

Defying Gravity

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1 CHAPTER ONE

It is written: I met Christ in a pawnshop.

1. bringing home the bacon

Of course it wasn't that simple. It wasn't like I just walked right into a pawnshop, met Christ, and that was that. There was more to it than that... much more. When I look back on it, I honestly believe that the people and events in my life somehow led me there—that there was more than just dumb luck involved. In other words, I don't think I just happened to be there.

Way back then, back in the days before my destiny caught up with me, I was a handyman. What that means, of course, is that I had no regular job. I took on work whenever it suited me—which wasn't often. If the truth were told (and I hereby promise to make every effort to do just that), I was actually more often between jobs than actively engaged in them. Not that I hadn't done my fair share of work, mind you. I could look back, without any real sense of satisfaction, on a long history of meaningless, menial jobs—I'd pumped gas at sixteen, tended bars in the strip joints when I was still wet behind the ears, slaved in a dozen sweat shops by the time I was twenty-five, upholstered furniture for a while... hell, I even spent some time in the navy. But I was never really happy. I mean, how happy could I have been, hopping from one dead-end job to another, each time working only a few months and then moving on? I'd always dreamed that one day I'd be something... maybe appear in a Broadway play... maybe write the Great American Novel... who knows? But even as I grew older, when silly, childish dreams usually die, my dream of fame and fortune remained in the back of my mind. And it was that nebulous dream that always pushed me on whenever the idea of settling down—of actually accepting something less—began to nibble at my thoughts. So I'd quit whatever job I happened to have at the time, or I'd get myself fired, and I'd go collect unemployment. If a cellar needed cleaning, or an apartment needed papering, I sometimes made myself available for a modest fee—strictly under the table, of course. I didn't know what I was pursuing. I only knew that whatever it was that eluded me remained elusive.

And so, at the time just before the pawnshop, I found myself looking for opportunities, you might say, collecting experience for the Great American Novel with one hand and unemployment checks with the other. I wasn't doing all that great, exactly, but I wasn't doing all that bad, either.

I've neglected to mention a fact which, as it developed, was of supreme importance: up until just before the pawnshop, I was a married man. It should also be noted that my wife, Loretta, didn't exactly share my cockeyed, Quixotic outlook. According to Loretta's philosophy, life could hold only two possibilities: things could be bad... or they could be worse. After years of struggling, just barely keeping our heads above water, I could hardly blame her. Because my income was somewhat stunted (ahem), Loretta was forced to take a job herself. Like me, she had little to no experience or training, so she worked as a cashier in a luncheonette—a job

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which she enjoyed about as much as having bamboo splinters inserted under her fingernails. Poor Loretta—her job, our marriage, her entire existence seemed to account to nothing more than a figurative form of premature burial.

Each night, when she returned home from work, the same scene would transpire until it became so automatic, so unconscious, that it seemed as though we were merely repeating lines from a play rather than holding a conversation.

Loretta would sit, soaking her feet in a pan of cold water. By the time she got home, they were always so swollen that they threatened to burst out of her shoes. The cold water seemed to revitalize her. When at last she was ready, her face set and expressionless, she asked what appeared to be a perfectly innocent question. But we both knew what it really was... the opening shot in a volley that characterized our disintegrating marriage.

“What did you do today?”

The answer was this: not much. Usually, if the weather was good, I’d find some trivial chore that could be accomplished out in the courtyard behind our apartment house and chit-chat with whatever of my cronies happened along. If the weather was bad, I’d be forced to spend the day inside, or I’d kill some time at Clancy’s bar down on the corner. Somewhere along the line, I’d find an hour or two to go job hunting, which consisted of putting in an application at any of a hundred or more places that I knew weren’t hiring. To give myself due, and just to show that I wasn’t totally worthless as a husband, I also kept the apartment in a reasonably clean condition.

But what I said was this: “I went looking for a job. Nobody’s hiring.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes in exasperation. “How long do you think we can keep this up?” she asked.

“Keep what up?” I snapped. “Okay, so we’re not rolling in money right now. But things will get better. One of these days I’m going to...”

“You just don’t understand, do you?” she interrupted. “I don’t want to work in some crummy luncheonette for the rest of my life. I want more than that—*better* than that!”

And there was just no arguing with her. That was her heavy artillery, for which there was no effective reply. This was what it all boiled down to: my wife was supporting me, not by her choice, but by mine. That’s all there was to it.

Actually, that wasn’t completely true. Because if I were to boil that fact down a little more, if I rendered the remaining fat from its cold, hard bones, the real truth would begin to emerge... that my wife was supporting me because I was thirty-six years old and didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Of course, at the time I couldn’t admit that. Not to Loretta or even to myself.

So I said, “You knew what I was like when you married me. If you wanted someone to bring home the bacon, you should’ve married a butcher.”

I thought I was being clever. But the joke was on me.

2. the focal point

For the next month, we hardly argued at all. Loretta didn’t complain as she sat soaking her feet. She seemed more content than she had in years. She whistled to herself as she went

around the apartment. She hummed as she did the dishes. I suppose I should have caught on to what was happening, but I didn't. So sue me for being human.

But when she didn't come home from work one night, it finally hit me.

She called very late that night.

"I'm sorry, Marko," she said. Her voice sounded resolute and unemotional, and I wondered just how sorry she really was. "I want more than you can give me. I want a life... a future. Maybe I even want kids someday. I can't stay tied down to someone who isn't going anywhere."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said. There were a lot of other things I wanted to say, but that's all that would come out.

After that things happened pretty quickly. Loretta hired herself a lawyer, got a quickie divorce, and took up residence with a brain surgeon from Westchester. I wondered just how coincidental it was that she got her divorce and someone to bring home the bacon within roughly the same time period. Anyway, they're married now; they've got a big fancy apartment over on Park Avenue West and a huge house out in Westchester.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. When Loretta left, she took nothing but her own presence. Not that she actually needed anything, of course—her hot-shot boyfriend, soon to be her betrothed, took care of that. What she left me was an apartment complete with the furniture (such as it was), a heap of bills that were beginning to take on terrifying proportions, and a fat and lazy old tomcat named Lightning.

She also left behind her engagement ring—a quarter-carat diamond number that had taken me two years of nearly constant employment to pay off. So what if Liz Taylor wouldn't be caught dead wearing it? I thought of it as something kind of special.

If it hadn't been for the ring, I think I would've been okay. I mean it! I really and truly believe that without that ring to remind me, I could've convinced myself that it really didn't matter that my wife of five-plus years was gone. I could've stored the truth away in some deep closet in my mind like a Christmas present from Aunt Hildy that nobody wanted or needed. But there I was, holding the truth right in front of my eyes. I sat in the big easy chair in the living room (the one that popped springs like a jack-in-the-box) and rolled the ring around in my hands. I flipped it like a coin, absently, over and over again for hours. My fingers were shaking. My palms were sweating. The ring somehow made it all seem final. Over.

For the next few weeks I rattled around the apartment like a marble in a band-aid box. Once a week I went down to the unemployment office and collected a check. After the rent I had enough left over for beer and chips. That's what I lived on—Iron City beer and State Line potato chips. For intellectual stimulation, I invented a game called Glue Your Eyes To The Set. I watched TV as religiously as an old maid while the apartment slowly decayed into ruins around me. To his credit, Lightning kept me intermittent company, but a pussycat does not a great companion make. He was a lone wolf, and I admired him for that very quality. I, on the other hand, was merely *alone*, for the first time in some five-odd years.

It has been pointed out by certain individuals (who, for the time being, shall remain nameless) that I was at a very vulnerable stage in my life at that time. Looking back on it, I feel compelled to disagree. I certainly didn't feel vulnerable; but then again, who, when they're at their most vulnerable, is aware of it? And, curiously, I held no resentment toward Loretta. Even then, at my lowest point, I had enough insight to realize that our marriage had actually ended long before Loretta left. If there was any bitterness, however deeply buried, it was not so much toward the fact that our marriage was over but the *way* that it ended: I hadn't merely

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been dumped, I'd been dumped for a man who was *Going Places...* if not *Already Arrived*.

Maybe that was what hurt the worst; that Loretta knew what I couldn't admit even to myself; that I really was going nowhere. Maybe, way down inside me, I resented the fact that Loretta's ship had come in and I was left standing on the pier.

But I wasn't seeking retribution. I felt no need for solace; no desire for consolation. So when I finally left the apartment one Thursday morning in early spring, with the sole intention of getting rid of the ring that was the focal point, so to speak, of all my sorrow, I was not feeling vulnerable. A large chunk of my life had been painfully excised, and I was feeling the hole that it left behind. It was deep, and the edges were ragged, but it would heal. Given enough time, all wounds do.

No, I wasn't feeling vulnerable.

Absolutely not.

3. archimedes and the east river

A steady breeze nudged me forward toward the end of the pier, whipping my windbreaker like the tattered sails of a derelict schooner. My hair was a total loss. But that didn't matter. For all I cared, all my hair could blow right off. I felt ecstatic. I'd found the most absolutely perfect way to dump the ring, and in the process, place the last five years of my life squarely in the past where it could never come back to haunt me... or so I thought.

I'd spent almost the entire morning walking the city streets, searching for the solution to my problem. I'd already mentally proposed and rejected half a dozen scenarios: I'd thought of dropping the ring down a storm drain (lacking in ceremony and even more so in imagination), dropping it from the top of the Empire State Building (too dangerous for pedestrians), placing it in front of a steamroller (difficult to arrange and maybe just a little too weird), and simply putting it in a trash receptacle (least imaginative of them all). None of these methods came even close to matching the scope and grandeur of the event—not only was I disposing of a ring, I was putting to rest an entire portion of my life.

It wasn't until I'd made my way all the way to the East River that the answer finally came to me. It was brilliant, if I do say so myself. I felt like Archimedes—I wanted to run through the streets shouting 'eureka!'. In the East River, the ring would not only sink, it would probably dissolve before it hit bottom. Swelling with pomp and circumstance, filled with righteousness, I looked toward the East River in the same way that an Inca Priest might've eyed a doomed virgin.

4. a nolan ryan fastball

I stood at the end of the pier, looking out at the broad back of the river. The water was the color of bruised fruit, brown and sickly green. Even with the wind behind me, noxious fumes reached my nose; a smell like a cross between a compost heap and creosote. Not a single fish rose to break its oily surface; not even a fuzzy-white dead one nuzzled its banks. The last of the fish had died a long time ago. Nothing swam or crawled beneath its waters. The river was undeniably, irrevocably dead. It was nothing more than a flowing cesspool.

I just stood there for a while, remembering, allowing the wind to play at my back. At last I took out the ring. It lay flat in my palm. I stared at it without animosity, just trying to let go of the past.

I closed my fist around it. “Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said to no one in particular. It seemed like a fitting epitaph. I curled back my arm back and then, with all the strength I could muster, uncoiled my arm like a Nolan Ryan fastball.

Satisfied, opening my fist, I found myself staring down at the impossible. There, lying in the palm of my hand, the ring sparkled up at me like an improbable relic.

I couldn’t believe it. I was certain that at precisely the correct point in the arc that my arm described I’d opened my hand and the ring had gone sailing away out over the water. I was even half convinced that I’d heard the tiny *plink* as it hit (although my rational mind told me that such a thing would’ve been impossible).

I threw the damned thing. I *knew* I threw it. And yet, there it was... hard, cold, real and irrefutable.

I didn’t like mysteries. I liked things neat and explainable. I believed that there was an explanation for everything. And yet, here I was, faced with a real-life enigma. It was like an omen or something.

But omens didn’t exist. If I didn’t throw the ring, then it was because (I told myself) my own subconscious was telling me not to.

Yes, of course. That made more sense than believing in omens and supernatural crap. So I thought about my situation, really *thought* about it, for the first time. And I realized that since Loretta left I’d been running on emotion and adrenaline and little else. I hadn’t acted rationally in weeks.

And the reality of my situation was that I was damned near broke, had little prospect of finding decent work... and my dream of fame and fortune, of success, was further away than it had ever been. I was a failure, as a husband... as a human being.

So why are you throwing away a ring that’s probably worth at least a few hundred bucks?

The thought came out of nowhere. But it sure made a hell of a lot of sense. I suddenly realized that I’d been about to deep six the only decent prospect I had. I really *had* been thinking irrationally!

Well, okay, then. I’d been out of town for a while, but I was back now, thinking clearly, and things were going to be different.

I pocketed the ring once again, turned around, and headed back toward the city. For the first time since Loretta left, I had some plans. Real plans.

5. your average nut

I was just kind of browsing through the junk that offered itself at ridiculously high prices, not really seeing it, and trying to make up my mind whether I really wanted to go through with hocking my ex-wife’s engagement ring. A mere ten minutes after I’d turned my back on the river, the old emotions began to show themselves again and the rationality, which I thought I’d laid a solid claim to, started seeping away. By the time I made my way all the way to the pawnshop, I began to feel like a traitor. And although there was no reason for it (my struggling rational mind told me), I found myself feeling guilty for even thinking of hocking the ring—as

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if I was betraying my wife, even though it was she who deserted me. So there I was, wavering indecisively, amid the flotsam and jetsam of other people's lives. Steeling my resolve, I think, is the poetic way of putting it. But I didn't feel poetic. I probably looked like a shoplifter.

The pawnshop was a pretty shabby deal. Most of them are, I guess. It's a no-frills kind of business. Who needs wall-to-wall carpeting and polite salespeople in a pawnshop? Let's face it—when was the last time you saw a Madison Avenue executive roll up in his Mercedes to take his wife shopping at Stymie's Stop'n'Hock on West 44th Street? Not bloody often.

So, what the hell... I tinkered with this gizmo or that, gingerly picked up a rare Ming vase from Sears, and admired an antique lamp that had been bought new around 1975 and beaten to crap by about 1978. Great stuff.

It was while I was examining these priceless relics that I became aware of the other person standing at the display counter near the front of the store. He was just standing there, not moving, staring down through the dirty glass counter-top. Come to think of it, he'd been there when I came in. In the same place. In the same *position*. He apparently hadn't moved a muscle since. And there was no way of telling how long he'd been standing there *before* I came in.

I was curious about him, but there was more to it than that. I'd been riding an emotional see-saw for so long that maybe I just needed a diversion. Something to take my mind off my own problems. At any rate, I simply *had* to know what he was staring at.

As unobtrusively as possible, I hovered nearer and nearer until I was just behind and to the right of him and I could at last get a glimpse of the object of his attention.

There, lying on the top shelf of the glass case was...

a *fiddle*.

Not a Stradivarius. It couldn't even be rightly called a violin. Not by the furthest stretch of the imagination. It was just an old, dusty, warp-necked, shit-kickin' fiddle that some down-on-his-luck, misplaced shitkicker had probably hocked for about three bucks.

I glanced down the counter. At the end, on the other side, sat a fat dwarf with a face like a bull terrier's; unmistakably the owner. He was sitting on an old barstool, swigging from a can of Mountain Dew, and reading a cheap paperback. As if he sensed that I was watching him, he looked up, cast a decidedly unbusinesslike eye our way, and returned to "Puppy Lust". Or whatever.

I was startled when the stranger spoke to me. I'd had no idea that he even knew I was there. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he asked softly, almost reverently. His voice was pleasing. Mellow.

I gave him an incredulous 'what, are you kidding?' look that he didn't see, mainly because he was still staring down into the case. Considering the object of his adulation, however, three possibilities ran through my mind. That he was either:

- 1.) a (very) bad judge of quality, or;
- 2.) the most avid fiddle fan of all time, or;
- 3.) a nut.

I suspected that the last was the most likely. After all, this was the City, where nuts are both indigenous and prolific. It was only after I'd processed each of these thoughts and really taken a good look at the stranger that I realized that I didn't really believe any of them. Somehow, on some level, the man just didn't strike me as your average nut.

Maybe it was his appearance. I figured he was maybe thirty or thirty-five. Tall; close to six feet. His clothes, a pair of no-name jeans and a blue chambray shirt, were clean to the point of sterility. If cleanliness really *is* next to Godliness, then the stranger's clothes could've been canonized. He wore his blonde hair stylishly long and as neat as his clothing. He was so clean-shaven that I couldn't even see any of those little peach fuzz whiskers that blonde men often overlook.

Or maybe it was his expression. From what I could see of his face from my vantage point, it seemed to be naturally expressive. There was humor there, and a touch of sadness, too. Warmth. Strength. A *human* face.

I was completely caught off guard by his odd question concerning the beauty of the fiddle. (Even the King of Pawns down at the end of the counter had looked up sharply at that moment and squinted his eyes at the stranger as if, by adjusting the video, he could somehow fine-tune the audio.) "Do you play?" I asked. A neat side-step, if I do say so myself.

"Oh, no," he replied, and then he chuckled quietly. "I used to be pretty mean with a lyre, though."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," he replied with what I thought was a mischievous grin. Still, he went on staring at the fiddle.

