

# The Potion

# Part 1: The Downing

Churning wisps of vapor rose from five chalices, like a witch's brew or wizard's potion from a film.

Five people stood in a solemn circle surrounding an antique oak table in the dingy basement of a moldering apartment building. Their eyes stared dubiously at the elixirs that now rested before them on the table.

Stan scanned the faces of the other four.

Barry. His white beard hid a deeply lined face, scowling resolutely into the brew. His hair had been awkwardly cropped in a dirty-gray bowl atop his skull, blending into the gray fur that began on his neck and continued down his shoulders and into the top of his filthy white t-shirt. His lips were caked with dry flecks of skin, and strands of mucus stretched between them as he seemed to be speaking silently to himself. Behind those lips, teeth the color of jaundice gave him obvious pain as he pushed a finger against his cheek, searching for some relief.

The old man thought of himself as a father figure, and it galled Stan that anyone would think him a child in need of paternal care. Stan's father had died when he was young, and he was just fine with the situation. The last thing Stan needed was to have some old man using him to find purpose in his meaningless life. If Stan had wanted a father figure, it certainly would not be Barry, with his persistent wreak of desperation. This pathological wretchedness, Stan assumed, must have had something to do with the death of Barry's teenage son—the victim of a horrific murder over a cheating girlfriend—five years ago. For this, Stan sympathized with the old man, even if he didn't care for him. This was why he had invited him here. If anyone needed freedom from his pitiful existence, it would be Barry.

Then there was Morris, Stan's one remaining friend from childhood. Morris's square jaw gave him the appearance of an athlete, but he was anything but. Morris was weak. Weak of body, and weak of will. Stan hated Morris, and often felt guilty for feeling that way. After all, Morris was a nice guy, and would do anything for anyone, especially Stan. Were Morris to find out how Stan truly felt, he would be heartbroken. So Stan pretended to like him. It was the best he could do.

Morris's oversized and drooping lower lip quivered with fear as he gazed into his misty goblet. He turned his pale blue eyes up toward Stan briefly, and his face twitched into a nervous, reassuring smile before he looked back down. It seemed he was trying to comfort Stan, and for a moment, Stan felt enraged. This feeble, overgrown mouse of a man thought to comfort *him*? It should have been Stan reassuring Morris.

Morris's face had not been shaved in several days, and the stubble grew unevenly across his chiseled jawbone. His brow, with its protruding ridge, cast a shadow that now obscured his eyes as his head tilted down. The wavy brown mop on his head had been styled with chubby fingers and putrefying sweat, and his flaky scalp was visible through the thinning region toward the rear. Strands of hair were shaken loose from their oily locks by Morris's trembling in the chill of the basement. Repulsed by the display of weakness, Stan's eyes moved on to the next person.

Jess. Stan felt a slight stir in his groin as his eyes traced her trembling body, and the shame he felt only intensified his arousal. Jess was an unsightly woman by most standards, but when he Stan at her, his body often reacted this way despite heated protests from his mind. It wasn't that he required perfection—he had often envisioned his ideal mate, and his imagination had never produced a perfect woman. Instead, he imagined the pretty sort of girl who might ring up his purchase at a clothing store. Pretty, but not intimidatingly so. Preferably a brunette with soft breasts the size of apples. He had met several women in his life fitting that description, but none had ever caused him such involuntary arousal.

Then he had met Jess. His friends had made fun of her behind her back, and he had pretended to laugh with them. Her teeth were jagged, and she was overweight. Her overbite often caused her mouth to fail at keeping saliva trapped behind her teeth, and she was forced to slurp audibly just to keep from drooling down her chin. Most importantly, she was painfully inept at social interaction, of-

ten saying strange things that ground discussions to an uncomfortable silence, with no one quite knowing how to resurrect the conversation.

Somehow, it was these very things that turned Stan on. Her supposed imperfections were, to Stan, perfect. He imagined running his hands along the soft contours of her pillowy flesh; of kissing that awkward mouth; of brushing back the tangled web of hair that obscured her eyes; of guiding her softly and patiently through the uncomfortable early stages of courting. Right now, there was nothing that Stan wanted more. But despite his desire for her, and the fact that having her should have been easy, she remained oblivious to his needs. Stan knew he was a good looking guy, and she should have been clamoring for his attention, but she simply did not seem interested.

She brushed her hair back and looked around, and Stan wondered how nobody ever spoke of her eyes. They were, to Stan, like two perfect gems gazing out from the muck. Of course, her eyes usually stayed obscured behind that nest of hair—a testament to the severity of her insecurities—but when they were visible, they were stunningly bright, clear, and aquamarine blue. Whenever her eyes met Stan's, he became strangely uncomfortable, and would usually be the first to look away. He was intimidated by her eyes, and this intensified his shame—which, in turn, intensified his arousal. Stan felt himself begin to sweat, and decided it was time to move on to the next person.

