my discomfort. She told me that when I returned, the whites of my eyes were often the color of blood. On those days, she had a shower running for me, and I stumbled into it as soon as I had the wits about me to move. Among the few practical bits of wisdom Goldberg offered up me during my training was that water, combined with a simple act of concentration, served as a magnet and neutralizer for negativity. One simply had to envision the darkness flowing away from oneself into it.

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Like so many people, after five minutes in the shower, I was ready for the day, though in my case it was not sleep or lack of it that was washed away, but eternal damnation. One does what one must. On one particular day, however, I emerged from the shower with the scheme for study #2 in our grand project intact and agile.

What I saw was unlike any mobile I'd created before. It would look like a swirling, ethereal Christmas tree. In its basic form, each element—seven counter weighted beams with plates and seven counter-weighted chimes—branched separately off a central core, around which each rotated freely. This core was a rigid transparent plastic rod, but those fourteen counter-weights for the beams were not metal plates but glass jewels, spherical or cut-crystals. Again the Fibonacci sequence 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 was at the root of the design. So the first of these beams was 1 inch long, below it, the second 2 inches; below that, the third 3 inches; below that, the fourth 5 inches; and so on through the fifth 8, and the sixth 13, and the seventh 21. The glass counter weights for each upwardly arching beam varied in size according to the length (weight) of the beam. Above this system then, was an identical one but with chimes hanging on the ends of the lengthening beams, and each of these balanced by a corresponding glass counter-weight. The metal plates I had in mind to be mounted on the arching beams were the graceful *resting comma* shape again but with longer more delicate tails as with comets.

This was the design at its simplest, but of all my mobile designs, this was by far the most difficult to realize, because with many arms branching off the central core so close together, the element of upward and downward sway of each had to be minimized to avoid collision. And when Trixie decided that another system with at least four chimes needed to be suspended below this, the complexity became ever more challenging.

Again Trixie chose the Lydian Mode to express this glittering mobile's music. In selecting these tones Trixie took two things into account. First, to create the most pleasing (that is, *familiar*) possible harmonies; and second to balance those with the infrequently sounded *outer*, less familiar notes in the system above. Her plan, again, was to do this in such a way as to blend the familiar and the mysterious in the most beautiful way. That was the plan, though with the demands of filling the back orders for "Branches,"

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there was hardly time to work on it or to investigate the unfamiliar world of cut glass.

A great deal would happen in the next six months as winter passed and summer approached. Mason continued to improve. He no longer followed Margo around like a dog. Watching him eat, no one would suspect he was anything other than deliberate. He'd become a regular at the Vienna hotdog place down the street, which besides reflecting his good taste in classic street food, won him a friend in the proprietor. Mason had begun to speak more frequently and smile most of the time. Before long, he was greeting me every day, "How's it shinin' boss?" he routinely said, and he carried on short interchanges with all of us as long as the subject matter was of no consequence other than how we were *doin'* or other immediate matters. He was particularly jolly after our "staring contests in the back room," as Margo called them. Though he was tall with a narrow frame—Icabod Crane-like actually—he filled out considerably on the diet we provided for him. Sometimes he did ask for "that other chick's dinner," referring to Birdie, whom he didn't seem to remember had left town.

Trixie and I often invited Margo and Mason to the house on Hawthorn Street for dinner, though Margo declined more often than not. Mason seemed to love it there, and my father thoroughly enjoyed him for reasons I didn't entirely understand. Margo, however, was a little edgy at my father's house. When I asked her why, she told me to figure it out. She said a mythological hero ought to be sensitive enough to know when lady's got something to hide. Then she winked at me and hugged me like my mother.

This set me to thinking, just as my father had when he repeatedly reminded me my studio was my modern day "Argo." I'd been calling it "The Ship" for years by then, but hadn't thought of my namesake or my exceptional life in regard to that myth. Back in the earliest days of my new life, when I'd told Anita the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece, I'd half-seriously thought of myself *as* that Jason, living my own version of a hero's life, just as my father suggested when I was a little boy. But I never thought that way anymore. The thought embarrassed me. Maybe my growth *had* outstripped my character, or as I'd been supposing, I couldn't fill out my psychic clothes again. I was trying to do my best, but

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everyone else always was too, all the time. It was nothing special. Trixie and I had a grand plan... but me? I was no Jason, and certainly no hero.

During those days I felt more like a victim than a hero. Besides my routine visits to an unspeakable Hell, the most troublesome thing about those winter months was my restricted activity due to my “image problem” as we began to call it. I couldn’t let myself be seen outside except when bathed in direct sunlight. Never at night. I could be whisked into the car and shuttled to Hawthorn Street or taken for a drive, but not much more. The few times I tried to pretend I was a normal person, the results were disturbing. It turned out, I could be detected from fifteen yards away. Some people who saw me looked shocked but didn’t say anything. Others gave the impression that they believed I was *impersonating* a saint or religious figure of some sort and reacted angrily. Some backed away. When I tried to walk a few doors down to the hotdog place, I heard the word a woman use the word “radioactive” again. When Trixie and I once took a break from cranking out mobiles and tried to go for a walk in the park, every time clouds covered the sun, I glowed like such an electric sign that dogs snarled at me and some people, including a woman with a baby in a carriage, fled at a full run.

It was after that depressing and foreboding day in the park that Trixie brought up Mr. Nash’s name again, and asked me if I still had his card. I’d been afraid this was coming. If no solution was found, my “image problem” promised to destroy the quality of my life, but I didn’t want to contact Mr. Nash, and I didn’t want Trixie to contact him either.

Things showed no signs of improving, however. It felt more and more like my life was closing in on me, that my brightness had imprisoned me, that eventually I would shrink away within it. Even when it seemed I no longer had a choice, I still resisted. Every time Trixie suggested I call Mr. Nash, I came up with one excuse or another: it wasn’t the right time; I didn’t feel up to speaking to him, maybe I’d write him or email him instead or I was still trying to think of other ways to solve the problem. Meanwhile, we continued to manufacture mobiles, I continued working with Mason, and I settled into my reclusive ways. It wasn’t until April, when there was no reason to hide inside because

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of the weather, that Trixie's hectoring became too much to bear, and I finally relented.

She volunteered to call J. Norbert Nash herself, but accepting her offer would have been a cowardly thing to do. I hadn't looked at the card since he'd given it to me in Kansas City.

J. Norbert Nash, Associate Member The Omega Society

A woman answered the phone. "Omega Society, Florence speaking. How may I direct your call?

I told her I was looking for some information about a PVD.

"Is this in regard to a certified threat of abduction?"

"No, Ma'am. I'm just looking to stifle my aura."

There was a pause. "Are you from that magazine?" she asked, sounding wary.

I felt I had no choice. "No, I'm not a reporter. I met Mr. Nash in Kansas City early last fall, and he recommended a PVD."

"Could you hold just a moment, Sir?"

I waited in silence. No music.

"Hello," said a voice, warily, I thought. "This is Mr. Fitzsimons, Mr. Nash's associate. May I ask to whom I'm speaking?"

I didn't want to tell him my name, but I told him the circumstances under which I met Mr. Nash and my reason for calling. He put his hand over the phone and said something indistinguishable. Then he spoke to me: "Harapat... ploi... Harapat... flah!"

"Excuse me? What was that?"

He repeated it. "Harapat... ploy... harapat... flah!"

"I'm sorry. What *is* that? I don't understand. Is that... Arabic?"

Again there was the muffled sound of a hand covered phone. "No, that's not Arabic, Mr....?"

It sounded like he wasn't going to give up. "Finch. Jason Finch."

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"Yes, Mr. Finch. I'm sorry about that, but we've been under surveillance, and I needed assurance that you were who you said you were."

"Surveillance? By whom? And what did you say?"

"That's a delicate issue; I don't know how much Mr. Nash told you..."

"You thought I was a... a *Flutarian*? Didn't you? And that was their... their language?"

"That's correct, Mr. Finch."

Another crackpot. I was about to hang up. "Where are you calling from?" Mr. Fitzsimmons asked.

"From Fluto!" I answered, still about to hang up. "I'm calling from a phone booth on Fluto! Actually one of the moons of Fluto! Zuto!"

"Is that Chicago? Area code 312?"

I'd never liked those caller ID's, and liked them even less at the moment. "Yes, Chicago," I said. "What does it matter?"

"We have someone in Chicago who can fit you with a PVD. And I'm sorry if you find our precautions comical. The experiences of most abductees have been horrific, truly beyond the boundaries of imagination..."

"Not my imagination, buddy. Not mine," I answered with no intention of explaining myself.

Mr. Fitzsimmons didn't reply to this. "If you'd like the contact information I'd be glad to pass it on once I've verified your story with Norbert. I have your number here. I can have him call you if you like."

I didn't want to have anything more to do with these people, but I realized that Trixie would and my father probably would too. So I said fine. Then I said, "Airport ploy Airport flop!" or something like it and hung up.

The next day, Tuesday, I received a phone call from a Chicago member of the Omega Society. Perhaps he sensed that I was defensive or had been warned by his colleagues, but he assured me that the services of the Society were available to regardless of belief—which I took to mean there would be no mention of the Flutarian lunacy. He also said he understood that I might not want to go out in public and told me most of what I needed to know over

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the phone. However, he said that if it was acceptable to me, he'd like to pay me a visit so he could "have a look at me" and to ascertain which of my "vital centers" or "Chakras" were "actively radiant." This, in short, would determine what needed to be covered up. He made it sound quite scientific. When I asked him about the cost for his visit and the production of my PVD, he said that as long as the need was genuine, the Omega Society provided services at no cost to the recipient, but did accept donations from those who could afford it. This gentleman, a Mr. Pruitt, had no air of the lunatic fringe about him, none at all; and (if he wasn't in fact a Flutarian agent) I was prepared to trust him. I was surprised, and a little annoyed, at how perfectly normal I felt in anticipation of his visit the next day.

Trixie and Margo were beside themselves as we waited for Mr. Pruitt's arrival. They were giggling like schoolgirls, making one reference after another to my image problem and speculating just how Mr. Pruitt was going to "check me out." Trixie suggested I could make millions advertising vitamins; Margo said I could put Rudolph out of business. Trixie wondered if Mr. Pruitt was going to use an ordinary light meter; Margo speculated he'd bring a jar of amorous fireflies, let them loose and see what body part they headed for. Mason listened to it all and seemed interested.

Mr. Pruitt was a small, sandy-haired, smiling man with fine features, and dressed like an executive. He greeted Trixie, Margo and Mason politely; looked up and around at the mobiles and the production equipment, made a courteous comment, but seemed like he wanted to get down to business. He carried no light measuring equipment. He told me he could see why I wanted "protection" but would need to take a look at me in the dark to get "a more accurate reading." Trixie and Margo tried unsuccessfully to hide their giggles.

We went back into the living room of the apartment, pulled down the shade, shut the door and cut the lights.

"There are seven radiant centers associated with the human body," Mr. Pruitt explained. "The first, at the base of the spine; the second at the genitals; the third in the solar plexus; the fourth in the heart; the fifth in the throat, the sixth on the forehead, and the seventh at to top of the head. There is a great deal of information

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available regarding these, and I'll be happy to refer you to a wide range of books, if you wish, written from a number of different points of view, including unbiased physiological studies. But briefly, the Chakras correlate to levels of awareness, developmental stages in life, bodily functions, elements, colors, sounds and a great deal more. I don't know if you've studied this but you've clearly developed yourself spiritually, though in a unique way. Though all your Chakras are healthy and radiant to a sensitive like myself, your astonishingly resplendence radiates primarily from two sources: your Fourth Chakra, the 'Heart Chakra'; and your Seventh, the 'Crown Chakra'. The brilliant Heart Chakra connotes a highly developed ability to feel love and compassion; the Crown Chakra connotes a link to pure consciousness, to a greater world beyond.

"I've never encountered anyone like you, Mr. Finch," he went on after raising the shade, "and I wouldn't feel appropriate questioning your remarkable circumstances unless you wished to volunteer the particulars. But I have good news for you. Diffusing the radiance of these centers entails no special problems. A lined skull cap and a lined upper garment will be required, but these needn't be conspicuous. The skull cap can be covered with any sort of hat or cap you choose, and the lined upper garment resembles a vest and can be covered in any way that's comfortable. It does add a certain bulk, but it's appropriate for outdoor wear in all seasons, unlike PVD for the Fifth Chakra in the throat, which can be covered by a scarf or bulky turtleneck in winter but poses problems in the warmer months."

"What about a neck brace?" I offered.

"Yes," he said. "That's the typical solution." He looked at me placidly before continuing. "And the PVDs for the lowest Chakras, of course, are somewhat uncomfortable for men and difficult to wear with pants."

He went on to tell me that he'd need to take a few measurements and that he'd be able to deliver the PVDs in about a month. This would be mid-May; just before my 27th birthday. When I asked him about others who required aura diffusion, he declined to answer, but with uncommon gentleness. I couldn't believe this man believed in flying saucers. It wasn't until then that it dawned on me that despite the expansiveness of my moment, I had no edge on him, no foresight into his reactions. When we

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walked back out into the studio, I felt exceptionally serene. The feeling lasted for days.

The day before Mr. Pruitt paid me his second visit, Trixie and I decided we'd earned and saved enough to put a temporary limit on orders for "Branches." Thousands and thousands had been sold, and if Margo alone continued to produce and assemble new orders, we'd be able to keep the market fluid and continue to provide her with enough income to rent a little place to live. And besides, Trixie and I were exhausted. We'd begun to investigate the availability of crystals and actively work on our new design. Everything suggested it was time for a change.

§

"People react to the unknown in different ways," Mr. Pruitt said calmly in answer to my question about the Flutarians. "There are plenty of ways to go around, and each way may have its corresponding *expressions*."

He'd arrived early one morning with my new "lustrainsulative" clothing, as he called it, in a small valise. Both the skullcap and the vest consisted of a black synthetic shell into which the tailored lustrainsulative material fit snugly. Though Mr. Pruitt wouldn't elaborate, the material itself seemed made of finely spun fiberglass coated with something granulated and crystalline. He warned that I should always wear the washable shell over this material since it chafed with prolonged contact with the skin. Though they weren't particularly heavy, the skull cap and vest did have a certain bulk to them and would take some getting used to.

Mr. Pruitt was very confident when we went back into the darkened living room to test my *personal vibratory diffuser*. Once I put the two pieces on, I couldn't detect any personal luminescence at all. As a sensitive, Mr. Pruitt said he saw some glimmering at the "margins," but assured me that only a small number of individuals like himself had a chance of noticing it, and only in complete darkness. To assure me of this, he brought Trixie and then Margo into the darkened room and showed that neither had any luck in locating me. I was exceedingly happy.

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It was I who brought up the Flutarians when we were back in the brightly lit studio after the test. Beyond his general (and generous) comments about the enormity of the unknown and the varied expressions thereof, Mr. Pruitt would go no further. He remained inscrutable. Regarding the Omega Society, he used the same words J. Norbert Nash had used when I met him outside the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. "A society dedicated to the extraordinary in life."

"But Mr. Nash said you were sensitives, and 'an allied group of abductees,'" I ventured, worried that I was trying the good man's patience.

"Our organization embraces diversity," said Mr. Pruitt. "Our interests include many phenomena inexplicable to contemporary science. Only a small number of our membership is aware of the far reaching scope of the Society's concerns and endeavors." He was speaking like a politician. Then, taking me by surprise, he read my mind. "You have more than enough to occupy you, Mr. Finch. I'd be concerned that membership might tax you beyond your already extraordinary limits."

I asked if the Omega Society would have any interest in one or a number of my musical mobiles. He said that he appreciated the offer, but they had no central headquarters, and that he didn't feel that a personal gift would be appropriate. A cash donation would be most useful, he said. So I wrote him out a check, for which he thanked me but put in his pocket without inspecting. Then he gave me his card,

The Omega Society The Reverend Phillip W. Pruitt, Co-Founder

and told me to call him if I had any problems or questions about my PVD.

"There's one last thing I should mention," he said. "Regarding side effects." He gave me a keen look. "As far as our studies have shown, diffusion of the aura has no side effects on the psyche or physical well being; though to be frank, Mr. Finch, we've never outfitted anyone with your extraordinary degree of effulgence." At this point his serene manner gave way to something more official. "We have every reason to believe reabsorption is

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harmless. A self-aware man such as you should be able to discern anything out of the ordinary, however, so feel free to get in touch if you have any unforeseen reaction.” Then he smiled, said goodbye and shook hands with Trixie, Margo and Mason; then shook mine, said it was a pleasure to meet me, and left.

“Someone’s going to get his insides baked,” Margo said gleefully as soon as he was out the door. “Near-Westside Explosion Levels Eight Square Blocks!” she cried out then.

“First Male Pregnancy!” cried Trixie. “Local Artist Gives Birth to Flutarian Twins!”

Mason didn’t appear to understand what all the fuss was about.

There were no adverse reactions, however. I felt that a great burden imposed on me had been lifted. I felt very friendly and took the whole lot, including my father, out to dinner on my birthday to celebrate my newfound freedom. I made it a point to go to a casual restaurant, so wearing a hat indoors wouldn’t be an issue. It was a Chicago Cubs baseball cap; a gift from Margo and Mason. It had an adjustable head band so it fit perfectly over my skullcap. My vest under my shirt gave the impression that I was somewhere between a white-haired fitness freak and a white-haired barrel-chested beer drinker. Of course, for one who spent every fourth or fifth night experiencing the torments of Hell, occasional stares were of no consequence.

SIMULTANEOUS INSPIRATION

SIMULTANEOUS INSPIRATION

It had been a while since I'd longed to slip through that sheer membrane that separated me from Poseidon's realm. Perhaps I'd been distracted by my season in Hell, my one true love, my friends and my commercial endeavors. In that realm, I seemed to recall, no shadows were cast; everything radiated light, not enough to shine, but enough to defeat even the possibility of darkness. Perhaps it was my own unwanted radiance that brought this to mind.

Mercifully, the pace of my life slowed once my image problem was solved. Not only had we relaxed production of "Branches," our first mobile based on the Fibonacci sequence and the Lydian mode, but once relieved of my constraints, I felt expansive and serene. I went for walks. Trixie and I picnicked in Lincoln Park, my Cubs hat in place. We spoke about our plan to drive off the road together as if it would be a happy vacation in the sunny future. The sunny, distant future. It would still be a year

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before our next mobile was ready for the stores—a calm year, by my standards, but not uneventful.

Most significantly, Mason continued to recover at an ever more promising pace. I wasn't sure what effect our "staring contests"—or "Zap Therapy," as Margo renamed the sessions—had on his regained ability to interact in the world of the living, but Trixie, Margo and my father seemed certain that I had curative powers. Mason's recovery may have simply taken its own natural course, but we were all happy with his return to himself: it wasn't that long before he was talking to us all again. As remarkable as his renewed chattiness, however, was his return to work. Though a little slower, his manual skills resurfaced as a complete package. It wasn't that long before he and Margo were working side by side again. This too, contributed to the couple's earnings, and with this added income, they began to live comfortably again in their newly found, neat little apartment only a mile from The Ship. I never questioned Margo again about her drug use. I couldn't tell if she respected me or resented me for my silence about that. I could never read her as easily as others, and made a point not to. She was cheerful and alert most of the time and never seemed strapped for cash. I took that as a good sign.

My future as a healer began to replace my image problem as a favorite topic of conversation at the dinner table at Hawthorn Street. Though Trixie knew that our plans for the future did not include the opening of a free clinic, she didn't do anything to discourage my father's somewhat unrealistic enthusiasm. I found this annoying.

"Testing of a confidential nature would be required," he offered. "We might make discrete inquiries to the holistic medical community, but I'd think it best to avoid the medical establishment, and the Federal Government, who, Lord knows, might see you as a resource for national defense."

Trixie laughed at this, but her reaction apparently went over his head.

"You know," I said, visibly irked, "I wish *I* felt I could choose how to dispense my God-given powers, but I've been struggling just to keep from being overwhelmed. I still feel like a little boy most of the time."

"I can't say I've thought of you that way for years, son."

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“But it’s true. I feel like a little boy who says his prayers and tries to do his best, and feels lucky to have some cool futuristic armor to wear.”

Trixie had a beatific expression on her face. “He doesn’t know his own strength, professor. We’ll have to forgive him.” I glanced at Trixie, read her mind, and approved of her next question.

“Have you heard from Mrs. Wosenberg recently?” she asked my father.

Ever since my vanished mother had told me the story, I’d thought of Adele Rosenberg—the neighbor across the street in whose mailbox I’d put the skull—as “Mrs. Wosenberg,” and I was happy and surprised when I found that she and my father had begun to spend time together, as unlikely as that pairing seemed. Though she considered anything associated with our Hawthorn Street house eccentrically unacceptable if not abhorrent, she’d struck up a casual acquaintance with Birdie over the years and knew about her departure and failure to return. Since then, she’d spoken to my father on the sidewalk several times, and must have concluded that he wasn’t as subversive as she’d believed, because she invited him over for coffee. (Had she seen him standing on his hands in his underwear, all those years back? Or me—not in my underwear?) This “coffee date” was a breakthrough, since while being her neighbor for thirty-five years, my father had never been in her home. She was widowed now and living alone except for occasional visits from my first true love, her daughter, little Lucy, who, Birdie had told me, was now an actress seen occasionally off Broadway and often in commercials. Adele Rosenberg had told my father that if he was ever lonely he should “give her a ring.”

“Yes, I have seen Adele,” said my father, and then he went on with unalloyed enthusiasm to describe a talk about the neighborhood they’d had just that day on her front porch. His face pinked-up and his eyes showed signs of twinkling. Just as Trixie hoped, the conversation steered clear of me, my free will or lack of it during the rest of the meal and the coffee and dessert that followed. Euripides said, “Ignorance is bliss,” several times; to whom that referred is debatable.

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After I awoke the next morning, said ‘my prayers’ and meditated, my mother popped in. It was a Saturday. My father slept late on Saturdays, and Trixie was still curled, warmly asleep at my side.

“You’ve made quite a stir, you know, dear,” my mother began.

She hadn’t been communicating with me at all recently. Nor had Goldberg’s Ghost, who seemed to have lost interest in my cause. This did not disappoint me at all, but I’d missed my mother. I hadn’t lagged in my meditative regimen, so, I believed, she had a clear landing strip on which to alight if she chose—but she hadn’t, until now. It had been months.

“What does that mean, mother? Quite a stir?”

She laughed. “That’s an intelligent question, Jason. I mean it literally. A stir. In the ethers—and you know, I like that: *ethers*. I prefer it to that confusing Oriental mumbo-jumbo about the Planes. Why must those people make such a metaphysical fuss about everything! You know, the Astral Plane, the Buddhic Plane, the Akashic Plane. Who can keep those straight? You see, Jason... Well actually you *don’t* see. That’s what I’m referring to. You, and most others, it turns out, *see* only a part of it. You’ve made quite a spectacle of yourself. What’s made the stir in the ethers is your efforts to stifle your radiance. It’s caused quite a little vortex around you; powerful eddies of energy that send waves through places you’re unaware of...”

I felt suddenly sick. “So I screwed up?”

Again she laughed. “No, not at all. You’d be surprised at the number of stirs being made all the time. It’s like psychic weather. It keeps the currents vibrant.”

“What currents?”

She hesitated a moment. “You’d call them Thoughts and Feelings, dear. In reality, they’re like winds and weather systems that move in the *ethers* around in the earth’s aura.”

There was something in her voice that told me she wouldn’t expand on that any further, so I filed it away for future consideration. “So does everyone who diffuses their aura cause a stir?” I asked.

Either I was being very foolish or my mother was in a laughing mood. “No, no, dear,” she laughed. “That would only happen with the most brilliant auras, like yours. There are lots of

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other ways to stir things up, but great strivings are usually the cause.”

“Great strivings? So... of all the things I’ve been through, my strivings finally qualify as “Great” by stifling myself with this PVD?”

“Jason, I’m indulging you. And that’s not at all what I mean. Try to see. You’ve been remarkable for ages, but never before has there been a need for restraint. It’s not the nature of the striving; it’s the tone, the hue, the texture of the intent. And that’s clear and bell-like—it’s always been the same with you, all of you, all of *the you’s* at once: your existences are simultaneous, really: the original ‘Jason,’ and all the others and finally a ‘Jason’ again. It’s the same scale played out in different dreams. But at the *same time*! If only you could see! It’s those Orientals again! Those Hindus and Buddhists again who’ve obscured the truth with their fixation on reincarnation! Oh, listen to me! Won’t this set you wondering!” Again she laughed.

I didn’t. I was stunned.

“Now, never take anything too seriously,” she said then. “One thought isn’t all that different from all the others, and none of them last. They’re just passing winds; sometimes you feel them, sometimes you don’t. When in doubt, be kind to butterflies, dear. Kindness lasts; thoughts don’t. You’re doing fine. Just fine. Oh, and that was me, by the way, in a little disguise, with your confirmation notice... Who disappeared outside that museum in Boston.”

The silence was ringing like a bell.

“Mother? Are you still there?”

“I don’t want to seem a nag, Jason, but *still* and *there* are such misleading words, such dreadfully *flat* ones. I’ve touched you in a different way today. Let me stay.”

Was there any possible response to this? “I love Trixie,” I said, feeling like a small animal.

“So do I. I always have.”

“I’m very happy now.”

“I can tell. I’m very *here* now.”

“Thank you. I’ve missed you.”

“No you haven’t, Jason. You can miss a bus, not a person. People are everywhere... just like your *incarnations*.”

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“Mother...?”