Weird. I know; I was thinking the same thing. But sometimes you get a feeling about someone, like you know it's okay to talk to them. You know you're safe.

"Are you going to buy it?" I asked, intrigued.

He seemed to become very thoughtful, as if, having recognized the fiddle's questionable beauty, he was now appraising it of its value. Then, for the first time, he looked me straight in the face. "It hadn't occurred to me," he said. "Would you recommend it?"

I was taken aback—not by what he said, but by the expression on his face. In retrospect, I think that it was at that very moment that I first realized who I was talking to. It wasn't a conscious realization, mind you—I was still a long way from that. But somewhere inside me, maybe in my soul, I knew. Somehow, it seemed inevitable that I would.

I'd never seen such honesty anywhere in my life. It was plain and simple and beautiful, like a Grandma Moses landscape. His face seemed to be saying to me, "Here's someone you can trust with your new car, your kid sister... or your soul."

"No offense," I answered in reference to his question and deference to his previously stated opinion, "but to me it looks like crap. I definitely advise against."

He laughed heartily and the sound of his laughter in the otherwise silent and dingy pawnshop was as welcome as the sound of running water in the desert. "I'll accept your judgement," he pronounced, "with reservations." He gave me a knowing glance, and then a completely unexpected wink. "Contrary to public opinion, sometimes what you see is *less* than what you get."

At that very moment, the proprietor, apparently realizing at last that we weren't potentially viable customers, slapped down his classic and glared at us icily with narrow terrier eyes. "If you two art lovers ain't gonna buy nothin'," he growled, "and ya ain't got nothin' ta hock, why'ntcha hit the bricks?" And he pointed a pudgy finger at a sign that hung over the door. It was caked with grimy dust, but you could still make out NO LOITERING if you squinted your eyes just right.

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Which, of course, brought me back to earth and to thoughts of the ring. I mean, that's why I'd gone there in the first place, wasn't it? To hock the engagement ring that I'd once upon a long time ago slipped onto the finger of my then-fiance-now-ex-wife. But was that what I really wanted to do? Or was it simply that I couldn't move on carrying around a reminder of what Loretta had put me through by leaving me?

At the same time that I was thinking these things, I became aware that my new-found friend was watching me with an almost expectant expression, as though he knew my turbulent thoughts.

And in one of those rare, unexpected moments of clarity, where everything seems to just fall together in one startling instant, it dawned on me that Loretta and I had had some*good* times too. Like snowball fights in Washington Square; the little coffeehouse in the Village where we'd met and discovered that we both liked jazz; a long-ago Christmas when we'd gone out caroling and gotten giggling-drunk on the brandy we'd taken along to keep us warm—I could almost feel the snow creeping under my jacket when I fell and the warmth of her lips as she kissed me to make it all better. All these memories flashed through my mind in those few seconds that we stood under the scrutiny of the pawn broker.

Was I burying the past, or was I only hocking the ring as a kind of parting shot at Loretta? Hadn't those good times meant something to me in spite of what happened later?

Of course they did. I'd probably known it all along. I just hadn't wanted to admit it to myself. And if I'd hocked the ring I would've been admitting defeat—that it had all been for nothing; that the last five years of my life had been wasted.

Well, I just couldn't do that. Life goes on, ladies and gentlemen. You take what you can and you scramble.

The emotional and the rational came together for me then; I found what I'd been looking for. I was able finally to let go of the past. "Let's get out of here," I murmured. Four words and a contraction that would change my life forever.

My newfound friend smiled, as though he was satisfied with a decision he couldn't possibly have been aware of.

6. a pastrami nightmare on rye

We walked around aimlessly for a while, talking easily like old friends. I found myself thinking of when I was a kid, when my father would take me for long walks on Sunday afternoons along these very same streets. The city had seemed so much larger back then, vast and mysterious and a little frightening. But my father strode these streets as if he were a king, tall and noble, and I pumped my legs beside him, walking in and out of his shadow—as I would, in other ways, for my whole life. With my father beside me, this city didn't seem so frightening, so overwhelming and imposing. My father was a draftsman; he worked in an office in one of the nameless skyscrapers. From his office window, I often looked out over the tops of other buildings and imagined that I was standing in a castle tower. He once said to me, "Son, this town can be your best friend... or your worst enemy." I didn't understand what he meant. I looked up at him, all seven or eight years of pure curiosity, and asked him, "Which one is it for you?" He smiled and said, "Right now we're on pretty good terms." What he really meant was that he loved it. Loved it so much, in fact, that it was only natural that I would grow to

love it too. But when he died, some of my love for the city died with him.

Strangely, when I was walking with my newfound friend, I felt some of that old love for the city returning. I began to look around and really notice the people again—all the different faces, the different shapes, the different walks. It had been a long time since I'd thought of myself as a part of all this, and yet that's exactly how I felt that day. I was a member of the human race again. I felt *alive*.

Eventually, our strolling took us all the way to Central Park. We took one of the paths, walking among the joggers, and emerged on the eastern side. It was absolutely amazing how we'd taken to each other. He was... magnetic. That's the only word I can think of to describe him. Later that afternoon, we found a nice kosher deli and had a late lunch—mine a corned beef on hard roll and his a pastrami nightmare on rye. We took our time—as it turned out, neither of us had anything pressing on our agenda, so we just relaxed and talked quietly at a small table near the back of the deli.

He dominated most of the conversation in his gentle but persuasive manner, holding forth on a variety of obtuse subjects ranging from the social life of insects (who, he claimed knowledgeably, were as intelligent, pound for pound, as humans) to the ancient Aztecs (who, he said significantly, raising his pale eyebrows, could accurately predict solar and lunar eclipses for the next ten thousand years but never quite grasped the concept of the simple wheel).

And somewhere in the course of our convoluted, multifaceted and mainly one-sided conversation, I learned his name...

Myron.

7. a rose by any other name

Allow me to digress for just a moment, if you don't mind. It won't take long and it may help clarify a confusing point that I seem to have thrown at you from way out here in left field.

You may be staring at what I've just written and thinking, "Say what?" Or maybe you're *glaring* at it and saying to me, the guy telling this story, "Look, buddy, if you're talking about who I *think* you're talking about, then how come his name isn't Jesus?"

Right?

Well, that's okay. I know how confusing it must be. But if you'll just bear with me I think I can straighten this whole mess out. It just takes a little explaining.

You see, it really *was* Christ that I met that day. But not exactly the *same* Christ. He'd been reincarnated, see? He's a brand new person—on the outside, anyway. Inside, He's still the same. Last time around, His name was Jesus; this time around His name is Myron. New body; new name. But still the same person.

Got it?

No? Well, then, let me put it this way. You wouldn't really expect Him to look exactly the same way He did almost two thousand years ago, would you? Dressed the same way and everything, walking around with sandals and a sheet, long hair and a straggly beard? I mean, that went out in the Sixties. So He was reborn. He had a new mother and, if not a new father, then at least a new step-father. He's different, but He's the same. And incidentally, while we're on the subject, His last name isn't Christ. It wasn't when He was Jesus, for that

matter. Christ is a title. It means saviour. I don't know what His last name was when He was Jesus—or even if He had one—and I won't say what it is now.

So what difference does it make if He looks like a beach boy or a model for Brooks Brothers or some picture hanging in a church? Or if He's called Jesus Christ or Myron Christ or Saviour Cougat? It all works out the same. A rose by any other name, after all...

Suffice it to say that for the Second Coming He is called Myron. Myron Christ. You'll just have to take my word for it.

8. a corned beef sandwich with the King of Kings

Of course, I didn't know any of that either when I first met Myron. We just talked like any two people in a decent deli, making pleasant conversation and whiling away the time. Around us floated the aroma of meats and cheeses, and the pleasant sounds of the little old Jewish couple who ran the place going about their business behind the counter. We ate our sandwiches. We talked and laughed. There was something about the man who sat across the table from me, but I had yet to put an exact finger on it.

"What do you do?" I asked Myron in one of his rare pauses.

He regarded me quizzically, a tiny dab of hot mustard painted on His upper lip.

"For a living?" I prompted.

"Oh," he said in his by-now familiar significant tone. "I guess you could say I'm in the religion game."

Frankly, I wasn't sure if I should be dubious or embarrassed. I mean, he was a nice guy and everything—and I'd finally narrowed that *something* about him down to a... a *power*, I guess you could call it. But somehow, he just didn't come off as the clerical type. He was just too earthy... too oddball.

And yet on the other hand, if he really was... well, I was silently ticking off the long list of expletives I'd uttered in the relatively short time since I'd met him.

"You mean you're a priest?" I asked, hoping that the doubt in my mind wasn't too obvious in my voice.

He shook his head.

"A minister?"

Another shake of the head.

I thought about it for a minute. Myron seemed to be enjoying my confusion.

"A rabbi, then!" I cried, sure that I'd finally nailed it down.

He smiled sympathetically and said, "Not in the literal sense," confusing me even more.

"Well, then..." I began.

But Myron's smile vanished and he suddenly became as serious as a heart attack. His face looked as though it had been chiseled in stone. "I think you already know who I am, Marko," he said in a *very* significant tone.

I think I shook my head out of bewilderment. I blinked like a cow, surprised by the farmer's cold hands on an unexpectedly warm morning. Somehow, don't ask me how, I knew what he was hinting at; and I also knew that I wanted to believe it. But who could believe it? There really wasn't any reason to believe that he was anything but a well-intentioned, but nonetheless misguided, religious fanatic.

Except...

Except that I remembered that first glance at his face in the pawnshop, and the feeling of trust, of serenity that I experienced at that moment.

Except that He radiated goodness and power like a microwave radiated ultrasound. I was basking in it.

God, yes... I wanted to believe it!

He smiled and slowly nodded.

I closed my eyes. My mouth was as dry as the dust settling on the pews of a church.

"It's true, Marko," He said serenely, with such conviction that I was almost *forced* to believe Him. I opened my eyes again just as He spread His hands on the table, palms up. On each wrist, just below the heel of the hand, I could clearly see a roughly circular scar half an inch or more in diameter. When He turned them over, there was an identical scar on the other side. I hadn't noticed them before, but then again it wasn't exactly something I was looking for. "I've come to fulfill the prophecies," He said.

I said nothing. If someone had lit a firecracker under my ass at that moment, I don't think I could've found the word 'ouch'.

"I know that you want to believe me," Myron went on...

(which was true – I *did* want to be sitting in a kosher deli, eating a corned beef sandwich with the King of Kings)

"... But you have a pre-conceived notion of what I'm supposed to be like. It's clouding your vision."

He settled back into His chair. I still hadn't found my voice. The sounds and smells of the deli had disappeared; I was unaware of anything but the man sitting across from me. I was, to say the least, staggered.

"Maybe it would help if I told you a parable," He said.

A parable! Why didn't that surprise me? What else would one expect from Christ?

So I closed my eyes and listened.

9. walnuts

"Once upon a time," Myron began, "there was a young man who sought the meaning of life. He was very determined—he dedicated his entire existence to the search. He went to a dozen colleges where he studied philosophy, theology, psychology, and astrophysics. He investigated the occult, astrology and even consulted a Ouija board. He dabbled in Buddhism, Brahma, Judaism, Mohammedism, Hare Krishna, Zen and Zoroaster. He tried yoga, yogurt, aerobics and the Scarsdale Diet. But all to no avail. Nothing answered his single question: what is the meaning of life?

"Dejected, the young man set off to travel the world alone. In the course of many years, he crossed the burning deserts, sailed the raging seas, and climbed the snow-capped mountains. He shivered with cold in the far north; burned with fever in the tropical jungles. In short, he walked, ran, stumbled, and crawled through and over the most desolate wilderness on earth, always seeking the answer to his question."

Myron took a bite of His sandwich, chewed, and swallowed. The blot of mustard wobbled on His upper lip and nearly lost its tenacious hold, but in the end remained where it was.

“At last,” Myron continued, “when he was no longer a young man, he came to the greatest mountain of them all. As he gazed in wonder at its cloud-obscured peak, a voice seemed to say to him, ‘what you seek you will find up there’.

“And so he began climbing. When he finally collapsed at the summit, days later, his clothes were no more than shredded rags, his shoes had been worn right off his feet, and his fingers were raw, bloody wounds.

“He awoke—who knows how much later—to find, to his utter astonishment, that he was not alone. He was lying at the very feet of what had to be the oldest man in the world. The ancient one sat in the lotus position: gaunt, little more than skin stretched over brittle bones, with a beard that spread over his loins like a carpet.

“The younger man struggled to sit up. ‘Oh, ancient one,’ he said reverently, ‘I have searched the world over for the meaning of life. At the foot of this mountain a voice told me that I would find the answer here. Surely you must know—what is the meaning of life?’

“The ancient one nodded once, very slowly. ‘Life,’ he said in a tremulous, high-pitched voice, ‘is a walnut.’ And he said no more.

“The seeker staggered painfully to his feet. ‘That’s *it*?’ he demanded furiously. ‘I search the world over for the meaning of life; I freeze my ass off in the north, boil my ass off in the south, cross the raging seas, climb this damned mountain, and you sit there and tell me life is a frigging *walnut*?’

“The ancient one stared at him in abject confusion. ‘You mean,’ he began hesitantly, ‘life... *isn’t* a walnut?’

“So each of the two men threw himself off the mountain.”

10. ...and nothin’ *jḅ*but the truth

Myron just sat there, smiling benignly, the small spot of mustard still clinging for dear life to His lip. People were coming and going, in and out of the deli; outside, on the sidewalk, I could hear laughter and mingled voices. The old Jewish couple sliced salami and headcheese, blissfully unaware of the events taking place in their deli, and served it to equally blissfully unaware customers. From further down the street came the machine-gun rattle of a jackhammer. But for me the world had stopped; nothing made sense anymore. I didn’t know exactly what to say. I suddenly realized that I’d been holding my breath. I let it out with a sigh.

What *could* I say? Because, strange as it may seem to anyone who didn’t actually experience the telling of that story, I found myself convinced that Myron was who He was claiming to be.

The message of His parable was clear: we spend our whole lives wondering what our purpose is, what our lives mean. But we always have pre-conceived notions of what that purpose couldn’t possibly be. Our purpose is not, for example, to evolve into blue cheese. The meaning of our lives is not to achieve a mystical state of dizziness. Life is most assuredly not a walnut.

But what happens if you suddenly find out that one of your pre-conceived notions might be *wrong*? What if you meet someone who believes in the possibility of something as strongly as you believe in its *impossibility*? What if, for him, life really *is* a walnut? What then?

I understood what Myron was saying to me—that I was the young man in the parable, and that He was the ancient one. I also understood what He left unsaid. In His eyes there was such a lack of guile, such an innocence, that suspicion of Him became totally ludicrous. His

eyes said: "I am what I am, and you can choose to believe or not. Your faith matters. But no one's going to force you to believe. If you get up and walk out and never say another word, then that's okay too."

I think that what Myron didn't say convinced me more than what He *did* say.

So, without real conscious thought, in what I can only call an instinctive binding, I decided that I wouldn't be like the young man in the parable. I wouldn't let my pre-conceived notions of what Christ should look like, act like, or even what He should be called, blind me to the truth. And the truth was... well, the Truth was sitting across from me at a table in a kosher deli, eating a pastrami nightmare with mustard on His lip.

At that moment that was all I knew; nothing else mattered.

"I am the Truth and the Light," He had said once, over two thousand years ago.

Now He was telling me first-hand.

11. the middle of God's cosmic plan

Yes, dear reader, I believed. At least, looking back, I *think* I believed. I told myself that I did. When I said it, an answering voice seemed to reassure me. It felt right. There would be times to come when, being human, my faith would waver; there would be other times when my faith would stand like a lion in the face of adversity.

Of course, as I've said, it was inevitable. For better or worse, I had somehow found myself plunked down right in the middle of God's Cosmic Plan. Whatever it might be.

It also seems to have been inevitable, on retrospect, that I, Marko Grouch, would become His first apostle of the Second Coming. I really shouldn't have been surprised when He threw *that* curve ball at me... but I was.

"I want you to be my apostle, Marko," He said nonchalantly. "My first. I want you to come with me."

For a minute I couldn't say anything again. I couldn't find my tongue, which seemed to have slipped down to the vicinity of my navel.

As usual, He just smiled. At last, He took His napkin and finally laid the spot of mustard to rest.

"Why?" My tongue had slithered back up to its rightful position and blurted out the first thing my brain threw at it.

"Because, Marko," Myron answered significantly, "you don't ask for miracles."

I sighed. That was apparently good enough for Myron.

"I'm glad that's settled, then," He said.

"Myron, could I ask you something?" Out of all the strange things that had happened that day, there was one thing that really puzzled me. "Why the fiddle?"