Marla. The whore—or at least that's how Stan thought of her, though he would never say it. She had slept with Stan several years ago. Neither had wanted a relationship, but it had still hurt and angered him when he found out she had slept with someone else the very next night. In fact, he suspected the affair

had been orchestrated to make the other man jealous, and apparently it had worked.

She was the only one of the five whose eyes weren't glued to the frothy elixir awaiting consumption. She, like Stan, was looking around at the others. Who could tell what devious thoughts hid behind those dark, wandering eyes with their mischievous gleam?

Her short, almost-black hair, like most of the others, was in a state of disarray—but in her case, such madness of form was contrived and orchestrated by her own skillful hands. It was much too perfect in its chaos to be an accident. It was a mirage—a manufactured concept, designed to give the impression of something wild and untamed. It fooled no one but those who wished to be fooled, usually for the purpose of allowing oneself to be seduced. Stan had fallen for her seductions once, but never again.

Finally, there was Stan himself. The leader—unofficially, but with no less certainty than had it been decreed by God. It had been Stan who had talked the others into gambling their lives tonight, and had made the arrangements to meet in this abandoned cellar. Stan just had that way about him. Others did what he wanted. Even when they opposed him, or did the opposite of what he had asked, it would still inevitably turn out to be what he had wanted them to do. This is why he so often smiled to himself, as he was doing at that very moment, as he suddenly found his eyes lock with Marla's. She shook her head with a fleeting look of disgust, then continued scanning the faces around her. Stan stopped smiling.

His dark brown hair, tinged with early gray, had grown ragged, and he had pushed it back until the tangles kept it pulled back out of his eyes. Unfortunately, that meant that it stuck in the air like a beehive. He knew it looked ridiculous, but it had grown matted. The only way he could possibly fix it would be to chop it off at the scalp, but there had been no scissors handy.

His face had become lined well beyond its scant 42 years, but was mostly hidden behind a thick bush of brown and gray prickly whiskers. Under his eyes hung umber bags of skin, their fissures wet from the moisture of his sensitive, leaking ducts. Lightning patterns of red twisted and turned through the whites of his eyes, gathering into pools of solid red at both sides. He had not slept in days, and the smoke from the candles in the closed cellar burned at his eyes. Stan wished for just a moment in which he could shut them, but he knew that once they closed, he would sleep, and would not awaken for some time. So he kept them open with as much will as he could muster.

It was time to drink.

Barry, his scowl deepening, raised the goblet to his face and sniffed. "This ain't gonna be tasty." He took a deep, halting breath, his nostrils widening, five wicked hairs visibly quivering with the passage of air. "I ain't gonna say I'm happy to be the first crazy asshole of the bunch to test this, but that's just my luck, ain't it?" Barry had drawn the shortest straw. At first, they had planned to drink together, all at once, but at Stan's prodding, they had agreed that if the brew was going to kill them, it may as well not kill all of them. So instead, they would drink one by one, in the order decided by the straws.

Mist no longer exuded from the cups. They now contained just a flat, opaque, brownish liquid with subtle opalescent swirls of cyan and amber. It looked like a substance that might have been extracted from the bladder of a creature in a polluted swamp. And, in fact, it was. At least, that had been the first ingredient. The last ingredient had been a dash of salt.

Barry put the cup to his lips, stared at the other four one-by-one above the far rim, and then pitched his head back. The briny liquid would not go down easily, and he coughed and sputtered, spilling much of it into his beard. He paused to gather himself, without removing the cup from his lips, and then dropped his head back further, draining the last of the contents. As he swallowed, his eyes clamped shut and a shiver descended from head to foot. He opened his eyes, and they were wet. He slammed the cup onto the oak table and took a step backwards.

"WHEWOO!" he howled at the air around him. His eyes were glassy and unfocused, and he looked even more the part of old village madman than before. After some time, his tremors settled, and clarity returned to his gaze. He looked at Stan with an expression full with accusation—of what, Stan did not know, but the intent was unmistakable. After a moment, the expression dropped, and he repeated his howl before shaking off the last of his tension and assuring the group that all was well. "It tastes like drinking a melted down car battery, and it burns like lit gasoline going down, but I think it's okay. I'm okay."

Without pause for consideration, Morris suddenly turned his cup up, clenched his eyes shut, and began gulping down the oily concoction, not pausing until his cup was empty. The cup fell from his hands and clattered onto the ta-



ble, and his legs buckled, tumbling him to the floor. Before anyone had a chance to move toward him, he held his hand up to stop them. "I'm okay. I'm okay." His eyes were still clenched, his mouth puckered, and he was shaking his head as if trying to exorcise a rancid thought from his mind.

He wiped his hands down his face, pulling the skin down on each side, his eyes forming a distorted arc and his lips pulled into an elongated frown. As his hands fell from his face, the skin snapped back into Morris-form, and the exaggerated frown lifted into an intoxicated grin. "Christ!" was all he had to say as he shook his head in wonderment.

As Morris stood back up, and took his place at the table, Stan looked back at Barry, and could not help but think that something had changed. Did the old man look even hairier than usual? Something was off—it just did not feel like Barry.