I knew it. Speaking to her was like flying in a dream. One simply lifts off, glides a bit, and does it again; it’s perfectly natural. Asking for her was like trying to fly while wide awake. She was gone. Or, as Trixie reminded me when she woke up, everywhere.

For a while, I reveled; I wallowed in my freedom and went out much more than back in the days before I glowed. Trixie and I stopped in for late night snacks at the Mexican restaurant on our block and walked through the neighborhood investigating streets and stores and pubs we’d never visited before. I went to the Art Institute more often than I ever had in the past, and to the Museum of Contemporary Art, where I absorbed and reabsorbed the elegant simplicity of Calder’s beautiful hanging mobile, “Polychrome and Horizontal Bluebird.” In this, the horizontal silhouette of a blue bird hangs against a bobbing, swiveling structure of red, black, orange and yellow plates; nine in all: some circular, one with round holes in it, and some—the black ones—like sharply pointed boomerangs. No one seemed to notice that I wore my hat and sunglasses indoors or that my upper torso looked like I borrowed it from my big, weightlifter brother.

Trixie suggested that I might try wearing my PVD to sleep to see if it had any effect in Hell. It did, and this was the first and only side effect I suffered with its use. During the night I slept with it on, I first encountered one of the trials of the Jason of old: the famous clashing rocks that guarded the entrance to the Sea of Pontus which led directly to the Golden Fleece. King Phineus had given Jason the secret of how the Argo could pass these rocks without being crushed. I had no such secret, and enclosed in my PVD that night, the huge rocks closed in on me and crushed me repeatedly, shattering my bones again and again with brutal, unknowing, but agonizing geologic resolve. And then entrapped in my PVD, a skull-crushing vice (with a clamp in my mouth and another on top of my head), tightened in endless torturous increments, and then an ever tightening, suffocating straight jacket was added to my list of torments. Hell has a way of making everything its own. I never wore my PVD to bed again; but wearing it when I went outside became second nature to me. I put on my hat and vest just as a

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nearsighted person puts on glasses when he or she gets up every day.

My morning resolutions felt firmer and more wholly intent than they had in years. The list remained the same. 1) To live to the age of one-hundred-and-fifty. 2) To practice kindness every day. 3) To remember that everyone is always doing his or her best. 4) To make myself permeable to the good in others. 5) To look upon the conditions of my life as a blessing. 6) If unable to find a worthy cause, at least, smile. And finally, 7) To respect my doubts as faithfully as my beliefs. And once I'd committed to all that every morning, I felt perfectly ordinary. Eager, and a bit cocky. Which makes perfect sense, since everything I thought or felt or did was rooted in my own experience which had come on me as if from behind, and I did my best to take neither credit nor blame for it. Which also made sense: maybe it was like feeling those winds my mother was talking about.

Something did change in my morning routine, however. Trixie and I were now learning to meditate together. We'd wanted to do some reading about this possibility but found the resources scant. It turned out that all techniques of meditation, both in the venerable Eastern traditions and the modern innovations, focused exclusively on individual attainment: on the quieting of or tuning of *one* mind, of *one* mind becoming a clear lens, for purposes ranging from simple relaxation to at-one-ment with the universal mind and heart. In our research we did find techniques for group meditation, but these were all for the sake of aligning the minds of *individuals* to a higher purpose or for *individuals* to become receptive to teachings or blessings. We found nothing regarding a dual quest, dual aspiration. Nothing about a practice uniting individuals as a loving pair, a practice where a loving pair seeks to become not necessarily a clear *lens* through which *to see*, but a perhaps a *crystal* through which the knowing of the cosmos may be *radiated*.

Trixie summed it up. "One begets two; two beget the many." At times she could be disturbingly philosophical.

"Explain," I said. I felt like Birdie dealing with my father.

"An individual longs to be united with a mate. The united pair, long to be at one with the multitude, silly!"

"What does that have to do with meditation?"

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Meditate on it," she said.

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To evolve as a pair, it would seem that certain prerequisites would be necessary, and being wholly in love, metaphysically like-minded (well, almost) and skilled in meditation, Trixie and I felt we probably fit the bill. So we just started in, trusting we'd find our way as we went along. To begin, we decided that rather than simply envisioning a source of white light as we'd done individually, we envision *ourselves, together* seeing that light until that *unity of intent* became comfortable for us. It was a bit of a brain strain at first, *envisioning* ourselves *envisioning*, but after a few weeks, we managed shake loose our old habits and get the hang of it. Once we got to that point, Trixie and I began know each other's minds in a way unlike anything we'd previously experienced.

"What should we call this?" she asked. "If we ever need to talk about it?"

"Meditating together," I said. "Isn't that all right?"

"Not really. That sounds like two people meditating at the same time."

"Co-meditating. How about that?"

Trixie scowled. "You're kidding, right? That sounds like living together or some New Age psycho-babble."

"What about Mutual Meditation?"

"Mmmm. That sounds naughty, doesn't it? But why not just Mind-Fucking then?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's go tell my father about it."

"We'll have to work on it, I guess. But hey, maybe if we *mutually meditate* we'll have *simultaneous inspirations*."

"Mmmm," I said. "We like those, don't we?"

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Along with my new PVD-reliant self, my true love, our grand project, our even grander, mystical plan (the two begetting the many?) I had a small musical mobile factory to run. More than ever before, the mobiles were drawing critical acclaim. Trixie's parents, who had extended their stay in Australia indefinitely as Trixie had predicted, told her in one of their periodic calls that museums all over the country there had hung the musical mobiles in special, silent chambers with seating supplied. Here in the U.S., a small but prestigious museum in New York City had collected the first four and displayed them in separate galleries. A number of other museums had one or two. Trixie suggested this was a preparatory manifestation of the Plexippus Principle, for if our grand project was to be a success, it would have to be prominently exhibited. With Mason back with us, work picked up filing orders for "Branches," and Trixie and I devoted ourselves full time to the design of "Glimmer," as we'd decided to name the fifth commercial

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mobile. After a good deal of research and testing, we'd decided to use spherical glass jewels rather than faceted ones. Numerous faceted crystals would be a dazzlingly distracting display, a room-filling shimmer of rainbows that would demand as much attention as a brass band—not what we had in mind. More in keeping with our design were round, semi-refractive glass counter-weights that would beam pinpoint rays of light in the only brightest conditions and otherwise provide only subtle hints of luminescence.

Given that every element was attached to one central, transparent, vertical rod, simplicity was at the heart of “Glimmer’s” design, yet the number of the upwardly arching beams created a dense complexity. It took another six months to produce the prototype. Since the Fibonacci sequence governed the length of the beams, when the whole system was set into motion by air currents pushing the comet-like plates, not only would the mobile make music and generate rainbow glimmers, but again produced the optical illusion of *motion within motion* due to the properties of the natural arithmetic pattern when approaching and receding. As with “Branches,” the combination of actual and apparent motion was mysterious, enigmatic and even a little bewildering. The result gave the impression of a festive tree with a beguiling, daunting confluence of moving branches and stars gleaming all around its trunk. The elongated, graceful, comet-like plates were all in shades of sky blue and pale violet, tails out. The arching beams themselves were painted flat white. With the crystals revolving tightly around the core, it was a cool, shimmering whirlwind of close and far-flung pastel hues.

It was the music it played, though, that truly set it apart. The simplest melodies in the Lydian Mode, one of seven notes above another of four, proved to be consistently enchanting. Just as the crystals were muted, so too were the chimes in this mobile, though only slightly, so that when the revolving plates struck the chimes suspended from above them in a gentle current of air, the tone rung out *pianissimo*—very softly. The overall effect of this mobile, though it added gleam to color, form and tone, was more subtle than any of the previous four. It took nothing more than a simple announcement sent by mail to the participating stores to receive a reply from each, with few exceptions, to send out a model by overnight mail.

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Trixie and I were feeling new depths and heights of happiness. Since we'd begun to successfully meditate together, our lives had taken on a startling new dimension—or maybe more accurately, our *life* had taken on a startling new dimension, because we'd begun to dream together. Not every night, but we often woke knowing we'd been together and were able to confirm it by recounting the same experience from our separate, personal points of view. One night we'd been walking through a city, for example, a city we both remembered, as if we'd been there before in other dreams, other lives. In the morning we described many of the same streets and buildings, but Trixie also talked about some I'd hardly noticed, and I filled in details of some that Trixie forgot to mention. This was a stunning new development. On another morning we were able to reconstruct the words and melody of a song we'd heard; on another we rehashed the argument we'd had while trying to find our way through a maze of alleys lined with locked sheds. And on another night we flew together, stepping so lightly and soaring off. Waking became an adventure, the highlight of our day on those mornings when we remembered being together in that other world, wherever it really was. On those mornings, we were sometimes so hot to exchange memories that we vied for rights to speak first, interrupted each other, bickered, laughed and forgot our dreams before we could finish trading impressions. We even began to feel a kind of *dual pride*. Were we pioneers? Was this gift of ours unprecedented? Was this a step on a pathway? Of the evolution of the *Two*? It felt like it.

Our mutual artistic success strengthened our bond even further. As we'd hoped, we'd been able to work out design elements for our grand project in the musical mobiles we manufactured. It was settled that the Fibonacci sequence would be a prime design element in "The Big One," that the music would be modal, and that refracted light would play some part in the realization of this final project. We'd also begun to come to grips with a new, crucial element of the plan. The Ship wouldn't be able to house the project. The mobile would be much too big. We needed a new space.

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Adele Rosenberg was nothing like Birdie. Widow of a wealthy Jewish scrap-metal magnate, she'd seen the world, wintered in Miami Beach, loved to dine out, shop, play cards, go to the spa, the hair-dresser and tanning salon, loved her cocktails and though she'd recently quit, had a husky smoker's voice. She was as conventional as my father was eccentric. Maybe that explained the odd attraction between the two. It had been nearly twenty-five years since the skull in the mailbox incident; my toy collection had been stored away in the attic, but Adele, strictly avoided entering my father's house, because no matter how he tried to dissuade her, she "worried about the specimens... scientific and such." Yet she was a very friendly woman; and a charming woman, powerfully charming.

"Oh, Phineas," she said on her front porch on the occasion of their first dinner engagement. "You can't wear that tie where we're going. It doesn't match. Go back and get some others. I'll pick one out. You'll look nice."

Several dinner engagements followed—at restaurants of her choice, with my father wearing ties of her choice—but despite their continuing companionship, Adele had made it a point of avoiding me or cutting our conversations short. She was enthusiastic about how proud my father must be of his "son the artist," but I believed that my precocious exhortation about "the truth setting her free" might have remained a sensitive issue, even after all those years. Since my father didn't drive, and Adele enjoyed her Manhattans before, during and after dinner, the two always traveled by taxi, leaving her Cadillac in her garage. After returning to Hawthorn Street, they usually went to Adele's house where they did God knows what until my father crossed the street, a detectable air of bourbon surrounding him.

As far as I knew, Adele Rosenberg didn't know anything about the classics or any of the academic and scientific fields that fascinated my father—but then neither had Birdie. I had no idea how Adele felt about Euripides, or how it was she allowed the increasingly salty old bird in her car. More than once when I asked my father what they found to talk about, he said "the neighborhood." More extensive questioning yielded, "Old times," and once he went as far as to say, "Adele's a wonderful story teller," adding, "we don't necessarily talk *about* anything. She taught me how to play Gin Rummy. We do that a lot." Pressed even further

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when I asked what *he* talked to her about, he said, “You’d be surprised.”

Gin Rummy was surprising enough. My father had never shown the slightest interest in playing cards; I believe he’d frowned on it.

That they went out to dinner, played a lot of cards and talked about the neighborhood was essentially all I learned about the two of them together. I didn’t fully understand his reason for secrecy but I respected it. At times, I felt sad that he was drifting away from me, but at his age, he’d earned whatever privacy he wished, and every right to drift. Margo, on the other hand, dismissed such tact out of hand.

“I hear you got somethin’ goin’ with the babe across the street,” she said one night at dinner. My father didn’t hesitate. He leaned over to Margo and whispered something into her ear that set her cackling. Then he cleared his throat and continued on with dinner. I didn’t even consider asking.

The friendship, romance or whatever it actually was between my father and Adele Rosenberg held to a steady course for the next full year. They continued going out to dinner several times a week. When I asked where they dined, my father replied, “Here and there. Places Adele likes.” Trixie only talked to the woman briefly in passing, but one morning when I ran into Adele at the corner, she seemed to have had a change of heart and confided in me.

“I’ve never known a man like your father,” she said, in a half whisper. “He’s something I missed in life. My social circle was...” she shrugged. “Limited? God forbid I wouldn’t be thankful for my lot in life. I have everything. My husband was a prince among men, but your father... he’s got a young heart, the man does. A brilliant mind and a young heart. I don’t need to tell you about the mind. Just after the war, I graduated Northwestern, where Phineas teaches, and I’m like a schoolchild compared to the man, but he never flaunts. Not once has he flaunted. That’s all from the heart.” Then she smiled broadly, showcasing thousands in cosmetic dentistry. “You’re a good boy!” she said, as if that summed it all up.

As the months passed, my father became more and more cheerful—but not his old cheerful self: a new, revised cheerful self;

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one I no longer knew quite so well. This new cheerful-self talked about what an excellent Manhattan Adele mixed (he explained: three parts Crown Royal to one part sweet vermouth over ice, a dash of bitters, garnished with a maraschino cherry and Adele likes a sliver of orange—a series of words *never before uttered* by Professor Phineas Finch,) and furthermore, how late at night, she'd once dealt him "Gin," an event he compared to opening the door to "The Golden Fleece!" It sounded like my father too had found something he'd missed in life. Pining for Birdie seemed to be a thing of the past, and given his renewed well-being and steady companionship, Trixie and I began to spend most of our nights in the cozy privacy of the little apartment at The Ship. We prepared large batches of food whenever we were on Hawthorn Street, but since it was Adele who most often drove my father and Euripides to work and back, Trixie and I were free in a way we'd never known before—outwardly now as well as inwardly.

§

Dreaming together felt like an unfolding miracle to us, but waking together each day wasn't always an intriguing adventure. We knew what happened had been inevitable. Out of regard for Trixie's privacy, I won't describe the horrors of it all, in part at our own hands. To dream of Hell for two is darker in its darkness than dreams of flight for two are bright. No need to mention I'd endured this already for years, because now we both knew that eternity was eternity, and to suffer it for a moment of it is to suffer forever. Still, Trixie needed care the following day. She needed distraction mostly, to allay the fear that she might *remember* that night in her daily life. I knew that wasn't possible, even if she tried, but I needed to devote the entire day to her psychological comfort. This too was a new experience, one that brought us even closer. Her vulnerability stirred me deeply. The next night we dreamed separately, and the next and the next. Our nights dreaming together continued at regular intervals, just as my own individual nights in Hell had done and continued to do. We didn't jointly visit Hell, however, for several months.

It may be that the heart of darkness lies within, and that that darkness is only an absence of light, but even if that truth's

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irrevocable, there's plenty of sunshine and starlight around to tip the balance, and despite my repeated brushes with eternal damnation, I felt my life was ticking away bountifully on a great cosmic clock.

It was on the day that the chimes rang in my twenty-eighth birthday that Trixie and I found our new studio. We'd been looking for an Indian restaurant in a fashionable neighborhood close to the Chicago River just west of downtown. The streets were lined with art galleries, new restaurants and old industrial lofts converted into trendy apartments for the upwardly mobile. On our way to lunch, we were distracted by one gallery after another, and eventually, blocks out of our way, we saw a renovated four-storey warehouse on West Grand Avenue with the words "Will Divide to Suit" painted on a whitewashed window. Across those words were more, these scrawled in grease pencil. Several numbers had apparently been rubbed out until it simply read: "Remainders Available."

"There's just one left," said the rental agent, a Mr. Schenck. We found him inside supervising the polishing of a hardwood floor in a vast loft space. "But it's no use to anyone unless you want it for storage—of flag poles maybe, or masts." He laughed, as he led us out to a quieter hallway. "Or you might have an odd little shop, but odd's in, isn't it? It opens on the alley."

"This is an elevator shaft were talking about," he said as we went out the front door and walked us around toward the back side of the building. "Big, freight elevator, you know. It's down in the basement now. They stored materials down there. Manufacturing. Streetcar motors, I heard. The top of the elevator's where your floor would be. It's covered in plywood. A nice job. Creaks a little but makes a good solid footing. Measures fifteen foot square."

In the narrow alley behind the building, Mr. Schenck looked at my hat. "Some season," he said derogatorily. I wasn't much of a baseball fan, but you couldn't live in Chicago without knowing the Cubs were off to another bad start.

"Maybe next year," I answered. I knew that was a pat response, but I took off my sunglasses and caught his eye. It seemed harmless enough. Truth was, I'd begun to play loose and easy with my "Zap-Vision," but only in casual situations, where it didn't seem I could seriously alter the natural progression of events—or so I hoped.

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“This time that could be true, you know,” he said brightly. “I’ll take your word for it. You speak with authority. There’s this kid, Wood, comin’ up, right? And maybe Sammy’ll finally bust out and do somethin’ for once.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, grimacing, but undetected.

We’d come to a loading dock halfway down the alley. Mr. Schenck slid open a large, heavy door.

“Ladies first,” he said to Trixie. “Excuse the unfinished floor.”

As soon as I followed her in and tested the plywood under our feet, I knew that the Plexippus Principle was in its governing mode. We were in a room fifteen feet square and some sixty feet high. Ladders, probably meant for elevator maintenance, were built onto three of the brick walls. An elevator motor with no cables attached was centered above the shaft on I beams, and above that was a massive skylight, apparently also for maintenance. Light poured down from it around the industrial silhouette of the motor. But that wasn’t the only light source in that fifteen by fifteen by sixty foot room. On each of the four floors above the alley level entrance to the elevator shaft were large windows, six by eight feet, each consisting of 48 separate panes, many cracked but none broken. Across from each of these large windows was the freight door to each of the floors, doors, which Mr. Schenck told us, were now sealed. The windows, apparently, had illuminated the massive, open-sided elevator as it stopped on each floor. The elevator shaft itself was as bright as day. Since the rental company had essentially given up on leasing the space, Mr. Schenck—who’d been acting like my best friend since my eye contact and harmless baseball chatter—enthusiastically agreed to install some plumbing for us, do a little electrical work, and build safety rails along the ladders mounted on the walls.

“And is there anything else I can do for you folks?” he asked, seeming to be a rental agent overshadowed by Santa Claus.

The floor space would be just big enough for two worktables and the rest of our mobile making equipment. It was going to be a tight fit, but with pulleys attached to the I beams at the ceiling and ladders on three sides for access, the room could have been made for the construction of a huge, three tiered mobile. Several large panes of the skylight opened outward, and Mr.

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Schenck gladly agreed to install a few small panes that could be cranked open on each of the four mammoth windows—if a few panes for each window would be enough, he added. He remained very accommodating—or perhaps bedazzled, or benevolently molested.

I told him a few would be just fine.

“For ventilation, right?” he asked.

“In a way,” I told him.

It reminded me of the day I found The Ship: we hadn’t even had lunch yet, and the lease was signed. As we left his office, Mr. Schenck told me he had a friend who gave him seats behind the Cub’s dugout for a Sunday game every year, and that he’d let me know the date ahead of time so I could keep it open. He didn’t give me a chance to decline the invitation. My sunglasses were back on, but when he shook my hand he looked into them eagerly. I was half-tempted to dose him again, but refrained. Once Trixie and I were back outside, we looked to see if anything was carved in stone above the front door of our new building. Only the date was there, 1922, but when we crossed the street to get a view of the building as a whole, we saw someone looking out of a fourth story loft window, smiling and waving at us.

“Isn’t that Mr. Pruitt?” Trixie asked.

Amazed, I thought it was. But he was only visible for a moment. We went back to the front door to see the names on the mailboxes inside, but the door was locked. Mr. Schenck had driven away.

I’d spoken to Mr. Pruitt only once since he’d delivered my PVD. This was a courtesy call to let him know how happy I’d been with my life since I’d been dimmed and how grateful I was to him and the Omega Society. His reaction was warm but calm. He made no specific inquiries about my low wattage life, and no reference to his original claim that he’d “never encountered anyone like me.” I felt a little slighted. When we were saying goodbye, however, he told me that if I ever needed the Omega Societies services, I should feel free to contact him.

“There are other services?” I asked.

“As the need arises,” he said. And that was it.

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A week later when Trixie and I were back on Grand Avenue speaking to Mr. Schenck about the renovations he was making for us, I asked him if a Mr. Phillip Pruitt had rented from him on the fourth floor. He said he hadn't heard that name before. Maybe he was just visiting, the rental agent suggested.

It wasn't long before we were busy making the Grand Avenue studio, "The Shaft," as we called it, work-ready. Along with the improvements we requested, we needed new worktables and stools, cutting, fitting, and bending equipment, some of it on a larger scale than used for my previous designs. We also packed in certain amenities, like an under-the-counter refrigerator, a coffee maker, a hot plate and a small blue loveseat into the fifteen foot square workspace. There was barely room to come in the door. Once the electrical work was done, we fit the sixty foot walls with vertical track lighting to enhance the natural light during the day and make evening work possible. By early autumn our very tall room was ready for us, but our design plans were still amorphous: not a shape or dimension had been committed to paper. We didn't feel any need to hurry.

Meanwhile, along with Margo and Mason, we continued to produce "Glimmer" It was selling as fast as we could crank it out and was meeting with great critical acclaim.

"A pristine, nascent art form," said one prominent critic; *"A captivating new expression,"* said another, *"surpassing the visual and aural and suggesting a dimension beyond."*

This was exactly what Trixie and I had hoped for. It felt like a welcome reception was being prepared for our final project. Even more promising was Mason's continuing recovery, though *recovery* only begins to describe his progress. It wasn't long before he began to exceed his former capabilities of mind. I had to admit that our "Zap Therapy" sessions probably had something to do with it. His awareness seemed stabilized and intensified; his thinking gained continuity. Mason didn't lose track of what he was saying anymore. I didn't always agree with what he had to say, but the gaps were gone.

"It's your powerful-ass meditating, man," he said to me, as we sat at a worktable screwing crystals jewels onto the ends of "Glimmer" branches. "You're full of starlight, man. That's what

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makes you glow. We're all full of it, starlight, we're freakin' *made of it*, but you've got it to spare. You do! You're one full-grown, righteous, benevolent dude! Spreading THE-E-E-E light."

"Hey, I'm not doing anything special." I insisted. "I couldn't change a thing, either way."

"Like a flower grows toward the sun, man."

"Stop it."

"Thus speaks the humble man. The humble zapper man."

"Stop it! You're asking for a lobotomy!"

"Been there; done that," Mason answered, sounding a little smug.

"Leave him alone, Jason," Margo called out from the other table where she and Trixie were stacking parts. "He's a *regular* savant now. Dropped the *idiot* part. Got yourself to thank for that."

Mason made an idiot face at me. I concentrated on my work. Above us, the studio model of "Glimmer" continued to play variations on its lovely Lydian tune. Light poured in from the front windows refracting through the polished glass gems in our hands, casting arrows of color, reds, blues and greens, across the table. Mason seemed lost in thought. Trixie headed back to the kitchen to brew us another pot of coffee.

It was easy to be happy under these conditions.

My father also continued to thrive. Most afternoons he called and told us that he and Adele were going out and that we shouldn't come to prepare dinner. Formerly, he'd tell us he was going out only after we arrived, perhaps because he thought we liked making dinner and staying the night on Hawthorn Street—which we did. But once he regularly began to ask us to stay at home, we knew something was up. One morning when I was there looking for a book on Egyptian History in the library, he came in from across the street at Mrs. Wosenberg's looking like he just got up. He acted as if nothing unusual had happened, and I guess nothing had. When I asked if he needed a ride to the University that day, he said Adele liked the drive up to Evanston.

The next time Trixie and I visited Hell together was much like the first. The particular abominations differed; the styles of torture, the circumstances of betrayal, of abandonment, of humiliation, of

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suffocation, of roasting, of rivers of blood letting, disemboweling, and the like, but *worsening* was out of the question—eternity can't be trumped. It can be widened, however, and it was in that way that our conjoined Hell differed from my own. The torture remained the same but the field of perception widened: it doubled. Trixie and I harmed, degraded and betrayed each other eternally. At first, I was stunned to think that we awoke still in love after the unrelenting cruelty and deceit we rent upon each other, but when the two of us reflected on that together, it made sense.

The Big Picture, after all, has the widest, most inclusive scope, because as horrendous as double Hell was, it deepened the experience of our lives together, and with that our feeling of unity. In a vague and distant way, our bonding in Hell reflected that day when Anita and I were so sick together in the ratty little bathroom in my college apartment. But Trixie and I spent far more nights illuminated than in darkness. We'd begun to dream ecstatically together. We'd found we were able to fly when we wished, even hand in hand. We found ourselves in crystalline, familiar realms, like the confines of "The Golden Fleece," where all things radiated light and shadows didn't exist; we dug in the soil together, unearthing golden coins and jewels—and all these dreams we remembered and shared on awakening as if speaking of recent vacations in paradise. This, we concluded, was as good as the best sex—not better, mind you, that would be a rash claim—but equally thrilling and sublime. We, together now, were becoming a slightly different kind of being.

But neither of us individually believed we could take credit for the transformation. Beneath it all, I often felt like that wise-ass kid; and Trixie felt, as I'd learned earlier, like a skinny, precocious brat. The trick, it seemed, was to welcome the wise-ass kid and the bratty know-it-all as family. To invite them in, to make them feel at home. If we tried to fight them, if we didn't *love* them, well...that's a simple equation to solve.