"Fiddle?" He asked, seeming to be perplexed for the first time since I'd met Him.

"Yeah," I said. "The one you were staring at in the pawnshop."

"I wasn't staring at any fiddle," he replied.

"Well, then, if you weren't staring at the fiddle, what...?" I began, and then remembered. Way down in the corner of the case there was something that I hadn't even mentally registered. That's how insignificant it had seemed to me. But, knowing Myron, it really *would* have been

beautiful, just as he'd described it. But it wasn't the fiddle He had been talking about—it was a tiny spider web.

I looked at Myron. I noticed that His smile seemed a bit wider, but all He did was shrug His shoulders and raise His eyebrows.

I sighed again. As I would learn, over and over again, it was the unexpected that was inevitable with Myron. It was something that I could count on.

12. the religious hall of fame

So we left the delicatessen, in not quite the same light that we'd entered.

There I was, walking down the street at the side of the Son of God, wondering just how in the world I'd gone into Goldman's Deli an unemployed handyman and come out an apostle.

The ease with which I'd committed my faith—imperfect as it was—astounded me. I was no Jesus freak. I hadn't even set foot in a church—except for my wedding—in at least twenty years. I'd never had, in the words of the born-again Christians, a “personal relationship” with God. Yet there was no denying it; in the space of just a few short hours I had not only accepted Christ but consented to be His apostle. God, it was mind-boggling!

There was only one slight problem...

This isn't something that I'm particularly proud of, but I did say that I would try to tell the whole truth, and I think that in the long chain of events that make up my involvement with Myron this is an essential point that you should be aware of. You see, those same people who have pointed out my “vulnerability” have also suggested that I mindlessly plunged into some virulent form of religious mania, which Myron (sensing my “vulnerability”) eagerly fed.

Well, I'm sorry to say that that simply wasn't true. I only wish it *had* been true—God only knows how differently things might've turned out. But that's just not the way it was. Alright, yes, it's true that I was eager to follow Him. And yes, I'd consented to be His apostle. And yes again, I believed in Him as much as I could...

... But not completely. I was no zealot; no Saul, blinded on the road to Damascus. The full truth is that I kept a small portion of my mind open—a few mere brain cells that said, ever so faintly, ‘What if Myron really *isn't* Christ?’

I'm ashamed that, of course—it was the deep, dark secret that I kept from Myron and which, as long as it remained, would prevent me from ever being as close to Myron as I desperately wanted to be.

So to all those whose battle cry is “vulnerability” and “religious mania” I must sadly say *phooey*. I was not—I *am* not—a mindless robot brainwashed by Myron.

Actually, I was more like a little kid tagging after a big brother that he idolized. And I was confused, bewildered; my thoughts were careening around my brain like crazy pinballs. I mean, put yourself in my place—I was suddenly and inexplicably thrust into the Religious Hall of Fame and I'd never even played in the minors. How would *you* feel?

Yeah, that's about what I thought.

“Where are we going?” I asked Myron as we walked towards Times Square.

Well,” Myron answered lightly, “I thought we could use a little fresh air and sunshine.”

It was nearly four o'clock. Shadows were beginning to deepen between the buildings and the breeze was cool. There was nothing I wanted more, after this hectic day full of momentous

surprises, than to enjoy the last of the sunlight out in the open, away from all the surrounding skyscrapers. I glanced around quickly, getting a fix on our position. "Myron," I said, "we're headed *away* from Central Park."

I know," He replied. "Actually, I was thinking along the lines of Oregon."

My jaw must've nearly hit the sidewalk. "Oregon?" I said, mostly to myself. God!

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13. stocks in AT&T

So we went to Oregon. And as God is my witness (which, in a manner of speaking, He was) we walked every inch of the way.

This, as Myron explained to me, was to be my initiation. I was to be tested by the rigors of the road—hunger, poverty, abstinence, and bone-wracking weariness. Myron, of course, was to be my companion and teacher. And what was I to learn from my experience? Faith, of course. Faith in Him and in His Father. As well as humility and charity, thrown in just to be on the safe side.

Between us, we had a small amount of money when we set off on our journey. While we had the cash to buy food in the towns that we passed along our way, we were marginally comfortable. After the first few days, my legs grew accustomed to the long miles and I enjoyed listening to Myron's parables early in the evening as we sat in our meager campsites just off the road. We slept with only the stars for a blanket. I was largely content (although the thought of my apartment, with its comfortable bed, nagged at me occasionally; for instance, when swarms of spring mosquitoes swooped down on us like bloodthirsty Stukas, or when I sat down on a small grassy tussock only to find it inhabited by even more bloodthirsty red ants). But all in all, the journey went smoothly. None of the relatively minor aggravations mattered (much) because we still had a little money to take us a little further down the road. Fortified by this false, as it turned out, sense of security, I became almost cocky. My pride swelling with each step, I thought to myself, 'Here I am on a journey with the greatest teacher of all time. There's so much I can learn. I'll be taught the mysteries of the universe... I'll be shown Heaven... why, I'll sit at the right hand side of God!'

Sure. And pigs will fly and the president will balance the budget.

Myron taught His lessons every day, apparently taking little notice of my arrogance. To give myself due, I listened and tried to understand every word He said. Most of it was familiar—love thy neighbor; turn the other cheek; obey the commandments. In two thousand years the lessons of Christ hadn't changed much. By that time I was beginning to wonder about the purpose of His return... I mean, the Messiah doesn't make an appearance every day. When I thought about the last time He was here, and the end result, it produced an uneasiness that quickly overshadowed my confident mood. But when I asked Him about it directly, Myron would only give me an almost sad smile and say that all would be revealed in time.

Yeah, things were going well. So well, in fact, that after a while even *I* began to realize that I was being unjustly confident. I began to wonder when my initiation—the *real* testing—would begin.

And then the money ran out.

I immediately felt a gnawing hunger, as if my stomach felt compelled to remind me that we were also out of food at the time. Myron, however, was quick to point out that money wasn't

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necessary... that if we had faith, we would be provided for.

I, of course, had my doubts (after all, I was still only a beginner at this faith stuff). “What will we use to buy food?” I asked nervously.

He only smiled patiently. “My first apostles wondered the same thing,” He replied. “I’ll explain it to you in the same way I explained it to them.” He took me by the arm and led me to the side of the road. We were somewhere in Ohio or Indiana at the time. Farming country. A rail fence ran parallel to the road like a giant’s Lincoln Logs, and beyond it spread broad fields of new corn. He pointed out into the cornfield, where blackbirds and crows circled and drifted down to the rich earth and emerald green shoots.

“Do you see those birds out there?” He asked.

I nodded morosely.

Do any of those birds have a Swiss bank account?”

“I seriously doubt it,” I responded, not really liking where I thought this conversation was leading.

“Or stocks in AT&T? Or municipal bonds?”

“No,” I answered in a small, humbled voice.

“Or a yacht, or a house in the Hamptons?”

What could I say? I shook my head in resignation.

“Do any of them work in an office or a factory?”

Feeling shamed, I just stared at the birds while my stomach grumbled for me.

“But they get along, don’t they?” Myron went on cheerfully. “Now, in the order of things, who do you think is more important to my Father—those birds... or you?”

“Me?” I ventured doubtfully.

He nodded gravely. “Now... if my Father protects those birds, who don’t work and don’t collect a paycheck at the end of each week—who neither toil nor spin, to coin a phrase—do you think He would neglect you?”

“I sincerely hope not,” was my unenthusiastic answer.

But Myron smiled confidently and laid a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Marko,” He said. “I didn’t arrange this test just to have you fail.”

Which, I’m ashamed to say, didn’t reassure me very much at all. I felt as though I’d already let Myron down... and my initiation hadn’t even really begun. My only consolation was in remembering something my father had said once when I was a boy. He’d been referring to my mother’s brother, who was a drunk. He had recently gone on the wagon, which lasted all of a week before calling in the middle of the night to say he was in jail for public intoxication. My father, hanging up the phone, standing there in his pajamas, said, “Well, when a jackass learns to fly, you can’t blame him for not staying up too long.”

14. genetic soup

Isn’t it odd how quickly people change? I’ve always found it fascinating.

Take, for example, the miser of fifty years who, because of some vague and totally uncharacteristic dream, suddenly gives his entire fortune away to charity. Or the prisoner of war, who having once found pleasure in bombing innocent civilians, discovers God at the hands of his captors.

From saint to sinner, from sinner to saint, it happens all the time. People change. They're resilient and adaptable. This is what human nature is all about.

Maybe it's a survival instinct akin to self-preservation. Someday, I imagine, they'll discover a gene that's responsible for man's innate ability to change when circumstances demand it. Or some little chromosome swimming around in his genetic soup. I don't know...

At any rate, perhaps because of that very ability, I survived the journey and passed my initiation. Believe it or not, it was less of an ordeal than I'd expected on that day when Myron and I stood beside the cornfield. Oh, sure, it was difficult—don't get me wrong. It wasn't a cake walk, not by a country mile. I knew hunger. I often was lonely—the stark loneliness of the homeless. At times I was so thirsty that I would've given the entire gross national product for a mere thimbleful of water.

But the point is, I survived. And in the course of our journey I came to recognize my own faith in Myron and in His Father.

When we were so hungry that we could hear each other's stomachs growling like grizzly bears, someone always happened along to befriend us and offer to share a meal with us. When I was too thirsty to go another step, we would somehow suddenly hear the sound of a brook babbling nearby in the woods just off the road.

At the time, it seemed as though Myron and I were isolated and cut off from civilization. But looking back on it, I realize now that we were never alone for long. We met people all along the way—farmers, loggers, hikers, homesteaders, and itinerants like ourselves. We were warmly welcomed by all. As I've said, there's something about Myron that inspires trust and good will. We were given food and camaraderie. We left behind us a trail of warm, generous companions.

We still slept outdoors, as we had from the beginning. And each night Myron would teach me another gentle lesson. I had lost my cockiness; it had been replaced by a more divine surety. I slept better than I ever had before, assured by Myron that all would be well.

Of course, at any point along the way I could've said, "Say, Myron, I just happen to have this l'il ole diamond ring in my pocket, see? We could sell it and have *plenty* of money to get to Oregon."

But I didn't. I *wouldn't*. I didn't *need* to. Because whenever things got tough, I knew that somehow we'd get through. As each day passed into the next I could feel my faith awakening and growing... and the need to resort to the ring dwindling. Halfway through our journey, I knew—I *knew*—that I would never need it. It actually got to the point where I almost looked forward to adverse conditions just so I could demonstrate my faith.

And Myron was well pleased.

By the time we reached Oregon, two months after we'd begun our journey, it seemed as though I was going to do just fine in the apostle business. I had passed my ordeal and was looking forward, like a little kid toward Christmas, to whatever lay ahead of us.

15. what actually happened

For all the time and effort that it required to get there, our time in Oregon was, with one notable exception, a disappointment from my own point of view.

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I don't really know what I'd expected—some deep and significant religious experience, I suppose. Maybe the sky opening up and the Hosts of Heaven descending; maybe a profound conversation with a burning bush. Maybe it's only that Oregon *looks* like Miracle Country. Anyway, I was expecting anything... other than what actually happened.

What actually happened was, we arrived in Oregon one morning (somewhere around the end of June, but I can't say for sure), hiked around the majestic forest of the Pacific Northwest all day, enjoyed a gentle misting rainfall in the afternoon, and made camp near a burbling mountain stream as evening fell.

I lit a small fire and warmed up the roast chicken and baked the potatoes that had been given to us by a kind-hearted farmer the day before. We ate in silence and watched as the darkness fell around us.

"This is a nice place," Myron said quietly.

I thought he understated the case by at least two lightyears. Oregon in May, for anyone who's never seen it, is absolutely breathtaking. Mountains, capped with snow, peer majestically over the pine forests, and distant lakes glitter in the sunshine like sapphires set in green velvet. There's an enormity about the region that makes you feel minute; yet, at the same time, you feel so much a part of it all that you're vast and omnipotent. In the valleys there's an awesome stillness; in the higher regions there's a slight chill that makes your heart race and, if you give in to it, can turn a thirty six year old man into a boy of twelve. At night, there's a hush over the entire forest that can only be described as holy. I suspected that it was this solitude that Myron sought—that here He was somehow closer to His Father, away from the contaminating influence of civilization—and that this, more than my initiation, was the real reason for our long trek. I never confirmed my theory by simply asking Myron, but the one significant event that took place later in our short stay seemed to support it.

At any rate, I was still overwhelmed as we sat talking quietly beside the campfire. "It's gorgeous!" I gushed.

"Yes," He said sadly. "It'll be hard to leave all this so soon."

"Leave?" I cried, stunned. "But Myron, we just *got* here!"

He shrugged His shoulders in what had become a familiar gesture of resignation. "True enough," He answered. "But there are people waiting for us in New York. We have to meet them."

"Who?"

He just gave me that half-sad, enigmatic smile.

"You mean to tell me that we have to walk all the way back to New York?" I almost whined. "I thought that part of my initiation was over!"

But Myron reached into a hip pocket and pulled something out. "It is, my dear Marko," He said, smiling broadly as He handed me what turned out to be two airline tickets. "It is."

Why was it that things like that always surprised me? Didn't I already know to expect the unexpected where Myron was concerned? I found myself repeating something I'd said many times over the course of our journey: Myron works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.

16. defying gravity

I awoke sometime in the middle of the night. The forest was as silent and black as the dark side of the moon. Our small fire had dwindled to embers, fighting valiantly, but vainly, to push back the darkness. Lying there, surrounded by a seemingly infinite void, it was easy to imagine myself as a primitive half-human, and the forest as a primordial scene of a million years ago.

My scalp prickled for some unknown reason and I remembered that in those long-dead days, superstition had ruled human lives. But I didn't believe in any of that stuff, prickling scalp or not. I'd never had any reason to be frightened in the time that I'd been with Myron and there was no reason to think that I had anything to fear now. But it wasn't really fear that I felt; more, it was like I was lying at the edge of a field of energy...as if my body was involuntarily reacting to some outside force. "Back then," I thought, suppressing a giggle, "they would've called it a spirit." I peered into the night, searching for Myron.

Ah, yes, there. On the other side of the dying campfire. Myron sat in the lotus position, His eyes closed, His face peaceful.

I watched Him for a few minutes, feeling more peaceful now myself, except for the persistent prickling of my hair. It took those few minutes to realize that all was not as it should be.

Did you ever see one of those drawings with the caption "What's Wrong With This Picture"? And you always find the obvious ones right away, but you have to work to find at least one subtle one. That's what it was like... there was something wrong with the picture of Myron sitting beside the campfire, but I just couldn't place what it was.

I squinted my eyes. I looked at the overall scene. I narrowed my field to details. The thing was, I knew it was something that I'd normally spot right away. But whether because of the lack of light, or because my eyes were playing tricks on me, I just couldn't figure it out. Then at last it struck me... and my hair, which had been at half mast all along, shot straight up the flagpole and threatened to fly right off.

Myron was sitting there, alright. But His Holy Heinie, His Revered Rear, His Glorious Gluteus Maximus, wasn't touching the ground. He was floating six inches in the air.

Myron was right when He said that I don't ask for miracles. I don't. But I'll take 'em when they come along.

Myron just sat there, defying gravity and logic, until the embers faded completely and the red haze of dawn took their place.

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17. one of the quieter parts of Yellowstone Park

Two days later I again found myself beating my aching feet against the sidewalks of old New York.

Myron, as usual, led the way along crowded streets filled with New Yorkers newly energized by the warm weather and promise of summer. There had been times, as we'd been making our way alone across the country, when I'd wished fervently to be back among these teeming throngs; now for reasons that I myself could not understand I found myself depressed by them. Their frenzied activity tended only to increase my depression rather than lift me out of it. Maybe it was only because I had no idea of our destination or the identity of the people we were supposed to meet; maybe superstition had actually gained a toehold on me after all these years. Whatever the reason, I was beginning to feel claustrophobic. New York had changed, or maybe I'd changed. Either way, I didn't think that I would ever feel the same way about it again.

I was still mulling over our sudden return and by our seemingly willy-nilly progress ever since. It was like being caught in a whirlwind, thrown here and there, from direction to direction, by what seemed at times like mere whimsy. Walking along the sidewalk, I stared at the back of Myron's blonde head, trying to reach inside and discover what strange wheels and cogs turned in there. Was he trying to test me again?

Probably.

We'd walked for a dozen blocks before I came out of my reverie and realized that the crowds had thinned considerably. One glance around us told me why—while I'd been daydreaming, I'd allowed Myron to stray into what I'll politely call here the wrong side of the tracks. I felt a twinge of fear creep up my neck.

Myron, on the other hand, just strode onward like He was strolling through one of the quieter parts of Yellowstone Park. Not a care in the world. Did He realize, I wondered, the kind of place we'd entered?