Stan shrugged and looked to Jess, who was up next. He could see the fear in her eyes. The skin was stretched unusually tight around her eyes as she stared down into her cup, giving her the distinctive look of paralytic shock. He found himself wanting to comfort her; to stroke her cheek, his finger running down her face, to her neck, and beyond.

She took a deep breath and a nervous smile exposed that meandering row of uneven porcelain. For all their rugged misshapeness, she had somehow kept her teeth a ghostly white, despite the lack of bathroom pleasantries of late. While the rest of the group's teeth had yellowed or browned, hers had somehow retained their milky purity. Stan found himself wanting to lick them; to explore with his tongue that rocky terrain with its unexpected turns and mysterious crevices.

With a shrug of dignified resignation, her eyes relaxed, and she emptied her cup. She was the first to keep her eyes open, and she looked at each of the other four in turn, meeting their eyes as she gulped. No drops spilled, and when she finished, she quietly set the goblet down on the table. The only evidence of her suffering was her slow breathing, which was an obvious tactic to maintain her composure. It was clear that she had determined not to allow her poise to break as had Barry and Morris. Despite the obvious difficulty, she was successful, and after a few moments, her face relaxed, she wiped the slight bit of remaining moisture from her lips and onto her skirt, and then looked toward Marla.

Stan looked around the room again, and saw that the changes in Barry had become more apparent. This was not Barry. The hair around his eyes did not seem right. This was not the hair of a human, but that of a beast. Or had Barry always resembled a beast? Stan wasn't sure. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his head. When he opened them, Barry felt even less like Barry. This was an imposter. A look-alike.

And Morris. He looked like the same Morris that Stan had known since childhood. But this wasn't Morris. Perhaps it was the demeanor. Perhaps it was the shape of the face, which appeared even blockier than before. It just wasn't Morris.

He wanted to warn the group to stop drinking this poison. But what would he say by way of explanation? Barry looks hairier than usual? Morris looks blockier than usual? They don't feel like them to me? They would accuse him of backing out of the arrangement at the last minute. They would accuse him of simply being afraid.

Why was Jess looking at him? Was that the face of a gourmand staring at a delectable meal? No, it was gone as quickly as he considered it. Hers was the look of patient anticipation; of waiting to see where this journey into reality's hinterlands would take them. Except, that wasn't Jess. Not any more. Those curves were weightier than before. She had changed before Stan's eyes. Her bulks had become bulkier; the crags of her teeth had become craggier.

Marla also was looking at Stan, but with a different expression entirely. Hers was imploring, pleading with her eyes for deliverance from this impossible moment. But there was no refuge in Stan's return gaze. If whatever had happened to the others were to happen to Marla, he would be glad. To rid himself of the embarrassment of his coupling with her those years ago would set him free. Let her be replaced by an imposter. He looked at her coldly, and her face twisted in grief. She looked down at her drink and tears began to fall, some going into the beverage, causing a strange chemical reaction of fizzing and tiny wisps of smoke.

She looked back at him defiantly and stared into his eyes as she lifted her cup and began to drink. Tears streamed from her lower eyelids, but with bleak determination she forced down one swallow after the next, her gaze never leaving Stan's. He felt himself cowering within, even as he maintained his cold stare. His guilt threatened to consume him, but he cast it aside and resolved to see this thing through. When she finished, the viscous substance was running down her chin, and one drop fell onto the table. Like Barry and Morris, she was overcome by tremors and was forced to sit on the floor for several moments to await its passing. When she stood back up, she was no longer Marla. She was an imposter, and this time, Stan was thankful.

It was Stan's turn. Every eye, he realized suddenly, was turned toward him.

"Wait." Stan had been so immersed in watching the others he had forgotten about the immanence of his own requirement to down the curdled goo before him. "Just wait. I need a second."

"If you think too hard, you'll back out, Stan," growled Barry with a voice of gravel drowning in sludge. It was meant to be a friendly enough nudge, but erupted from his throat with a harshness that is the hallmark of a lifelong chain smoker.

Stan had not realized until this very moment just how scared he was. Was he ready to risk his life, or to risk being replaced by an imposter? He looked around and found the air heavy with anticipation. Jess reached across the table and put her hand on his shoulder, rubbing it softly with her thumb. "Do it, Stan. The taste is bitter, but it passes. Just drink."

Who was she, Stan thought, to try to comfort him? With a jolt of determination, he lifted his cup to his lips. He tilted it until he felt the wetness of the liquid touch his upper lip...and then he stopped. He couldn't do it.

He set the cup back on the table and began backing away. Four faces fell in disappointment. Morris spoke with a steady assurance that he was not normally capable of: "Stan, you have to drink. You convinced us to do this, and you were right. It was the right thing for all of us. Now it's your turn, and you're going to drink."

"I'm not, Morris. I'm sorry."