There was another matter, however; a perplexing one that tempered my high spirits with an echo of mystery—at least at first. On several occasions, when alone, walking in the city or driving, I was certain I saw sandy-haired Mr. Pruitt again. But in the oddest places. Once, when driving, I saw him up on a ladder working on a stop light. I was waiting for it to turn green, and just before it did,

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he looked down and waved at me. Cars behind me honked, so I couldn't check it out. I did drive around the block, but when I came back to that corner, no one was working on the light. And then one November morning, I was walking through Lincoln Park Zoo, a place where I went to clear my mind and recharge my artistic batteries. I felt rejuvenated when I made eye contact with the animals. Particularly the apes. I always took my sunglasses off when I looked at them and they inevitably looked back. But on that one morning I saw that a man, a zoo keeper in a green uniform, was in one of the large outdoor monkey cages. He was facing away when I approached and turned and looked at me directly for only a moment before he disappeared through a door. He had smiled and waved at me and I was certain that it was Mr. Pruitt. Something about the encounter was even more bizarre, however. Not the setting, not the surprise: it was more the atmosphere of it, the way he looked through what seemed a shimmering in the air.

And then on another day, a snowy one about a month later, I saw him looking out the window of a passing bus. The bus was crowded, packed with people, and the man whom I believed to be Mr. Pruitt was looking out the window furthest to the rear on the right side. His expression was identical to that I saw in the monkey cage and the fourth floor window of our studio building on Grand Avenue. Again he smiled, he waved; again he did so through a shimmering veil, and then vanished after only a moment. I called his office later that day to confirm the sighting, but no one answered the phone.

The next time I saw Mr. Pruitt, he appeared in a crowd of people crossing State Street at Randolph in downtown Chicago. Again he looked across at me and smiled welcomingly, but directly behind him something was dreadfully wrong. It was the sickening vision of Hades, leering at me again. By the time I mixed into the crowd, they were both gone.

I didn't see Mr. Pruitt again until long after that disturbing day. Once, however, I saw the huge man sitting on a green bench in Lincoln Park, his face in shadow. As I approached, he stood up suddenly and walked away, but looked back at me menacingly over his shoulder. The encounter was blood-chilling. All my experience and accomplishments felt washed away under his glance, and it wasn't long he sat down again on another bench and watched as I

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approached. I was already trembling. I wanted to turn and run in the other direction, but fearing that he'd follow, I forced myself to walk on. Soon I was close enough to see his face. I was stunned. The tall man sitting there on that bench, the shadowy man dressed in a black overcoat, had a very ordinary face. I'd been misled. He smiled uncertainly at me. Perhaps he was reacting to my shock. Perhaps not.

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PART IV

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“The Song the Birds Forgot” was blue, shimmering and iridescent, with fleeting hints of sweet, pale yellow flashing across it. It was huge: twelve feet across and twenty-one feet from the highest arching beam to the lowest ovoid plate. This was a three-tiered mobile, with chimes of different metallic composition comprising each tier, bringing distinctive tone to the three melodic lines it played.

Each of the two hanging parts of the topmost tier curled off like the chambers of a shell, like glittering solar systems side by side. These played seven tones plus one, tuned to the highest registers, sounding crystalline, like snowflakes, icicles. Below it, in the middle tier were two systems wider spread, outside the upper two, again curling off in Fibonacci spirals, and playing eight tones again, these an octave lower than the first, in the range of a sweet

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voiced soprano, but burnished, like bronze, like an enchanted oboe. Below, the lowest tier, centered between them all, spiraled out again, playing eight more round, resonant, tones in a lower register, like church bells, supporting the others. Each tier played the same tones in the Lydian mode plus one, the last in the dreamy Mixolydian: five melancholic notes across the three cascading octaves of chimes, like a chill breeze on a resplendent, full moon, autumn night.

It looked like a dream galaxy, a swirling ocean of moonlight, a captured whirlwind. All the iridescent plates were smoothly rounded, as if stretched: those in the outmost spiral reaches of each turning system had graceful comets' tails trailing off and away; while the innermost one of each was rooted with a clear, polished glass jewel, five in all. Beams of blue light flashed out from its inner workings like shooting stars. Every branching bough curved up and around, or down and around, as if the mobile itself had been unscrewed from a cosmic clockworks. As with all the two rudimentary mobiles composed in part upon the naturally occurring Fibonacci sequence, "The Song the Birds Forgot" appeared to sustain lucid inner activity apart from its outward movements. On this scale, however, with this degree of complexity and refinement, the sense that the mobile was thinking, composing, or even dreaming shone through its towering, spiraling, orbits, curves, swoops, cascades, reflections and symmetries. Here the mobile's inner life, its "soul" spoke through the polished plates—azure, ultramarine, milky yellow—it played across the eye alive, like smooth, lithe words, approaching, receding, diminishing eloquently in a language of high clouds, deep water, of windswept dunes: a language clear to a soul that "abides in a state of a spectator without a spectacle." And all this articulation, all this eloquent interplay, sustained its brilliance while subsumed within the music itself. The music. Three melodic lines of music. The resplendent music, which by virtue of *its* eloquence, silenced the souls of the spectators. It was simple: sweet, comforting and forgiving, almost familiar, towering with tone; yet haunting and cool and aching like a forgotten love, a lost star. It sounded like faith. It sounded as if it had been long forgotten.

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Trixie and I had become lost in it. A year and more had melted away. We had abandoned all our plans; our drawings and models lay in heaps as we began to build it from the bottom up, an element at a time, staying with each until it wanted nothing, until it felt like a piece of nature in our hands; relying on what knew, not what we thought. It was the culmination of our work: an improvisation, growing upward in meaning as each part was formed until the rest unfurled as if by law, by blueprint drawn with utmost certainty in the pattern of the highest pitched bell tones at the top. The chimes were tested and added as we went along, hung on twins of each spiral branch we built, Trixie calculating the pitches and timbres and spending hours and days at the little south side foundry, carrying wine, bread and sausage for the kind men who did her bidding and returning with bags of chimes and her dark blue eyes gleaming like a goddess of the night sky.

We hung from the ladders on safety belts made for window-washers, pulleys dangling, adjusting beams, aligning plates. We contemplated, calculated and crafted; we polished and fitted; we gazed upward, panes cranked wide and narrow, our lives forgotten; people, even the closest, fading away. My father, suddenly retired, off with his lady on a world tour, rewarded with her caretaking and riches; Euripides in residence with us, traveling by day to the amazing room, where he faithfully carried on: "Beginners luck! Beginners luck!" My mother, serene, inscrutable in her everywhere, doesn't say a word. Margo and Mason stepped back and away, arriving at our Armitage Avenue home when we'd gone, leaving before we returned; "Glimmer" and "Branches" again safe in their skilled hands, revenue accruing in the bank, in their pockets; their eyes bright, their good will maintaining us, securing us, alone at work: our big door to the alley locked.

As the work grows, my resolutions are perfunctory and all but forgotten; our morning meditations rote, our shared nights in Hell contained and subsumed in a cocoon of unconcern. Of ourselves, only our work and our dreams remain, and our lovemaking: thirsty, devouring, everlasting; we rise up on our studio couch, drenched in each other, the baffling, gorgeous music spinning above us in the silver air; plans with reasons and hopes attached cast off like sweat. Not a word, not a note, not a hint in answer to messages left and knocks on the dented alley door. The

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curators and critics will wait. We are beneath it day and night; dreaming together of what it might do.

It is a day in early May when the music stops. The breezes from the skylight and the windows and the fans meet for a moment of silence, a hush in the midst of forty chimes and forty plates. Trixie and I are startled from a reverie. Are we finished, or finished with? Our fingers cut, stained with paint; necks and shoulders aching and stiff, ears and eyes keen as never before. What once was once a purpose or a plan or a vanity has become the sound of faith, “The Song the Birds Forgot,” and at last we open the door to the world.

The response is stunned, reverent. Viewing by appointment only. Will it be Chicago? Boston? San Francisco? A freestanding gallery? An atrium? A silent gallery? At what price? Yet no one knows the secret numbers in the song. Will trees uproot themselves to hear it? Will a pebble move? Will even one leaf turn? Does my mother know? Does Poseidon? Does Hades? Do they care?

Then we slip away—or back, it doesn’t seem to matter which.

My father returns. He seems younger. When Trixie and I bring him down here to see and hear what we’d done, he looks up and weeps. His reason, however, is not what I supposed. True, he’s moved: “Struck by a bolt from above,” he claims. But it’s his old man’s sorrow, he says, that makes him weep. He explains, and Trixie and I are of one mind. “The Song the Birds Forgot” will remain at home. He’ll see it as often as he wishes, daily if he likes. Silent hours will be observed. The museum’s atrium will have to do.

The place is new. Its atrium is flooded with light from above: three tall stories high with sleekly arched marble stairways all around. The support will be fitted in a week, we were told. Trixie and I will dismantle it all in a few long days. We’ll begin Monday. Sunday will be my birthday. We’ll picnic in the park.

§

“Let’s do something extravagant tonight,” Trixie said that Saturday. I’d confirmed my vows that morning, refilling myself to the brim. The two of us had meditated like twin stars, as never before. Yet

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we were at a loss. We'd hardly left our work: we'd been locked away, out of the country, it seemed, out of the world. Trixie found the announcement in the paper. Shakespeare was not our accustomed fare. The performance was at 8:00 P.M. We decided to dress up. I'd acquired something special for occasions like these, occasions when my Cub's hat wouldn't do. A yarmulke, a simple black skull cap: I'd disguise myself as an Orthodox Jew, a white-haired Orthodox Jew. I didn't look particularly Jewish, but then again, I might have converted. I didn't expect to be questioned—not a performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Trixie wore a little black dress; her hair up.

Once in the theater, however, we wondered why we'd come. The farce played out before us with its Athenian royalty, its king and queen of the fairies, its mistaken identities, its magical love inducing flower, but it hardly seemed to fit our lives. We were amused, a little intrigued, but our hearts—our hearts or perhaps our souls—were elsewhere. Off the road? In the sway of the silver sounds of faith, "The Song the Birds Forgot?" If I hadn't been certain I'd seen Mr. Pruitt disappear into the crowd as the theater emptied out, the night might have seemed a loss.

"Maybe it is," said Trixie as we walked out into the May night. "All of this. A dream. Like Puck said... at the end:

'If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended—
That you have but slumb'ered here
While these visions did appear.'
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.'

I turned to Trixie in astonishment. I'd been staring back into the throng following us out onto the street as Trixie recited Puck's lines. She beamed, and shook the program in front of my face. "*I might have remembered it,*" she said. "I do have a powerful mind. *I am* a precocious brat."

Mr. Pruitt was nowhere to be seen. "Do you think what Puck said is true? That it's all a dream?" I asked.

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“Could be, Ducky. If it were, we’d never know, would we?”

“Until we woke up. Off the road.”

“But then it would be too late, wouldn’t it?”

A hollow ache of loss gripped us both, just below our hearts. We reached for each other’s hands as we walked off down the broad, busy avenue.

“What park?” she asked the next morning.

We were up at nine. We’d walked back home after the theater: a long walk from South Michigan Avenue to Armitage and then west to The Ship. We’d talked of our imminent dismantling project as if it was our lives we were about to take apart—something that seemed appropriate in preparation for... for what, exactly?

We hadn’t spoken much of taking the next step. This seemed appropriate to us since we knew it was our motives that mattered, not our ideas. Talking, or even thinking about it felt wrong, counter-productive, like birds strapping on wings or fish wearing flippers.

“Just do that again. When the time is right,” Poseidon had said. *“Drive off the road if you feel the need to return here.”* I’d tried that once when I was mired in life, hoping to be recharged—obviously a dubious motive. So we hadn’t planned how. Would we return to Iowa, to that same place on the road, and what? Hope it worked? That didn’t sound quite right, but we believed when the time came, we’d know. As we approached home after our long walk the night before, Trixie had made it all seem simple. The question wasn’t how, it was why. “Because we’re in love,” she said. “That’s why. Like your mother said. ‘If you want to get divine, get personal.’”

“By the conservatory,” I said in answer to her question about the park as I poured my first cup of coffee. We were sitting in the little kitchen that Birdie had painted pink—to remind us of her. “Between Schiller and Shakespeare,” I added, referring to the statues that delineated the place I had in mind: among the flower beds in front of Lincoln Park Zoo.

“Let’s take wine,” Trixie said. “Champagne. Let’s keep trying to celebrate.”

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"If we drink wine in the afternoon, we'll fall asleep before dinner," I warned.

"Not on your birthday, we won't. Not on 'Dismantling Day Eve.' We'll take a thermos of coffee too. A thermos of espresso. How's that?"

"You're the boss."

"Since when?"

"Since you first tricked me."

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that. Practicing enchantment without a license."

"What makes you think I don't have one?"

I looked at her in a way I must have looked hundreds of times before. "My mother says she's always loved you."

"You told me that."

"I know, but I like to say it. It gives dimension to dreamland."

Trixie seemed thoughtful. "That cuts both ways, you know. It opens one door but shuts another. It's that feeling, you know? When you remember just a taste of a dream, and there's this deep longing for a place you've known but know you've forgotten, forever maybe? And that that's how *all this* might seem someday? All of it? Lost? Worse than lost? Forgotten?"

"I like a more inclusive view," I said. "A more forgiving one."

"Who said you get to choose?"

"What if I insist?"

"Then you'd be a real hero, Jason," she said. Looking dreamy? Looking sad?

"Hey," I said. "Cheer up. It's Dismantling Day Eve."

Trixie picked up her coffee and walked out into the bright white room. We'd brought over a working model of the top tier of "The Song the Birds Forgot," and hung it up for Margo and Mason to listen to while they worked on production. With its two, side by side systems it played the descants that danced above the bigger melodies created by the wide-spread middle tier and the powerful central one below it. Alone it sounded like a song ice crystals might sing when in love and longing, or a bittersweet butterfly serenade or an elegy for a sunrise. There was certainty in the ever changing melody, certainty tinged with intrigue, or doubt—silvery doubt,

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Trixie called it, like the silvery blues that flashed as it turned in its stretched, concentric waves.

The floor was swept. The worktables neatly stacked. We pulled back the gauzy white curtains on the front windows to watch the traffic and people pass. The great beam barred the door, humming from time to time when something on the street set it off.

Trixie looked at me. I knew what she was going to say. I always did by then, but usually let it go. I always knew what my father would say, what Mason and Margo would say, but shut my mind just as I shut down my glow—or I *had*. I'd lost that self, my created, hybrid self; muffled it, given my gift to a *thing*, a collection of metal, paint and glass that might not turn a leaf. But one does what one can; one needs a life path, after all. When in doubt, sacrifice.

“Let’s drive out someplace first, and let you off your leash,” she said. “Give the ethers one hell of a stir. Wake your mama up? Catch her and Old King Phineas in the act? What d’ya think, big guy?”

Why not? It was my birthday. Trixie drove. We sped west for an hour and a half until we found a County Park, a bird sanctuary/wildlife reserve. There were only a few cars parked in the small lot. It was hot for a late spring day, pushing eighty. Trixie had put on a white summer dress; I wore only a tee shirt over my vest, shorts and my Cubs hat. We followed an uphill trail until it forked: the right path further on to a hilltop scenic overlook, the left down to a pond. We climbed the hill. It was a short climb; there are no mountains in Illinois, but when we got to the top, I was sweating under my PVD. No one was around. The wind was calm and all we heard were the birds. The sun was brilliant in the small clearing; I kept my sunglasses on despite our solitary position.

“Stand there,” Trixie said, indicating a little rise. “Stand like that statue in Rio. Really. Do it”

I slipped off my tee shirt and undid my vest. I tossed my Cubs hat and skull cap to Trixie and took the pose on the scenic overlook: arms outstretched, like “Christ the Redeemer” on Mt. Corcovado overlooking Rio de Janeiro. I hadn’t been outdoors, exposed like that in years. The sun in my eyes was so bright that I didn’t see a difference. I felt one, though. Distinctly. If I hadn’t

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known my aura was unleashed, I might have said it felt like stepping out of the water on a hot day: a refreshing chill, the sting of evaporation. But I did know, and one look at Trixie confirmed it. I was shining like a god. There was a tremendous stir among the birds: maybe they remembered the song they forgot. Glancing down, I felt unmoored—*looked* unmoored, that is: I cast no shadows. For a moment I felt defiant. I had the right to do this if I chose. To *waste* my radiance if I wanted to, to shrug it off. And I did, but not for long. Five thousand years ago I might have heard Zeus rebuking me, a thundering voice from above, because this glow was *not mine alone to squander*. I was glowing for everyone. The sting I felt was dispersion; what was evaporating was myself: I was burning myself away. Everyone was rebuking me, not just Zeus, everyone. I was horridly alone.

“No!” I called down to Trixie from my mountain. “I won’t! Give it back!”

I snatched the vest from her hands, thrust it on, and crouching, hugged myself. I held myself secure, rocking there for a moment on the stony ground of the scenic overlook. *What was that?* I asked. That wasn’t freedom. That was murder.

Trixie looked pained as I fumbled for my skull cap and put it on.

“I didn’t understand what you said,” she told me, frightened now. “What happened to you?”

I wanted to tell her but couldn’t. The emptiness that had closed in around me wasn’t an answer to a question. I sat down and leaned back against a gnarled old tree. The landscape that unfolded out before us to the south and west was bursting with the promise of May. I shook my head.

“Did you open the wrong door?” Trixie asked.

“No. I just saw what was really behind it.”

“Which was...?”

Again I shook my head. Everything familiar that was rushing back to me had never felt dearer: the stones and dirt beneath my hands, (my stones? my dirt?) the dangerous blue of Trixie’s eyes, (my eyes? our eyes?), the smell of May. Trixie was still waiting for an answer, but then nodded as if something dawned on her. “I retract the question,” she said. “Let’s go have our picnic.”

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We didn't say much driving back into the city. I felt like a dog that'd escaped its leash, been hurt in traffic and was lolling in the security of home. Trixie and I were apparently of one mind. "We won't take you out like that again, Ducky," she said. "Not ever if you don't want."

Trixie had brought a big basket with wine glasses, cups, plates, napkins, silverware, a thermos and a sky-blue quilt for our picnic. We stopped for bread, cheese, sausage and Champagne. Then at a coffee house we had our thermos filled with half espresso-half house blend. Just espresso would have taken forever. Apparently the Plexippus Principle was operating, because we found a place to park directly next to where we planned to picnic.

The park was already crowded when we lay our quilt down on the grass. We'd found a central spot, surrounded by flower beds. We felt like picnickers in a French Impressionist painting. The sunshine, the fragrances, the chatter of the crowd, and soon the Champagne washed away the shock of my morning's moment as "Christ the Redeemer," or as Trixie was now calling it, my "bollixed Avatar experience." In the past, alcohol had temporarily turned down my wattage, and I wondered if the Champagne I'd already drunk might have dimmed me enough to try taking off my *lustroinsulative* vest, its fiberglass-crystalline material hardly garb for a hot day in the park. I loosened it a little and Trixie leaned over and peeked in.

"Nope," she said. "I wouldn't take that off unless I wanted to make a very important speech."

Then she looked at me lovingly. She held my face in her hands. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," she said, kissing the bill of my Cubs hat. "But look at me!" And at this, she stood up in her white summer dress—like the Fairy Queen, like a gift. "Look at me!"

When Trixie stood up in the hot wind that was blowing that day, she was a sight to be seen.

"Stay like that," I said. "You're gorgeous."

§

The sight of the sky-blue quilt flying from the single tallest tree in the Rookery, an oak, snapped the image to my mind like the crack of a gun. I hadn't thought of it in years: the grove of Ares, the god

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of war, where King Æetes had secured the Golden Fleece, hung from atop an oak, a monstrous serpent coiled its trunk.

Soaked in sweat, I rushed to my car.

Anger, fear, bewilderment, courage: all that and more. I shook so violently I couldn't unlock the door. I had to lean against the car to steady my hand. Once inside, I tried to calm myself, but only for the sake of driving. I had a long way to go; I didn't want a wreck before I got out of town. The question of my father disturbed me only a little, working its way in between the waves breaking in my heart. But he, if anyone, would understand: this had *happened* to him, and he knew the stories, all of them.

But things were simpler in antiquity. It didn't matter to me if tales had wrapped themselves around my life in tangled strands, indistinguishable, meanings worn and blurred: Jason's quest, Medea's magic, Orpheus's art, and now this? My love lost to the world beyond? But which one? Was that a question or a string of words? A string of hollow words? Sobbing, I gripped the steering wheel, because I knew all I needed to know. Orpheus' love, Eurydice: bitten by an asp and delivered to Hades' realm. The rest was history. Drive west.

Each moment I drove, I woke from a dream, forgetful of my tragedy only to remember, again, shocked, sickened. And again, and again.

"The Song the Birds Forgot" was finished. We had worn ourselves away. We'd become simple, our only hope to nourish as we'd been nourished ourselves. We'd found a happiness beyond yearning, beyond purpose. Or maybe not. The greatest love can be neither diminished nor shaken? God's love? To Hell with God's love! Is that what that was? God's love? Is that what I tried to find and screwed up? To Hell with that! My knuckles were white on the wheel. I was gritting my teeth. I had to take my foot off the gas if I wasn't going to kill someone on my way out. I'd already killed Anita.

Everything was up for grabs. I'd earned that. I was no longer an ordinary man. Ordinary men know they'll die before they reach their hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. Ordinary men don't read minds. Ordinary men don't glow. Ordinary men don't return from Hell or shake hands with laughing gods. Ordinary men don't return from the store to find the only remnant of their true love flapping in

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the wind! Ordinary men aren't tracked through their lives by monstrous apparitions. I was no ordinary man! Is this was that was all about?

It should be clear to me: everything was up for grabs. But it wasn't clear, nothing was clear because I'd screwed it up again! I was lost. I'd been going south, not west. For miles. I'd taken a wrong turn! A fucking wrong turn! I had to stop the car and turn around.

When I walked into the gas station to get directions, I saw that everyone in there was very pale. Three of them: one behind the register and two customers. They looked weak and sick, like I'd driven into a quarantined zone, a place where an epidemic had taken its toll. I hesitated at the door. They too, I soon saw, looked shocked at *my* appearance. I reached up to be sure my hat was in place. It was, as was my vest. My sun glasses covered my eyes. They were always there; day and night. If I wanted to get directions, I'd have to wait in line. When I finally asked the pale clerk for directions, he looked at me as if at a cadaver. What the hell was that? Was I sick? I walked back to my car both knowing and not knowing what was happening to me. Then I remembered faith. Then I remembered the music of "The Song the Birds Forgot."

The thought was a blow to the heart. The very existence of that very tall room made me want to double over in pain. How could *that* still be there? How could anything still be the same?

I wasn't in tears when I found my way back to the road west. I was shaken with rancor. To think that the cosmos worked as it did! That beyond the humdrum, worn-out sorrow of daily life, the world of the miraculous held nothing more than this! This *shit*? Fuck it! The world of the miraculous? Enigmas? Lies! All of them! Compounded by illusions of faith! That petty little world! How dare it treat me like this! Me! Had I heard once that we ourselves are the creators of it all?

The sky clouded as I drove west. Rain began to fall; the temperature dropped.

What had my father thought that terrible day when I was three and my mother walked into the woods and never returned? What had he thought, knowing so much less than I know now? Was believing she was a goddess enough? How had he had the grace to

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accept it as he did—with such equanimity? Or had he hidden his sorrow away? And his wrath? How strong was he? How shallow was I?

My windshield wipers could hardly keep up. Sheets of rain whipped and rolled across the highway. My car was riding on sheets of water, skidding, gripping for pavement, skidding again through turns, down straight-aways. I was not an ordinary man. Damn the ordinary! I was fearless! The torments of Hell were contained within *me*, within *my* being, I knew that. It was my terrible privilege to know that. It was my honor to know that! *I* was the one who survived it! I was the one brave enough to know! There was no greater terror than myself. Or maybe not. Was that all a self-serving lie, a vain deceit? Fuck the cosmos!

The flashing red and blue lights that approached me from behind carried a stale, worn little terror of their own. I didn't feel this petty terror in my soul, only in my blood, but my blood was thin; my blood was nothing.

The downpour had not let up. I opened the window when he rapped on it.

"Your license please, sir. And proof of insurance," he said, his voice stinging with resentment. I had him standing there in the rain. "Trying to kill yourself?" he went on.

I fumbled for my wallet, and handed it to him.

"Remove the license, sir," he said. "And your insurance papers, please."

"I don't carry those. I'm sorry."

He snatched my license out of my hand and returned to his patrol car. I knew that he walked slowly and deliberately through the driving rain in sheer defiance.

For a moment I forgot again. I was listening to the hammering on the roof of my car when I remembered. I groaned, but the sound of my sorrow was swallowed up. How dare they! How dare these cursed rains drown out my grief! How dare the heavens challenge me! I caught myself thinking that I'd smash the clouds that rained on me, when there was another rapping on my window, more forceful now.

"Please come with me to the car, sir," the policeman said. I saw his features clearly for the first time—perhaps because I finally looked. He was cut from a martial mold. He had the chiseled face

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of a soldier: a firm, rocky chin, a determined mouth, small eyes; a fiercely resolved look. Yet indignity betrayed his discipline. Resentment seemed ready to break through his stiff, practiced decorum.