The further we penetrated, the worse it became. On either side of the street the buildings became more bleak and decrepit, far beyond what time alone could bestow on them: jagged wounds gaped where windows had once sunned themselves, and graffiti scored the walls like cave paintings. Winos lolled in the shade of a hundred doorways, dreaming sweet wine dreams. Stripped cars hulked like rotting dinosaurs. The dread of superstition that marked life long ago had given way to a new kind of dread. This was a lush scene of human decay, done in cruel brush-strokes, dipped in the harsh hues of misery, and people died here... by the bottle, the needle, or the knife.

As we crossed a dirty street I noticed that a group of teenaged boys had gathered on the next corner. From a hundred feet away I recognized telltale signs—each wore an identical black leather and denim jacket, and each jacket bore an identical emblem; a red dragon breathing fire

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and smoke. An occasional stray sunbeam flashed on chains and God knew what else, barely concealed under jackets or protruding from hip pockets. I watched nervously as their eyes fell on us.

I stopped. I'd gone far enough. Messiah or not, I wasn't about to let Myron go walking naively into an ambush.

Aware that I was no longer following, Myron stopped and looked back at me with an odd mixture of pity and humor. "Oh, ye of little faith," He said just loudly enough for me to hear. "After all I've taught you... after I've told you who I am... you're *afraid*?"

"Well..." I began, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You're afraid of what might happen to a hundred and sixty eight pounds of mere flesh..." (I think my eyes popped when He revealed my exact weight.)

"...when I promise you eternal life?"

"But it isn't me that I'm afraid for!" I cried. Which was only half true. "That gang up there will tear *you* to pieces. What good will it do to get killed before you've even started?"

Incredibly, He laughed. "I've told you," He said. "I'm the Messiah! I've been sent back into the world for a far greater purpose than to be carved up by a street gang. Do you really think my Father would allow that to happen? Has your initiation been for nothing, Marko?"

Humiliated, I could feel a hot blush rising in my cheeks. I'd been chastised like a disobedient child—and the worst part was that I knew I'd deserved it. For one incredible minute, I thought I might actually start crying right there in the middle of the street. Christ, when *would* I believe?

Meanwhile, the gang had moved closer. They were taking their time, eyeing us, sizing us up. All told, there were nine of them—leather tough and arrogant, with brightly colored headbands and skin-tight chinos. I could see that they were feigning boredom, acting overly disinterested in us, laughing among themselves. Acting as though they'd already dismissed us as worthy adversaries. Psyching us out. I can't speak for Myron, but I know it was working on me. Before this, the phrase 'sweating bullets' had only been a cliché for me. Now it took on a whole new meaning.

They were fifteen feet away when the leader, who strutted in front of the pack, cocksure and defiant like a killer wolf, suddenly held up a hand. The gang behind him halted immediately. He advanced alone; slowly, swaggering, his eyes never leaving us for a second.

I suppose that without the expression of smugness, of universal contempt, he might've looked like any other kid of eighteen or nineteen. Without the glint of subdued rage, he might've even been considered good-looking. But his expression made him seem far older, harder, uglier. His was the face of someone raised in these streets; someone who knew them like the feel of a woman, like moonlight flashing on a knife blade. He was savage and wise, young and old, eager and sly. His eyebrows flickered with delight while his eyes eviscerated me.

"You," he said, sneering, his face mere inches from my own, "are on Red Dragon turf. Nobody comes on Dragon turf unless he's lookin' for a fight. Is that what you're lookin' for, man?"

Without waiting for an answer, he snorted in disgust and turned to Myron. He was about to speak, and I was mentally playing various scenes of what this young punk could do to someone like Myron, when something completely unexpected happened. The smug look of contempt disappeared the very second that he looked into Myron's face. Suddenly, I saw confusion, suspicion and maybe even a trace of fear spread across his features like the traces of a disease.

“Do I know you, man?” he asked, making a supreme effort to sound as intimidating as he had with me. But the uncertainty crept into his voice. When he became aware of it, it only served to undermine him even more. “Yeah, that’s it! I know you from... somewhere.” He was actually floundering. He looked like a dancer who’d had the rug pulled out from under him—still dancing, but definitely on the way down. Under any other circumstances, it would’ve been funny.

Myron just looked at him serenely—so calm, so cool, warm butter wouldn’t have melted in His mouth.

Fear was rapidly becoming the dominant emotion in the gang leader’s expression, but he struggled desperately not to let the others catch a whiff of it. I sensed that they were like sharks—hurt one and the others would tear him to pieces before your eyes; then they’d turn on you. “Hey, what’s *with* you, man?” he hissed at Myron. He looked like a man close to the edge of madness. I thought sure that at any second a blade would flash and it would be all over before it even started.

But Myron held His ground. “Yes, you know me,” He said in a quiet voice.

The gang leader squinted into Myron’s face, trying to place Him, and trying to understand why he was suddenly more afraid than he’d ever been in his life.

“You know me,” Myron repeated, “like I know you. Once you looked for me. Once you sought me out in tenement churches filled with the smell of incense and rot, but you couldn’t know I was there all the time. You were young, and already blinded by rage and deafened by the hatred roaring in your ears. So you chased me in dark alleys, in moon-bright streets, across empty roof-tops, never knowing that I ran beside you. You were dead before you ever lived. Now I give you life.”

The gang leader’s face betrayed his wonder. It lit up his eyes like light dawning through a dirty windowpane. “Who *are* you, man?” he whispered. This time, though, there was no menace. Only the awe that follows being read like a book and thoroughly understood.

“Come on, man,” Myron said allowing a smile to play across his face. “You know me. Come with me.”

And then the most amazing thing of all happened. The young gang leader pulled off his jacket and let it drop to the cracked cement of the sidewalk. It lay there, sprawled grotesquely in the deepening shadow, like a bloodstain.

The others, who’d become as skittish as cats as they watched the scene unfolding, stepped forward as one. The leader stopped them with a single glance.

“Hey, Duke...?” said one.

Duke stared at them defiantly. “I’m goin’,” he said simply. They looked from one to another, unsure of what to do. You could almost smell their fear.

We just turned and walked away, leaving the gang standing there, shifting their feet, watching us like hyenas robbed of a feast by a lion.

When I looked back, they were gone.

18. the unsuspecting city

We walked again, now three of us, until the sun sank below the skyline and stained the city sky, bruising and finally blackening it.

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A dirty wind sprang up behind us, pushing us along the sidewalk, scattering the ever-present litter before us as though it were clearing a path for the Lord.

Myron hadn't spoken since we'd left the street gang behind—as was often the case, He seemed to be in deep meditation. In the meantime, I had introduced myself to Duke and the two of us spoke in a respectful whisper as we followed behind Myron.

"I'm really sorry about the way I acted back there, man," he said. "It's just that..." His voice trailed off into an embarrassment.

There was a genuine note of sincerity in his words; I didn't feel that any explanation, or apology, was necessary. "That's alright," I answered. "You were only doing what you thought was necessary. I can't imagine growing up the way you must've – sort of forced into protecting yourself any way you can. If it means joining a gang, then you do it. Or you pay the consequences."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's part of it. But there's a lot more. I've done some really bad things. So why would He want me?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I've asked myself the same question. Lots of times. All I know is, He understands."

Duke—once a feared gang leader—smiled almost shyly. He was like a completely different person from the swaggering punk I'd seen a little while before. There was a light shining in his face. An expression of... well, I can only call it Glory. I had witnessed a man transformed.

I couldn't help but think that in just these few minutes, Duke had become much more of an apostle than I *ever* would.

Duke still had that awed, almost sappy smile. It should've looked inappropriate on him, but somehow it didn't. "He's really who I think He is, isn't He?" he asked.

"Yeah," I answered simply. "He really is."

For a while we left conversation behind and time passed slowly. Myron continued to meditate and Duke was absorbed in his own thoughts while I brooded over the envy that had suddenly come over me. Rationally, I knew I had no reason to be jealous of Duke, but pride would always be my Big Sin, my *numero uno*.

It seemed as though we'd been walking forever; our surroundings were totally unfamiliar to me now. It was getting late and the prospects of getting a roof over our heads were pretty slim. To make matters worse, unless Duke had a few bucks stashed in his chinos, we didn't have one red cent between us.

I caught up to Myron and walked beside Him for a few minutes, waiting as patiently as I could for Him to notice. At last, He turned His head and smiled at me.

"I was just thinking, Myron," I began in a properly respectful tone. "It's getting really late. Where are we going to spend the night?" It was one thing to be without shelter in the country, where all you had to worry about was bears or wolves or mountain lions; quite another to be in the same predicament in New York City.

"We'll know the right place when we see it," Myron answered.

I really hated it when Myron went mysterious on me like that.

So we had no choice but to walk on, with the dirty wind behind us—the unlikely Messiah and His two improbable apostles—into the dark, unsuspecting city.

19. as welcome as leprosy

Pardon me. I'm about to go sailing off on a seemingly pointless tangent. But I promise to return us to our present course, unscathed and none the worse for wear despite our side trip. Believe me, I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it was important.

You see, as unlikely and improbable a trio as we made, the place we eventually found to stay the night (or were led to find, as I fondly think Myron would have us believe) was even *more* unlikely and improbable. And so, in order for you to have a true appreciation of the uniqueness of the situation, I think a little background information is prudent.

Okay, so how many people know where Bohemia is? Let's see a show of hands.

Well, that's okay—that night I didn't know either. I found out later, though, that Bohemia is a former province of Czechoslovakia. It's located on a plateau, largely surrounded by the Bohemian Forest, the Bohemian-Moravian Heights and the Riesengebirge. It's a tiny, backward region with a long and troubled history. It's been fought over, annexed, subdivided and sectioned off by any number of foreign powers ranging from the Holy Roman Empire to the House of Luxembourg to Hungary and Austria. As if the fact that other countries were constantly biting off sizable portions (or swallowing it whole) wasn't bad enough, stir in the fact that religious turmoil seemed to be its natural state and you have what amounts to a geographical turd that hardly seems worth all the hubbub.

A natural consequence of all the civil unrest and religious upheaval was that many Bohemians were more or less forced to pack up and hit the road.

I'm not really sure why, but the wandering Bohemians were made to feel about as welcome as leprosy in whatever country they emigrated to. Maybe it was because at one time or another, any given neighboring land had been Bohemia's enemy. And for equally mysterious reasons, the name Bohemian came to be synonymous with the name Gypsy—the far-ranging nomads who originated in the region of Romania. Whatever the reasons, the confusion remains to this day.

The Bohemian gypsies found themselves lumped into the same category as the Romaines, and received the same sort of treatment. They were shunned; considered outcasts at best and criminals at worst. Even now, the word gyp (as in a raw deal) is a direct derivative, handed down through the ages like a distasteful heirloom. This is not to say that this was totally undeserved, that they didn't have their seamy side—they most certainly did—but then again, who could really blame them? Since they weren't allowed to get what they needed to live a semi-comfortable life by the more direct route, the gypsies were pretty much forced to get it by wit and cunning (not to mention outright thievery).

As the years passed they spread far and wide over Europe, rolling along in their strange, kaleidoscopic caravans, eventually reaching even as far as America. They evolved their own form of Royal Family—a kind of compensatory measure, one might assume, for the lack of a true homeland. They had a King of the gypsies, and a Queen of the gypsies, and a whole slew of princes and princesses of the gypsies.

Now it so happens that one of these royal gypsies—a young woman with the incongruous handle of Princess Joan—had a few years previous to the night in question immigrated to New York with the intention of starting up a modest palm-reading consortium. Gypsies, it will be remembered, are famous (or notorious, depending on your viewpoint) for their “second sight”. Tarot cards, crystal gazing and palm reading are the Big Three of the gypsies—the gypsy Ford,

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GM and Chrysler.

Business, however, was unspectacular for poor Princess Joan. In the space of three years, she moved from Manhattan to Queens, from Queens to Yonkers, from Yonkers to the Bronx, and finally from the Bronx to Greenwich Village—where, she, she discovered happily, being weird was considered more or less normal.

And so it was in one of the most remote corners of Greenwich Village that she finally, triumphantly, opened and unveiled for the world's viewing pleasure "Princess Joan's Wax Museum, Fortune Emporium, and Boarding House".

And it was in front of "Princess Joan's Wax Museum, Fortune Emporium, and Boarding House", with its dazzlingly unspectacular sign hanging above a seedy-looking doorway, that Myron called us to a halt.

"This is the place," He announced significantly.

20. the world's tallest chef

New York, as anyone who has ever been there even once can testify, is a hodgepodge of cultures, customs and languages from every God-forsaken corner of this colossal Rubik's Cube called Earth.

New York is a gigantic Waring Blender filled with millions of human ingredients, churning out American Pie at an ever-increasing appalling rate.

The Statue of Liberty is the world's tallest chef. She is not particularly good at her job. She pours the tired, the poor, the huddled ingredients into the blender whether they are good or bad, sweet or sour, fresh or foul. She is not selective. She doesn't have to eat her own cooking.

That night, as I gazed at the dismal sign that read "Princess Joan's Wax Museum, Fortune Emporium, and Boarding House", my first impression was that the Lady With The Lamp had recently whipped up a batch of fruitcake.

21. Rod Serling and the Hotel California

A yellowing index card taped to the inside of the door's small, cloudy window bade us enter. We did so.

We found ourselves in what I can only assume was once a storefront. It smelled of dust and old wood. One side was partitioned off. Through a chink between slabs of splintering plywood I caught a glimpse of a felt-covered card table. The side we occupied was sparsely decorated with three mismatched wooden chairs arranged against the wall opposite the partition, a small knee-high table, and an absolutely humongous fern in a corner by the window. Facing the door, there was a counter on which the oldest cash register in the world squatted, looking senile.

But what caught my eye was what was *behind* the counter. There, contemplative yet watchful, stood the most exotic woman I'd ever seen. She had spell-spinning eyes that looked like they'd been carved from onyx. Her skin was dark like caramel and yet creamy like nougat. Her lips, moist and slightly parted, were maraschino cherries. I remember thinking that she hadn't ever been born—she'd been delivered in a heart-shaped box with a ribbon and a big red bow on top.

Her eyes sparkled as she tossed her head in a grand gesture, scattering ringlets of jet-black hair in a shimmering cascade.

I didn't think about it at the time, but now, in hindsight, it seems to me that she'd been expecting us. I don't know how. But why else would she have been standing there, just waiting, at that time of the night?

"Welcome," she breathed. "I am Princess Joan." She spread her arms (I caught the flash of half a dozen rings on her fingers) and did something that was halfway between a bow and a curtsy. The top of her loose, gaudy costume fell forward slightly and revealed a glimpse of a full, dusky bosom. The motion, along with that brief foray into unexplored territory, left me dizzy and breathless.

Fortunately, Myron came to my rescue. "We need a room for the night," He said, breaking the awkward silence.

"Of course," the woman replied with apparent approval. "That is as it should be." She reached under the counter, bent low (another quick peek at her ample proportions), and hauled up a huge book which was obviously an ancient guest register. She blew the dust off its cover in a small cloud. "Eventually everyone will need a room here," she continued, and now I noticed an odd accent—sort of Old World-Bronx. "They will come to gaze into the future; they will come to see themselves revealed, but they will all need rooms." As she spoke she was flipping through the pages of the register. Most of them, I noticed, were blank. At any moment, I expected to hear "Hotel California" playing in the background, or see Rod Serling come strolling out of the shadows with his cigarette and sardonic grin, saying, "Offered for your approval..." in that familiar nasal tone.

"What've you done—invent a better mousetrap?" Myron asked seriously as He took the quill she offered. He dipped it in an ink bottle that she had also produced from under the counter, and signed His name *Myron*.

"No, no" she replied. "*Anyone* could do *that*. Maybe something better." She narrowed her eyes in a knowing expression. "I offer a room with a different view. Someday the world will know that this place, or perhaps whatever is in this place, is... *significant*."

Curiosity got the best of me. One day, I knew, I'd pay for that. But I just had to know. "Are you a gypsy?" I asked.

Those onyx eyes flashed my way. "I am Joan," she answered haughtily. "Daughter of Holvik—*King* of the gypsies."

Of course. How foolish of me to even ask.

She held her head regally erect, defying me to challenge her. I declined, instead accepting the quill from Myron. Like Him, I signed only my Christian name.

Finally, the quill was passed to our new companion. He signed *Duke* below our two names in what was little more than a childish scrawl. In the Hotel California, it was apparently not only acceptable, but customary, to forego surnames. Our three single names seemed lonely on the otherwise empty page.

The register was closed and did a vanishing act beneath the counter. The quill and ink bottle soon followed suit.

"You can pay whenever you leave," Princess Joan said.

"How much is it for one night?" Duke asked, surprising us all. We turned toward him, not out of embarrassment but because I think we all seemed to sense that it was inappropriate to talk of money matters. The very atmosphere seemed charged with portent. I knew that

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something significant was going to take place within these walls; something that would render the issue of payment academic.