"Yes, Stan. You are." There was no mistaking it now, Stan realized with horror: these were no longer his friends. They were counterfeits. Their forms were

changing before his eyes. They were becoming monsters. And they were taking steps toward him.

# Part 2: A Friendly Face

The rain was fierce this evening. The roads flowed with the translucent sheen of oil on water. If one didn't know that it was the result of pollution, one might find beauty in those rainbow swirls streaming down the streets. But everyone did know, and so they all did their best not to step in it. Today, with an inch of rainwater covering the asphalt, it was impossible. Waterproof boots were the only protection.

For the fifth time today, Stan passed the boy holding the sign:

***Salvation is at hand! Your suffering can end, starting today! Ask me how.***

Stan could not help himself. "Hey kid, suffering ends at death. You know that, right? So what are you selling me? A death cult?"

"Not death. Life. Are you asking me for answers?"

"I'm asking you a question. How do you propose I end my suffering, if not by dying? By joining some organization? Giving you money so you can teach me

some God-channeling prophet's ideology? I'm curious: how much is salvation going to cost me?"

"Our method is free to learn, but costs about fifteen dollars to buy the ingredients. There's no organization, no ideology, and certainly no prophet. Now, are you asking me for answers? If you want them, you have to ask."

"How old are you, kid, to have the answers I'm looking for?"

"I'm nineteen. Are you asking me for answers?"

Stan shook his head in exasperation and continued his walk home. These snake oil and salvation peddlers filling the streets these days were repulsive to him, and there seemed to be more every day. The worse people suffered—and the suffering was growing everywhere—the more common and pushy these buzzards became.

He wondered why they made him so upset. Why not just ignore the kid today? Why did he feel compelled to challenge him? It was, he realized, because he wished one of them would turn out to be authentic. He yearned, quite deeply, for a way out of this bottomless abyss of gloom that had engulfed him and everyone he knew. It hadn't been like this when he was a child. The world, he remembered, had always been difficult, but there were often moments of joy that had made life feel worthwhile. The human race had destroyed that world. If he could find some way to escape, or to make this bearable, he would give up everything he owned. He would join the cult that could provide that. He was just too smart to fall for it, because that sort of deliverance didn't exist.

And that was why he hated them. They preyed on the collective weakness of a suffering people—and every time he saw it, it reminded him of his own weak-

ness, and his own suffering. He was condemned to that suffering, and if he gave in to their temptations, they would only make his suffering worse and leave him poorer for it.

But the kid had said it cost fifteen dollars, and that wasn't a fee or tithing. What sort of racket was that? It had surely been a trick. But the kid had not been pushy. He wasn't like the others. He hadn't condemned Stan's soul or shoved on him even a single nugget of revelation. In fact, he had refused to give any answers unless Stan asked for them in earnest. That was no way to extort money from the spiritually vulnerable.

Perhaps he had run into one who wasn't trying to prey on people, but who actually believed in his own nonsense. A good kid, trying to do the right thing, but misguided. Maybe the kid had, himself, thought that God had spoken to him, and had been compelled to try to help others.

No, that couldn't be it. Those sorts of people could not possibly bottle in their revelations long enough to wait for someone to ask. They have to tell you, and it cannot wait. After all, the divinely inspired Word of God has to be revealed. People's eternal souls are on the line, and the clock is ticking. More importantly, the recipient of divine transmissions wants to bask in the glory of being God's chosen one, and for that, a person needs witnesses. No, this was something else.

He shook his head to clear it of such speculation. He had more immediate concerns than spiritual salvation. He had dinner to prepare.

That night, Stan couldn't sleep. The sirens had been incessant lately. There had been a frightening increase in suicides, and ambulances were criss-crossing



the streets, blaring and bleeping as they passed Stan's street corner. He was somewhat detached from the sound being on the fifth floor, but tonight he was sleeping lightly, and the sirens were passing two and three at a time, ringing out in dissonant harmonies that set his teeth on edge.

So he decided to go out and have a late-night drink. As was normal for him, he would sit at the bar, speak to no one, have three drinks in quick succession, then he would wander the streets aimlessly, hoping to be mugged so that maybe he would get shot.

No, that was the gloom taking his mind to dark places. He wandered the streets, he told himself, because it was relaxing. After all, he had no desire to die, even if he did resent this unfortunate and unsolicited affliction of life.

He gathered his wallet and phone, pulled on some pants and a shirt, pushed his feet into his shoes, looked in the mirror to make sure his hair was tame enough for public, and walked out.

Two blocks down, he saw that the kid was still out, and still holding that sign. Stan realized that in the six times he had walked by this kid today, not one person had he seen talking to him. They all merely walked by as if the kid didn't exist. This wasn't entirely surprising, of course, but it made Stan wonder why the young man bothered. So he asked.

"Hey kid, how many souls have you saved today?"

The kid smiled. "It's not souls I'm saving. It's their minds. And the tally so far is zero. Deliverance from suffering can't be forced, and it can't be rushed. You're actually the only person who has talked to me, and that's okay."