Still dressed only in my blue hat with its red “C”, a dark blue tee shirt over my vest, and khaki shorts with sandals, I wasn’t clad for heavy rain and scampered out and back toward his car. He walked slowly as I waited, hugging myself by the door. He put me in the back seat.

A bright light was on in the car, yet still he shined a flashlight in my face.

“Remove your dark glasses please, sir,” he said.

“I can’t,” I answered. “I have an eye condition. They’re very sensitive to light.”

I saw that this angered him and knew what he was about to say. “In that case, sir, you have no business driving in the rain, let alone driving too fast for conditions without proper insurance documentation. I’ll be taking you in now. You’ll be charged at headquarters. I’ll arrange for your car to be towed.”

The officer—Officer Hill, I read on his badge—had no idea how much time was passing between his every word; how I had the opportunity to weigh my options and consider the possible effects of each—on Police Officer Hill, on myself, on others at his headquarters, on his family, and on the natural unfolding of events itself. But I would be set free; there was no doubting that, not for a moment.

Nothing could hold me back. The only question was how soon. Did I have ample time to consider that Officer Hill was doing his best, to let his inherent goodness permeate me? Did I have adequate time to realize that whatever results this experience produced would be a blessing, whether those results pleased me or not? Did I feel one way or the other? Whether I smiled or not wasn’t going to make much of a difference either way. I had never before brazenly wielded my power to overturn the will of the world, but I bore the challenge well. Removing my hat or vest would have been an abuse. Removing my sun glasses seemed appropriate, even modest.

Officer Hill was in the act of turning away from me. He was about to speak into his radio when I cleared my throat.

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“There’s just one thing,” I said. The smart-ass kid in my voice was reveling.

Officer Hill turned back around, affronted; his official manner dropped. He started to take his handcuffs off his belt. I took off my glasses, fixed him in my gaze, and having decided to smile, did that too.

His face froze.

No choices were available to Officer Hill. His position was unprecedented, untenable. I had cracked the man in half.

What could he do? What options were open to him? What could a responsible man say? A responsible defender of the law? *“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were a holy man.”* Could he say that? *“We don’t arrest holy men.”* Could he say that? *“Or men from outer space.”*

What could he say to express his helplessness and shame?

“GET OUT!” he shouted, spitting with fury, baring his teeth like a frenzied animal, his eyes welled up with tears.

“GET OUT!” he shouted, reaching across into the back seat and frantically trying to push me out the door. He grabbed my shoulder but released his grip when he felt the vest under my tee shirt. He thought it was body armor. The briefest glimmer of simple confusion crossed his face. I looked at him for only one instant more, then he opened the door and jumped away into the rain.

The bright light inside the car shown on him like a floodlight. Now he was humiliated. He looked at me out the driver’s door window; hopeless, he pounded it with his fists. I thought he was going to draw his gun. Was he weeping? Was he gasping for breath as I backed away toward my car? Was he dying? As I skidded away, I watched the flashing lights, red and blue, recede and dwindle into the distance and disappear.

Perhaps I could have found a way. Perhaps I’d had a choice but hadn’t bothered. What would happen to him? To his life? What would he tell his colleagues? How many miles was it to Averno?

I arrived just as it was getting dark. The rain had passed away behind me, to the east. The parking lot of the café was covered in puddles; the air outside my car smelled like fresh-washed May in

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Iowa. I remembered that from my college days, when I was still at heart an ordinary man, who believed he happened to be brighter than the others. Brighter? The fortuity of that word annoyed me. But the reminiscence of those carefree days made me ache. Yet there, only steps away was that window, steamed up again, the word “Café” lettered across it. I wanted to take off my glasses again as I strode inside, blinding the crowd of the damned, but didn’t. I pulled the door open forcefully, my feelings churning like a tempest.

It was dark inside, and miserable. It resembled the place I’d suffered my torments only in its dreariness. There were booths to one side, grimy looking; and a long, chipped black counter on the other. This was not a coffee house. It was a run-down rural café. The ceiling was clotted with grease. There were no tables, no canisters of coffee in front, no pile of dirty cups, no rock hard confections, no snake-haired waitress bashing her way through a crowd of miscreants. There was no crowd. Just a group seated in the back booth, men in dark green work uniforms, two men at the counter, where a waitress leaned next to a tinny radio playing country music. The place smelled of fried food and stale coffee. No one looked at me at first. Then the waitress gave me a bored nod, and both men at the counter turned and stared. My feelings sunk back into a pool of regret.

One of the men at the counter called out to me. His voice suspicious.

“Hey...” he said. He looked like a farmer, not a prosperous one; he wore bib overalls, boots and a seed cap. His creased face and voice were sour. “Hey!” he repeated accusingly. “You look like that guy who started all that trouble here. You are that guy! You got your nerve! Coming back in here... Hey!” he called out to the others. “Look at this guy!”

At this, the group at the back booth turned and looked at me. Their faces were all worn, all slack. They murmured indistinctly among themselves and one spoke to the man at the counter who’d shouted at me. “Dunno, Frank,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Frank. “He’s the one. He’s the one that started it! Aren’t you, fella?” He made no attempt to disguise the malice in his voice.

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“You must be mistaken,” I said, sinking further back into my sad self. “This is the wrong place. I was looking for someone. I’m leaving”

No one said a word.

The group at the back booth returned to their bits of conversation; one of them had shrugged. The two men at the counter turned away from me in silence, Frank glancing back momentarily as I backed out the door. “Yeah, do that! Get outa here, you son of a bitch!” he cursed. His eyes were straight out of Hell.

Deflated, I walked through the puddles back to my car, which looked smaller, meeker than before. Orpheus, son of Apollo, hero, had come up short, fired a blank. I’d be leading no one back from Hades’ realm. I wouldn’t charm the Lord of the Underworld with my art; nor distract the damned from their punishment. Tantalus wouldn’t pause in his futile grasping for food and drink; Sisyphus wouldn’t sit, resting on his great stone to listen to my plea; the daughters of Danaus wouldn’t cease drawing water with their sieves as I convinced the Lord of the Dead to release my lost love. I would dazzle no one with my gaze. I would not lead my true love back to the world of the living, safely this time, without disaster. I was no Orpheus; no more than I was Jason

Night would fall soon. The puddles smelled rank. I heard those sour words again. “Get outa here, you son of a bitch!” Spent, I moved my car to an unlit corner of the lot and slept.

I was awakened by a rapping on the window. I had been dreaming about Officer Hill and I believed it was he who was knocking. In my dream he had a bleeding head wound and tried to apologize to me but I wouldn’t let him. I told him *I* was at fault, insisted I was at fault.

“At fault for what?” he asked.

“I forgot who you were,” I said.

“And who am I?” he asked. “Who the hell am I?”

That’s when I woke up.

It wasn’t Officer Hill outside my car, however. It was a child; a blond boy. I slipped my sunglasses on. I’d slept in my hat.

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"This is my daddy's," the boy said when I opened the door, got out and stretched. "You can't sleep here."

"I'm not asleep anymore," I said. "I'm going now, anyway."

The boy, around ten, dressed in shorts and a clean white tee shirt, sized me up.

"My daddy don't allow camping here," he said gravely. "You should leave before you get in trouble."

I smiled at him. "It's okay. I'm going."

He looked at me curiously. "How come your hair's all white?"

I shrugged. "Just one of those things."

"One of those things...?" he asked. It seemed he'd never heard the expression before. "What you got on under your shirt? That a bulletproof vest? You a cop?"

"No. It's not a bulletproof vest and I'm not a cop. I wear this because it makes me comfortable."

"Can I put it on?"

"No. Sorry, it's just for me."

"Where'd you get it?"

"A friend of mine made it for me."

"Maybe I'll get one of them too."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe someday."

I glanced over at the Café. An "OPEN" sign hung on the door. The front window was steamed up again, but I saw movement behind it. I wondered how people could eat breakfast in a place like that. And what about Frank?

"This your car?" the blond boy asked then.

"Um hm."

"Your wife drive it too?"

It was only then that I fully awoke. I had forgotten. The weight of Trixie's disappearance slammed into my chest like a boulder. "Uh huh," I said. "She does drive it."

"Where's she at? In the house?"

"That's right," I said. "She's back in the house."

"You better get back," he said. "She'll be worried you didn't check in."

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Check in? I stared at him. “You’re right,” I said. “I better get going.” Any arrogance I’d felt the night before had melted into sorrow.

“I won’t tell my daddy,” he said.

I looked at him, shocked, at a loss for words. I saw that he was looking at the contours of my vest. He was still standing there watching after I rolled down all the windows and pulled out of the parking lot onto the highway going west, but when I looked in the rear view mirror, he was gone.

It seemed absurd to me, but as I drove off, I remembered my resolutions. How can this be? I wondered. Power and meekness melded into someone without the sense to guide it? Without the will? How can this be? How can any of this be? A senseless, hard-shelled, blind thing, crawling in the radiant body of a god?

And yet, it was what I might have called a glorious day in May. The landscape around me was at its most hopeful young green; the farmland fertile, orderly, burgeoning; the trees in bloom. I was driving on a straightaway, at least I had that metaphor for want of any other, and I knew my destination was hardly an hour away. No old, black sedan was following behind me. I should know by now how to spend an hour, I thought—or how to save it. Spend time? Save time? Humans are confused about time.

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The place was exactly as I remembered it. I'd come off the straight highway west and turned back to the northeast, driven no more than a mile, and there it was. There had been no cars behind me, so I drove slowly as I approached it and eased the car off the road at just the spot I wished. Yellow lilies and tall grass grew knee high along the highway where I stopped. I felt transparent as I walked to the place where the rosy door had stood in the snow. I pushed some bushes to the side, and there it was again. The roses were as they had been in winter; they had attached themselves to the wall around the door, and I remembered the sound they'd made as they'd broken free: like brittle pages flipping in an old book. The nameplate was still affixed to the door; it was just as I'd seen it: the golden letters nearly faded away, but now I knew what they spelled out. I forgot about the impenetrable membrane as I slipped through.

"You won't be needing those in here," said Achilles as soon as I entered.

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I wanted to hug him, and once I slipped off my vest and put my shirt back on, I did. His chest and shoulders were of such girth that I barely got my arms around him, but I didn't worry for a moment that it might not be appropriate to hug the hero of Homer's Iliad: the great warrior who's sea nymph mother, Thetis, had tried to grant him immortality by holding him by his heels and dipping him in the sacred waters of the River Styx. I was so happy to have arrived at my destination, in fact, that I didn't search the crowd in the coffee house for my true love, but watched as Achilles hung my vest and hat in a cloakroom I hadn't seen the first time I'd visited the place. A strange variety of garments hung on hooks: there was armor there; a cape of living flowers and leaves; what appeared to be a set of wings; a motorcycle jacket, and sure enough, a vest similar to mine, larger but made of the same materials.

Though I hadn't let myself admit it, since I woke in my car that morning, I'd put off stopping for coffee in anticipation of having a cup of *the best coffee in the world*. That I'd wish for a cup of coffee before inquiring after Trixie didn't seem indecorous or unfeeling at all, however; the atmosphere of the place was so uplifting that every impulse felt raised to a golden standard. Golden indeed, for just to make sure, I glanced up at the blackboard behind the counter where the names of all the coffees and baked goods were written out in several colors, and there at the top was inscribed in yellow-orange chalk: "The Golden Fleece;" and just below that, in smaller letters, "Member of THE BIG PICTURE family of establishments."

"You look like you could use a cup of coffee," said the slayer of Hector.

I didn't have to say a thing, or even nod. Achilles filled a bright yellow cup from one of the canisters behind the counter and handed it to me. The relief of finding myself in wonderland again was sweeping over me in waves. It felt like chunks of psychic plaque that had accumulated around my soul were being dislodged by the very air I breathed in there. The most striking and satisfying sort of immediacy had overcome me. Standing there, I took a sip of coffee.

"I'll try one of those too," I said to greatest of all Greek warriors.

"The sugared ones or the plain?" he asked.

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The decision seemed both simple and momentous. “Sugared,” I answered, feeling a happiness I hadn’t known since the last time I sipped the coffee at “The Golden Fleece.”

When Achilles handed me the sugary confection along with a dollop of whipped butter and a butter knife on a pale yellow plate along with a soft, white linen napkin, I felt I’d been presented with a medal of honor, or a crown, or a sheath of invulnerability. I followed him into the crowded room, but when I saw Trixie sitting at a table with my mother, I froze. She looked the same; she was dressed in the same white summer dress she’d been wearing when she vanished, but a small voice in my chest (beneath my medal of honor) and in my brain (beneath my crown) cried out to my invulnerable self in alarm: was this the same human Trixie I loved or a superior, heavenly Trixie, a being like my mother, above it all, above the fray, above me? But Achilles’ hand was on my shoulder urging me on. It seemed that a signal had been sent across the room when he touched me, because just as he did, Trixie suddenly turned, stood, rushed across and threw her arms around me.

“Oh, Ducky! She promised me you’d come! I thought I’d die waiting!” She heaved a deep sigh. “Except, of course...” Trixie held my shoulders in her hands and looked in my eyes, “...that things are different here. But you know that. You haven’t... changed, have you?”

“No. I almost died myself. And almost killed someone, too, I think. I was arrested. I was trapped like a rat. I had to take my glasses off and give the poor cop a serious zapping.”

Trixie burst out laughing, and just as she did, a drum beat: *ka-boom!* and the whole crowd of assorted dignitaries and who-knew-who-else burst out in peals of laughter as well, continued for several seconds until the drum beat again, *ka-boom!* when they returned to their conversations, coffee or reading, a few titters lingering on.

My hand in hers, Trixie led me over to the table where my mother was sitting alone.

“You see,” my mother said to Trixie, smiling, as I put down my sweet roll and butter and sat down. “Just as I said. You needn’t have worried; no more you should fear the loss of your shadow when the sun goes down. You two are interlocking parts of a device

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as wondrous as the one you just finished putting together! Oh, listen to me again! Speaking like a thinker!” She laughed.

I cocked my head to listen to the crowd around us, but there was no *ka-boom!* and no outburst of mirth. I looked at my mother quizzically.

“It’s only for guests,” she offered. “Your temporary status. Now sit down and let me look at you, dear. You’re quite dashing with white hair.”

My thought to wonder why she didn’t *know* about my hair, why she hadn’t been able to *see* me as well as speak to me acted as all such thoughts had done on my last visit: it circled the airport but didn’t land. But there *was* something I was slightly perplexed about. As far as I understood, I was sitting at a table with a goddess, or something like one, at least, a goddess who didn’t have much patience with *stupid question*; along with Trixie, a human like myself, a human who lived in a world where questions and answers weren’t only reasonable, but at times, the currency of understanding. So could I...? What would happen if I...?

Apparently reading my mind, my mother laughed again. “We’re more tolerant here than you suppose, dear. And not so nose-y. So feel free. I am your *mother*. But I do want to some more coffee, and I have some gossiping to do too. I’ll be right over there.” She pointed to a table: there was sitting the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Just as I’d been certain that the coffee in The Golden Fleece was the best coffee possible, I knew that I was gazing at the most beautiful woman in creation. She had flowers in her long, flowing golden hair and was scantily dressed in Attic attire. She radiated enough light to read by in the dark. Seated along with her was a beautiful boy. Only when he turned to look at my mother approaching did I see that he had wings and carried a quiver; his bow was leaning against the back of his chair.

Trixie beamed at me, wide-eyed. “I could just sit here forever,” she said. “And just look around. See over there?”

“My God!” I answered. “He really looks like that? Like an actor?”

“I guess so. And that’s his sweetie.”

The person in question looked remarkably like modern portrayals of Jesus. He radiated light, had a pronounced halo, a

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staff, and a white lamb at his feet. The striking woman at his table was fabulously adorned and stunningly made up.

"I saw you took off your Flutarian stuff," Trixie said to me, looking back from the crowd of notables, the A-list of immortals. "You still glow, you know. Maybe not like *them*, but you're no ordinary man, Jason Finch."

I suppose she was right. But neither was she. Then I remembered.

"Hey! Wait a second," I said. "WHATEVER HAPPENED? You're going to tell me, aren't you? How'd you do it? How does it work—vanishing? How does it feel? C'mon! Don't go all abstract on me!"

"Ducky! We're sitting in... I don't know. In Heaven? Something like that. At a round table made of what? What kind of wood is this? Where does this wood come from? And we're drinking this inconceivably good coffee! It's just so completely *cool*. There's Jesus and Mary Magdalene! There's Aphrodite and Eros! And you want me to... what?"

I gave her a look.

"You wouldn't prefer my goddess act?"

I repeated the look.

"Fine, Ducky!" she said. "I'll tell you what I can, if you insist on being so...so *earthly*. But some of it was hard to grasp; ephemeral, it had a kind of sheen to it, slippery almost, but electric..."

"So you left to get more Champagne, right? And I was just sitting there looking around when I was sure I heard the big mobile playing. The music was cutting through all the outside noise in the park. I could hear people talking and laughing, kids running around, some people arguing, even radios playing, but the chimes seemed to be *carrying* it all, *clarifying* it all, *outlining* it in shimmering light. It was definitely the music we'd set up and set free, but like it was drifting all the way over to the park from Grand Avenue! That's miles! Strictly Lydian with a hint of cutting Mixolydian melancholy, but working itself out in more intriguing and complex and cohesive ways than it ever had before. Astonishing ways, in melodies and harmonies that seemed eternal, in ways I'd hoped were possible, but which seemed to fit together effortlessly, endlessly—even little bits of fugue. It was just outlining the sounds at the park at first, but then my thoughts got

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somehow wrapped up in it, and then the things I saw around me, the people, the flowers, the *meanings* of the people and flowers even. The *meanings* of the flowers! How about that! It was perfect lucidity, Jason. Just like it is here. And everything there in the park stood out with such polished clarity; like everything radiated light, just a little, but enough to make everything crystalline. It had all become music! Life was music. That's what happened. Life was music and it seemed it always had been!

"But I hadn't been doing anything at all special. I wasn't detaching myself or meditating or feeling any particular love for everything around me. I remember feeling very much in love with you, though, and was looking forward to another bottle of that Champagne. Maybe that's what set it all off. Who knows? I even thought for a second that you had something to do with what was happening, and actually, that's when this unearthly feeling came over me and I started to remember the most rapturous dream. It was a dream about a place I'd visited so often, even before my life it seemed, in dream after dream. It was a place I'd never dreamed with you, but oh, how I wished you were there with me. Everything about it was *so* familiar to me; the atmosphere, the feeling of the place. It was more familiar to me than even *myself*, if that makes any sense. But it also felt just beyond my reach, like I couldn't remember enough; I couldn't quite get it. And that's when they raised me up. The people. A family of people; they were praying, all of them, in Spanish. They lifted me: they really did. They lifted me up and offered me. And that's when I felt the surfaces slide against each other, sliding with a sheen, an electric sheen. It was a shift; massive but subtle at the same time, and then, my God, I *saw* it: I was there.

"Everything else stopped; everything but the music: the park had stopped, the noises there, the picnic basket that hot wind vanished. I didn't vanish; the world vanished from around me. It wasn't far away; the surfaces slipped just a little bit, but the surfaces were so massive, Jason. There was a bell tower on a small building, a sanctuary. The tower and building were made of brick, bricks in different shades and set in striking, symmetrical patterns like mazes—but not ornate; simple, perfectly simple, amazing patterns, that were obscured here and there by ivy with tiny, star-shaped leaves. The sanctuary was on a little grassy rise, radiantly green,

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and the bells were tolling. Deep, resonant, silver tones; tones that held and released the same music I'd heard in the park that was as close as the next room but a world away; tones that described life, that *included* it. I was standing on a curving path set with smooth, flat stones; they were nearly white, and they fit together perfectly like provinces on a map. In the distance there were more little rises, some with green-black trees and more stone paths curling among them. The air was fragrant with cool stone, the lush, emerald green grass, and the bushes. The bushes were like junipers, but they had long, soft needles, Jason; and deep, blood red blossoms, and some of the blossoms fallen off and were strewn around on the grass like rubies. And the sky—the sky was deep, midnight blue and the most delicate, crystalline azure *at once!* And there were stars, resplendent ones; and planets, huge, hanging big as fruit!”

Trixie was breathless and stopped a moment. “Then I opened the door,” she said. “A beautiful arched wooden door. I remember wondering where your roses were. Isn’t that odd? It was the door to the sanctuary. I believed the key to the marvelous dream was behind the door, but I had the urge to look behind me before I went in—and when I did look, I saw it wasn’t just that one family that had offered me up, but more people, so many more people had lifted me, nations of people. I mean that. Nations! I was awestruck, Jason: because *everyone in the world* brought me here, *contributed* to me, everyone was *responsible* for me. And then when the door opened, I was here, in your mother’s arms. She welcomed me, but I recognized the place right away. I’d been prepared.”

Trixie smiled. “...Well, kind of. The first thing I asked, even before I knew it was your mother, was whether I was dead. And in just that instant before she answered, I was afraid that I *was* dead because the band didn’t start to play “*the stupid question music*.” But she told me no, I wasn’t dead, and not to be frightened because she was your mother and *my* mother too and that she loved me and had known me and nurtured me for five thousand years. And I wept.”

Trixie rolled her eyes. “So you can imagine,” she said. “But that’s not really *it*. I’ll have to tell you all of this again, for years and years and years I’ll tell you again and it’ll never be quite the same or complete.”

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The coffee I was drinking had chemically cleansed me; I felt purified blood was coursing through my body. "This stuff's incredible," I said to Trixie, sounding a little silly. I'd already emptied my cup. The sweet roll didn't seem to have any miraculous effect, it was delicious, though, and didn't need any butter.

"Let's get some more!" she said, standing and pulling me up. "We did it, Ducky! We're here! We're explorers now, pioneers! D'ya think?"

I'd never seen anything like it. Her dark blue eyes were positively smoldering. I put my arm around her as we walked toward the counter to get our cups refilled; her neck and shoulders tingled, electrifying me. My mother—*our* mother, I guess, maybe *everybody's*—was still sitting at the table with Aphrodite and Eros—or Venus and Cupid, if you prefer. All three of them were laughing. Trixie and I looked at each other thinking identical thoughts. What? What in Heaven or on Earth or anywhere in between could they be laughing at? Would we think it was funny? Would we be struck down hearing it? Would we die laughing?

Though Achilles was standing close by, he wasn't the one who dispensed the coffee there in that "member establishment of The Big Picture." It was the angel from the "Temperance" card in the Tarot. I wondered for a moment if Anita was still there in "The Golden Fleece" to help me understand the angel's significance, but I did know a little. I'd been doing some studying.

The broad-winged angel, dressed in a white robe with a golden triangle emblazoned on the front, traditionally stands with one foot on land, the other in a pool and pours water from one golden goblet to another. The fourteenth card in the book of the Tarot (the vowels and consonants in the language of eternity, according to Great Aunt Theresa), "Temperance" doesn't just represent moderation, but the blending of opposites, the mystic marriage of the irreconcilable, of fire and water, of spirit and matter: the synthesis at the core of life; the essential mystery. Here, over seven feet tall, radiant as a star, she was pouring the best coffee in the world. Not such a surprise, really. When Trixie and I thanked her, she nodded but didn't speak. As I took the cup of coffee she offered me with her large, long-fingered hand, I looked into her eyes for only a moment, but felt I'd be psychologically disabled if I continued.

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"I hope that spooky horseman on the 'Death' card's not lurking around here anyplace," Trixie said as we made our way back to our table.

"Last time, Poseidon told me the difference between being alive or dead was 'of little consequence here.'"

"Easy for him to say," said Trixie, but she'd hardly uttered the words when the kettle drum boomed again and the crowd burst out laughing, continued for a few seconds and then settled back down.

"Was that really that funny?" Trixie asked me. "This place is kind of... goofy? Isn't it?"

"I think maybe they're being very polite," I said.

"Eavesdropping too," she answered. Glancing around the room, I saw no one was looking at us or appeared to be listening to our conversation. I did notice something that hadn't been apparent on my first visit, however. The farthest recesses of the coffee house were far more distant than I'd believed. I'd known it was a large room, but thought that I'd at least had a look at most of its occupants. But it appeared that wasn't the case. Maybe it was the figure approaching from deep in the distance that brought it all home.

"Uh oh, Trixie. You shouldn't have said that." I shook my head. "There he is."

And there he was. Closer now. Even more quickly than I expected. He was on his horse, a majestic white one. Such a large animal making its way through the crowded room without causing any kind of hubbub would have been surprising in an ordinary coffee house, but not this place, even with the black armor the skeletal figure was wearing clattering a little—and there was no mistaking his head for anything else than it was. It was a bare skull in a helmet with the visor raised.

I'd never seen Trixie look frightened before. Death and his horse had come up to our table and stopped.

"Please, let me introduce myself," said the skeletal head, its jaw moving with some slight difficulty, creaking just a bit. "I am Death, Member of the Greater Arcana. *Arcana* from Latin, you know. It means... *se... se... sec...ret*."

He was having trouble with that jaw. He shook his skull and tapped the creaking mandible with a skeletal finger. "Excuse

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me,” Death said. “As I was trying to say: We, the Greater Arcana are the twenty-two trump cards in the Tarot deck. We represent archetypes; we are symbols of the major circumstances and situations in life. We are much like the sixty-four hexagrams in the I Ch... Ch...Ch...”

Apparently the lower jaw was stuck now. With a somewhat unnerving snap, he dislodged it from his upper, dipped a finger into my butter, lubricated it the jaw and snapped it back in place.