“Whatever you think it is worth,” Princess Joan replied. “As I said, it will be a room with a different view.”

As she led us to a stairway, I watched her and thought that in her exotic, mysterious, not-quite-normal way, she was one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen.

And of course I should’ve known, since Myron had selected this place to spend the night, there was more about her than met the eye.

Much more.

22. poverty-stricken anarchists

There are rooms... and then there are *rooms*.

We sat cross-legged on a bare floor, staring at each other—Myron seemed content, Duke seemed curious, and I was trying not to look as uncomfortable as I felt.

There was no bed. There were no chairs. No tables. Not even a window for the darkness outside to press its face against.

Centered between us, a kerosene lamp sputtered on the floor and etched our faces in eerie yellow light. Our shadows, cast on unadorned walls, leaped and gamboled like spastics while we sat as motionless as monks.

That sense of impending momentous events remained with me, and I had a feeling that tonight’s lesson would be no ordinary one. I wondered if tonight, finally, some of my thousand and one questions would be answered.

“There will come a time,” Myron said solemnly, as if reading my thoughts, “when everything will be revealed to you... the true purpose of my return, your own places in events yet to come, the changes you will experience, and the changes you will bring about. My purpose, my will, and my Father’s will... all that I know, you will know. In time.”

He paused, staring at a blank wall as if He could see through it. I waited, disappointed. Once again, Myron had avoided any direct mention of why He was here. “The world has been waiting for a long time for my return,” He went on at last. “But don’t expect it to fling its arms open and say to me, ‘Hey, it’s great to have you back... here, have a Lite and let’s talk over old times’. Instead, expect it to turn a deaf, cynical ear. Why? Because the world *is* deaf and cynical. It’s grown in doubt and skepticism until it’s like a fat, ripe fruit. But fruit too long on the vine goes sour.

“You see, the world is too sure of itself—all the mysteries are passing away. The scientific mind has killed them. Worse than that—it’s unmade them. Technology has found all the answers. Man has shaped the world to his own needs... and sacrificed the world in the process. He forgets that this little planet was a gift. He manufactures commodities to make himself comfortable, and the fumes from the factories kill the birds, poison the water, make the air unbreathable, and make the sky gray like an old woolen blanket. He finds the cure for every illness while he devises new ways of killing. He knows how to do anything—there are no more mysteries. And what greater mystery is there... than me?”

He stared for a moment at the lantern on the floor before Him. Then He said, “You both know the story of the Prodigal Son, don’t you?”

We both nodded.

“He returns to his family a failure, expecting to be turned away. Instead, he finds himself welcomed back into the fold.” He stopped and peered at us, indicating that He was about to make a relevant point. “But I ask you—what if the prodigal son returned home... and no one recognized him? Would he be accepted as a stranger?”

“Long ago came a warning: Beware of False Prophets! Well, there have been a lot of false prophets in the last few thousand years. So many people claiming to be the Prodigal Son. And now who would know Him?”

“You, my first two pupils—my apostles—think you know me. But let me tell you right now—you don’t. One day perhaps you will. But not yet.”

The lamplight suddenly shadowed His face. He looked ancient and sad. “Let me warn you,” He went on. “Don’t harbor any expectations. If you do, you’ll only be disappointed. But at the same time that I warn you, I also make this promise: there is a reason for all that will happen. No matter what it might be.”

We fell into a moody silence. After what seemed like an unbearably long time, Myron broke the tension by addressing Duke.

“All this depressing talk,” He said, smiling, “and you’ve only been with us one day. So much has happened to you. You’ve followed me far, without knowing our destination, and never once questioned.” He smiled even more broadly. “Isn’t there anything you’d like to ask me?”

Duke’s response was typical of his transformed personality. “I didn’t mind the walk,” he said. “I just don’t understand why you’d want me around. I ain’t no saint.”

“If I wanted to hang around with saints,” Myron said, laughing, “I’d probably be the loneliest person on earth.”

“Yeah, but you knew me—you knew what I was—and you picked me anyway.”

“Yes, I did,” Myron answered. “Look at it this way: a doctor deals with people who are sick. People who are well don’t need him. A lawyer deals with people who are in some kind of trouble with the law. People who aren’t in trouble don’t need him. Do you see what I’m saying?”

“I think I do,” I answered. “When you were here before you spent all your time with the dregs of society—the poor, the sick, the prostitutes and beggars. It was one of the things that got you in trouble. People thought you should be spending more time with the kings and priests and all the hot-shots.”

“But the people who were suffering—they were the ones who needed you most,” Duke finished.

“Exactly,” Myron replied.

“I’ve got one more question,” Duke said shyly.

“Ask and ye shall receive, if I can coin a phrase,” Myron answered.

Duke gave the question a lot of thought. At last he said, “Well, when I was a kid, my mother used to tell us stories. She was a good woman, my mother. Went to church every Sunday, and she lived every day like it *was* Sunday. We lived in the tenement—me and my mother and five other kids. My old man split right after my littlest brother was born. I was nine. Our apartment was three rooms—a two by four kitchen, a little box of a living room, and a bedroom that was too small for two people, let alone seven.

“Anyway, she took us to church back then and told us stories from the Bible every night before we went to sleep. She said that Heaven was this beautiful place where there was all

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kinds of room, and everything was clean, and everybody was nice to each other, and nobody was poor. ‘There ain’t no rats in Heaven’, is what she said.”

“And you want to know if she was right,” Myron said.

“Well, yeah, sort of. I mean, I know it’s probably not the same exactly—you know, like they used to say the streets were lined with gold? But yeah, I guess that’s about it. Is it real?”

“Is there really a world outside this room?” Myron asked in return.

“Sure there is,” Duke answered.

“Can you prove it?”

“All I have to do is walk outside.”

Myron shook His head emphatically. “Without leaving the room.”

I’d been listening carefully to this exchange. Finally, I spoke up. “I think I can prove it,” I said.

Myron turned to me with interest. “I’d like to see that,” He said.

“I can describe it to you. I have memories of it. I can see it very clearly in my mind.”

Myron smiled. “Have you ever seen a real live dragon?” He asked me.

I shook my head.

“When I asked you that question,” He continued, “did you see an image of a red dragon in your mind’s eye?”

Deflated, I nodded. “One popped in there, yeah.”

“So,” He went on, “If you described the world to me right now, it might be the description of something very real or something that was produced by your imagination. In other words, it would require an act of faith on my part to believe what you say, wouldn’t it?”

I shrugged my shoulders in defeat. “I guess so.”

“So if I were to tell you that there’s a Heaven, it would require an act of faith on your part to believe that it’s true.” He looked over at Duke. “You know that the world is out there, just as I know Heaven is there. If you believe in me, and I say that there really is a Heaven, then you must also believe that there is a Heaven.”

Duke seemed satisfied by this answer. But it was plain that Myron expected more questions and that He was prepared to answer them. He had set the guidelines in the beginning—the only topic which was verboten was anything pertaining to the reason for His return. Anything else was fair game.

My knees ached from sitting cross-legged; the tendons were stretched like new garters. I drummed my fingers on them and felt them vibrate like fiddle strings. I played a tune on them, something appropriately thoughtful and melancholy, like an empty room without windows.

“If there’s a Heaven,” I said when the tune was over, “then how do we get there?”

Myron looked at me with a soft, beatific expression. “The rules are simple,” He explained with what amounted to about the hundredth time since I’d known Him. I’d actually asked the question for the benefit of Duke, who had yet to hear it. “First of all,” Myron continued, “believe in me and my Father. Second, love yourselves and each other as you love me. There can be no room in your hearts for anger or hatred. And third, obey the commandments.” He was contemplative for a moment. Then He said, “Nothing has really changed but the time.”

My tendons tightened a full octave.

Myron went on. “I suppose it would be fair to sum it all up by saying that you should serve my Father. Serve Him not only in deed but in thought as well. Serve Him with your body, your mind and your soul. And serve no one *but* Him. Serve no other person; no other thing; no

other idea. For instance, you can't serve a government and still serve God. A government is an idea dreamed up by overly ambitious men, specifically designed to take the place of God, no matter how pious and reverent the people in charge might seem. You can't serve those people in charge either, and still serve God. And here's one example that's unfortunately all too common: you can't serve money—a mere earthly thing—and still serve my Father. It's either one or the other. You can't have both. So I guess if you really want to be assured of getting to Heaven, you should throw away your money and become an anarchist. Unfortunately, not too many people are keen on the idea of being poverty-stricken anarchists nowadays."

"I am," Duke said obediently. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "But then again, I never had much to give up anyway."

My knees by this time were screeching to be unwound. I stood up, hearing them pop, and wobbled unsteadily around the room. My shadow mimicked me cruelly. "Me, too," I assured Myron. But I was sure that He was aware of the uncertainty in my voice. I stuck my hand in my pocket then, and felt the ring, which had lain there forgotten for so long, and I could've sworn that it burned my fingers.

It was an awfully big step to ask of someone, I thought. At the same time that I was feeling ashamed of myself for thinking such a thought, I was also defending myself for being a victim of the pride that had plagued me for so long. Perhaps I'd thought that our present situation was only a temporary setback. Maybe I had visions of a future that revealed Myron enthroned in some fabulous palace with throngs of worshippers battling to have an audience with Him... and with me sitting right by His side.

But now Myron had painted the true picture. My testing had started on the road to Oregon... and it was never going to stop.

It was the first time that I began to think that maybe I'd bitten off just a tad more than I could chew.

23. nighttime on Pluto

"A room with a different view," is what Princess Joan had said.

I wondered hard and long what she'd meant by that; wondered, in fact, if it meant anything at all. Although she was beautiful, she wore her strangeness like a garment. She seemed wrapped in it, and so I found that I was suspicious of her motives in spite of persistent reproach from my libido. So many strange things had happened to me lately that I thought that I'd become jaded to it; that no matter what might happen in this room—and I felt fairly sure that something *would*—I didn't believe that I would even be surprised by it.

Outside our box of a room the moon had since risen, and though I couldn't see it, somehow I felt its presence. I felt light-headed, as though its gravity force affected my brain in some mysterious way as it hung in its own warm-fluid womb.

The night was long. I could hear both Myron and Duke breathing in easy, sleepy exhalations in the darkness. Nothing else. Nothing moved, not even the air. The world seemed to be holding its breath.

My mind, unwilling to lay down and sleep, spun circles like a restless dog. It paced the room, questioning, always questioning, on silent paws. What was I doing here in this bizarre place? Why had I *really* decided to follow Myron... and why, for that matter, had *He* chosen

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me? What did Duke have to do with the Second Coming? On the surface, he seemed an even more unlikely candidate for apostlehood than me... and yet he'd dropped his jacket on the sidewalk, and followed, and been—in only these few short hours—much more unselfishly devoted to Myron than I had been in all the weeks that I'd known Him.

And what about this place—this wax museum (where I'd seen no wax figures), and fortune emporium (?), and boarding house, with its exotic “gypsy” princess and rooms without windows? I was sure that Myron hadn't chosen this, out of all the places in the city, to stay the night without some reason. Surely it wasn't random. Who *was* this Princess Joan, whose odd beauty I found so tempting yet disquieting?

And what, most of all, was I *doing* here?

Full circle. See what I mean? And my restless dog imagination was off and pacing again.

I must've dozed off eventually, because I snapped suddenly awake in what must've been only a few minutes. Someone had opened the door. I couldn't see, of course, for it was still as dark as nighttime on Pluto, but I could sense that the door was open. Every hair on my body was alert and prickling, and I could feel a change in the air. A subtle change, like a shift in a magnetic field or the fluctuation of an electrical current. I was instantly reminded of the night in Oregon, when I'd awakened to find Myron floating beside the campfire. The others hadn't been disturbed; I could still hear their slow, peaceful breathing. I realized, without any conscious thought, that it must've been the click of the door latch that had awakened me.

Someone else was in the room; I sensed that too. Oddly, I wasn't afraid, even though I was aware that we were unarmed, unable to see, in an unfamiliar room, in a strange place, in Greenwich Village. Instead, I was expectant, almost euphoric, in spite of what I'd earlier considered to be my complacent attitude. I was still in thrall of that unexplainable sensation of energy, of great unseeable machinery in motion, as I had been in Oregon.

And then I heard the voice; soft, low, whispered. Even when whispered, it retained the odd conglomerate accent that I'd noticed earlier. It was Princess Joan's voice. She was talking to Myron.

I felt as though my unnoticed presence was an invasion of privacy, even though it was she who had entered, uninvited, in the middle of the night. Still, I couldn't help straining to hear her words.

“I know,” she said to Him, and my suspicions immediately fell to the wayside. “I know,” she whispered again. “The cards foretold your return. It is you. The Lord of Light. The Promised One. The cards don't lie.”

All was silent for a few minutes, but for the heavy night breathing of my two sleeping companions. Then a new sound emerged out of the darkness. It took a moment to identify, but at last I recognized it: the sound of water splashing gently in a pan. Then I smelled spices, pungent and strong, and I knew what she was doing.

It was an ancient tradition—a way of humbling oneself while honoring another. I'd read about it, a million years ago, in the only written source I'd ever seen it described—the Bible.

She was washing Myron's feet.

Princess Joan labored at her task a few minutes more and then she was gone, the door closing softly and the scent lingering behind her. And then I heard Myron sigh and ask the darkness, “Woman, did you really need the cards?”

24. my brain was still the boss

What can I say? Imagine, if you can, being witness to such a marvelous, heartfelt display of devotion. Imagine, if you can, what the events of that night meant to me.

What *can* I say? Up until that moment when I realized what Princess Joan was doing in the darkness of that windowless room, my life—in spite of Myron, in spite of everything that had happened to me since I'd known Him—had remained essentially unchanged. That is, I knew that the sun rose in the morning and set at night; that the world turned in one direction and at a specific speed; that it orbited the sun and that the sun was only an insignificant speck of fly poop in the overall scheme of the universe.

Up until that moment I'd had an image of myself: I had a past that I could look back on and, hopefully, a future that I could look forward to. I had a persona, an ego, a mind that allowed me to know these things. My brain—that fleshy, vulnerable and miraculous mass of neurons and synapses—was still the boss.

Up until that moment I'd known—or at least I *thought* I'd known—what reality was. Myron had once been a stranger, and had since become a friend. *That* was reality. I had once been married; I was thirty six years old; my parents were both dead, eaten by an automobile gone berserk. *That* was reality. I'd been telling myself that Myron was the Messiah. But as I've said before, I didn't *completely* believe that. Compared to what I felt that night, breathing spice and darkness, my faith had been little more than a knee-jerk reflex to His power and His aura of deep—if unorthodox—spirituality.

I had to admit—because of that strange and moving ritual—that none of my own concepts of reality counted anymore.

And now?

And now, well, who can really say what reality is? Maybe there *is* no reality. Maybe there's only Myron. Maybe reality is a room without windows in which a gypsy princess washes the feet of God.

Maybe there are only rooms. With a different view, of course. For now, at least, the world is still spinning.

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25. the Idaho Conspiracy Theory

I've never met anyone from Idaho. Never, to my knowledge, have I ever seen a car with Idaho license plates. I don't even know anyone who knows anyone *else* from Idaho.

Likewise, I've never met anyone who has ever posed in a men's magazine. You know the ones: Playboy, Penthouse, Hustler, and scores of cheaper and sleazier imitations. Page after page, issue after issue, month after month, year after year, they appear in all their natural splendor, in a constant, mind-boggling stream. Somewhere out there, there are literally thousands of these women shedding their inhibitions (along with their clothing) in literally hundreds of different magazines every year, yet I've never met even one.

Which, of course, led me to wonder.

Which, in turn, led me, many years ago, to hypostulate...

THE IDAHO CONSPIRACY THEORY

According to this theory, Idaho, in the normal sense, does not exist. What *does* exist, in the place where the state of Idaho *should* be, is a gigantic warehouse. We're talking huge here, folks. A warehouse to end *all* warehouses.

By the same token, the various and sundry women who pose so seductively for all those men's magazines do not exist either. Actually, each and every one of them is an absolutely perfect, anatomically correct, nuclear-powered android.

And where do these perfect reproductions come from?

That's right. You guessed it. From the warehouse in Idaho. Yup. They're ordered, requisitioned, packaged and delivered. Rented. With an option to buy.

Potatoes? From Idaho? Forget it—they're a front; a myth invented by the fiendish mastermind who runs the warehouse. Nope, no spuds... only cheesecake.

They even have a catalog...

"Joe? Hef, here,." He puffs meticulously on his meerschauum. "*We need a blonde for next month's centerfold.*" He listens intently with the telephone pressed against his ear. "*Well, I see a dandy on page 300 of the Idaho catalog. Have you got it handy? Good. Number 36D. Yes, I agree. Fill out the order form tonight, we should have her Tuesday.*" He hangs up the phone, draws at his pipe, and wanders off through the mansion to play with *last* month's model—remember the option to buy?