Stan found himself beginning to like the kid. Whatever he was, he certainly wasn't a con artist or an aspiring guru, unless he was a really terrible one. "I'm going to the bar. Want to come have a drink with me?"

"Are you asking me for answers?"

"I'm asking you to have a drink. We can talk while we drink. But I'm not asking for your answers. Not yet, anyway. I want to know more about you. The person, not the message."

The kid looked thoughtful for a moment, and then leaned his sign against the nearest wall. "I would love to have a drink with you, sir."

"My name is Stan."

The boy held out his hand to be shaken, "I'm Moses."

"Jesus Christ!"

"It's the name my mother gave me. I didn't choose it."

"Screw it. You have the first truly friendly face I've seen in ages. Let's go. I'm buying."

# Part 3: The Answers

The man Moses asked Stan to visit was not what he had expected. He was not sure what he had expected, but this was not it. This man looked suitable for a lab coat and a clipboard rather than the flowing robes and long locks of a spiritual leader. As it was, the man wore neither. He wore a light jacket over a simple blue button-down shirt which hung over a pair of casual slacks. His dark hair looked like it was due for a trim, but was kept neat. This was no cult leader. This was just...a guy. Except that something was unique about him. It was in his eyes—there was no sadness in them. This man was a happy island floating in a vast sea of misery. Stan could not remember the last time he had seen someone so at ease.

“Stan, I’m glad you came. Moses told me he had a great time with you last night. I appreciate that you did that. There are so few people out there with the energy left to try to be good people.”

Stan found that an interesting statement, but was unsure of why.

“It was my pleasure. He’s a good kid. I’m sorry. He told me your name, but it was after a few drinks.”

"I'm Noah."

"You have to be kidding me."

"I am. But that would be funny, wouldn't it? My name is Kyle. Moses told me you think we're going to prey on your suffering, ply you with some religious exegesis that stimulates your desires and exploits your fears, and then leverage that to extract some money from you—or at least demand your devotion to our cause. I can assure you, that's not what we're about."

"Then what are you about, Kyle?"

"Ending suffering. Stan, I'm going to keep this simple and not waste your time. What I have to say, you won't believe. There is no way I can word it so that you will believe it. There is no proof that I can show you. So I'm just going to say it and hope that you'll just consider the possibility and give my recommendation a shot."

With a patronizing nod, Stan smiled. "Go ahead. At least I can expect to be entertained by a good story, right?"

"Exactly! Just listen to my story, then you can decide what you want to do with it." He cleared his throat, then began. "I was a scientist with a company called Genesis Labs. We did a number of unorthodox experiments—mostly fruitless—at the behest of technology companies on the off-chance that we might make unexpected discoveries that our clients could then use for future product development. The company has been in operation for several decades, and has had a moderately significant effect on humanity's technological and scientific landscape."

Then, seven years ago, one of our experiments uncovered a revelation into the heart of reality that changed our entire understanding. We discovered that the world we live in—the world you see before you, in which you and I are talking right now—is a dream. We entered this dream willingly, long ago, but have become lost inside of it. We’ve long forgotten that it’s a dream, and in our fear, we’ve rejected the safeguards we placed inside the dream that would remind us that we can awaken. Our playground has become our damnation.

“My guess is that the dream must have been good for a while, but starting with a few missteps long ago, it became a nightmare. The longer we stay, the worse the nightmare becomes, generation after generation. At some point, fear and distrust entered the dream. The dreamers began to grow apart. We began to live in isolation from one another. We became competitive with one another. We forgot that we entered the dream as one. We were lonely and afraid, and so we fought. The fighting increased our fear and loneliness, and as the fear and loneliness grew worse, we fought harder. The dream darkened, then. Wars, pestilence, sickness, pollution, greed, poverty, violence in the streets, reality shows... all growing worse as time passed, eventually leading to dreary world you see outside. And it’s all just a dream. We can wake right now.”

Stan pinched himself. “Still asleep.”

“It’s not that easy, of course. Have you ever experienced sleep paralysis? There’s one particular variety that might help you understand the dilemma we’re facing here. Perhaps you’re in a dream, and you suddenly realize you’re dreaming, but are unable to wake up. You may tell yourself, ‘Wake up, Stan!’ But it doesn’t help. It’s as if you can’t find your real body and are stuck in your dream

body. Worse is when you're afraid to leave the dream, because if you leave, something terrible might happen. You may wonder, in your hazy, sleeping mind, what if the dream is real? For example, perhaps someone you care about is about to be hurt when you realize it's just a dream. You could choose to awaken, but what if you're wrong? What if you find yourself on the other side, realizing that you've abandoned a loved one to suffer? You're invested in the dream, and can't let yourself awaken.

"Both of these factors are at work here. You can't awaken, because you've become so accustomed to your dream body that you're unable to find your way back to real body. To make matters worse, you can't possibly let go. You're too invested. You might have people you care about, and you don't want to leave them. And if you don't, it doesn't much matter, because you have an identity here. You spent a lifetime developing that identity. If you left it behind and awakened, who would you be, out there? There's comfort in the familiar. To wake up would disrupt the continuity of experience, thrust you into an unfamiliar world, with potentially unfamiliar people, as an unfamiliar self. The person you are here...that person not just dies, but becomes merely the memory of a dream that was never real.