“I’m three-hundred-and-fifty-million years old,” he complained, not apologizing for dipping into to my butter. “But I was saying: We, the Greater Arcana, are much like the sixty-four hexagrams of the I Ching, but being fewer and pictorial symbols, we are more potent purveyors of meaning, if I say so myself. We provide a map of spiritual evolution; we are chapters in the Book of Life... like my colleague, Temperance over there, whom you’ve met: she who provides your Elixir of M-y-s-t-e-r-y!”

Both Trixie and I looked down at our coffee. Then Trixie looked back up at Death, still warily.

“I’m sorry to have frightened you, miss,” he said. “I take this form to command attention, you see. And I always do. You don’t suppose people would pay me much heed if I dressed like a clown, do you? Or a nurse?”

Trixie spoke up very bravely, I believe, considering The Grim Reaper was close enough to lay his hand on her head. “It’s your skeleton that creeps me out,” she said. “I’ve always been frightened of skeletons. I’m sorry. It’s just a *thing* I have.”

“You have another *thing* too, my dear: you have a *skeleton*,” said Death, doing something with his lubricated lower jaw that suggested a smile—not a particularly beguiling gesture. “Everyone does. It’s just covered up. Mortals are often frightened of hidden things.”

“Well, I wonder why!” Trixie snapped back. “When our skeletons aren’t hidden it usually means we’re dead!”

Death nodded his...his skull. “Touché,” he said. “You’ve got me there, little lady. In reality, physical death really isn’t anything to be frightened of, but it does *seem* frightening. I’ll grant you that. It needs to. Fear is useful, and not only the way your anthropologists believe. It protects you soft ones from being bitten by hungry or angry things; it always has, but it does more: it is the

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symbol of everything there is to transcend. It's your ready-made reminder of what stands between you and your freedom. When wishing to evolve, fear can be your ladder."

Death bowed his skull, causing his armor to clatter a little. His white horse, seemingly of the same mind, not only bowed his head, but nuzzled Trixie on the neck—a part of her I knew was extremely ticklish. I wondered if the horse read my mind. Trixie snorted as the horse's soft muzzle brushed her neck. This may have dispelled her fear. There was nothing disturbing about the horse.

"There's no talking you mortals out of your fear of physical death," the skeletal horseman continued. "A bit always lingers, it's inherent in mortality itself. But that's not what I'm about, at least not often." Here he stopped, waggled his lower jaw a bit and continued. "People fear my Tarot card so, and it's depicted *everywhere* these days. You can't see a spooky movie without ME, on some ominous kind of card. Before you know it, I'll be on a Wheaties box!"

Death made a peculiar sound at this point, and given the skull shaking that accompanied it, it assumed he was laughing at his own joke. "But it's a shame," he went on, "that humans fear me so. It's unfortunate. It makes me... regretful. You see, people do die now and then soon after their fortune is told, that's statistically inevitable, but the fuss they make when the 'Death' card shows up in a Tarot reading! It would make you think the Plague was back! I am not the Plague." He raised his arms dramatically. "I am transformation!" He pronounced this word in a surprisingly resonant voice for a bare boned being.

"Tra-a-a-a-nsformation!" he repeated, dramatically and louder.

"The death of one phase, or one state of mind. One step on the ladder of e-e-e-evolution and the birth of another! The end giving rise to the beginning! The beginning rising out of the end! Yes! **TRA-A-A-A-NSFORMATION!** I am **TRA-A-A-A-NSFORMATION!** Look at my card! There is a rising sun on the horizon! A sunrise, not a sunset!

Here Death paused, and composed himself, it seemed. He quieted his resonant voice. "And yes, discomfort may accompany transformation, just as there is discomfort in birth. But have you ever thought that there is no 'Birth' card in the Tarot? There's no

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need for one! IT IS I! I! There is more to me than you ordinarily suppose!”

Death seemed to be getting excited again; his tone ever more dramatic. “I’ve been compared to Time. To Cronos, Father Time! But Time, we immortals know, is a half-truth, an illusion. Death is to Time as Resurrection is to Eternity! That’s the BIG picture! And since that’s where you two find yourselves—in ‘The BIG Picture’—make yourselves comfortable with that, and with me. And as you’ve seen, I have a very nice horse!

“I am Death, I am **TRA-A-A-A-NSFORMATION**, I am **RE-E-E-ESURRECTION!**”

But with these words, his mandible simply popped out, landed on the wooden table and bounced off onto the floor. And at this, the kettle drums boomed once again, but the peals of laughter from the crowd lasted several seconds longer than for us, befitting a member of The Greater Arcana, perhaps. I picked up Death’s lower jaw, and returned it to him, realizing, as I handed it back, that the popping out may have been part of his act. Once the laughter had subsided, the skeleton man in black armor replaced his jaw, bent down and whispered something to Trixie. She grinned, nodded and walked off toward the front of the coffee house. A moment later she called out across the room: “The sugary kind, like this?”

Death smiled his skeletal smile, which was growing on me, and nodded, his helmet rattling.

Trixie returned then, demurely hiding something behind her back, but with a coquettish glimmer in her eye. “Here, big boy,” she said, at which she disclosed her gift to the horse, who made a waffling sound—perhaps a thank you—and gobbled it out of her hand.

Having made his point about **TRA-A-A-ANSFORMATION** and **RESURECTION** to boot; and having successfully made friends with Trixie, Death said goodbye to us both—with a good deal of flourish and creaking. Then he promised us that if when he saw us next, the time for our transition had come, he’d give us the V.I.P. treatment.

“The Deluxe Package! All the frills!” he explained. “A guaranteed pain-free departure, lucid moments for a profound deathbed utterance, thunder and lightning at the moment of passing,

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recurring sweet dreams for loved ones, and a mysterious, spontaneous tolling of local church bells.”

Then Death bowed one last time and rode off back in the direction from which he came. He stopped his horse next to the table where Jesus and Mary Magdalene were still sitting, said something that made them smile, tipped his visor to them, and proceeded on.

I looked at Trixie sitting with me there; it felt like we’d become a third person, a supremely perceptive and sensitive being.

“My God,” Trixie said to me. “I can read your mind.”

“I know.”

“Don’t give me shit,” she said. “I can, and I know about the detachment you were talking about, that too. The way you were when you were here before? About feeling above it all here; how all those thoughts just give up and don’t even try anymore.”

“We like being one organism,” I said.

“Don’t talk that way. It’s disgusting. Let’s just say we’re really together in this now.”

I nodded. “We must retain individual integrity,” I said.

“Stop talking like a robot, Ducky. Do you want to go over to that table and join your mother and her friends?”

“I love you, sweetheart, but I’m not sure if I could handle sitting at a table with the Goddess of Love—getting anywhere near her for that matter.”

“Even with your mother there?”

“You’ve got a point.”

But we were to remain at our round wooden table. We weren’t about to go anywhere. Two things struck us; one following closely on the other.

I looked at Trixie and said what we’d both suddenly remembered through the barrage of new impressions. “It’s just hanging there. The door’s locked.”

“We left two vents open,” she added. “It’s probably singing.”

I was bereft. I didn’t know I could feel longing there in the Coffee House of the Gods. Trixie’s fierce blues reflected the same thing. In fact, tears welled up in her eyes. But this longing, it was ...*different*. I felt the difference but couldn’t name it, couldn’t

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define it before Trixie and I were struck by the second thing. Behind us. Something large. A powerful presence, but a peculiar one, a baffling one, and alien one. Yes, an *a-a-a-a-alien* one.

He was dressed in a white suit with no lapels, buttoned snug at the neck, and like other powerful beings I'd seen, he was well over seven feet tall. He also had a very large bald head. "Harapat," he said. "I am Harapat."

The remembrance of our work left behind had already disturbed my heavenly equilibrium. I felt like a man who'd just remembered he'd left his child locked in a car on a hot day, a world away, and the mere suggestion of flying saucers brought out my ire. I remembered that word "Harapat" and some other related nonsense words from Mr. Fitzsimmons, the one I'd first spoken to at the Omega Society.

"Oh, come on!" I said to the tall stranger, despite his imposing look and the daunting power of his presence. "Death on a horse is one thing, but space invaders? Gimme a break!"

I might have expected something from the crowd at my outburst, and it was immediate: "O-o-o-o-o's" rang out from all directions. "O-o-o-o-o's" of surprise, of shock, of concern—concern for me, perhaps, having dared to challenge the mighty Harapat. But I was feeling my humanity.

"Finel!" I said. "And I suppose you're a Flutarian? Is that it? From **FLUTO**?" I was shouting, and Trixie put her hand on my shoulder. She was trying to calm me; she nodded at the tall person looming above us. He was smiling; beaming, actually.

"I'm sorry you've formed an unfavorable impression of me." His voice was so soft I could hardly hear him. There was something of a cat's purr in that voice. "I'm just breezing by to say hello," he continued. "If you'll let me join you, I'll try to clear a few things up."

Trixie seemed immediately enchanted; eager to play ambassador of good will. She asked him to sit down. I wasn't opposed to inviting him to join us, but I was temporarily stuck on indignation.

"Would you like me to bring you some coffee?" Trixie asked Harapat as he lowered his huge form down into a chair across from us. There wasn't a lot of room for his knees under the table. I noticed that we were still drawing attention from the crowd.

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Harapat graciously thanked Trixie, and said yes, he would like coffee, but just a taste. It occurred to me as Trixie left that my incredulity might be unfounded, but I wasn't going to yield until I received a plausible explanation. Of course I was aware plausibility wasn't necessarily valued in "The Big Picture." Harapat had said he'd "clear things up," however. There was an uncomfortable moment then, for me at least. I didn't know whether to attempt to start a conversation with this... this being there with me at the table or wait until Trixie returned. My concerns were dispelled when I saw that he'd closed his large eyes. Perhaps he chose to meditate before coffee; perhaps that was a Flutarian custom. In any case, I took a moment to look at him more carefully.

His hairless head was large but not disturbingly so. Its proportions resembled humans' with the exception of his slightly extended forehead and large crown. His eyes, nose, mouth and ears were large but in no way surprising. It looked like he was carrying quite a big brain in that head, though; not unlike a caricature of a very smart person. His white suit was made of a soft, glossy fabric I didn't recognize, though it reminded me of the material from which my PVD had been fabricated. His relaxed manner suggested a kindly nature, as his voice had, but I still had my doubts.

Trixie presented him with his coffee as if she were serving royalty. I think I even detected a hint of a curtsy before she sat back down. I rolled my eyes at her.

Harapat took a sip and smacked his lips in a very human way. "I'm greeting you here as a representative of everything beyond," he began in his quiet voice, "and in that role, please understand that I am an illusion. That's not to say what I have to tell you should be dismissed as insubstantial. You mortals have been born and bred on illusions and seem to have thrived." Here he smiled an expectant smile. Had that been a joke?

"I am among the elite," he said then, softly as before. "An Archetype, the GRAND SYMBOL OF THE UNKNOWNABLE, and therefore I have a unique perspective—probably one... *unfamiliar* to you?"

At this, a soft little boom sounded from the kettledrum but only a tittering of laughter followed from the crowd. Personally, I though this deserved a better laugh. Obviously reading my

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thoughts, the personification of everything forever beyond my reach winked at me.

"The nature of the cosmos," Harapat went on, the purr in his voice even more apparent than before, "is a mystery and must always remain so to all those who are not at one with it. Simple, no? And it follows that those who are limitless in everyway themselves are, in fact, the cosmos itself. In order to grapple with this mystery, mortals have invented gods and religion. But concepts of gods and the religions that surround them have been codified, normalized, withdrawn from the frontiers of speculation. Obviously, God is no longer unnamable, a quality of the true Mystery. So you see, kind people," Harapat purred, "*I* am what stands *beyond* the frontier of all your gods, because I am a symbol of a reality to which no mortal qualities have yet been officially ascribed. Some might conclude, therefore, I am the highest authority. And I am an illusion. Isn't that delightfully perplexing?"

Harapat looked around the room. At once a chorus of appreciative, awestruck "O-o-o-o-o-'s" rang out. I laughed. Harapat seemed to appreciate that and smiled at us with stunning results. I felt as if I'd had a light transfusion; a feeling I'd only achieved after deep, long meditation. The transformation I felt was complete. My truculent insolence evaporated entirely. Suddenly I was all ears. Somehow, Harapat's large, bald head had become the picture of gentleness.

"Now I will tell you something you have never heard before. Being the representative of the unknowable, I am in a position to do so."

Harapat smiled, hesitated for a moment, but when the kettledrum and crowd didn't respond, he continued, very softly. "Understandings are based on the sum of one's experience," he said, "and though some experiences are more complete and inclusive than others, no experiences can be dismissed. It may be true that your own concept of reality surpasses that of some others— those people those who see *flying saucers*, for example, those worry about *abduction* and *unseemly probing*. But what would you think about others, like me for example, whose understandings surpass the idea that there is, in fact, *a galaxy out there*? Hmmm?

"What would you say if I told you there *never* was a galaxy out there before your race built its telescopes? Formerly, the stars

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were brilliant dots in the canopy of heaven and nothing more. Don't misunderstand me. That's what *they actually were*. They became concrete only as your experience precipitated them, gave them form and history—just as some honest, fearful souls have been taken up in alien vessels from space...and, indeed, just as the stars will cease to have their present form when a new understanding transform them. You two have never been told that before. But you have been told that you invent your reality. And that is not a metaphor. You make it up. You make it all up. This you have heard before, but you never seem to believe it! Perhaps the implications are too far-reachingly glorious for you to manage. But you make it up. You make it all up. You really do."

Here Harapat laughed and continued to speak softly. "Do you want some more?" he asked, smiling, but not waiting for a reply.

"When you *die*, as you call it; when you cease to exist in one material form, the world in which you have lived *disappears*! It doesn't *seem* to disappear because you aren't there to see it, **IT DISAPPEARS!**" He voice was no louder, though the purr in it gained power. "It does. It no longer exists. It no longer happened. Everything you know individually is of your own making. Now listen carefully. The cosmos exists for *your* experience, *your* diversion—*only yours*. **YOURS ALONE**. But the same applies *to every one of you!* **AT ONCE! EVERYONE!**

"So what do you think?" he asked. "Isn't that a fine conundrum? **A MARVELOUS IMPOSSIBILITY?** Have I given you a little clue? A key to the door which I guard? It's something everyone should hear, at least once, whether they believe it or not. That's why I breezed by." He drank his coffee in a satisfied gulp.

"I do love people!" Harapat said. "Even though I'm an illusion, kindness is such a gratifying gesture! I do hope I've made you day a little fuller! And thank you, sir. And thank you, miss," Harapat said to Trixie, setting his cup down on the table. Then he smiled another of his smiles. My brain finally gave up. Its neural tyranny was for a moment overthrown. The taste of the profoundly irreconcilable reminded me of childhood—when I was mistakenly taught that two plus two equaled four and not forever.

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Harapat stood up then, but before he walked away, a round of polite applause echoed across the room. Taking Trixie's lead, I clapped too, at which Harapat bowed, suddenly, and in a silver shimmer, took the smaller, smooth form of sandy haired Mr. Pruitt, who gave us a twinkling look, and then became, before our eyes, a large black rabbit and hopped off toward one of the endless recesses of the room.

What's a body to say?

"I wonder who's next?" said Trixie. "Can anyone possibly be next? Who trumps the GRAND SYMBOL OF THE UNKNOWNABLE? Elvis? Daffy Duck? The Stay-Puft Marshmallow man?"

"Well, maybe if we just sit here...."

Trixie smiled and shrugged.

"What about the mobile?" I said. "I think we have to go back to take care of it."

"So do I, but that makes me feel sick. Going back, I mean,"

I nodded. "But abandoning it makes me feel the same way. I think we've got a problem, Trixie."

Trixie gave me one of her enchantress looks. "I think maybe we have *the* problem, Ducky."

I still had a little coffee left in my cup. I drank it. "That may be, but there're two of us. That's got to be a new twist. Don't you think?"

Trixie didn't answer. The woman who approached our table had a concerned look on her face. "How ever did you two get past me? You haven't been checked in! Oh, my!"

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party came immediately to mind. Maybe it was her manner—and that rabbit.

"Oh, my!" she said, fumbling now through the pages of a large gilded book that she'd been carrying with her. "Wherever is it?" Finally she settled on a page.

She was a powerful looking woman but oddly shaped. Dressed in a tailored tweed suit that might have been imported from the 1940's, she looked like a frumpy secretary. Her bust and hips were wide, her waist narrow, but she had a thickness about her. She wore an ornate ebony nametag with gilt letters: "Cyrene," It read. Her face was worn; she was clearly past her prime.

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“Jason Aeneas Finch and Beatrice Lucia Angelet? Correct?”

“Yes...” I said tentatively. “May I ask why you need to know?”

“All exceptions to the rules must be recorded, and verification of final arrangements must be certified. If not...well, I needn’t tell you about The Lords of Karma. Everyone knows what sticklers they are. Honestly! They’re celibate, you know. Maybe that’s the problem!”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” said Trixie. “And what ‘final arrangements’ are you referring to? Isn’t that a euphemism for funeral costs?”

“Oh, I suppose so,” the woman said, sighing. “I haven’t been properly trained for this, you know. How do they expect me to keep current?” She shook her head. Her hair was pinned up, but a strand came loose, exposing a streak of gray.

Both Trixie and I expected her to elucidate, but she didn’t. She turned to a different page in her book. “*Final arrangements*,” she read haltingly. “The responsible settling of affairs to assure the stability of those left behind, both relations of the first and second degrees.”

“You mean immediate family... and cousins, second cousins?” Trixie asked.

“*Cousins*? Second *Cousins*?” Cyrene asked, flipping through pages now, looking perplexed. “I don’t know the word. Is that with a Kappa or a Chi?”

“So your name... Cyrene?” I said. “It’s Greek?”

“Yes. I’m from Thessaly. Near Mount Pelion. I’m a retired nymph.”

“Really! Mount Pelion. Did you know Chiron, the Centaur King? And Jason, who was raised there?”

Cyrene stepped back from the table, and put a hand on her hip. “Did I know Chiron?” she laughed a late middle-aged laugh. “Oh, yes. And young Jason, too. But not they way I *knew* Apollo. *Apollo*, the *God*, you know? He carried me off, you might remember, when he found me wrestling a lion. I was so extraordinarily beautiful, you see, and so extraordinarily brave. He took me to Libya and named a city after me—Apollo did.”

Here Cyrene looked heavenward and sighed wistfully.

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“It was a very important city, too. You should have seen the Temple of Zeus! People still do, I’m told. And Apollo’s sanctuary? After all, it was just a stone’s throw from Appolonia—on the sea, the bustling port?”

Cyrene stopped, looking disappointed, but she kept talking. “It’s more of a *region* now,” she said. “*Barqah*. That’s *Cyrenaicia* to those in the know...”

She paused for a moment again, and then, as if carried away: “Oh, Apollo! *That* was a God! *That* was a God! Maybe you may remember our offspring? Idmon? My son, Idmon, the seer? The brave one? Who foresaw his own death, but accompanied your namesake on the Argo, nonetheless? And Aristaeus? My son, the benefactor? Aristaeus, who taught you mortals how to make bee hives, cultivate olives and make cheese? I don’t care for cheese myself, but I’m told many do.” Cyrene smiled a satisfied mother’s smile.

“And then of course, there was my third husband, Ares—Mars, some say, but not me. You might remember our son, Diomedes?” Cyrene said expectantly. “He was a dear; it’s too bad that all anyone remembers were those dreadful man-eating mares of his. Now, Abas, my second—well, Aphrodite over there turned him into a swan, but...” And at this a change came over Cyrene, as if a cloud passed over the sun. She stopped, shook her head and sniffed. “My grandfather was a *River God*! *A River God*! Look at me now!”

“Would you like to sit down?” Trixie asked. “You seem upset.”

“Thank you, but I can’t. It’s not allowed.”

Trixie and I exchanged a glance. “Not allowed?” I asked. “By whom?”

“Bubbles, of course,” Cyrene replied.

“Bubbles... that’s Poseidon, right?”

Cyrene nodded. I could see her bravery more easily than her beauty. She had stifled both her tears and her indignation, and stood next to us in again what seemed an official capacity.

“I hadn’t thought of Poseidon as an autocrat,” I said. “I probably should have known...”

“Oh, no, no,” she said. “Bubbles saved me from a far worse fate than this. I was among his favorites. I, along with a few

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hundred of my friends. Oh, yes! We were *always* in there.” She gestured in the direction of Poseidon’s office. “Naiads, Dryades—that’s water nymphs and forest nymphs to you—and some of the Pleiades too, the seven sisters, you know? Before Orion chased them away and they became such...*stars*.”

Here Cyrene paused, as if waiting for a laugh from the crowd, but there wasn’t so much as a titter. Which was too bad, as far as I was concerned.

She put on a smile. “Once we get to a certain age though, and lose out looks...” She shrugged. “Most of my girlfriends tried to make it on their own. It’s not recommended, but like they say, everyone has a dream...” At this she looked at *us* expectantly.

“That was a little joke,” she said. “Ex-nymphs *always* try to make it big. With mortal men? You know? By starring in fantasies, in...um...*erotic* dreams? Some hit the big time, but most of us usually end up in the imaginations of adolescent boys, or worse. I could tell you stories! But Bubbles, he’s a sweetheart; he knew that wouldn’t be any kind of life for me, so he gave me a chance to stay on. I knew the rules. I was never going to be one of The Select; I really didn’t have a chance. So I’m part of the help. I complain, yes, but I have privileges. I get all the coffee I want and I’m perfectly safe—for all eternity! And of course I meet such interesting people. I can’t sit down with them—but I do meet them, and I know all the celebess who like to dally here.” She looked over at the table where Jesus was still sitting with his girlfriend. “He’s a great tipper,” she said. “I clear tables on the side,” by way of explanation. “I can’t so much as pick up a cup without him dipping into his robe!”

Cyrene smiled at us. “But enough chit chat,” she said brightly. “I do have my job to do, and it sounds like you two haven’t heard a *thing* about final arrangements.”

But Trixie objected. “I’d rather here some more about you,” she said. “We’ve already met Death and Mr. Hoo Ha, rabbit man, the Embodiment of Everything Unknowable, but I’d much rather talk to a nymph than those old guys. How ‘bout you, Ducky?”

I nodded.

“I can see what a beautiful nymph you must have been,” Trixie went on. “And you wrestled with a lion. And won?”

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The old nymph blushed, now leaning with her hand on our table but refusing to sit down. “Yes, I was a frisky one. You may have read about me in Pindar—our greatest lyric poet? He said I was extraordinarily beautiful, but that I ‘tired of pacing back and forth at the loom.’ So I watched my father’s herd, but really, I could barely wait for those beasts to come down out of the hills! I did like my sword, of course, but my javelin, that was *my lover*. I did have it with me when I beat the lion down—past his prime, to be honest, but that Apollo! If he saw a pretty young girl swatting a fly, he’d try to seduce her on account of her bravery! He was my first. Before Apollo, my only bed-fellow was kind Hypnos himself... that would be *Sleep* to you. But once Apollo had a word with Chiron—who watched over me like a father, by the way—he just snatched me up and whisked me off to Libya in his golden Chariot. Ah!” Cyrene reminisced. “Being snatched up by a god! In a golden chariot, no less! There’s nothing quite like that. ‘Accomplishment is swift when the gods are already hurrying.’ That’s what Pindar said about it in one of his lovely Odes. I’ve read them all.”

Still leaning on our table, Cyrene looked dreamy. Trixie stood up and hugged her, and at once “O-o-o-o-o’s” arose from all directions of the room along with a smattering of applause. Cyrene’s features had softened a little; she seemed to have shed years, maybe hundreds. Given that she was probably five-thousand years old, this didn’t make a drastic difference in her appearance, but it helped. Her secretary’s suit did seem a little looser, her hair more radiant.

Trixie held her out at arm’s length. Cyrene blushed again. “It’s the human touch,” the ex-nymph said, teary-eyed now. “It works wonders. I haven’t felt like this since Akbar the Illustrious ruled India.” She sniffed loudly several times and dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. “Now we have to get back to business or I’ll get the boot.”

Though her transformation was less drastic than Harapat’s, it was much more moving. Cyrene seemed more in control than we were, however: Trixie and I were still doing our own dabbing when the granddaughter of the River God began reading from her gilded book.

““In the case that mortals permanently cross the boundaries of Terra Firma by means other than physical death, responsibility

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for the psychic health and stability of all individuals within said mortals' first and second circles of influence remains their own.' Does that help? Is that clear?"

"No-o," I said. I made a sour face and shook my head. "What's that about *permanently* crossing the boundary of Terra Firma? I didn't leave permanently. I just came to visit—and to bring Trixie back. We were in the middle of something."

A hush fell across the room. The color drained from the somewhat younger looking nymph's face. She flipped through the pages of her book. "I don't know," she said under her breath. "I don't see anything like that in here." She looked down at us, bewildered now, dumbstruck. Her eyes darted around the room. She didn't look like she could subdue a lion. "I'll have to speak to... to, you know," she said, sounding worried. "I don't know how he'll react. I've never..."

"No," I said. "No. You don't have to talk to him, Cyrene. I will. We will. Trixie and I will. We'll be glad to. It isn't a problem. It's a misunderstanding. You're not responsible."

The mother of Idmon, the Seer, was still worried. Everyone else I could see in the room had returned to their coffee, conversations or both. "Would you like your cups freshened up?" she asked, putting on a brave face.

"No, that's okay," said Trixie.

I thought of my father. He might be the one person who'd understand if Trixie and I never reappeared. But he'd be heartbroken. So would I. He could never explain it to Adele. Maybe Margo and Mason could help him. I hope he'd tell them the whole story, everything: the resolution, shaking hands with a laughing God, Hell, everything. That would make it easier for them all. They'd all be so much closer if Margo and Mason only knew.