Of course, all of this is kept strictly secret. The greatest (i.e. the most devious) minds in the country are involved in the Idaho Conspiracy. It's considered one of the top priorities in national security. Because if the warehouse ever became public knowledge, the area now known as Idaho would collapse under the weight of every red-blooded American boy and man rushing to fulfill his American dream.

26. the frog's eye concept

The Idaho Conspiracy Theory may help demonstrate my long-standing pre-Myron attitude and philosophy, and explain just how difficult it was for me to change—really change—when I met Him. For me, what I couldn't see simply didn't exist. My own theories, as far as I was concerned, were as valid as anyone's. I wasn't actively seeking any Great Answer when I met Him. I was content with my own beliefs. People from Idaho, the Playmate of the Month, or God Himself, it didn't matter... I'd never met *any* of them, ergo there was no such thing. I couldn't help feeling that way. It wasn't something that I purposefully practiced. It was simply engrained in me. *I yam what I yam*, as the great philosopher Popeye would have said.

There's an interesting analogy, provided by Mother Nature herself, to my own state of mind when I met Myron: Frogs, it seems, can't see anything that doesn't represent either food or danger. Their brains won't let them. It's a scientific fact. They even have a name for it—the Frog's Eye Concept. Really. Ask a scientist. To a frog the sun, the moon, a beer can, or a Del Monico steak just *ain't*.

I could identify with that. I could see my wife (when I *had* a wife) and my job (when I had one) and my apartment (while I lived in it). Nothing else was real for me. Nothing else existed. Frog's Eye Concept, that was me.

And I *stayed* that way—if only to a degree—right up until the night that Princess Joan crept into our room; until her simple act of devotion confirmed my belief in Myron and made it *real* for me. Nothing before that had sunk in. *Nothing*.

So, thanks to Princess Joan, I finally abandoned the Idaho Conspiracy Theory and the Frog's Eye Concept, and was able to accept—*truly* accept—Myron as the Messiah.

27. an abdication in Greenwich Village

It was decided—by Myron, of course—that Princess Joan would become the third apostle. This was only fitting, I decided when I thought it over, since she, of the three of us, had perhaps demonstrated the most unquestioning faith in Myron—misguided though her method of discovering His identity might've been. She alone had found the most perfect way of showing Him her love and devotion. What *better* way than that described in the Bible, the history of his first incarnation? I almost felt jealous that I hadn't thought of it first. (And for this I felt the usual pang of guilt, because I knew that Joan had acted spontaneously and sincerely; there was nothing premeditated in her actions, as there would have been had it been me holding the washbasin.)

Myron announced her apostlehood the following morning and of course, Myron being Myron, no mention was made of her odd and unorthodox method of divining His identity. To Him, she had merely demonstrated a human shortcoming. It was simply forgiven and forgotten.

We were, of course, surprised by the announcement... Duke more than myself since he, as far as I knew, was unaware of the events of the past night. When his face betrayed his astonishment, Myron said simply, "If women can vote, they can be apostles."

And that was the end of that.

For Princess Joan's part, she promptly and humbly announced her abdication, and requested that in the future we simply address her as Joan.

And that was the way that Princess Joan became Joan the Apostle and, incidentally, the way that Myron Christ came to make New York City—and in particular an off-the-wall hole-in-the-wall on a dingy little street in Greenwich Village—His base of operations for the Second Coming.

28. another one bites the dust

Did you ever get a song stuck in your mind? You know what I mean—some totally ridiculous, inane tune that you don't even *like* somehow gets itself trapped in the convolutions of your brain and goes ricocheting from one tiny cerebral wall to the next, like a rat on acid in a labyrinth. You catch a couple of bars on the old Victrola and—WHAM—there it goes. An endless loop recording of *Feelings*, or *My Sharona*, or...

Another One Bites The Dust. That's the song that was playing in my own mind one morning not long after Joan had joined our little family as the third apostle.

I don't know where I picked up the little pest—I'd probably heard it somewhere, on the street maybe, when some fool passed by me with a boom box. For all I know, it may have been lying dormant in my brain for days, waiting for just the right moment to sneak up and surprise me like a coiled-spring snake in a peanut can.

We were sitting in the kitchen that faced an alley behind the Fortune Emporium—now the unofficial regional headquarters of Myron Christ and His Small Band of Apostles. Joan was toiling at the ancient gas stove, cooking pancakes. Her pancakes, which had become our traditional breakfast, tasted strange. I suppose it was a Bohemian recipe. I wondered what the ingredients were that made them taste that way, but I was afraid to ask.

Across the tiny table from me sat Duke and Myron Himself. There was friendly morning chatter, the rattle of pans, and the alien smell of Bohemian flapjacks in the air.

Duke was reading the Daily News. I was still in awe of the change in him.

I once saw a movie called *An American Werewolf In London*. Did you ever see it? There's an incredible scene in the film in which the star is turned literally cell by cell into a werewolf right before the audience's eyes. It's shocking because you actually see it happening. It's graphic and brutal and ugly. You can almost *feel* the agony of transformation. It's complete and absolute.

Well, that's the way it was with Duke, only the opposite was happening—he was changing from something ugly and violent into something beautiful. I could see it happening minute by minute and day by day; the werewolf shedding his skin to reveal a pure spirit underneath. Single frame photography and the best film editors in the world couldn't have done a better job.

He was into the middle section of the paper when he suddenly closed it and crumpled it in his hands. He looked at me with a shocked and sad expression.

"What's wrong?" I asked with concern.

His gaze travelled from my face to Myron's and back again. There was a pitiful look in his eyes. "One of my brothers got himself killed last night," he said.

another one bites the dust...

Myron blessed him with a soft smile tinged with sadness. "How did it happen, Duke?" He asked.

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Duke shook his head with what might have been disgust. “The same way any of us gets it. He got shot. Right in the middle of the street. They don’t know who did it... probably don’t even *care*.”

Joan lowered the flame under the flapjacks, came over behind Duke, and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Duke,” she said softly, nearly breaking my heart with her accent and the tone of sympathy in her voice.

“Me, too,” I said. What can you say when things like this happened? I think I knew where Duke was coming from—though he had turned away from the gang, they were as close to being his true brothers as anyone in the world.

He shook his head again. “No, don’t be sorry, any of you. He knew what he was getting into. We all did. It was just a chance you had to take. Knowing I could buy it any time never really meant much to me... until now. We were punks and bigmouths and we fooled ourselves into believing we *had* something. We thought we were big... as long as the rest of the gang was standing behind us.” He eased back in his chair and now smiled almost wistfully. “We thought we could take on the whole world. We really did.” He shook his head for the third time and lowered his eyes to the crumpled paper in his hands. Then he held it up for all of us to look at and consider. “But this is where it ends. Every time. And I don’t mean the society page.”

...and another one gone...

Duke turned toward Myron. I thought I’d seen a faint light of hope glimmer momentarily in his eyes and then vanish. Myron must’ve seen it too, because he said, “What a man would give for the life of his brother, is how he shall be measured in the eyes of the Lord.”

...and another one gone...

Duke lowered his eyes. “Not for the likes of him. I mean, I couldn’t ask...”

“You don’t need to ask,” Myron interrupted. “It’s already been done.”

another one bites the dust...

I noticed before anyone else that the flapjacks were beginning to burn. Hesitantly, Joan returned to the stove to try to salvage them, but it was no use. She dumped them into the trash.

It didn’t matter anyway, because no one was hungry anymore. For a little while we all just kind of froze there, not knowing what to say or do, trying to absorb the significance of what Myron had just said. Slowly, one by one, the others just sort of drifted away, until I was left alone at the table with a hundred thousand thoughts careening through my mind and colliding with that damned dreaded song that wouldn’t leave me in peace.

I stared at the newspaper. I took it in my hands. It was no different than any paper you might pick up from the old crippled immigrant with the bad teeth who runs the corner newsstand. It was made of newsprint and ink, and it had the same headlines, and it weighed no more than any other. But I held it like an icon, like a piece of the True Cross, like a scrap from the Shroud of Turin. But of course, finally, I opened the paper. I didn’t *want* to. But I found myself doing it anyway. I looked on every page. I knew there was no story in there about a boy being shot. I knew that it had no longer happened. But I had to look anyway. I had to be *sure*.

...another one bites the dust...

Before I left the kitchen, I took the newspaper over to the trash can and stuffed it in with the ruined flapjacks, as if I was hiding the evidence of my own weakness.

29. wax

One drizzly afternoon I was puttering around the Emporium with nothing particular to do, when my eye caught that old cash register sitting on the counter in the front room.

I meandered over and ran a hand over it. It was a beautiful piece of work—they really *don't* make 'em like that anymore. I'd say it must've been seventy-five years old if it was a day. Its tarnished brass surface was covered in fine scrollwork and filigree, reminding me more of a classical musical instrument than a piece of utilitarian hardware. Out of curiosity, I tried to lift it. It probably ran eighty, eighty-five pounds.

The red NO SALE sign was flying in the window. Hardly thinking about what I was doing, I pressed the \$1 key. Nothing happened. So I pressed a few more keys, kind of absently, and still nothing happened.

Being an ex-handyman, I felt the stirrings of an urge. My interest was piqued, and like I said, I didn't have anything else to do, so I gave in to the urge and did what I suppose any ex-handyman would do when faced with something in a bad state of don't-work. I browsed around under the counter, hoping that Joan kept a few tools handy just in case an ex-handyman should happen along. There was an amazing collection of junk under there, but not even the least little screwdriver. So I went out to the kitchen, grabbed a butter knife, and headed back. I looked the machine over one more time, decided on a course of action, and bent to my task.

A few minutes later I had the side panel off and the insides were peeking at daylight for the first time in probably fifty years.

"It's never worked since I moved in here..." a voice said from the doorway leading to the kitchen. I stood up abruptly from my work and dropped the butter knife.

"...but it looks so pretty just sitting there that I decided to leave it," Joan finished.

"You scared me half to death," I blurted out, scooping the knife from the floor. "I thought you were out with the others."

"I'm sorry," she said with a smile as she came into the room. "I didn't mean to scare you. I was upstairs in my room. I thought *you* were out with the others."

I shrugged my shoulders self-consciously. I felt as if I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't have been doing, despite the fact that my tinkering with the register was perfectly innocent. "Oh... well... no, I've been right here all along." It was a foolish thing to say, but I didn't know what *else* to say. She was so beautiful that whenever I was around her I always felt... *goofy*. I'd noticed that she no longer wore makeup or jewelry (having thrown herself over to Myron with such a passion, she must've considered it sinful), but it didn't matter. She was still stunning. Her accent intensified the effect. It was like being around a movie star.

We looked at each other for an awkward moment until I had to force my eyes back to the register. "I thought I'd just fool around with this thing and maybe get it working," I said, aware of how idiotic I must've sounded.

"Do you know much about such machines?" she asked, seeming to be genuinely interested.

"Well, not really," I replied. "I know a little about most any machine. I'm a handy—that is, I *was*—a handyman. Back a long time ago."

I sensed that she wasn't really satisfied with my answer, but she didn't say anything. Still put off by her presence, I returned to work. I poked around in the gears and prodded at this gizmo or that. I still hadn't found the problem, but I figured I soon would. It wasn't complicated at all—not like the new electronic jobs with their micro-chips and memories and

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super-conductors and what-have-you. Mostly gears and springs, this old beauty. In the back of my mind I was thinking of how ludicrously difficult it would be to find replacement parts if any were needed.

"How long have you been with Myron?" she asked at length.

"A few months," I answered offhandedly, without looking up. "It's been quite an experience. We went to Oregon together."

"Ah," she said, as if this meant something to her. Actually, I doubt if she knew any more about Oregon than most people know about Bohemia.

"But to tell the truth," I added, turning to look up at her, "I'm still not quite sure what He expects of me. I mean I *do*, and I *don't*. Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded in thought. "Perhaps it is enough for Him to know what He expects of you."

I shrugged my shoulders in semi-agreement. That was easy enough to *say*; still, it would have been nice to know for sure. "I suppose so," I murmured into the register.

"Are you happy with Him?" she asked, making it seem like a very innocent, conversational kind of question. I wondered why she asked it at all.

"Of course I'm happy with Him," I answered without hesitation, turning my head to look at her. "Why? Don't I seem like I'm happy?"

"Sometimes," she answered.

"Well, I am."

"Of course. I apologize for asking."

"Have you got something sharp?" I asked in an effort to change the subject. "I think the framistan is hung up on the garanator and I can't get it loose with this butter knife." Actually, something was caught in one of the springs, but I didn't want her to know just how mundane a job it really was. I *know*... my pride again. Tell me about it.

"Just a moment," she replied, and then disappeared into a back room. She came back a minute later and handed me a knife. Actually, it was more of a dagger, sheathed in a leather scabbard. I drew it slowly out. The blade was long and wicked and the bone handle was encrusted with jewels. I didn't know if they were real or not, but it didn't matter—it was still beautiful.

"God, this is gorgeous," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"My father gave it to me," she said. "To protect myself from crazy Americans."

"Ever had to use it?" I asked, chuckling.

"Only once," she answered laconically.

The chuckle died in my throat, but I forced a humorless smile. I went back to work, freed the spring, and tinkered a bit more. "Could I ask you something?" I said, glancing up at her.

"If you like."

"Well, I know you tell fortunes—palm reading... tarot cards?"

She nodded. "I *used* to tell fortunes."

"Yeah, right," I nodded back. "You used to. And you rent rooms, I guess. I mean, you rented one to *us*. So I can see where you'd call this place a boarding house. But it's that other part—the wax museum—that stumps me. I've been thinking about it a lot, and I'm damned if I can figure it out. What does that mean? Was it something that you planned that fell through?"

She eyed me intently for a minute, as if trying to guess my intentions, then turned away and walked to the other side of the room. She just stood there, looking out the window with

her back to me. At last she turned around. Her expression was a mystery. “There *are* wax figures,” she said, but she kept her voice low, as if this was some kind of state secret. “But they aren’t exactly the same as the ones you see in other wax museums. These are special. From the *old country*.” She put the strangest emphasis on the last two words, as if they implied much more than they said.

I said nothing, waiting to hear more.

“They tell the future,” she said plainly, as if she were telling me that it was raining, or it was ten after two in the afternoon.

I kind of coughed politely into my fist while I tried to keep a serious expression on my face. “They tell the future,” I repeated.

“You don’t believe me,” she said incredulously, as if disbelief was the last thing she would’ve expected.

“Well, gee-*whiz*, Joan. It just sounds so *spooky*. You mean you’ve got a bunch of wax dummies that talk?”

“You’re making fun of me,” she said, and she looked so insulted that I was immediately sorry. Joan wasn’t the kind of woman you’d want to hurt—when she looked wounded, she could tear your heart out.

“Hey, okay,” I said, “I apologize. I was only kidding. Okay, so you’ve got wax figures that tell the future. Why not? If someone had told me six months ago that I’d be an apostle and live in Greenwich Village I would’ve laughed in his face. But I’m not laughing now.”

She was silent for a moment, studying my face and maybe deciding if I really was serious. “It’s true,” she said. “They are a family heirloom. I’ve sworn never to use them again—somehow it just wouldn’t seem right since Myron has come—but I don’t suppose it would do any harm to just show them to you.” Her eyes flashed darkly. “Just so you’ll *really* believe me,” she added.

Well, if she was willing to show me these wonder-waxworks, the least I could do was go along. After all, I was an adventurous kind of guy. If I wasn’t, would I have been where I was in the first place?

She took me by the hand (I immediately felt giddy, like a love-sick schoolboy) and led me to the stairway. We went up to the second floor, past the windowless room where Myron, Duke and I now spent every night, and to the end of the hallway. She opened a door that gave onto another set of stairs. It was dark and narrow inside the stairwell. We slowly made our way up to the third floor that I had never seen.

At the top of the stairs we stepped into a large, open room, like an attic (which I suppose it had once been; even now the conversion was incomplete). Gray light filtered in through wide, grimy windows. Against one wall was a canopied bed. Opposite the bed stood the largest vanity I’d ever seen. An old curtain draped the gigantic mirror (more evidence of her war against self-pride, I assumed). Scattered among now-unused makeup and lipstick rolls I could make out strange jimmyjohns and doomafetchies, which might’ve held some significant place in her former occult occupation.

One end of the room was separated by a bead curtain, which hung from ceiling to floor.

“This is my room,” she said dramatically. She went immediately to the bead curtain, swept it aside, and waved me in. “I keep them in here,” she said.

I stepped past the curtain and into another time.