"But if you don't awaken, then you're stuck here, and your suffering will get worse. The world will continue to decay, and so will you. People will become more miserable with each passing day. And when you die, the process will repeat, because it's all your mind knows. Until you make a decision—a decision you can make right here, and right now, to accept the help of a stranger, and to let go of the dream and the identity you've created to navigate through it."

"So when I go to sleep tonight, and I dream of wonderful and terrible things, those are dreams within a dream?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Fine. I don't believe you for a second—in fact, I think you're absolutely mental and probably need help from a professional—but you've gotten me curious. If I can't wake myself up, then how can you help me?"

"I didn't say you couldn't do it yourself. All it takes is letting go completely. But that's never as easy as it sounds. What I'm going to do is help you along the path. There's a personal preparation that takes up to a couple of weeks, and at the end, you combine several ingredients into a liquid, boil it for three hours, and you drink it."

"That's it? Some sort of potion of awakening?"

"That's it."

"A

d r u g ? "

"Nope. Drugs alter your experience. This will end this experience, and you'll wake up."

"And what happens to me here, in the dream? Do I die? Is that it? You poison me, and I die, but my spirit awakens?"

"No. Here, you simply cease to be. You'll be a missing person. You'll wake up, and you'll be relieved at the close call. And it is a close call, because eventually, it might be too late. We might all become so removed from the real world that we'll never find our way back. We came into this dream intentionally, and I believe that we meant to forget for a while. But we never meant to stay this long, or

to let things go this far. We never meant to subject ourselves to a world so destructive and needlessly violent. We never meant to become trapped in a culture so greedy, so apathetic, so grotesquely slothful and gluttonous. We never meant to get so lost in egotism, but our fear and suffering have caused this escalating spiral of violence, fear, and separation. It's past time to wake up, Stan."

"And what will I wake up to? Some Utopian civilization?"

"It is not like this world, Stan, neither in content nor physics. I think of it as a world of pure magic. It's a world without form or identity.

"Here, in the dream, you've always had the power—even if you never realized it—to choose your identity and your interpretations, moment by moment. This is how I stay content: moment by moment, I choose. Some people have discovered that ability, and those are the magicians of our world. They're just the people who have realized they're not restrained in the ways society and culture have told them they are. They have freedom beyond most, and can play outside the rules of the game. They can choose, moment by moment. But when we awaken, that freedom and power will be the state of all things."

"Fine. But I see one major flaw in your story. If this is all true, then why are you here?"

"Of course you don't believe me. I'll tell you what. Leave here as soon as we're through talking. Research Genesis Labs. You'll find that the team existed, did obscure research for tech conglomerates, and disappeared. Twenty-six researchers, and they're all filed as missing persons. No explanation. I'm the only exception. I was questioned, and I told the truth. Of course, no one believed me. For a moment, I thought they'd try to arrest me for murdering the rest of the



team, but it's kind of hard for one person to murder twenty-six people and hide all the evidence and bodies. So here I am. Look into it. When you've confirmed my story, come back, and we'll talk some more."

"That doesn't answer my question, Kyle. I'm not asking for proof, I'm asking for your motive. Twenty-six people woke up and are gone. Fine. I want to know why you're still here."

"Because I thought of everyone I'd be leaving behind. If we're all stuck in this dream together, we must have come here together. We must have trusted one another. Out there, we must have cared deeply about one another."

"So I made a decision. I'm not going to wake up until I can wake everyone else up. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to stay here until I do. Once everyone else is awake, I'll be the last to go."

Stan did not know why he was crying, suddenly, but Kyle remained patiently silent until he was finished. Finally, he said, "Tell me what I have to do."

Kyle's face became sympathetic. "It's simple, really. You just have to drink an elixir that I'll teach you how to make. But first, see if you can find some people to take with you. Then I recommend preparing your mind to let go of this life by cutting all ties. Leave your social circles behind. Let go of any attachments. Stay away from your home, and anything else that reminds you of the identity you're shedding. Get used to not being you, at least for a couple of weeks."

"Then, you drink." With a grin, he grabbed a golden goblet from behind him and shoved it into Stan's chest. "It's more fun if it feels like a fancy ritual, so use this. I'll come by and collect the cup after you're gone."

"And that's it? The suffering will be over?"

"That's it. The suffering will be over."

# Part 4: Monsters

Stan was utterly alone in the world. These four people who he had so despised were, he realized, the only friends he had left in the world. He understood now that he hadn't invited them along to do them favors, as he had told himself. He had invited them because they were all he had left, and he didn't want to leave without them.

And now they were gone. But not gone as he had expected. They had not, as Kyle had led him to believe, gone from the world. They had not vanished before his eyes. They had merely been transformed into the hideous beasts that now chased him relentlessly through the back alleys of Philadelphia.