Cyrene had walked away, still concerned. I was sorry she was leaving. So was Trixie. She could have been our friend... maybe she still would. I could read her. She wasn't frightened for herself, but for us. For a moment then I remembered. Even there in that ante-room of Heaven, I was still a hybrid being. Maybe my light didn't show in that place where so many glowed, reading minds was no outstanding gift there, and my longevity—well, what was a hundred-and-fifty-years when the hired help lived five-thousand? But I had set out on an exceptional path. It had only

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been eight years since I'd started and here I was. No, here we were. I was no longer only a *me*. Trixie's eyes were like blue hot steel, and still a smile crossed her face.

"Are we going to go see the boss now, big guy?"

"What do you think she meant by *the second circle of influence*?" I asked.

"Doesn't Poseidon know everything?"

"Probably," I said. "Enough of everything for our purposes. You're right. Let's do it." I seemed to hear my own words from a distance, but Trixie brought me back.

"What about your mother? Shouldn't we say something to her? Or are you still worried Aphrodite will give you an eternal hard-on?"

My mother was still sitting, chatting with the Goddess of Love. Cupid had left. His bow and quiver remained though, giving me the impression that he'd gone to the... what? The Angel's Room? The Little Boys' Room?

I took Trixie's words as a challenge. As we stood up to go over there, however, I remembered what Cyrene had said about "The Lamb of God," and fished in my pocket for something to leave for a tip. I didn't suppose U.S. currency went very far in a place like that. Along with some loose change and my keys, I found I still had a little chime in there: one that had been replaced in the upper tier of "The Song the Birds Forgot." It was an F, the foundation note for the Lydian Mode: a very high one (the third F above middle C.) It was fitted to a bit of high test line, so I dangled it and struck it with one of my keys. The shimmering note silenced the room. All eyes turned toward us, among them, Cyrene's. I held up the chime to her, winked and let her see me leave it on the table. Cyrene's eyes flashed back at me, a beautiful young nymph's eyes. I felt ready to meet Aphrodite or Venus or whatever she chose to call herself. It wouldn't be any problem at all.

"You two seem to have fit right in," my mother said as we came up to her table. "You probably recognize my friend."

Though I was still feeling self-possessed, I looked at the Goddess of Love cautiously. Aphrodite, after all, had quite a history. Daughter of Zeus, she was first married to Hephaestus, the smith-god, who gave mortals the gift of working with iron, copper, silver and gold; but before long she had a brazen affair with Ares,

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the god of war (Cyrene's ex,) with whom she had three children: two sons (of whom any mother would be proud), Demos (Fear), Phobos (Panic); and her daughter Harmonia who was eventually turned into a serpent, though a happy one. She also got cozy with Hermes (Mercury), the wing-footed messenger of the gods, with whom she had one famous child—or would that be two?—Hermaphroditus. A male child at first, he was seduced and captured by a water nymph, Salamis, who found him so overwhelmingly attractive that she asked the gods that they never be separated—and of course they never were. Aphrodite was also loved by other gods and mortals as well with whom she mothered many children, Eros and Aeneas among them. Most notably, Aphrodite gave aid to those in love, punished those who didn't honor her, and constantly meddled in both Olympian and mortal affairs. Most famously, she bribed Paris to select her over Athena and Hera in a heavenly beauty contest by promising him the hand of Helen of Troy, thus starting the Trojan War. She was not necessarily a sweetheart, but in the moments I had been within her range, she already had me under her spell.

She extended her perilously beautiful, glowing hand to me. Her bracelet was of living, blood red roses, thorns and all. I felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her hand. This might have been the end of me, so I firmly shook it instead. Trixie laughed. She embraced the goddess, for just a moment longer than I expected, something I found and continued to find sensationally erotic. But I held my ground.

"We're going to go talk to The Admiral," I said to my mother. "There seems to have been a misunderstanding about our presence here."

My mother and her friend exchanged glances. "Is there anything I can do?" asked Aphrodite. I thought of the Troy. "No, I think we can work it out ourselves, but thank you."

Mercifully, the goddess of love simply nodded and turned away. My mother looked back at Trixie and me, held out a hand to each of us, smiled an enigmatic smile, nodded and let us go.

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“It’s right back here,” I said to Trixie as we snaked our way through the crowded tables, hoping to loosen Aphrodite’s grip on me as I walked. Not only did the coffeehouse seem to have deepened its horizons, but the distance back to The Admiral’s office appeared to have increased as well. My confusion at things having changed was somewhat compounded by the vast array of characters seated at the round wooden tables we passed. There were more winged patrons at The Golden Fleece than I’d remembered. Some had birds’ heads, but most had human heads—not all of which were friendly looking, though several among them had the traditional appearance of Biblical angels. Many others there were dressed in feathers, some scantily, some carrying spears. A number of centaurs stood around one table; one distinguished, gray bearded one in particular brought to mind Chiron, the King of them all, though I remembered that Achilles had indicated that the great one was “gone for now.”

As I’d noticed on my last visit, there were turbaned patrons with deeply burning eyes; there were some with garments made of

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leaves: and there were those with crowns like Old King Phineas, though I couldn't pick the king out in the crowd. But in addition to these, there I saw a number of individuals who seemed composites: women with branching tree limbs for arms, trees with faces sitting with bent trunks at tables; men made of boulders; children sprouting garlands of flowers instead of hair; fish-people. I held Trixie's hand as we passed these and a table of bumblebees speaking French; a table where spitting images of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were playing poker; a table where solemn figures sat in meditation; and one where several of the Greater Arcana sat. There was the Magician with his cup, sword, wand and pentacle; the Fool with his little dog on his lap, and the veiled High Priestess. I thought about asking if we could join them, but that's when I noticed a short, dark hallway with a door at the end of it. There was no sign on the door, but a bundle of what appeared to be clean, white linen napkins against the wall beside it.

I felt Trixie tug on my hand in the other direction. "I think it's over here," she said.

The door with "Office" inscribed on it in faded gold leaf appeared to be just where it was on my first visit. I did feel a slight tightening in the pit of my stomach, but I ignored it. Just as I was in the act of knocking, however, just before my knuckles touched that wooden door, it swung open. It *was flung* open.

I stumbled forward into a laughing Poseidon's arms.

"I always get a kick out of that," he said, releasing me. Then he stood back, beamed at Trixie and hugged her as well.

"So glad to see you here!" he said to her. "But next time, be wary of knocking!" He waited for her to return his great god's grin with a charming one of her own. Then he invited us in. I was stunned by the relief I felt in his presence; perhaps being *hugged* by a laughing god induces well-being of an unparalleled sort, even in rarefied realms. Trixie was shining. She immediately went over to the wall of photographs.

"Do you still swim?" Trixie asked the god.

"Haven't been wet for fifteen hundred years," he answered, shaking his noble head. "It's that fishy smell. Took centuries to wear off."

"Jason told me there was one here of him as a pup," Trixie went on.

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The Lord of the Deep joined her in front of the array. “Not just Jason, dear. You were in the same litter.” He showed her the picture of the huge man with the Easter Island head and his pack of cat-dogs. He pointed one out. “This may be the first time you were together,” he said. “To think that it’s come to this!”

For obvious reasons, I couldn’t read him. But I had to ask. It didn’t seem like *a stupid question*. “When you say ‘To think that it’s come to this,’ exactly what do you mean?”

The three of us were still standing in front of the wall of pictures. Poseidon went behind his elegant desk to sit down and invited us to do the same. Two chairs were set in front of it.

“You two are among the pioneers,” he said. “Forerunners among the pioneers. Coming here as you have like this: together. It’ll be all the rage before long. The old models of aspiration will crumble—I love it when that happens. Every few clicks, that’s millennia to you, the house comes tumbling down. Put me out of a job, actually, when we pagans bit then dust, but as I told you last time, Jason, I’d *had it* with seaweed. How’s my colloquial? I’ve been working at it.”

“*Bit the dust* is a little dated,” Trixie offered, speaking to the god as if he were a favorite uncle. “Otherwise, you sound great...Don’t you think, Jason?”

I nodded. What else was I going to do? I was hoping he’d say something about the *new* model of aspiration, however. I didn’t have to ask.

“You sought higher ground as lovers, that’s what I’m talking about. That’s the shift: from individual striving to the bonded pair seeking a greater *WE*. There are great implications. As we used to say, ‘From the *WE* comes *THE MULTITUDE*.’ Or did *you* say that, dear?” Poseidon asked Trixie, grinning like a sunrise.

“And there’s more. When we pagan gods gave it over to the Christ and Buddha types, humanity gained a lot but lost something as well. That scuffle between the body and spirit they introduced was never meant to be prolonged war! Of course, things *had* gotten a little out of hand. You mortals needed some lessons in compassion, and curbing your desires was the first step, but now it’s time to move on, just like you two tried to do. You two resolved the spirit-passion split that’s been torturing Christians and Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims for centuries. You hardly thought about it.

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Driving off the road together, right? Sorry for the eavesdropping, but there's poetry in that. Sounds a heck of a lot better than *seeking enlightenment* together, or *co-actualization*, doesn't it? "

Poseidon looked thoughtful. "You know, just because I'm the proprietor of a coffee house doesn't mean I can't work a little Olympian magic. Of course no earthquakes and floods like in the old days—no, I wouldn't want that anyway. But I've still got enough juice in the old tank to do a little naming. When your trend catches on, and I assure you it will, who's to say that the idea to call it *driving off the road together* might not work its way into a Secondary Crosscurrent, even a Primary one? It'll be picked up like 'rock 'n roll'—the name, I mean."

"Is that the way it happens?" I asked. "Gods plant ideas in the currents, the thought currents. People don't make ideas?"

"Gods don't either, my boy. Ideas *come to us* just like they *come to you*. Immortals have a little leverage you don't, but not much beyond some tinkering with the currents, some differentiation: like naming, dividing, some clarifying, amplifying. The currents have always been running and always will. Ideas begin as something akin to numbers, symbols, which are forever shuffled and reshuffled according to the Principle of Simplicity... I've been attending outreach classes at The School of Athens, can you tell? You're never too old to brush up on your philosophy..."

The ancient god of the deep nodded. "The source of those numbers-symbols, that *logos* is as much of a mystery as the source of anything. If there weren't mystery nothing could exist, and we all know *that* couldn't be, so where does that leave us, all of us? In the same boat, I'd say. Riding on the Sea of Imponderability without a paddle. Lucky we've got a boat, right? And you're hearing that from one who ought to know." Poseidon paused.

"What are you saying?" I asked. And even before I could blink, I heard the band strike up its tune, with slide whistles too, and the uproarious laughter that accompanied it shook the very walls of Poseidon's office.

He smiled. "I think we talked about this before, didn't we? About the *m-y-s-tery* of existence?" Theremin music accompanied the word *m-y-s-tery*, of course. "And didn't we conclude that to know the *m-y-s-tery* (more music) of existence, one needs to be at one with it, all of it, forever? That means graduation, kiddos. We

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Olympians, we're what you might call upperclassmen, maybe Juniors. You two, well, considering the attraction, you might be finishing up what they call Middle School these days. Graduation, now that's the highest accomplishment and a neat trick, but it makes conversation difficult—actually, it makes *individuality* difficult—and leaves questions, even intelligent ones in the dumpster. So you two should stick with *driving off the road together*. And to think, you nearly made it."

This remark was disturbing; even Trixie's smiling face drooped.

Poseidon's look was conciliatory. "I'm sorry," he said to me. "But if your timing had been just a little better, you wouldn't have had to come chasing after her. You know when you fell behind?" he asked. "It was by just one day."

"...No, I didn't know I'd fallen behind. I hadn't realized there was a schedule. Is there a schedule?"

"Yes... and No. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Surprised?" the god asked. "It's a schedule with multiple axes. Not just then and now and hereafter, but including *how* and *why* and *because*, and three other considerations you have no terms for, which in a certain way make it not a schedule at all, but a living, breathing thing, if you can imagine such a thing, which you can't—but *ignorance begets wisdom, error is the pathfinder for truth*, and all that.

"What caused the day's delay is difficult to pin down but I did talk to Cronos about it. Cronos is my father, by the way, Father Time, I like to call him. He likes to come by and gossip. You can imagine, once he started the wheels of time turning, he hasn't had much else to do but gossip, and snoop—and he said it may have been your dalliance with a woman named Daphne in Seattle that *screwed up* your time line. Did I use that correctly? *Screwed up*?" he asked Trixie, who nodded at him and then gave me a dark look.

"Well," Poseidon went on, smirking slightly, I thought, "to make a long story short, he reports that you unnecessarily removed your sunglasses in the woman's presence, thus causing her..."

"No! No, No! I was just being polite," I insisted. "I didn't have any..." But my words caught in my throat.

"It's okay," Trixie said, half smiling-half scowling. "I've flirted a little too...with those guys at the foundry—apparently not enough to *screw up the works*, but..."

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Poseidon was grinning. He half-glanced at the array of nymphs in his wall of photos and discretely back at me.

"Hold on a second," I insisted. "What does it mean that I was late? What does it matter? We're both here. We're in this together. We're in love. We dream together!"

"Arriving simultaneously would have had great *ceremonial* impact," the god said, with a certain ceremony himself. "It would have generated waves of a unique nature—new myths actually. You've still broken ground; you're still harbingers of better times, the best of times, in fact; your names will be long remembered, but mythically, well, you've slipped a bit into an old groove. The Orpheus myth—you know, Orpheus and Eurydice; trying to bring his lover back from the underworld, and in his case, *almost* succeeding—but that resonance should wear away before long. This isn't the underworld, after all."

Trixie and I didn't say a thing.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Obviously Poseidon wasn't practicing his omniscience. He'd promised he wouldn't when I was here years before, but I knew he often couldn't help himself—or maybe he was just acting.

"Yes," I spoke up. "I think something *is* wrong. Trixie and I wanted to come here together, but not quite as soon as this and not to stay. We wanted to visit. We know that's a great privilege, but we weren't finished with what we were doing, so we need to get back."

Poseidon looked genuinely surprised. He remained silent for a moment; he seemed to be pondering. "You know this is just a coffee house. It's just a place to refresh yourselves, engage in conversation, meet new friends. It's not a final destination.

"Beyond here, for those lucky enough to travel on, there are realms far greater than you two have known or imagined. Wonder-worlds for the soul; palaces of sublime ideas, the most exalted emotions, heavenly art and divine union. Realms you're destined to enter *holding hands*, metaphorically and actually, where you will be welcomed by all those who've joined the *Circle of Love*, the *Great Dance of Consent*, as they've been calling it over there recently.

"But don't get me wrong," Poseidon continued, leaning over his desk toward us and lowering his voice a little. "These aren't ethereal, passionless realms, devoid of taste and touch. No,

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these are the realms where lovers moan on beds of cloud, where nectar of every flavor flows, where all the senses sing and rejoice at once—*among* cathedrals of spirit, *among* symphonies of wisdom. It's everything you love and more. It's not something you want to pass up."

Neither Trixie nor I expected this. The former Lord of the Deep understood our surprise and turned away so as not to disturb our consideration. Though his presence was powerful, omnipotent, perhaps, he almost seemed to disappear.

Trixie and I didn't need to speak. In the past we'd often been of one mind, but here, in Poseidon's coffee house, our sense of oneness was heightened exponentially: we were thinking the same thoughts and we knew it. Maybe we were pioneers. Together we cautiously touched the mind pictures Poseidon had presented. Cautiously, as if we'd be overwhelmed if we let ourselves enter in, or if we were to break the seals of the images, the floods of meaning that rushed through would sweep us away or drown us. Cathedrals of Spirit? Meanings unfolding like flowers opening to the sun? Difference dissolving in the light of forgiveness? Lovers moaning on beds of cloud? The touch and tone of Paradise? The taste of Infinity on our lips? The sweet, deep scent of Eternity? We? We were invited?

Poseidon gently slipped back to us.

"I'm afraid you can't go back," he said kindly, then. "Call it metaphysical law, if you like, but it's more like plain physics. You stumbled in to a mythic pattern that can't be broken. You stumbled heroically, I might add."

"Orpheus got back," I protested.

Poseidon just looked at me. Trixie, on the other hand, pinched me.

"But Orpheus screwed up," I insisted. "He turned around and looked. Is there some kind of deal that we can leave as long as I don't look back at Trixie? What if she goes first?"

"I can't open the door for you, Jason. Even if I could, there's no telling what would happen. I'd grieve for you, though. Just in case. Because we do know what *can* happen, don't we? It's fortunate you managed to get through that with your psyche intact. You do need to have felt it all; to achieve mastery, no experience can be avoided. Your visit to Hades enriched you in more ways

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than you know, but *enough's enough*, you don't need to visit my nasty brother again. And he may be waiting outside that back door you're talking about."

I hadn't thought of the tortures of Hell since I'd arrived.

"I don't care about the risk," Trixie said, shaking her head. "I won't sacrifice the world I know—dreary and humdrum or not. I won't. *We* won't. We're not going to opt out for Paradise, not yet. That's not the kind of attitude that got us here. We're going back." Her eyes darted fiercely in my direction. "There's a way. There always is. *I know* that."

I didn't realize that Trixie was in high gear. Trixie the enchantress, (bratty little Trixie?) could silence even a god. We all three sat in silence.

"What about the service entrance?" I finally asked Poseidon. "That back door. I saw it. Where the napkins are delivered."

The ancient God of the Deep looked perplexed. "I have someone take care of that," he answered, sounding uncertain. "The deliveries. I don't know anything about everyday operations." He paused. "Frankly, I never thought that there might *be* a back door. I surely wouldn't recommend using it. If anyone tried, I'd have heard about it."

"Would Cyrene know?" Trixie asked.

"You know her?" Poseidon said, sounding happily surprised. "I didn't realize you'd met. She's a spunky one! And yes, she orders supplies. We Olympians never learned to do such things. The coffee must come from somewhere too, I suppose. And those delicious confections. And napkins. New napkins must come from somewhere, too. If there is a back door, as you claim, she'd know about it."

"They wouldn't be new napkins," Trixie said, scolding the old god now. "The old napkins would be taken out and washed. It would be wasteful to order new napkins all the time."

Poseidon looked as if he'd heard a proclamation from the Oracle at Delphi. He nodded.

"You know, you two could stay on here, if you wished. You could tutor me on worldly matters, like the use of napkins and other important things I can't imagine. It would broaden me. You would have every privilege." He smiled as if he'd known us for

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years. He knew we wouldn't accept his offer, but it pleased him to make it and it pleased us too.

"You should talk this over with Hera before you do anything rash," he said then.

We looked at him blankly. "Your mother? My sister? Our Queen? She is the goddess of motherhood, after all..." Trixie and I still hadn't responded. "...and without a kingdom to rule, and with my brother Zeus going soft in his almighty head, she dotes on *all* her offspring, past and present and symbolic—she's making arrangements to adopt the entire continent of Africa!"

My circuits were overloaded. Two pieces of shocking news, one deeply disturbing, the other astonishing, left me stunned. Hera? The Queen of Gods? The goddess who appeared to Jason in his youth? The goddess that protected him? My mother? My mother was a god? My father was right all this time? But with the wrong goddess in mind?

Trixie's expression, though still defiant, showed amazement and shades of disappointment as well.

"The cosmos is constantly reinventing itself," Poseidon said. "Creation is an ongoing process. Every moment is the beginning and the end of everything—and everywhere in between. I didn't know that back on Mount Olympus; I had to figure it out for myself. It's difficult to do much original thinking when one's King of the Deep. Godhood tends to breed know-it-alls. Once we Olympians were taken down a peg by that handsome fellow Jesus... well, some of us looked around and took stock." Poseidon seemed pensive. "I won't claim to know what the future holds. And I *am* concerned. You are heroes; perhaps by daring to go back you'll achieve what you've set out to do. There are laws, though, perfectly natural laws, but sometimes laws are broken—to what end we never know. You wanted 'to drive off the road together'—maybe you *are* the road. I wouldn't want to impede the unforeseeable miracle of creation. But please," the kind god added. "Please *don't* try to understand. That screws up the works. Bewilderment becomes you, it truly does."

Even without that cue, we knew it was time to leave. We'd been hoping to stay much longer. Not forever, but longer. Poseidon took both our hands. He wasn't laughing this time, but neither was he

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grave. He looked at us with warm yet detached assurance. A god's warm, detached assurance, an expression more moving and profound than any I remembered—than *we'd* remembered. We felt hesitant to let go of his hands. We didn't say a word as we walked back to our table. Our mother wasn't anywhere to be seen. Neither was Cyrene.

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The atmosphere in The Golden Fleece was unusually subdued. We found many of the patrons sitting silently or reading. The composers were reading, so was The Fool, the Magician and the High Priestess. So were all the Centaurs, and several of the boulder men were working what looked like crossword puzzles with numbers. Cupid was sitting silently, apparently pining; Aphrodite was no longer at the table. We'd made our way quickly through the crowd. The coffee we'd left in our cups was cold. We'd hoped to learn all we could about the back door from Cyrene, but in her absence and in sharp contrast to the calm around us, we felt unsettled, impatient.

"Let's just go check it out," I said to Trixie. She was about to say the same thing to me, and with furtive glances around the room—as if we might be under suspicion—we made our way to the back of the coffee house again. The little hallway seemed farther away than it had a short time earlier, and darker. The bundle of clean napkins still lay next to the wall just inside the back door. When we walked down the hallway, we saw another door on the left

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that hadn't been visible before. This one had a "No Admittance" sign on it. This seemed peculiar and a little disturbing to us. Surely, if Poseidon didn't know about the service entrance, he didn't know about this door either, and what kind of room could this be? "No Admittance?" In his Coffee House? No admittance to whom? I tried the door. It seemed locked. We'd *never know* what was in there. The idea haunted me.

Trixie and I exchanged a glance as we turned to the back door. If we were going to "check it out," we had to see if it opened. I remembered the courage I'd felt when I'd driven west. Ready to snatch my love from the clutches of death. I was no ordinary man. Ordinary men didn't live to a-hundred-and-fifty. Ordinary men didn't read minds. Ordinary men didn't glow. Ordinary men didn't return from Hell unscathed. But now I was trembling. I couldn't make myself reach for the doorknob. But Trixie did. She turned it. The doorknob rattled, but the door wouldn't open.

"It's stuck," she said. "Not locked. Stuck." She put her shoulder into it. "You try," she said.

Why was the handle so icy cold? I looked at Trixie. Why hadn't she told me? Still trembling, I turned it. The door wasn't stuck. I pushed it open.

I had been late May in rural Iowa. I had been thirty years old. Maybe it still was; maybe I still was. The scene outside the back door of The Golden Fleece, however, wasn't vernal in the least. The last leaves clinging to the trees in the near distance were whipped by an icy wind. The sky was uniformly gray. A narrow alley met the back door, and some fifty yards away, it turned toward where the highway may or may not have been. The facades of dilapidated sheds with peeling paint and padlocked doors stood alongside the full length of the alley. Tufts of weeds, dead and dry, grew here and there in the cracks in the pavement. Bits of refuse, paper and dead leaves, swirled in the eddies of wind just outside the door. Trixie cautiously stepped out into it. I held back, holding the door open.

"Six months," I called to Trixie through the wind. "Could we have been in there six months?"

Trixie looked pale. "I don't think it's like that," she said, coming back next to me in the shelter of the building, and putting

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her arm in mine. "What should we do?" she asked. "It's cold. What do you think? You think your car's still there?"

"I'm not sure if I ever had one," I said.

Trixie nodded. "You want to look around?"

"Only if we can put something in this door... like a stone. But I'm not sure. Something tells me we won't be able to get back in."

"Why go back in, Jason?"

Why go back in? I was stunned. Something in me had frozen, and brittle now, broke away. The chill of that angry wind had done it. I didn't have an answer to Trixie's question. I was still holding the back door open, but Poseidon's world already felt lost to us. Even if we crept back in, we'd only be shadows of ourselves, fugitives. Our act had been irrevocable. When I let go the door handle, the wind slammed it shut. I didn't bother trying it.

Trixie put on a brave face. "Planning on just standing here?" she said.

I stepped away from the door. Who were we now?

"You don't glow," Trixie said. I glanced down at my chest. She was right. "Is that good or bad?" she asked.

I didn't know the answer to that. I shrugged.

She led me down the alley. The padlocked doors of the sheds along the way held secrets, lost in obscurity. Who locked those doors? Where were we? What could the sheds possibly hold? What a forbidding question! No amount of wondering could ever open those doors for me. So we walked through the cruel wind, eyes fixed ahead. We walked heavily, as if in sand. I reached down to pick up one of the scraps of paper that swirled in the wind. It was a torn bit of newspaper, but it slipped from my fingers before I could make it out.

Fifty yards down, past the sheds padlocked to all memory, the alley finally turned to the left. There we saw what looked like the highway—in November. It was where one might expect to find the natural world—the natural world hurled, apparently, halfway round the sun a trice. Hand in hand, unthinking, we ran to the cold road and down alongside it to where I'd left my car—the previous spring. And there it was. In clear sight of the highway. Rain-streaked and dirty. The windshield had collected a dead leaves, some wet. Bird droppings splattered the roof and hood, yet the car

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remained; abandoned but undisturbed. Had Officer Hill discovered it there and seen to it that it wasn't towed away—for fear of reprisals from the mysterious glowing man? Was it really my car and not just an illusion in a hollow world, a prop?