The space beyond the curtain was about twelve feet square. There weren’t any chairs. Instead, there were several huge, ornate cushions scattered on the floor. Peeking out from

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under them, I could see a beautiful Persian rug. I had no doubt that it was authentic and very, very old. Lavish tapestries covered every inch of wall space. Directly in the center, like a miniature obelisk, stood a small pedestal of some dark and obviously ancient wood. It was about two feet high and one across. On it lay a few small, multicolored lumps.

I stared curiously at them, noticing for the first time the same scent of herbs and spices that I'd smelled in our room the night that Joan had come to honor Myron with the ritual bath.

"Sit," she said, indicating the cushion nearest the pedestal. She took one herself and sat cross-legged, waiting for me.

I sat down, feeling numb.

"These," she said, waving her lovely hand at the small lumps, "are the wax figures. They are not quite what you expected?"

"Right," I said. "They are not quite. They tell the future?"

She nodded gravely.

"How do they work?" I asked, fascinated.

"It's difficult to explain. Do you know anything about the way a crystal ball works?"

I shook my head. "To be honest, I never believed *any* of those things worked."

She smiled as if she was quite used to skepticism. "Well," she explained automatically, as if she'd gone through this routine a hundred times, which she probably had, "the crystal ball works because it helps to empty the mind of all outside influences and allows the seer to separate himself from all that is around him at that moment. Once the present is removed, the future can make itself known."

I nodded uncertainly, still eyeing the figures. I felt drawn to them in some unexplainable way. I suddenly realized that I was sweating and decided that I didn't care.

"These," Joan went on, "work in much the same way. They have no shape, you see? There is nothing to see in them... nothing but the future."

"Would I be able to see the future in them?" I asked. I didn't know why that was suddenly very important to me, but it was. My mouth was dry; I found it difficult to get the words out.

"That depends," she answered.

"On what?"

"On whether you really *want* to see." Her eyes darkened ominously. "Sometimes what is yet to come is not pleasant." I didn't know if she was serious or whether this was a part of what had once been a vaudevillian routine for her. But what she said reminded of something Myron had said in the pawnshop: "Sometimes what you see is *less* than what you get". And I wondered why it was that I was suddenly so willing to believe that these ridiculous lumps of wax could foretell the future, when I found it so difficult to believe wholeheartedly in Myron.

I heard myself say, "I want to see."

But Joan was shaking her head. "No, Marko."

I felt as if I wanted to choke her. Why did she bring me here only to turn me away without *showing* me? "What do you mean *no*!" I shouted. "You said they work. What harm could it do to let me try!"

If Joan was frightened by my sudden rage, she didn't show it. She answered me calmly, "What harm could it do to lose your faith? You believe in Myron. To believe in Him is to believe that tomorrow will come and everything will be as it should be. Faith is blind, Marko. To require proof is to deny your faith."

Her words, and the tone of her voice, blew away my anger like a puff of smoke. It was true, of course. Every word of it. What she said was nothing more than what Myron had been saying all along. Why couldn't I rely on my faith? Why did I always have to see the proof? Just like the newspaper... I didn't *want* to look in it. But I did anyway.

I was overcome with shame and guilt. I felt weak and foolish. "I'm sorry, Joan," I said, hanging my head.

She touched my hair, gently, lovingly. "It's alright, Marko. Everyone must find his own way."

A few minutes later, laden with mixed emotions, we went back down the dark stairwell and soon I was standing beside the ancient register again. But I couldn't bring myself to work on it. All I could think about was my own weakness... and a few little shapeless lumps of wax.

As I buttoned the register back up and left the job for some future handyman to finish, I couldn't help thinking that once again I had been tested... and that in some way that I didn't even understand, I had failed. And the brutal truth was that I was beginning to think that I was soon going to do something very, very stupid.

30. there's a bad moon on the rise

I tried to sleep that night, really I did. I squeezed my eyelids so tightly shut that I thought they would scream, until the muscles writhed in agony, until phantom lights exploded in kaleidoscope patterns in the darkness behind them.

I *tried* to sleep, oh, yes, but all I could think about were those little shapeless lumps lying on their pedestal one floor above me.

If I had only been able to fall asleep, I honestly believe that some of the things that later came to pass might never have happened. Maybe I tipped some weird cosmic scale; or maybe I opened myself up to some sort of auto-suggestion which implanted the *idea* of those things in my mind. I sometimes wonder if it isn't possible to change our destiny simply by tempting Fate. Of course, it's possible that everything would've happened anyway, just the way it did. That nothing would've been different, no matter what I did. Who knows? Some people say that our lives are intertwined with the lives of every other person... that we make a thousand little decisions every day, and any one of those decisions can change the future and affect the lives of a countless number of strangers... some of whom might not even be *born* yet.

A drastic example:

A housewife has a Bad Day. The kids have been driving her crazy, the washing machine overflowed, and the dog pissed on the new living room carpet. Now her husband is late getting home from work and the roast, which she so diligently and lovingly prepared, bears an uncanny resemblance to a large charcoal briquet. Now normally, she's a sweet-tempered woman who wouldn't harm a hair on a fly's head, but today has been a Bad Day, and she decides that when hubby gets home she is going to, if humanly possible, commit murder with a three pound beef briquet.

Barely escaping with his life, hubby jumps back into the trusty Buick (sometimes known as the Domestic Violence Escape Pod) and decides to go Out For A Drink until his wife regains her sanity or Hell freezes over, whichever comes first. In the course of his travels, he must cross more than a dozen intersections, at which he must make a dozen decisions—left, right or

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forward? In the process—and before he can even find a bar—he is rear-ended by an over-loaded semi and propelled into the path of another car, killing himself and the other driver.

Bad enough, right? But there's more. Had he lived, the other guy would've married a young woman with just the right genes, and, combining his own with hers, they would've produced a fine, healthy, bouncing baby boy. And forty-three years later, that same little boy would've been the victor in a crucial presidential election, narrowly defeating one of the most unscrupulous candidates in the history of the United States.

Instead, our unscrupulous candidate wins by a landslide, and proceeds to cause economic chaos, civil unrest, and World War III. All because the right opponent wasn't there to beat him, because his father wasn't there, because a stranger made the wrong decision at some unimportant intersection, after having decided to go Out For A Drink, because his wife decided to take it all out on her husband because she had a Bad Day.

It might've never happened—but then again, maybe it *has* happened. Maybe it's happened more than once.

So maybe my decision to get up that night changed my own destiny, which changed Myron's destiny, which changed *everybody's* destiny.

Or—how's this for conjecture?—maybe it was simply my fate to get up that night. Maybe I was *meant* to get up and do what I did. Look, I know I'm grasping at straws here, folks... I mean, nobody likes to admit they screwed up. So sometimes I believe I'm a victim of fate. Sue me, I'm only human. All I'm suggesting is that maybe it wasn't me who was pulling the strings that night.

So, anyway, one minute I'm tossing and turning, trying to sleep, and the next minute I find myself in Joan's room. Of course I must've gone downstairs first, to make sure that Joan was in the front room, behind the partition, praying and meditating as she did every night, but I don't remember doing it. I remember that the moonlight was seeping through the grimy windows, making everything look pale blue. The beaded curtain sparkled invitingly, letting me know it was friendly, telling me everything was OK.

I rummaged around on the vanity and found a candle. I lit it and stepped through the curtain. I sat down on one of the cushions near the pedestal and set the candle down on the floor beside me. The wax figures lay where they had before, undisturbed. I could hear Joan saying "sometimes what is yet to come is not pleasant", and felt cold fingers playing chopsticks up and down on my spine. But no matter how *wrong* all this felt, I was caught up in it; I felt as much able to control my own actions as a bird when instinct tells him to fly north. I wouldn't say I was exactly in a trance, but I was as close as I'd ever been—or ever *want* to be—to one.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, tried to clear my thoughts as much as I could, and opened my eyes again. Choosing one of the lumps, I began concentrating on it, allowing myself to think of nothing at all. At first, nothing happened. Then, before I even realized it consciously, the colors in the wax began to swirl slowly. It seemed as though it was growing larger, expanding outward, until there was absolutely *nothing else*. As it spread outward, I felt it surround me, and in the space of a heartbeat, or an eternity, I became a part of the dancing, whirling colors.

Blackness followed—I don't know how long it lasted. But it was unlike anything I've ever experienced. It was complete and utter; a light vacuum; a Nothing. When it passed, I saw someone sitting on a bare wooden floor at some distance from me. There was a circle of light surrounding him like a single spotlight, as if he was an actor in a soliloquy. Wisps of fog,

trailing sinuously through the light, obscured him. It was several moments before I realized that he was me.

Something glinted in my image's hand, silvery and somehow ominous. Above my head I could see a golden halo; but no, not *exactly* a halo. When I looked more closely, I saw that it was a ring. A diamond ring of gold.

The silvery something flashed and I saw my image slump to the floor.

This scene faded; I next saw Myron—He was staring out through a window. There were bars on the window. His eyes fixed on me and I felt as though He was accusing me of something terrible.

I didn't want to see any more—I was filled with dread, although I didn't understand why. I didn't understand any of the things I'd seen. All I knew, all I *felt*, was that something horrible was going to happen. And I would play a part in it.

The next thing I knew I was back in Joan's room, lying with my face half buried in one of the cushions. My clothes were soaking wet with perspiration and I was shaking all over. Having looked into the wax, the spell—that feeling of powerlessness—was gone. I'd seen into the future, but even more, I now saw myself as I really was... weak and faithless. Joan had tried to warn me, but it hadn't done any good.

I laid there for a few minutes, trying to regain my composure enough to sneak away. My legs felt so wobbly that I didn't think I could walk.

At last, I was able to get up, return the candle, and sneak back down the stairs like a thief in the night.

By the time I returned to our room, I had resolved that I would do everything I could to fix things... to make myself worthy of Myron again... and most importantly, to prevent the grim prophecy of the wax from coming true. But an old song came back to me, and the chorus began to repeat itself over and over again:

*Don't go 'round tonight,
it's bound to end your life.
There's a bad moon on the rise.*

5 CHAPTER FIVE

31. that splendid little corner of Rome

I believe, dear reader, that there is a pressing need at this moment to go in an entirely different direction in the telling of this history... first of all because my last confession, which although it may have been good for my soul, has made me extremely uncomfortable and I therefore feel a need to talk about other things... and second of all because our story must continue, and in order to do that I have to draw your attention to some seemingly irrelevant points of interest along the way.

For instance:

Did you know that the smallest independent state in the world is also among its richest? Only a few square miles in area, its treasury boasts billions of dollars in gold, silver, jewelry and artwork. It owns thousands—maybe even millions—of acres of prime land in the United States alone, upon which it pays not one single red cent in taxes. Its patriarch has more subjects than the entire population of Europe. It has no army to speak of, yet it has been involved in countless wars.

This state that I speak of was founded, nearly two thousand years ago, by a man named Peter. Peter had good intentions, but very little political sense. For all the trouble he went through, in the end he wound up being beheaded. The strangest aspect of his death was this: he went *willingly*. Like I said, he had almost no political savvy—but then again, maybe he was so eager to lose his head because he somehow foresaw all the trouble that would soon follow.

I'm referring, of course, to the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican. You know—that splendid little corner of Rome where the Pope hangs out. Castel Gandolfo; St. Peter's Basilica... any of those names ring a bell?

Oh, *that* Vatican!

Well, allow me, if you will, to draw your undivided attention to a few little details that you might have missed concerning the illustrious history of the Vatican.

First, its reputation hasn't always been as... *untarnished* as you might have heard. For all of Peter's good intentions, by the Middle Ages the Vatican had become little more than a huge and well-appointed house of ill repute. That's right, folks, a cathouse. The Chicken Ranch of the Italian Peninsula. Several Popes (who are supposed to be the incarnation of the chaste Peter) died of syphilis within its very walls.

And speaking of Popes, it might surprise you to know how many plots and conspiracies, and even murders, took place down through the course of history in order that the "right man" got to wear the tall hat.

And let us take a good look at some of the gifts that have been bestowed upon us by our friends in the Vatican:

The Spanish Inquisition—remember that little carnival of horrors?—was produced by the blessings of the Vatican. I'm sure that was a comfort to the thousands of innocent people who

were tortured, maimed and killed at the hands of those oh-so-pious priests who committed every form of indecency in the very name of decency. In the name of Christ Himself.

And how 'bout those Crusades?—the bloody, barbaric, seemingly endless wars meant to bring the “salvation” of the Cross to the pagans of the Middle East. These, too, were hatched in the fevered brain of a fat, syphilitic tyrant. All in the name of Christianity.

The Thirty Years War, the Troubles in Ireland, the Protestant Reformation—the list just goes on and on. The Vatican—in whose affairs no government can meddle—has tangled its knotted fingers in international matters of peace and war for more than twenty centuries. It has started wars, but never ended them. It has taken sides, but never fought in them. It has crowned kings, queens and emperors. It hands out blessings like penny candy—believe it or not, even Adolph Hitler received blessings from the Pope... and kept it until it became obvious even to the blind eyes of the Mother Church that he could never win.

So you see? The Roman Catholic Church—the very church of Jesus Christ, founded by His own disciple—seems to have slipped off the Rock.

Now before you throw this on the fire and damn me for a heretic, I want you to know that I'm not bringing this up just to air the Pope's dirty laundry. There's a reason for it, and you'll understand if you'll just bear with me for a little while longer.

32. it's not nice to fool with Mother Nature

I once asked Myron why, since He was the Messiah, He never went to church either to attend or minister.

He immediately launched into a tirade so strong that I was appalled. I'd never seen Him so livid. It was then that I learned the previously mentioned facts about the seat of the Roman Catholic Church.

“Where,” He asked, his face alive with anger, “did they ever get the idea that my Father's house should be filled with gold? Did I ever mention that that was some kind of requirement? Look inside a church nowadays—any church—and what do you see? Gold! Everywhere! And false idols—it seems to me that I read somewhere Don't Worship False Idols.” He turned to regard me directly. “Didn't I say that?” But before I could respond he went on raving. “So what do they do? First thing, they set up this gigantic golden cross. And statues all over the place! When did I ever say there should be *statues!*”

He paced the room, fuming. “And what happens to all that money they collect? Where does it go? To the poor people who can't even afford a decent meal or a roof over their heads? Not a chance! They scoop it up like bookies, and—poof!—right back to the Vatican, *that's* where it goes! They make the Bank of England look like a bunch of pikers!”

He pinned me down with an icy glare. “And the Catholics aren't the only ones... oh, no. I've watched television. I've seen all those shows... *'send us money, here's the Prayer Line number, keep those greenbacks rollin' in!*' And the poor people who are taken in by a bunch of three hundred dollar suit-wearing hypocrites get nothing but poorer. They think they can *buy* salvation—and the so-called evangelists say *'yes! yes, you can!'* In my name! The liars!”

He suddenly slumped, and the anger went out of Him. He looked unbearably sad. “Somewhere along the line,” He said, His voice full of sorrow, “the message got totally screwed up.

All I said was be *nice* to one another. And now it seems like everyone is going around damning each other to Hell if they don't believe the same way."

Once again, His demeanor changed and He seemed to grow taller and stronger; fierce and powerful. "The time is coming, though," He said boldly, "when the churches will tremble and the hypocrites will fall to their knees in fear. I tore down the Temple once; I could do it again."

I was reminded of a bumper sticker I'd seen once. It read:

JESUS IS COMING, AND BOY IS HE PISSED!

Only I hadn't ever thought that the churches would be the thing He'd be the most pissed about. Especially the *Catholic* church. I'd just sort of assumed—like a lot of people, I guess—that since it was His idea in the first place, it was sort of automatically blessed or something.

I asked Him what He meant about tearing it down, but His answer, while provocative, was an unsatisfying "you'll see."

I filed that away, like so many other things Myron had said, for future reference.

Actually, I hadn't given it much thought until one day long after. I was alone with Myron that morning. It was a Sunday. Duke and Joan had gone out. I noticed that Myron was wearing a very smug expression on His face—very uncharacteristic. He looked like the cat that swallowed the canary. "What's up?" I asked Him.

I'm afraid I can't say right now, Marko," He said.

"You got something going on?"

"You might say that. But I can't talk about it right now."

I shrugged my shoulders. "If you say so," I said, knowing that I'd get no more information out of Him. I went out into the kitchen to find something to eat. When I got back, Myron was gone.

He was out for the rest of the morning. He finally returned just after noon. But He certainly didn't look like He had the last time I saw Him. Oh, no. This was a Myron I'd never seen before. His clothes were disheveled and dirty, His hair was askew, and He was sweating for the first time since I'd known Him. He looked for all the world as if He'd been in a barroom brawl.

"What the hell happened to you!" I cried without thinking when I laid eyes on Him.

He smiled with what I took to be enormous satisfaction. "I was taking care of business," He said simply, catching His breath.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes," He answered with a wave of His hand. "I'm fine. All I need is a shower and I'll be good as new."