Was this the deliverance Kyle had promised? Freedom from the suffering self by means of morbid transformation? Was this the awakening? If it was, Kyle would just as soon stay dreaming. He would try to accept his suffering, but he would not become one of them.

A growl from behind urged him into a sprint down the alley. He had come to recognize the distinctive growls and grunts of each monster, and this one was Morris, with his much-too-large square body, much-too-large square head, and

miniature limbs. The worst part was the weird tufts of hair that seemed to sprout randomly from various regions of his sweat-sheened naked body. When he spoke, it sounded like the grunt of an athlete in the midst of exertion. "Stan, there's no use running. We're going to catch you."

Stan rounded a corner, then another, then ducked behind a dumpster to catch his breath. The streets were unusually quiet this evening. The normally incessant storms and ambulances seemed to have conspired this evening to grant those monsters the rare gift of silence, so that every rasping breath rang out like a gong, echoing down the abandoned streets.

"Are you behind that dumpster, Stan? You're not going to escape. There's nowhere to go." It was Jess, the hideous thing. She had become an obscene ball of naked cellulite, with yellow, moldering teeth jutting in random directions from a gruesome slit in the upper region of fat. "I know you want to climb inside me, Stan. I've always known, but now I see the truth. True love is universal, and I love you now as I love all life. I can open up, and you can come inside." A slurping sound hinted at the opening of a gloppy orifice, and Stan could not help but peak around the side of the dumpster and down the alley. Jess was there, her fat sliding slowly along the ground toward him, the bottom of her rubbed raw by the asphalt. Somewhere in the center of her, a hole had opened, ringed by flower-like petals of skin, exposed glands leaking clear viscous fluid onto the road. To his horror, Stan felt himself as aroused as he was repulsed. He wondered now if, in his sick and twisted mind, the two impulses had come to be inextricably connected.

He turned and ran in the opposite direction, kicking his feet at a rate he hadn't known he was capable of, fleeing his own shame as much as the creature who had been Jess.

He turned onto Market Street and tried to flag down a couple of cars. Very few people were out, which was unusual even at this hour, and the few cars that were about either ignored him or didn't see him. He felt the monsters closing on him—or perhaps it was his fear of the open space, as he saw nor heard any sign of them—so he ducked back into the deep shadows of the next alley. Upon touching that shadow, he felt himself tumbling to the ground in a heap of hair and soft flesh. The ball of hair spoke to him with the voice of crashing boulders. "There you are. Now come on back. Let's talk this over like reasonable people."

Stan stood and began to run from Barry, who had become a shuffling tangle of slimy, matted hair. The rocky voice followed him: "You're wasting your energy, Stan. Haven't you figured it out yet? You're inside of a giant snowglobe. You can't leave. You can only keep running from us in circles until you can't run any longer. And then we'll have you, and we will make you drink. We're doing this for you, Stan. You gave us this, and now we want to share with you. It's obvious you won't come willingly, so as your friends, it's our duty to make sure you drink."

Stan didn't know where else to go, so he began running toward his own apartment. He would barricade himself inside, wait for morning, and hope they gave up. Unfortunately, his apartment was five blocks away, and presently, his path was blocked by the beast who still had the nerve to call herself Marla. A hateful thing.

"I'm not hateful, Stan. I never was." *How had she known what I was thinking?* Stan wondered. "That's what you've always done. You take your own weaknesses, and you project them onto others. I don't fault you for it. We all do it. But not me...not any more. I don't need to any more, and it's so liberating, Stan. I don't need to hate anyone. I don't need to be angry with anyone, or to be jealous. I don't feel lust, or greed. I just feel...happy? But that's not really it, is it? Happy is an emotion that comes and goes. I'd been happy plenty of times before. Happy is just what comes before sad, isn't it? This is something else. I'm free from that whole ride...like the rollercoaster came to a stop, and I climbed off. And I'd been on it so long, I forgot there was anything else. And you can get off, too, if you just drink."

Stan darted down a cross street and once again found himself on a wide main road, although he had lost track of where he was. The street was unfamiliar. He was tired and disoriented, and had lost his bearings. He chose a direction and began running, trusting on instinct to guide him back to familiar territory, and then back to his home where he could form a barricade. Maybe they were like vampires, and when the sun came up, they'd have to leave. Then he'd get the fuck out of Philly.

# Part 5: Home

This wasn't home. Just as those people chasing him were imposters, so was this place. He realized he had felt this wrongness outside, also. It was as if he was a miniaturized person running around a meticulously detailed model of Philadelphia. Now he had entered a perfect dollhouse replica of his home.

With no time for rumination, he began grabbing pieces of replica living room furniture and shoving them against the front door. Then he similarly blocked the fire exit. He left one chair in the center of the room, and when his labor was complete, he sat, and not knowing what else to do, he waited.