If it was an illusion, the illusion started right up. It took a while for the car to warm, and Trixie and I needed that time to shed the memory of the bewildering alley and eventually smile a little and shake our heads. How much time had really passed? A half-a-year as it seemed? Or two-and-a-half? Or ten-and-a-half?

If the clock in my car was still working properly, it was ten in the morning. Nothing we heard on the radio suggested decades had passed. The cars on the highway confirmed this, but still we were wary, uncertain.

We stopped in an upscale gas station on the outskirts of Davenport, Iowa, a place where we expected to find the day's paper. According to the Davenport's "Quad City Times," it was Thursday, November 26th, 1999. Thanksgiving. Exactly six months past my birthday: the day Trixie vanished from the park by the zoo. One might suppose that nothing could stun us after what we'd been through, but we were more taken aback than relieved. We left with two coffees to go.

Thoughts and feelings slipped through me without leaving much of a trace. Trixie too. We couldn't drink the gas station coffee. We seemed to be back, but then again not really. Not yet. Neither of us was in the mood to speculate. We knew where we were headed; once we arrived we'd see if we could adjust to whatever awaited us. It was a long drive. The chill wind seemed to seep through the car's closed windows. We hardly spoke. I tried to remember Poseidon's powerful look of warm, detached assurance, but could not. I remembered what he said, however: that he wouldn't want to impede "the unforeseeable miracle of creation."

The western stretches of Chicago seemed no different than before; maybe there was new construction, but I probably wouldn't have noticed if there was. Traffic was heavy. People were still arriving for Thanksgiving; some still leaving. We were downtown by one o'clock. We pulled up in the alley by the door to The Shaft a little after that, but before we even tried the door we saw up through the windows that "The Song the Birds Forgot" was not hanging there. And the key didn't work; the lock had been changed. We

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couldn't see the ground floor because of the way the light struck the windows, but no remnants of our work remained on the walls. The ladders were still there but the track lights we'd installed were gone; we saw what might have been the holes drilled for them in the brick, but we weren't sure. It looked as if we'd never been there.

No one answered the bell at Mr. Schenck's office, so after standing, shivering on the gloomy street for just a while, we walked to the corner. The convenience store there was open; a place where we used to buy the kind of flavored sparkling water we liked. We didn't recognize the clerk, but nothing else appeared to have changed.

The sparkly lemon water tasted to us as it always had. Trixie and I had opened ourselves to the world: it was icy cold; it burned just as it should. Quenched, we got back in the car and drove east and then north toward Hawthorn Street. At the stoplight at Fullerton, Trixie turned to me. "Are we all right? Are we still real?"

"Kiss me," I said.

"You taste lemony."

"So do you. That's the way we like it, right?"

"Chocolate's better," she said.

"We can get some of that for tonight," I answered.

"What about the glowing? I'm worried."

"Maybe I don't need that anymore," I said. "I can't tell what you're thinking, either." The car behind us honked, and we drove on, feeling real—tentatively real, at least.

The nervousness we felt as we pulled up in front of my father's house wasn't tentative at all. "The Song the Birds Forgot" was gone; in some incalculable way, it may never have existed. Here was my father's house. *Was it* my father's? Was he here? Had he ever been here? Would my father's house be like those padlocked sheds behind "The Golden Fleece?" A mystery locked away for all eternity? What sort of world had we reentered, extraordinary people that we were?

I avoided looking in the windows as I climbed the front steps. I didn't look at the mailbox; I just knocked. Trixie stood rigidly at my side.

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A great deal happened in that moment before words were spoken; before the impulse made its way from the eyes to the brain to the voice. A cascade of meaning burst forth: certainty, conjecture, dread, joy. It was my father at the door; my real father who spoke.

“Great God! You’re back!”

Immediately upon this, a scream issued from the house, there was a sharp scraping of chairs, and first Margo and then Mason bolted out onto the porch, Margo leaping into Trixie’s arms, Mason engulfing me in his. After only a moment, Margo and Mason must have realized my father was standing alone on the porch and released us. Trixie and I hugged him simultaneously.

“I never expected to see you again,” he said. “Not in this world.”

Margo and Mason were hopping up and down around us like children. “You’re just on time for dinner!” Margo cried. “We made a big a turkey, so there’d be lots of leftovers—so we thought!” She looked at Mason. “We were missing you!”

All concerns of illusion, of false reality, of insubstantiality dissolved into the balm of relief, the surging emotions of reunion. The burning questions to be answered and astonishing tales to be told would wait until we’d all held each other at arms’ length again and again just to see, and hugged each other just to feel each other’s warmth. Miraculously, it seemed, the table in the sun porch was already set. *The Plexippus Principle!* The turkey would be ready at any time, there was gravy to be made, potatoes to mash, a salad to be assembled. But we were brimming too full to eat—all of us. We needed a plan.

We assembled in the kitchen. Not a word until the work was done, we decided. We hustled around the oven, the counters, the fridge; Margo and Mason emptying a bottle wine while they were at it. Fifteen minutes later the stuffed turkey sat cooling on top of the stove, a sauce pan of gravy beside it. The baguettes from the bakery were ready to be popped in the still warm oven. The potatoes were seasoned, buttered and mashed; the sweet potatoes brown sugared; the creamed spinach simmered with its dash of allspice; the cranberries burst and thickened; the lettuce torn, tomatoes and cucumbers sliced. Then we left the room, went into the library and talked for an hour and a half, forgetting dinner

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entirely. Adele Rosenberg was absent. She was celebrating Thanksgiving with her son, the doctor, in Highland Park.

"The exhibitions director contacted me, after the curator hadn't heard from you in a week," my father explained. "I had my suspicions about what may have happened, but I didn't tell him of course, and put him off by explaining that you took frequent spontaneous vacations. That kept him away for a few more weeks, but the press release was already out. The museum had a gala opening planned for the first of September, and the director, a decent sort, insisted on seeing the completed work and making a decision about installation. I thought long and hard about that, Jason, but in the end, felt that no matter what had become of the two of you, you'd wish to honor your commitments, so I paid a visit to your landlord, Schenck, wrote out a check for the rent he was squawking about, and got a key to the studio.

"I knew I'd be more secure if I brought Margo and Mason with me when I met the director there, since they're skilled in the craft and I have no technical know-how at all. I was planning to explain that any decisions regarding removal and assembly had to be approved by *your assistants*, I called them..." at this he smiled affectionately at the two, who beamed. "...but any words I'd prepared were silenced the moment we entered into the presence of that majestic thing that occupied the studio space. The exhibitions director was also struck dumb. I was certain we were in the presence of a living being. After we all stood, looked up at it and listened to its extraordinarily haunting music for quite some time, he filled me in on the progress to date: that the curator alone had seen the completed work but only briefly, and wanted to take some measurements to see if the mobile indeed matched the specifications you had promised. That's when the technical work began. The next day a crew arrived."

My father turned to Margo. "I had to pretend I knew things I didn't," Margo began. "Like they asked me if there were replacement parts in case there was an accident, and I said there were, back at the other studio, even though that was pure bullshit. Are there replacement parts? Chimes, I think they were talking about."

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“All except for one high F,” I said. “And they’re right there. They *were* there—in crates on the floor. But the place is cleaned out, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, everything’s back on Armitage, but I wouldn’t let anyone mess with anything. It didn’t matter though. Those guys knew just what to do. They were more careful than Mason and I could have been. They took it apart section by section and loaded them into crates, ten in all, and drove ‘em over to the new museum, which is a very cool place, by the way. I wasn’t even sure where it was. So anyway, once they got it all there, they explained to us exactly how they were planning to hang the thing—*install* it, like they said—and again I had to bullshit my way through, but I was getting pretty good at it by then. They asked me if I knew how to make adjustments in the balance; and thank God you guys already had it calibrated, because I would have been at a loss ‘cause those parts don’t screw together like what we’re used to working with. But it went up fine. There’re a couple a places where I think it might need some tinkering, but they sure as hell don’t realize it. All they can say is that it’s a modern masterpiece and that it put the museum on the map. You’ll have to see all the write-ups. The coolest thing though, is that every day from nine till ten in the morning and four to five in the afternoon, they set up chairs all around it on all three floors and have “Silence Please” signs go up in the hallways and galleries that open onto the atrium. And man, people crowd in and just sit there and watch and listen. They line up outside on the street. They’re talking about taking reservations!”

“So how does it sound?” Trixie asked. “What kind of reaction do people have?”

“It sounds like God playing the chimes,” Mason said. “It sounds like starlight, man; like what the stars don’t say. Like Orpheus. Some people are saying it’s a piece of religious art, like a cathedral.”

No one said anything for a while.

“I told Mason and Margo everything,” my father finally explained. “I believed they needed and deserved to know.”

Mason and Margo looked at me shyly. “You lost your shine, man,” Mason said.

Margo gave him a look. “He still lights *my* fire,” she said.

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Trixie smiled and put her hand on my shoulder. “He sacrificed his glow to retrieve me from the world beyond,” she said as if she meant it. I searched her eyes. She was trying to protect me. Then she started in with her story: the music in the park; the sheen of things; how she felt she’d remembered a dream; how she’d been raised up; how the surfaces of reality slipped and she was in the presence of the sanctuary, the bell tower, the white stone paths and the bushes with blossoms like rubies; how she’d understood then that *everyone* had raised her, offered her up; and finally how she’d opened the door into my mother’s arms.

My father looked astonished at this revelation, but Trixie held her finger to her lips and went on. She described the interior of “The Golden Fleece,” the momentous coffee, the friendly, reassuring presence of the fierce Achilles, but none of the other immortal or mythical patrons, perhaps choosing to leave that to me. In describing her conversation with our mother, however, parts of her disclosure were news to me.

“She told me that she felt wounded for having left you, professor,” Trixie said, “and that she carried that wound as an emblem of the sacrifice and exaltation of love, its sweetness and its vulnerability; as a reminder that in love the personal and universal are united; that love is the path to the highest glory accessible to everyone.”

I’d expected my father to be visibly moved at this; his composure surprised me at first, but not when I thought of the empowering effect such a message must have had on him. He smiled securely.

Trixie went on. “When I first started talking to her, I was reticent. Jason had told me they played by different rules there, and they do. But she told me not to ‘fret’ about it. She said there’s no inherent problem with *reasonableness*, with *questions and answers*, with thoughts of *here* and *there* or *now* and *then*, it’s just that that kind of thinking can be so terribly *involving*. Then she told me that ‘a truly divine’ friend of hers—she really said that—one who has a penchant for teaching, said that spiritual growth for mortals is a matter of subtraction not addition, a matter of stepping aside from oneself, of unlearning all sorts of crusty habits of thinking and feeling, and that I could ask anything I liked as long as I didn’t *have a stake in it*.”

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I felt a slight pang of jealousy when I heard this, sibling rivalry, maybe. Trixie seemed to sense this and smiled reassuringly at me before she went on. This in itself was reassuring. At least *she* could read *my* mind. She only spoke a little while longer before she came to the part where Achilles greeted me at the door.

“Can we stop a while and have some dinner?” I asked. “I haven’t eaten since May.”

Trixie and I hadn’t yet told them of the time displacement. They laughed, apparently thinking I was referring to earthly food. Mason, apparently, was the executive chef, so he went to the kitchen to warm things up. We adjourned to the sun porch.

It was an odd meal. An excellent one by culinary standards, but odd in that everyone seemed distracted. This should come as no surprise under the circumstances, since we were speaking of events traditionally considered miraculous. Miracles, I’ve always supposed, are no more than events governed by unknown laws; but Trixie and I only marginally understood the hows and whys of what happened to us; we were reporting, not explaining. We were as distracted as everyone else, maybe more so.

Margo had been the pastry chef, and the two pies she’d made, one pumpkin and one pecan, caught everyone’s attention. It must have been the sugar and the strong coffee Trixie brewed for us. Not that the pies weren’t praiseworthy; they were, and praise was given. Margo giggled, as if on cue. It was wonderful to be back. Trixie talked about the coffee served in the ante-room of Heaven for a while then before we went back into the library where I told my part of the story, giving way to Trixie whenever she gave me the eye.

I began with what happened when I returned to the park with the Champagne. I told about my search through the zoo, about the sky blue quilt, my resolute but mad flight west, my crisis with Officer Hill, my miserable experience at the café in Averno, my night in the parking lot. I told them about the boy who woke me, about my easy arrival at “The Golden Fleece,” and how the hero of The Iliad suggested coffee even before I inquired after Trixie. Trixie and I talked on for hours then, telling the story as fully as we could, not once interrupted by a question. Finally, I told my father the truth about the woman he’d married and thought a goddess. I expected him to be surprised that she was Hera; I’d always had the

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impression that to the extent he actually *believed* she was divine, he'd assumed she was as the goddess of Love, Aphrodite. But apparently not. Aphrodite's name wasn't uttered. The wonder of it all, in fact, seemed to stun him beyond words. He looked as if he'd finally aged. His smile seemed frozen. I was worried about him. By the time it was over we were all exhausted.

The plan was for us all to go down to the new museum to visit the mobile the next day. My father wanted Adele to be there, so he called her and told her to meet us at noon. So would Mason and Margo. The two of them drove home in the used, red Honda they'd recently bought—the first car they'd ever owned. Trixie and I stayed at my father's that night. My father was happy to have us back. It was good we'd be spending the night. It would be better to return and check out The Ship the next day before going to the new museum. Margo and Mason assured us it was in tip top shape.

Trixie and I talked for a while before we fell asleep that night. All the lights were out.

"So what do you think, Ducky? About life? About the world we live in?"

"In a hundred words or less?"

"Try a thousand."

"It'll take some adjustment," I said. "Figuring out who we are, what we have to do. For me, that is. I think it's different for you, but I can't tell like I used to. That's what's going to take some adjusting. I have no idea how long I'm going to live now, Trixie. I can still be kind, and still try to see the best in others, and honor my disappointments as I honor my hopes, but without that edge I had. Maybe I'll get it back. I don't know. I'm a little sad about that. Sad about not being you as much as me, mostly. I hope we still dream together. I can do without glowing and reading minds, but I can't do without you. I'm happy, though... about what we did. About coming back, claiming the world, no matter what. I have a clear conscience now. That's what it is. A perfectly clear conscience. Maybe that'll improve my vision. And I hope the mobile works white magic on people. How many words was that?"

"Not a thousand. What about everyone else? How do they seem?"

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“Now that Mason and Margo know all our secrets it’s kind of a bigger world and a smaller one too. We... I, at least, have to relate to them in a different way now. There was safety in our isolation. I’m a little uncomfortable, but that’s good; I know that. My father must be the luckiest man alive, knowing what he does now and still having the freedom of an observer. Or maybe not. Maybe he needs to *participate* now, being retired and all. He seems a little different. We’ll have to ask him. And I have no idea what to do about the art. I’m holding off thinking about that until we see it again and get a feel for what effects it’s having. We never planned beyond driving off the road. I don’t know, sweetheart. Maybe it’s time to have kids.”

“I thought of that too,” Trixie said to me in the darkness. “I’d love to do that if we can.”

“I can’t see why we couldn’t?”

“What if duty calls?”

“Sure, there’s that, but as long as we’re *here*... I mean as long as we *stay*, I can’t see why we couldn’t have a family, just like anyone else...”

“What if we had little gods? It’s in your family, after all. What if we had Hercules or someone with super human powers? Or someone with wings, or a tail?”

I stared up at the ceiling. We both started to laugh. “You haven’t told me how you really feel yet,” I said.

“I think it’s just it’s like you, but the other way around, so we balance out perfectly now. I feel like I can read you; most of the time I can. And I feel empowered in a way I never was before. I feel like I’ve been given a gold medal for all the *little* things I’ve done in my life; things I’ve come to naturally. The way you naturally decided to live a hundred-and-fifty-years. But that only makes sense, right? I’m the kind of girl that takes this in all stride. What other kind could even consider a smart-ass like you? If I am an enchantress, I’ll never quit my day job. And I don’t mind a world without PVD’s. I like to see your chest at the beach. We won’t be any lesser artists now, I don’t think—if that’s what we keep doing. I do feel a little sadness too. I feel sad and brave, but that’s a good combination. I think we may have achieved more than we realize.

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“There is one other thing, though,” Trixie said after a moment. “I’m a little worried about your dad. You’re right that seems like he’s lost a little. Particularly after you told him about our mother. I hope he’s not approaching the end of the road. Maybe our disappearance was more than he could handle at his age. What do y’think? Has the gleam in his eyes has dimmed, just a bit?”

“It has. I saw that. Maybe it has something to do with Adele. Her not being with him tonight, I mean. I think he depends on her now. But I think it’s too soon to tell. He has been through a lot.” I stared up at the ceiling. “You’re right, though. Maybe his days of standing on his head are finally over. I’ve known that had to be coming.”

“That parrot didn’t say a thing.”

“Oh, God! I didn’t even notice that. No one knows how old *he* is? That’s depressing. I guess I feel his life is kind of linked to my father’s. I hope he’s just got laryngitis.”

“Good fences make good neighbors!” said Trixie in her best Euripides voice. “Life’s a bitch and then you die!”

Then we heard a garbled parrot sound from down in the library. It wasn’t talking, though, just a prolonged squawk.

“I can’t sleep,” Trixie said after a while. “I’m thinking about ‘Bird Song.’”

“So am I. I think seeing it’s going to bring us back with a jolt. I hope there’s at least a little out of whack. I want to get up into it again and mess around.”

“Me too! I’ve got a feeling you’re going to have to anchor me down when I’m around it—after what I heard when they punched my ticket to heaven. A new use for cement galoshes. What if I pee my pants?”

“That’s strangely sexy, sweetheart.”

Trixie rolled over close to me. I could see her raised eyebrows even in the dark. I pulled her closer. “I’d kinda like to wait until we’re back home,” I whispered. “I don’t want to worry.”

“Mmmmm,” she said. “Tomorrow night... with chocolate.”

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It looked like snow, but nothing came of it. The sky was heavy and low. Trixie had a way with coffee, though. Even after guzzling as much “Archetype Blend” as we had in “The Golden Fleece,” hers was still outstanding, despite coming from the same beans and coffee maker my father always used with lesser results. He’d walked over to Broadway for fresh bagels: egg and onion. It was a little chilly on the sun porch, but my father gave us both sweaters, so we were cozy enough for breakfast. We still had a few things at his house, so we had been able to change out of our springtime picnic clothes.

We decided to stop off at The Ship on Armitage to get winter coats before going to the museum. Trixie and I didn’t really want to do that: to just run in and then back out. We knew we’d feel like staying and poking around, but that would have to wait. Once we pulled up in front, I stayed in the car with my father while Trixie went to get the coats. My father didn’t feel like talking.

“How was it in there?” I asked when Trixie emerged with out coats.

“A little weird. Not in our part; that was just the same, a little musty but otherwise the same. There was work on the tables up front. That all looked fine too, but the working parts of “Birds” we’d hung up there, they seemed kind of lonely and silent—with no air moving in the place. Abandoned; a little spooky being so quiet—like we’d been missed. And I didn’t see any mail. Margo must have a new system. The floor sure was clean, though.”

I was already nervous. The museum was only ten minutes away. I was distracted as I drove east on Armitage. I missed a light turning green and the driver behind us had to honk.

“You seem upset, Jason,” my father said.

“I’ll be fine as soon as we’re there and I see it flying high. It’s just... well, you can imagine, right?”

My father nodded. “Of course,” he said. “I’ve known you long enough, wouldn’t you say?”

I reached over the seat and squeezed his hand. “Whoops!” I said, swerving to the left, nearly clipping the car next to us.

“You want me to drive, duck man?” Trixie asked. “I still value my life, you know. Just because I’ve been to heaven and back doesn’t mean...” Then she looked back at my father. “Professor? You okay?”

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“Never better,” he said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Really. Never better. It’s a glorious day for me as well.”

We parked in the ramp next to the museum. Just as Mason and Margo had promised, they were waiting when we walked in. Adele was there too. She and my father embraced in an old, familiar way. The new museum was impressive in its post modern tidiness, its retro elegance. The lobby housed a bright red standing Calder: a mobile on stilts, one I’d never seen—one I’d never heard of.

“I can’t wait to see how you react, man,” Mason said, clamping his arm around me, distracting me from the art. “The dude’s going to take us back.”

“He means Mr. Abaddon, the exhibition director,” Margo explained. “He’s sort of snooty. He kinda feels like he runs the place. He said to stop by his office when you got here.”

I didn’t feel like speaking to any museum administrators at that moment, and judging by Trixie’s look, neither did she. But the office was just steps away. Just down a little hallway. My father and Adele followed behind. Margo knocked on the pale wooden door. Then she opened it, and like a clap of thunder, the world collapsed in a stinking heap.

§

It was Hades standing behind the desk; the look in his animal eyes so cruel I turned away. It had happened again. I fell to my knees, Trixie at my side.

Then someone hit me in the neck from behind. I thought it was a hammer, but it was Margo’s rock-hard little fist. Margo: every hateful thing that ever *might have been* Margo. A grotesque, phantom Margo.

“You stinking pieces of shit!” she said to us.

“You stupid fucks!” said Mason, grabbing Trixie by the hair and scratching her face so brutally that that her blood splattered across me. Then he kicked me in the back.

“You stupid, trusting fucks!” He said, kicking me again. “You stupid, stupid pieces of shit!”

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“Look at me! Look at me! ME-E-E-E-E!” my hideous father screeched from just behind us where he was looming. “Look at me! You destitute pawns! You filth!”

“*Great God! You’re back!*” he said, mocking the way he’d spoken when he first saw us on the porch. “*Great God! You’re back!*” he said again, venomously, with derision, with hatred. “*It’s a glorious day for me as well! Ha!* You fools! You pathetic, self-deluded fools! You blind, arrogant posers! You followed the kindly professor to the doors of Hell!”

Then he spit in our direction, but the old man, who was the worst my father even might have been, missed, spittle drooling from his chin and thin lips. But Adele Rosenberg was at his side. She leered. Her look was diabolical, hideous, hateful; her face a web of creases and wrinkles. She too spit on us. Then she took off her shoes, her red high-heeled shoes, and with the strength of a demon, she beat us with them, furiously, as we cowered under our hands.

“I’ve waited years for this, sitting in my house waiting to shit on you. Your father was a tool, a weakling. I despise him. I have *always* despised you!” she said with disgust. “You smart-mouthed brat, you smart-mouthed piece of shit and your filthy, stinking whore of a woman!”

Mason and Margo had stripped naked before us. They danced a grotesque, obscene dance for our benefit. Then they squatted down and defecated at our feet.

“But he saved us from the evil of drugs!” said Margo, mocking, still squatting there: cackling, shrieking.

“He saved me with his eyes!” said Mason. “The stinking puddle of shit thought he saved me!” at which Mason began to bawl like an insane infant, circling us, taunting us.

My father and Adele had also obscenely disrobed. Adele had flung their clothes across the room, flamboyantly, mockingly, one by one. Their aged, sagging, wrinkled bodies reeked, as they began to parade before us, strutting like insane, demented denizens of the netherworld.

Hades surveyed it all with his cruel wolf eyes. He was dressed as he’d been when I saw him last: in a black suit with a black silk shirt.

“It thrills me to know two can be as gullible one,” he said. “Slothful in mind and course in your desires. As stupidly trusting as

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two dogs. You are a prize to me, the first of your kind, snatched from my weak brother's shambles of a retreat. I've been following you, have you noticed? Your so-called love for each other will not be your savior here; it will only entrench you deeper in your torment."

He looked directly at me. "How kind of you to introduce your whore of a bride to all I have to offer. But first," he said. "Give me the honor of showing you what you came to see."

Trixie and I were still kneeling on the floor, Trixie encircled in my arms. In the searing moment I had to consider it all, fragments of conversation ricocheted in my mind:

"We made a big turkey! We were missing you!

...I told Mason and Margo everything. They needed to know. They deserved to know

...You lost your shine, man, you lost your shine!"

It was my naked, wretched father who now tried to scratch at Trixie's face with his yellow, old man's fingernails. "Good God! You're back!" he said again, as he tore at her face. "I never thought I'd see you again, not in this world!" he howled. "You gullible pawns!" Mason had begun to urinate on us when I pulled Trixie to her feet, kicked my decrepit father away, shoved the gloating Margo to the side and bolted out the door. But once outside, we moved as in a dream, unable to escape. Our hideous "family" jeered at us from the open office door, all of them strutting naked in a demonic parade.

Hades separated us then. He pulled us apart. Most cruelly of all, he put his frigid arms across our shoulders and led us away like wretched orphans in his charge.

There was an atrium in that building, and something was hanging there. It even looked as if it was made from parts of our years of labor. But no graceful plates and silver chimes were fixed and hanging there about the elegant arching beams. Intestines hung there, bloated, swarming with flies, stinking, dripping bile, blood and feces; intestines—and diseased organs, split livers, torn bladders, shredded lungs.

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The innards of dozens hung there, human and animal.

It wasn't clever, it wasn't even cruel; it was careless, artless, and in that I took some solace, pitiful, but solace nonetheless. I hadn't yet realized that was to be our prison.

My father and our hateful friends had not followed us there to the filthy atrium floor. We could no longer hear their taunts where we sat huddled below the stinking degradation of our dreams. Had they been there, had those embodiments of hatred been there, even *their* presence would have borne the dimmest reflection of hope. And had Hades himself cursed us, damned us eternally, the despair would not have been as wholly consuming as it was, for he was gone without a word, and without warning the abominations swept over and spun about us in that hellish drum of insanity, promising only one thing: no hope. No possibility of hope. Not a breath of it. Not even a memory of it.