He looked around the room. The photos on the wall were replicas; the people in the photographs, imposters. Nothing here was real. It was an elaborate set, designed to fool him. The artist had left no detail unfinished. If it weren't for intuition, Stan might have gone on being fooled, as there was no piece of evidence he could find to prove the fraud.

Rationally, he told himself that it must all be in his head, but then, he had also doubted himself when he thought his friends had been replaced by imposters—and look at them now. He had been right. Why wouldn't he be right about this,

also? Someone had put together the most elaborate hoax of all time, all to fool one helpless man. Perhaps Kyle, the scientist, had put this together to study him. Perhaps he was being watched at this very moment. Kyle could be sitting in a chair in another room watching the glowing monitors, taking notes.

He scoured the room for hidden cameras, but found nothing. If someone was clever enough to stage a hoax of this scale, then surely hiding a camera in such a way as to never be found would be child's play. It was useless, he knew.

It was then that Stan remembered Barry's words. The words echoed clearly in his mind: *"Haven't you figured it out yet? You're in a giant snowglobe. You can't leave."*

Stan felt more helpless than he had ever felt, and wished that he could go back in time and avoid the kid with the sign.

"Is that really what I want?" he asked of the air around him. There had been a reason he had been willing to refuse his better judgment in favor of the ridiculous idea that a potion could end his suffering: because that was what he wanted more than anything else. His suffering had become unbearable. It was only a matter of time before, like so many others, he took his own life. Any reason he had for living had disappeared long ago. He had no family left, resented all four of his remaining friends, and grew more distant and vacant with each passing day. Life had become an unceasing series of halfhearted attempts to put one foot in front of the other, and then again, and then again. And when he looked into the eyes of the people around him, he saw it in them, as well. Suffering, to their very cores. So why were they all so damn attached to it?



He stood up slowly as a tear leaked from his eye. One piece at a time, as slowly as he could manage, he slid pieces of furniture away from the door until the way was clear. After a few halting breaths, he reached for the door handle, squeezed it with trembling fingers, turned it ever so slowly, and pulled. There, in the hallway, were four ghastly creatures who he loved, waiting patiently.

"Come on in."

"Is it time?" Barry growled with affection.

Stan nodded as he continued to weep. He sat on the chair and lowered his face into his hands. A length of flesh wrapped over his shoulders and pulled him into great slabs of wavering fat, and he felt himself surrender. He pushed his face into the malodorous folds of Jess's flesh, wrapped his arms around, and began to shudder with great wracking sobs while she held him.

Once he had control of his faculties, Stan let go and looked around the room at his friends. His real friends. These were not imposters. As they closed in around him, he felt loved for the first time in many years.

"Does it hurt?" he asked them. "The transformation?"

Jess rubbed him behind his neck with a tentacle of flab. "We didn't transform, Stan. This is your nightmare. What you see is what you fear, and what you're most ashamed of. You turned us into monsters. But as soon as you open your eyes, you'll see that we're not."

Marla sat on the floor before his feet. "The dream is closing in. Kyle told you the truth, but not the whole truth. Mankind has polluted this world beyond repair. Chemical vapors float through the air. It's been making our minds progressively more ill for many years. The first step in Kyle's procedure was to expose us

to a highly condensed amount of those same vapors. This way, we're able to see in stark contrast the hallucinations we've been suffering from. The truth becomes undeniable. Look around you, Stan, and see how the world you see reflects what's inside your head. You can see clearly how you've been creating your own pain, and ridding yourself of responsibility by projecting your problems and weaknesses onto other people."

Morris sat on the arm of the chair next to him. "If you had drank with us, you would have saved yourself a lot of pain, Stan. The potion is the antidote. It ends the hallucinations. But the antidote works slowly, while the vapors in that basement work almost immediately. We *all* had to face our demons while we were waiting on the antidote to take effect. You just had to face them for longer, because you ran."

Barry's growl cut through as he pulled a bottle from somewhere in that mass of hair. "Now drink this goddamn stuff and snap out of it, my boy. We've all remembered the truth, and we're ready to get out of here. We're just waiting on you. We said we'd go together, and that's what we're gonna goddamn do."

Wiping the tears from his face, Stan grabbed the bottle and pulled out the cork. There was no bubbling, and no vapors. It had gone entirely flat. Jess's tentacle rubbed him sympathetically. "I'm sorry for you Stan. It's the foulest stuff I've ever tasted, and I'm guessing it's going to be even worse now that it's had time to settle and separate. You might at least shake it around a bit."

Stan shrugged and raised the bottle to his lips, then hesitated and lowered it. "Jess, will you date me after this is over?" He thought an area of the upper folds reddened slightly, around those misshapen teeth. Had she blushed?

"I will, Stan...assuming such things still matter to us after we've woken up. I have a suspicion that where we're going, we all can just love each other freely."

Stan nodded. "Good enough for me. But for what it's worth, I wish we'd had a chance for a more carnal relationship while we were here. I should have asked a long time ago."

"Anyway, here we go..." He raised the bottle, closed his eyes, and began to drink.