Only the endless, burning spew. Blinded by blood. Split like fish. Together now forever. Witness to our own agony and each other's. Turning viciously on each other when the pain was not enough. Betrayal. Abandonment. Ridicule. Savagery.

For how many hours or days or months had Trixie broken my bones with her own? Battering me limp, bloody and shattered with her slick, white femur, torn from her thigh, by my own vengeful hands, as she shrieked? For how many days had I forced her under, held her down, pleading and gasping beneath the bloody stew of our own making? For how many days had I despised her? Degraded her? Shamed her? Forever, without a crease of hope, without a memory of it.

How many days or weeks had we fallen and spun, sick and backwards down an abyss called panic sharper than pain? How quickly did the infernal drum spin back across our minds, endless in its conjugations of horror, its permutations of misery fueled by our own engines of hate? No stopping. No punctuation. Our love, inside-out, black and bloody, turned upon us, unquenchable, like a ghoul. How long had I roasted her alive, impaled on a spit. My hatred for her consumed me. How long had she molested me with tools and torn me to shreds, like a Harpy, with her filthy hands and filthy nails. One moment of betrayal, eternal. A moment of spite, forever. Then we are nailed together on a tree, repulsive to each

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other in our slack, white skin. Then we are vomiting until our bowels hang from our mouths like the stinking array of our diabolical creation hanging above us.

In our every moment that was forever did my *real* father weep? Did our *real*, beloved friends pass their ordinary time, mourning us? Lost forever, never to return? Did they listen to the Song the Birds Forgot in the pristine white atrium that had become a cathedral through their thin, blind moments stuffed to bursting with our blood letting, our cannibalism? The three of them, and Adele, whole and complete and unaware? Did they still exist? Did anything exist but we, the slothful, the betrayed? Fused now in hatred? Did any memory of love exist? Did anything exist but our horrendous, circle of infinity damned?

Once, when I was very young, certainly no more than three, I lost my mother's hand and wandered away from her in a crowded department store. The floor was wet from snowy boots; the bodies of adults in heavy winter coats were smothering me. I couldn't see beyond the looming bodies on every side. I was buffeted by them, like a toy boat in a storm. Music, Christmas music, I imagine, was blaring across the steaming room of shoppers, because my whimpering went unheard. I remember the smell of wet wool. I felt I was going to be trampled by bossy women with packages and handbags, but then I was forced against a glass showcase filled with gloves of all sizes and colors. My hip was lodged against it in the crush, and I remember looking over my shoulder at the gloves and imagining severed hands, some children's hands like my own. The top of the glass case was above the top of my head; I was trapped unseen against the terrible display of hands when I turned my gaze upward to avoid the sight of them. But there, on the counter was a round mirror reflecting the faces of the huge, unseeing adults; faces I'd been unable to see from below, and faces that seemed disembodied like the hands. I was the abandoned child. I would never be found. And then... then in the midst my panic, I saw the face of my mother, somehow gleaming in the mirror for an instant, as through a crack, through a seam in my nightmare. Up from the depths of me then there arose a cry, a wail; my mouth against the glass case, parting the waves of the mob until I was raised up, sobbing in fear and deliverance.

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Was that how it happened? Was that what it was like? Like the face in the mirror through a seam in the nightmare, a crack in the horror? Because through a crack, so small that light alone could pass beyond it, through a fissure in the eternal and seamless procession of torture and abomination, came a memory, a memory, like the flash of a beloved face.

I knew the way out. I'd learned it. I'd practiced for years and years.

My dreams! I remembered my dreams of Hell! I remembered the way out!

"OPEN YOUR EYES!" I cried to my bloodied, broken self. And then to Trixie, I shouted it: **"OPEN YOUR EYES!"**

But the weight of millennia, of history and mythology; the ponderous, bloated weight of defeat and calamity bore down on me like the heavens on Atlas' shoulders. I could not do it. I cried out to Trixie again—Trixie whom I'd betrayed forever, Trixie whose flesh I'd seared to the bone—I cried out to her to OPEN HER EYES. But shrieking in her delusion, she clawed at my face to cease my torturing her. The filthy surgeon hovered above us, his hair clotted with blood. **"OPEN YOUR EYES!"** I cried again, struggling against the oppressive weight of myself, until my eyelids finally fluttered, and Trixie's too, but this was not night, not sleep. This was wider than night, deeper than the deepest sleep, more horrid than the deepest dream of Hell.

Eyes open, the scene we beheld was mirrored now, multiplied: the puss and the spew and malice of the torturer again and again, the filthy man in the blood-red pants, repeating itself endlessly, in all directions; all the horrors surrounding us, inflicted upon us, by us, upon everyone, by everyone, mirrored into eternity, duplicated into infinity.

And what was it then that changed it all? What was it that shut that terrible book of delusion? Had my love and I finally fused: fused in love *and* in hatred? Was it my journey on the Argo? My companion heroes at my side; our enchantress showing us the way? A company of souls entwined? Was it the picnickers in the park, the multitude that lifted Trixie; the multitude that offered her up? Or was it everyone? Was it that that changed it all? Did everyone change it? Everyone?

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“OPEN *OUR* EYES!” I shouted, we shouted, the words awkward, sticking to our lips. **“OPEN *OUR* EYES!”** the two of us cried together as one, the words quaking, splintering under their meaning. **“OPEN *OUR* EYES!”** we shouted again, not just to us: to Everyone.

And at this, the hideous specter began to give way. Only pinpoints of light showed at first, but then the midnight blue of the firmament began to open around us. **“OPEN *OUR* EYES! *OUR* EYES! ALL EYES! *ALL EYES!*”**

“OPEN *OUR EVERY* EYE!” we cried out at last, in a strange language of unity, a grammar beyond our understanding.

“OPEN *OUR EVERY* EYE!” we cried again as the layers peeled back, the membranes; eyes opened, eyes upon eyes, eyes within eyes, everyone’s eyes: the great deep blue eternity swelling up within us and before us as the light floods in. My love and I fused. The one begets the two; the two, the multitude. United, we illuminate.

And then everything is perfectly still.

And what do we see? What do we see with our every eye? What do all eyes see?

Do we see Jason Aeneas Finch and Beatrice Lucia Angelet seated on folding chairs? In a circle with his good father and their good dear friends, and with good strangers and admirers? Do we see them reunited? Do we see them seated on the second floor balcony of the atrium looking out and up at that same eternal blue, iridescent and swirling in a cloud of music that some say stops the world to let it catch its breath? That some say has opened the door to a new dominion? That some say has changed their lives? That some say sounds like God playing the chimes?

Do we see the trees taking notice? And the stones, awake at last but unmoving still... until?

Do we see Professor Finch? Phineas Finch who sheds secret tears, regretful that he will witness only a part of his son’s miraculous

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life? Do we see him as the long succession of kings that is *his* life, whole, round and complete?

Do we see Adele Rosenberg? Adele who said Phineas looked like Andrew Jackson in a good mood? Do we see her telling Phineas she's loved him from afar, from far across the street, for years? Do we see Phineas telling her such stunning secrets that Adele feels as if born anew? Do we see them in the great blue of eternity?

Do we see Pedro Reyes? Pedro Reyes who told the truth? Who told the worried man he'd seen no woman in a white dress. Pedro Reyes who scolded his children? Who scolded them when they begged him to tell the man about the bells that had been ringing in the air about them? Do we see Pedro? Why would he have told the worried man about the bells?

Do we see Bethany Young, kneeling at her son's graveside, regretting that she'd spoken so harshly to that boy who called—whatever was his name? Bethany Young who found the parents of that poor girl who died, and brought them cake and a box of oranges and promises and tears?

Do we see Cyrene, who thrills to see the ripples cross the crowded room when she rings the silver chime she keeps on a chain around her neck? Do we see the secret look she gives the laughing god when he steps out into the room?

Do we see Solomon Goldberg, still wounded and bereaved after all these years; his young wife taken so early, so cruelly? Do we see him who so dearly loves all who cross his threshold, and who grieves their departure like an ever opening wound?

Is this what we see with all our eyes? OUR *EVERY* EYE? What can we not know?

Do we see our own Margo when we look into that great deep blue eternity? That great blue eternity that is reality for all eyes as one. Do we see Margo, secretly high just one last time and so sweetly

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tingling with the deepest contentment, and so happy to be who she is?

Do we see Karen Piper, in her San Diego store, she who dreamed for weeks on end of the young artist who'd touched so deeply with his eyes? The young artist who reminded her of her first love, a boy she'd hardly known?

Do we see Mr. Nash? Josiah Norbert Nash—Josey, age eight, such a pretty boy his father made him his little girl? So pretty his father invaded his immaculate body and burned the bloody sheets?

Do we see Anita in the blue forever? Anita as a bud, poised to open, pearly-pink and break the membrane between eternity and time?

Do we see that man, Marty? Marty Spivac, shouting at his wife, Marlene, for tipping the pizza man five dollars for a fifteen dollar pizza? And his wife, conjuring up the young man's sweet face as her husband rolls over on her in their close, dark room?

Do we see everything?

Do we see Bill Gustafson, hardly knowing what to feel? Bill Gustafson, so proud of his son, Jamie, who showed such respect; but frightened him so by speaking to a stranger who slept in a car? A sex offender sleeping in a car? Do we see how William Gustafson loves his boy?

Do we see that man once called Mason, hook-nosed, creased, hideous, elongated now, the embodied hatred in himself, who slashed Trixie across her face with the nails of his long, bony, filthy fingers? Is he too, an illusion, there among the everyone all eyes see? Is the unreal real in eternity?

Or Dee Blackburn? Dee Blackburn, do we see him, who has to boost his dinner from the shelves the Seven-Eleven because that bitch Margo decided today was the day she was going to get straight?

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Do we see Augusta Bindle, with our eyes that are all eyes? Augusta, Birdie's sister? Augusta who's not so happy at Birdie's return as she'd expected, seeing as Birdie got so stuck up and distant? And Birdie? Do we see her, in failing health, dreaming of the little boy it took her so many hard years to learn to love, and dreaming of the professor every night, but remembering only fragments, if anything, when she wakes?

Do we see Officer Hill, who never said a word, but who dreams at night of a great white owl swooping down through the rain-washed air? Do we see Officer Hill shyly offering his service to the pastor of his church? "*Anything*," he says, "*I'll do anything*."

Do we see Charlie Schmidt who slowed down as he passed that stopped the Toyota in the driving rain because the car shown like the Star of Bethlehem? Do we see him, who, like Officer Hill guarded his secret for the rest of his life?

Do we see that boy, Luke, who refused to be dragged to that Tunemobile concert or whatever it was at the Coliseum with his girlfriend, and as a result never spoke to her again? Do we see him? Do we see her? What *was* her name?

And that rental agent, Mr. Schenck? Do we see him with whoever it was he took to that Cubs game? Who were they? Do we see them? Their faces? Do we see their lives in the great blue vault of eternity?

And what about Euripides? That grey parrot, ancient now, silent and about to die, but beginning at last to understand... just a bit? Do we see Euripides?

Do we see *all this*? Is this what we see? We, as Jason Aeneas Finch and Beatrice Lucia Angelet, we, as the ones who longed to unite, and united, begat the many, seeing with our every eye?

Or is it the other way around? Is this what all eyes see looking at us? At us, Jason Aeneas Finch and Beatrice Lucia Angelet, who

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will do as we please with this cosmos of ours? Or is it theirs? Do they see us, who will walk hand in hand, girdled in matching PVD's, to inquire about afternoon Kindergarten, while good uncle Mason falls asleep as Emily plays quietly in her room with her bones and her springs and her bells?

Who is looking at whom in the great blue of eternity? What is this *everything*? Is there really any difference? Is there a problem here? A problem for the mind? Even if we step aside? Even if we subtract ourselves, subtract our stake in the answer to the riddle? Perhaps. But there's no problem for the heart—not those good, bloody muscles that live our lives for us—no, the other hearts: our jewel encrusted, glowing hearts; our blessed hearts of Jesus, of Krishna; our Valentines, our lovers' hearts; our Eternal hearts that love without a word. Those hearts that see through all the eyes at once.

Is it all one heart? And what does it see? The double-helix of promises and wishes? The story of a story of a story? That great day that will forever be with us? Quiet now, listen to it. It's everything we ever dreamed. It rises and falls with every breath. It's the great song remembered. It's the Song the Birds Forgot. We are everyone.

§

And yet, the one once affectionately called "I" still sits alone in a white room. The white moldings along the floor and ceiling are finely milled and ornate. The walls, though glowing, are unadorned. The book he reads bears the title, *Dreaming Backwards*; a favorite. In it, the root of all paradox is exposed and elucidated as the title indicates. The appearance and deportment of the one once affectionately called "I" is that of a wizened old man. Though long, his snowy hair is thin. He is seated comfortably but walks with difficulty, though he does so nonetheless: in the garden and occasionally through a small park, in the city where he lives. The city is called "The Story of Beatrice Angelet." He *resides* in Beatrice Angelet, and she resides in him. They have always been together. In the garden *he*—to the extent that the pronoun alone defines him—is most fond of the deepest purple flowers, commonly

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called “Her Memory.” In the park, he’s attracted to the black silhouettes of trees at dusk; these he calls “Our Love.”

As an old man, the one once called “I”, still he goes by the name of Jason, and tells stories of *his* past, something he calls *his own*, just as the Moon appears to change its shape while remaining its spherical self. Some say that he, as an individual, has lived hundreds of years and has hundreds of children, but nobody knows. Today, he—for indeed he is no longer “I”—closes the book and sets it down on the round table, luminously white like the rest of the room. Visitors are arriving for an audience. He might dissuade them of their belief in him (*Leave your shoes and beliefs at the door!*) but that would deprive them of so many opportunities, so he’ll simply play a trick or two. First three arrive: children in pale yellow, dusty blue and white. Then three more: larger, called adults, all in black.

“Shall I turn myself into a crab?” he asks the children. “Don’t be frightened.”

And in a puff of light, he’s the size of a saucer, skittering sideways at their feet.

“It’s just a trick,” says the crab, in a thin, reedy voice; the crab who, in another puff of light is in his chair again, the same old man with long white hair and beaming eyes. “Don’t believe what you see,” he says, “but keep your secrets, dark as they may be!”

“And for you?” he asks the larger ones in black. “Shall I answer the riddle of eternity? It will only hurt a little, I promise.” And in another puff of light, the three of them are rolled tightly on the floor, limbs entangled, tied together in a ball with their clothing.

“Another trick,” he laughs, gazing down at them. “You look fine! Bewilderment becomes you, it does!” he says, merrily. “You can get dressed. It’s just a trick. Nothing real. Just a symbol, just a story.”

Once they’ve gone, he remembers the story of two children in a park; and he stretches so far we can touch the horizon on both sides, so high, our feet are anchored in the earth and our head disappears into starry blue. He opens our eyes. We are the players and the play; the lovers and the love. We are everyone. It’s the truth: and the truth will set us free.

“Our father once told us to love one another,” we say. “Our father once told us to practice kindness every day!”

NOTE ON FIRST EDITION

NOTE ON THE FIRST EDITION

My, oh my! That deserves a moment to reflect. You may need a little break before reading on. I won't mind.

Jason does get carried away, doesn't he? But of course I understand. I get carried away myself, and the two of us together have become so much more than ourselves. Something beyond words. Truly. That's where love leads—but that's not the only place it leads. No, it leads *both* ways. Remember: "If you want to get divine, get personal?"

I believe that, I truly do, so as the more level-headed representative of our divine union, I'd like to add some balance to my husband's report.

Let's start at the bottom—with Daphne. I'm afraid the love of my life lied. When my sweetheart-dearest was faced with that lovely, dark-haired, green eyed woman who made a noise like a cat before she lunged at him on his hotel room bed in Seattle, he *did not* jump

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away. No, he didn't jump. He didn't try to defend himself. Actually, he made certain that he and the cat-woman stayed right there on that bed. For quite some time, I now understand. Dear Daphne's head injury was one of the *bouncing off the bed* variety, not the *falling* variety. But I wouldn't want my true love's readers to doubt the truth of his story because of this little... *beige* lie. Or doubt my veracity either, since I did tell Jason that I "flirted" with the boys at the little foundry where they made our chimes. And yes, flirting was how it began that Friday, that much is true—but, you see, they were Italian.

But that's all of it—all there is. As far as I know, and at my age I know *very, very* far, beyond our two peccadilloes, everything else in Jason's history is true. It's also true that our unsynchronized arrival at "The Golden Fleece" cost us a heartbreaking deception and our "Honeymoon in Hell." We brought that on ourselves. But in his dotage, that part of Jason he still calls "I," that part that does not *always* reside in me, that part that likes to reminisce left out a good hundred-and-twenty years in the history of Jason Aeneas Finch and Beatrice Lucia Angelet in this written record. For we did not emerge from Hell as *residents of each other*, as dignified centauquingenerians who entertain children by turning into crabs and play melodies on the cello that routinely create tiny parades of pebbles and dandelions.

No. Once we'd broken free and seen eternity through our every eye, once we glimpsed the mystery of the multitude in ourselves, we emerged from Hell and the cruel betrayal that led us there stunned and depleted.

We found ourselves again just outside the back door of "The Golden Fleece," still dressed in our picnic clothes. Of course, this was long, long ago; and though I insist I'm as young as ever, Jason and I may have been somewhat more resilient a hundred-and-twenty-years ago than we are today. Resilient? Rash? Both suited us well, for without hesitation, my sweetheart and I were prepared to walk down that windy alley once again to see if we could to make things turn out differently.

Of course, we didn't know what we'd done wrong, or what we hadn't known that might have made it right. We didn't know how to become as happy as we'd eventually be, walking hand in hand, just as Jason described, girded in matching PVD's, inquiring

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about afternoon kindergarten, while our dear first-born, Emily (no wings, no tail) played quietly in her room, as good Uncle Mason nodded out over his coffee. We didn't know what we needed. Was it only the knowledge that we'd been fooled once? Would that be enough?

Maybe so. Maybe the wariness we'd have felt might have been enough to burn through any further deceptions on the part of Poseidon's cruel brother. But I had a funny feeling back there in that windswept alley. *Funny* probably isn't the best word for it, but my more literate soul-mate happens to be a lovely white cat at the moment, so I can't ask his advice. And I didn't ask his advice a-hundred-and-twenty years ago either, because my *funny* feeling prompted me to try the coffeehouse back door.

The former Captain of the Argo was aghast. He insisted that going back through that door might lead us to something more horrid than we could foresee. (More horrid than that skinning alive-business? Than beating Jason with *my* slick, white femur—mine—torn from *my* thigh by his own vengeful hands? More horrid than that? More horrid than that puss and vomit soup I was served as a perpetual complementary breakfast in the spinning drum of eternity?) More horrid than *who* could foresee? Not me. *I* didn't hesitate. I tried the backdoor to the Paradise Café, and behold: it swung right open.

As soon as I poked my head in, I knew I hadn't opened a door to Hell. I could hear the sweet murmuring of celestial conversation, and there was no mistaking the aroma of the coffee. After convincing my reluctant hero to follow me in, it was my funny feeling alone (or maybe *intuition* is the better word.) that led me boldly down the hallway and into the back of the coffeehouse. I'd told the love of my life to stay by the door and not do anything stupid. Glancing around, I saw that the coffeehouse was nearly empty, and that neither our dear mother, Hera, Queen of the Gods, nor our friend, Cyrene, nor Poseidon's friend, Achilles was present. I wasn't yet aware just *why* I was there, but not wanting to draw undue attention to myself, I walked calmly through "The Golden Fleece," nodding politely to the strangers I passed, and eventually arrived up front at the cloak room. There I found Jason's PVDs just where Achilles had put them. Apparently Jason would be needing them again.

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This alone was very encouraging to me, but as I set off back through the café, I still felt *funny*. Or maybe *prescient* is the more accurate word. So I stopped at the counter. Temperance was still there in all her celestial height and glory. I knew I didn't have to ask, but not wishing to pass up the opportunity to speak to an angel, I requested two cups of coffee, one black and one with a little sugar and lots of cream.

"To go?" the marvelous angel asked.

I didn't know she spoke.

"Please," I said.

So with Jason's Personal Vibratory Diffuser over my arm and two cups wonder-coffee in my hand, I wound my way back to where my sweetie was waiting for me, having concluded that he would need his PVD and that both of us could use some coffee before venturing back outside.

But I still felt *funny*. Or maybe *visionary* is the word. As I entered the hall where Jason was sitting, leaning against the back door to who-knew-where, it occurred to me that I might try that other door that said "NO ADMITTANCE;" the door that had seemed locked when Jason tried it and which had "haunted him."

Maybe it's the feminine mystique, or maybe my own personal magnetism, but again, the door swung open, effortlessly. I looked in, smiled, and beckoned to my lover. There was nothing haunting about it at all.

The room was small; it was really a closet, and it was at least knee-deep in used, white linen napkins, some slightly soiled, but most looked untouched or barely and very inviting for nesting and related activities. Seeing this bed of white linen, I felt even *funnier*, or perhaps even more *enlightened* would make it clearer, because I understood immediately. I understood as the enchantress, Medea might have understood, *luminously*. Medea, the enchanting key to Jason's great success.

"A little magic coffee first?" I asked Jason, whom I'd lured into the room.

Even before I pulled off my tee shirt, I could tell that Jason had registered the marvelous promise of making love in the closet of the ante-room of heaven. The *mile-high* club?

"Maybe just a few sips now, and the rest later?" my hero asked.

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I agreed. So we sat, arms around each other (and not the least bit chilly) and sipped for just a while, just long enough to tune us up.

“What if someone walks in on us?” Jason wanted to know.

“We’ll have quite some story to tell little Jason or little Trixie when they’re grown up enough to hear it!”

“You’re sure?”

“Oh, sweetie, you can count on that! I’ve been feeling it coming on!”

“How does that work?” the foolish man asked, so I just smiled to add to the mystique.

No one walked in on us. Anyone who might have would have been consumed. We certainly were: as ourselves, as each other and everything so sweetly in between. We spent quite a while in Heaven’s little linen closet. We even napped a bit. When we finally opened the door and peeked out, we discovered that “The Golden Fleece” was nearly dark. Apparently it was closed. Jason, as you might have guessed, considered this a mystery of the highest order. I indulged him. More significantly, someone was putting the chairs up on the tables, as if preparing for the floor to be cleaned. It was dark enough to go to the end of the hall and peer into the room without being seen, so we looked out.

It didn’t surprise us to see Cyrene busy at work, but we hardly expected to find her companion helping her so cooperatively, so supportively—so *subserviently*?

“Good night, you two,” Cyrene called out mischievously to us through the darkness, at which she clanged her little chime.

Jason says he heard The Lord of the Deep chuckle, but I maintain he’d hidden himself from us and didn’t say a word.

When we again ventured out the back door of Poseidon’s establishment with our nearly full cups of Heavenly Brew, the wind had died down. We were feeling just about as good as a loving pair can feel, still tingling, holding hands, of like mind and very confident. Again, it looked like November. I’d never been particularly intrigued or disturbed by the locked sheds in that alley, and Jason said they didn’t remind him of every unanswered question with a sinister answer anymore. Naturally, this was a relief

THE SONG THE BIRDS FORGOT

to me, expecting to be sharing his consciousness to an ever-increasing extent. Sinister's not among my favorite qualities.

So we walked down the alley untroubled and unafraid and found our car just as we had previously. It started right up again, so we sat in the car and got warm. We drove back toward Chicago then sipping the elixir of life, both of us feeling extraordinary, with me in particular, feeling pregnant. We stopped at the same gas station outside of Davenport to look at a newspaper. And sure enough: it was Thanksgiving again.

We drove directly to Hawthorn Street. Our reception was as truly joyous as the previous one was false, but I can't say we weren't both a little suspicious. Jason's wonderful father finally commented on our slight aloofness during dinner, and by that time the real Margo had begun to eye *us* suspiciously. Mason didn't seem to notice a thing. But we had to wait until everything played itself out before we could fully relax. We hadn't missed our cue this time, we knew that. We'd attended to everything necessary in the rarefied world of "The Golden Fleece." We'd paved the way for our future.

By the time we'd arrived at the museum, we felt certain. There was no evil Mr. Abaddon awaiting us, only kind Adele Rosenberg and a friendly Mr. Michaels whom we'd met once before as we were completing the huge, gleaming mobile. So much had already been said about "The Song the Birds Forgot." All of it true. It is captured sky and sunshine. It is a choreographed reverie; a far flung, glimmering dictionary of devotion, an atlas of aspiration. It speaks for itself and within itself—and the world is still listening.

§

But please, friends, don't be misled by such a simple, mundane exposition. If things were so simple, the world would fall from the sky.

And yes, this is what happened, but it's just a little slice—a sweet little slice, but little, nonetheless.

And please don't be misled by what you might call "a displacement in time." For just as my eternal mother cautioned me,

NOTE ON FIRST EDITION

I, a woman of many ages, will caution you to beware the past and future; to refrain from conjecture; to refrain from asking how it is that I speak to you from the time that I inhabit, so many years, as you say, “hence.” It’ll take a much thicker and richer slice than this to make that crystal clear to you.

So please don’t try to understand.

Let it go. Bewilderment becomes you. You’ve heard that before. But it does; it truly does. Only love knows. Only love *can* know. Only love.

So if there is sweetness, taste it. If there is good will, welcome it. If there is beauty, become it. And listen. Listen for the song the birds forgot: it’s the outline of life, of everything simple and true. Kindness lasts, remember? Thoughts don’t.

Remember? Our father told us to love one another. Our father told us to practice kindness every day.