But, Myron," I insisted. "What's happened?"

"I promise," He said over His shoulder as He headed off, "you'll get all the details soon."

It was evening before I found out what had happened that morning, and the meaning of His strange behavior. It was a much longer time before I realized the tremendous significance of the morning's events, both for Myron and myself.

Just after supper, Myron announced that He was going out. "Just for a minute," He promised. "I'll be back in a flash." Duke and Joan gave me a puzzled look.

"I'm not sure what's going on either," I told them, shrugging my shoulders. "He's been up to something all day, but I don't know what. But I have a feeling we're about to find out."

Ever true to His word, Myron returned in only a few minutes. He had the evening edition of the News tucked under one arm. He sat down immediately at the kitchen table, spread out the paper, and buried Himself in it, flipping over each page after only the quickest of glances.

The rest of us were left to watch in dumb curiosity.

“Aha!” He cried suddenly, startling all of us. “Here it is!” He folded the paper over and laid it on the table before us. Then He pointed a finger at a small article in the middle of the page.

I looked... and felt my stomach do a slow, sickening roll as I read the small headline.

“MAN GOES BERSERK IN CHURCH,” it announced grimly. The article went on to say how a man interrupted Mass at a local Catholic church that morning, first by verbally assaulting the priest, and then by knocking down candles, statues, and even the Pulpit. All the while, he was heard to be quoting the Scriptures at the top of his lungs. He was quoted as describing the Catholic church as a nest of vipers and money mongers, dedicated not to God, but to the Almighty Dollar. Before disappearing, he gathered up the collection plates and heaved the money into the street. Some of the money was returned; however a sizable portion disappeared, probably into the pockets of “opportunists”, according to a church official.

I slumped down into a chair and closed my eyes in exasperation. “Oh, Myron, what’ve you done?” I murmured. It’s not nice to fool with Mother Nature—but it’s *suicide* to mess with the Catholics.

“Done, Marko?” He asked in surprise. “Why, I’ve condemned the money-changers who have taken up residence in my Father’s house.”

Oh, Myron...

33. the tears of God

It’s occurred to me that I’ve been talking and talking about Myron—Myron did this, and Myron said that—and yet you’ve probably gathered nothing at all from my narration about who Myron actually *is*. Oh, sure, the *Messiah*. I’ve probably said that, at a rough count, at least a hundred times so far. But not a word about Myron Himself... not the Son of God... not the Messiah... just the Myron that I, after almost a year, came to know and, yes, to love.

There are some things about Him that I suppose I’ll go to my grave remembering. Most of all, I think it is His eyes—the color of steel, the color of storm clouds—that I’ll remember. When He smiled, it seemed as though they allowed His inner light to escape through them. When He was angry, they flashed like lightning, seeing through you, seeing *inside* you.

There’s one other thing that I think is important to remember, and this is it: Myron was a *man*. That was the way it was supposed to be, of course, and that much, if nothing else, closely paralleled His previous life. Although the circumstances of His birth were beyond our understanding and divine in origin, He was born of woman and suffered the frailties common to mankind. As a child, He was aware of Himself, of who He was, yet He had to learn what it was to grow and mature like any other child. Being Spirit in the form of man, He had to experience the world in order to save it. And in order to know the world’s pain, He would have to suffer. Not exactly in the same way as the last time, but at least equally.

Myron spoke often of His parents. It was easy to see that He loved them deeply. His mother’s name was Esther. He shared the same feelings for Esther that He still felt for Mary, although

they were fresher, perhaps more earthly, simply because they were more recent. In a word, He *adored* her, nearly as much as He adored His Father.

There is, of course, no real way for me to describe Myron's emotions. He is, after all, Pure Love, and that love goes beyond anything that a mortal, such as myself, can comprehend. Yet His love for His parents—both natural and supernatural—went even beyond *that*. How could I describe an emotion beyond the purest love?

Like before, Myron was born to humble beginnings. Both Esther and Simon, His earthly father, were refugees from the Holocaust. Simon had run a little shop in Brussels where he made and sold ceramics. At first, when the Nazis invaded, he had dim hopes that things would somehow return to normal. Someone somewhere, he thought, would put a stop to all the insanity. But he continued to be harassed, like all the other Jewish shopkeepers, by thugs and strong-arms shielded by Nazi authority. As time passed, many of his friends suddenly disappeared; taken from their homes in the dark of night. The official explanation was that they were sent to work in German factories, and were well paid for their contributions to the war effort. But the *explanation* did little to explain why widows and orphans were disappearing as well. Simon himself was subjected to lengthy questioning, sometimes beaten, and forced to wear an armband with a Star of David on it. His shop was seized and the merchandise confiscated or destroyed. Not long after, he was told by a German officer that he would be "relocated". Which, by then he knew, meant a concentration camp.

Terrified, he made contact with the underground, and eventually made his way to England. He had no money left. The cost of his freedom had been high indeed—he had spent all of his life savings. Eventually, he found work in a slaughterhouse—the only job he could find. He spent the war years there, in a small village not far from London, where he could hear the blitz in the distance every night and smell the stench of the slaughterhouse nearby. The putrid smell of slaughtered animals was, he thought grimly, what a concentration camp would smell like; the dull reverberations of the bombs exploding in London a constant reminder that even here he might not be safe. The sky to the east glowed a dull orange in the night, a false dawn. He lay in his bed, watching the night sky through the window, and waited for the Nazis to come and break down his door.

It was after the war had ended that he met Esther—she had escaped from Czechoslovakia at around the same time that Simon had escaped from Belgium. They were two misplaced Jews in a strange country who naturally gravitated to each other. They had no way of knowing that somewhere far back in time they had a common ancestor. They were also blissfully unaware that, because of that ancestor, they were both descendants of King David himself.

Although Simon didn't know it, Esther had narrowly escaped being raped by a gang of SS soldiers in Czechoslovakia. She'd been on her way home from what passed as a market, carrying a small bundle of half-rotten turnips, when the four of them stepped out of a building and blocked her way.

"Very pretty," said one, leering at her like a starving dog.

"But probably a Jew," said another. "She *looks* like a Jewess."

"Are you a Jewess?" asked the first, his voice as sweet as molasses laced with cyanide.

Esther said nothing. Although she was frightened half to death, she somehow knew that she would be alright. In her head, she heard a voice saying, "No harm will come to you. You are blessed as Mary was blessed."

And what was she to make of *that*? But she had no time to give any thought to it. The two

SS men who hadn't yet spoken suddenly grabbed her from behind and all four of them pulled her into a narrow alley. Her clothing was torn rudely apart. The eyes of the men were shining with the prospect of shredding the dignity of a Jew, and their black uniforms were the color of her despair. The first of the men was lowering his black trousers when a bullet entered his back directly between his shoulder blades. It exited through his chest, leaving a gaping hole as big around as a grapefruit. The same bullet travelled on, hitting another of the men in the neck. Both men dropped immediately; the one who had been shot in the neck clutching his throat and gagging on his own blood and the other not moving at all.

The other two pulled out their Lugers, but it was plain that the fight had been scared out of them. They waved their guns in wild desperation, not knowing where to shoot. The shot (or shots; they both thought it was two separate bullets) had seemed to come out of nowhere, and neither had heard a report. Esther watched them disappear into the alley, dragging their dead and dying companions behind them.

She herself skulked home, wrapping her tattered clothes around her, crying silently, terrified that more SS men would follow, would come to what was left of her home and smash down the door and drag her out into the street and shoot her. But no one followed her. She never knew who had saved her. As far as she knew, there was no Resistance in her village; she was quite sure that no one even owned a gun anymore. All that she knew was that a voice had told her she would be safe and now, miraculously, she was.

Esther never quite got over that harrowing experience; naturally, she was frightened of physical contact with men. And the voice she'd heard—so sweet and calm and reassuring—had told her that she was blessed. What was the special purpose for which her life—and her virtue—had been spared?

When they met, and fell in love, Esther told Simon that she couldn't make love to him. She couldn't bring herself to tell him why. She only asked for his trust and his faith, and swore that she would love him in every other way.

Simon, whose love for her knew no boundaries, accepted those feelings part and parcel with her solemn vow, and hoped that whatever troubled her would someday pass.

It remained that way for several years after they were married. And then one night Esther had a dream in which an angel appeared to her. The angel, who looked like Esther Williams, told her that she would bear a son, and that the child should be named Myron. "He will be the Son of God," said the angel.

That very same night, Simon dreamed too. An angel also appeared before him. Simon's angel resembled Leo G. Carroll, only younger. The Leo G. Carroll-only-younger angel told Simon that, although he had never known his wife "in the Biblical way," she would become pregnant and bear him a son. The angel also told Simon that the child would be the Son of God, and that they should name him Myron.

"I'm going to have a baby," Esther announced the next morning.

"I know," Simon replied.

And, of course, nine months later, they did.

As I said before, Myron is a *man*, as well as the Messiah. He is God created in our image; the mirror of the Creation, when Man was formed in the image of God. I like to believe that I know Myron the man—but I don't really know the God that lies within.

Myron has feelings—I've seen Him laugh, and I've seen Him cry. The tears that trickled down His cheeks, leaving glistening trails, are no different from mine... or *yours*.

And yet, they're the tears of God.

I think that if I could accept that, my crisis of faith would be over. And I *am* trying.

God, knows... I'm trying.

34. like a rag doll shot from a cannon

I feel like John Newland on the old TV show "One Step Beyond". Do you remember it? First the eerie music, and then Newland's voice, very suave and sophisticated—the very Voice of Reason, which you knew belied the very nature of the story to follow—saying, "The story you are about to see is true..." and so on and so forth.

Well, that's what I feel like in the telling of this tale, but most specifically, the particular incident which I'm about to describe. The story you are about to hear is true. None of the names have been changed to protect anyone... no, wait a minute, that's Dragnet. Doesn't matter anyway, I suppose.

I really don't expect you to believe this part of the story, even if you've believed the rest of it. I don't think I would've believed it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. If someone else had related it to me in the first person, past tense, I probably would've laughed in his face... or recommended a good psychiatrist.

But it *is* true. Whether or not you believe me is entirely up to you.

The day in question began normally enough—if you can consider waking up to realize that you're an apostle, as I did every morning, normal to begin with.

I washed up, brushed my teeth, and scrounged up some bread to toast for breakfast. I brewed some coffee in the old battered percolator on the counter (which looked as if it had travelled all the way from Bohemia with Joan and been manhandled by psychopaths along the way), munched my toast, and waited for the others to get up.

Within an hour everyone had risen, had had their coffee and whatever for breakfast, and were busily discussing the day's agenda.

Being an apostle, as you may have guessed, is a peculiar job. There's no office, no set hours, no deadlines, no working capital to speak of, and no profit margin (or prophet margin, if you prefer). As far as I could tell, our only purpose—at least so far—was to lead our austere lives, remain in more or less seclusion, and wait for something to happen. That was it. So planning the day sort of bordered on the ludicrous. When it boiled right down to it, there was really nothing at all to do.

Myron suggested, since it appeared to be an absolutely beautiful day, that we take a walk. There being no alternative suggestions, the motion was carried and passed unanimously.

The day was fine, as fine as they come in New York. There was so little haze that you could actually see *blue* in the sky. The air was breathable. We strolled along, enjoying the weather and making small talk.

"I think you're all doing a very good job," Myron said at length. "I'm proud of each of you."

"I just wish I knew what it was that I'm doing," I said in answer. "Whenever I ask you what this is all about, the bottom line, where is this *leading*, you never give me a straight answer." I looked up at Him, half fearful that He would be angry; that maybe I'd gone too far in my directness.

5 CHAPTER FIVE

But He smiled patiently. “Each of you were chosen,” He said. “Each of you has a place in the events yet to come. And you *will* know. I promise you that. I won’t need to tell you. As you grow, so will your understanding. The answers you seek, Marko, you will find inside yourself. When the time is right, you will understand.”

His answer, always the same, always said differently, was the most frustrating thing in the world.

“I will tell you this, though,” He said significantly. “Out of all my apostles, I expect that one, at least, will write down the story of my return.”

The three of us looked at each other blankly. So we were expected to be Myron’s chroniclers. I wondered vaguely, at the time, if I would ever be able to put down in words all the things that I’d done and seen since meeting Myron. I’d thought that it would be an impossible task.

“But how would we know what to say?” Duke asked. “You all know I can barely write my name. I couldn’t ever do something like that.”

Myron, still smiling, answered, “You’re forgetting that all this has happened before. Do you think my last apostles were perfect? On the contrary, they were nothing more than simple people. Common. ordinary... at least in the beginning. But they grew, each in their own way. Just like *you* will grow. Each in your own way. I told them, ‘when you go out to spread the Word, the words will come to you, because I will be in you’. So when the time comes for you to tell the story of my return, one of you, at least, will get it right.”

It began to seem that there *was* more to being an apostle, after all. The weight of that responsibility hung heavy on all of us.

We walked further on in silence. It seemed as though the day had turned gray; I was no longer aware of the blue sky peeking down at us from between the tips of the buildings. We came to a corner and waited for the light. I noticed a woman and two children waiting to cross from the opposite direction. The woman was young and plain. Her daughter, about seven, waited patiently beside her. Her son, on the other hand, was one of those high-strung five year olds who seemed to fidget every waking moment of their existence. He was trying with every ounce of his energy (which was probably considerable) to extricate his right hand from his mother’s tightly clamped left. After a minute or so, he succeeded.

I watched as his hand came loose and his legs started moving, seemingly at the same second. His mother reached out to grab him, and missed by about one nanosecond.

It was like watching a scene played in slow motion; I could see every detail as if I’d had hours to analyze it, although the whole thing probably took less than ten seconds. The boy was running across the street and the mother was just behind him, reaching out, clawing air, trying to catch hold of his shirt. I caught the taxi out of the corner of my eye. I saw the boy turn and his eyes take in the cab; saw the mother turn and her eyes go wild. Her mouth began working, trying to silently explain to the taxi that it just had to stop because her little boy was right in the way. I heard the dull thud of impact; it sounded like a fifty pound grain bag dropped on a dirt floor from twenty feet up. Then the little boy was flying, flying down over the street like a rag doll shot out of a cannon. He slammed into the pavement fifty feet from where the taxicab had hit him.

The four of us ran from our side of the street, and the mother and the little girl ran—both screaming frantically—from the other side. We arrived at about the same time. Immediately, the woman threw herself down on top of the boy, crying into his chest. The little girl stood beside them, looking hopelessly up at us through her tears. For a few seconds, time seemed

to stop. The feeling of helplessness, of wanting to go back just a *few seconds* to make it all right again, was gut wrenching. My breath was bursting out of me in jagged gasps, and I felt like throwing up. Seeing those three there in the street reminded me of one of those old war correspondence photos of refugees dying in the middle of a road that fell just short of safety.

A few seconds later the taxi driver came puffing up and the spell was broken. He took one look and his face went as white as a fuzzy dead fish. "I never seen him," he said to no one in particular. "Honest to God, I never seen him. He just come runnin' outa nowhere." He was beginning to cry too, and the blood was rushing back into his face, swelling the veins in his neck and at his temples. His bald head turned crimson. "Honest to God..."

I don't know where they all came from, but suddenly a crowd had gathered around us. The morbidly curious, I suppose... the thrill-seekers who crave death and destruction as a way of brightening up their otherwise dull lives. Before the accident the only people in sight had been us and the mother and two kids. Now there were maybe twenty, twenty-five necks craning to see if the boy was dead. There was a hum of excited speculation.

Off behind us, I heard a voice clearly say, "Let me through, I'm a doctor." The sea of faces parted reluctantly and a gaunt black man with a bushy, graying mustache and gold-rimmed glasses made his way into the small circle around the boy. He turned his head this way and that and said, "Give him some air." Firmly. The voice of authority.

The four of us linked hands with others and edged our way backwards, forcing the crowd behind us to give way. We bought a few precious feet.

Meanwhile, the doctor gently pulled the sobbing woman from her son. "I'm going to try and help him," he told her with a sympathetic smile. His voice was still authoritative, but tender. She just looked at him blankly.

He knelt beside the boy and took one small limp wrist in his hand, then lowered his head to the boy's chest, listening and feeling intently for signs of life.

Now I've never studied medicine, but it didn't take more than common sense to know that this was bad. I knew instinctively that there wasn't much the doctor—or *any* doctor, for that matter—would be able to do.

The doctor straightened with a terse expression. He lifted the boy's head and probed gently at the base of his skull. His fingers came up bloody and flecked with tiny bits of white and gray. With compassion, he deftly hid this incriminating evidence from the young woman. Then he lifted the child's eyelids and peered into two small brown slates that had been completely wiped blank.

With a look of genuine regret, he turned to the mother and slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, absorbing this news bulletin, this personal piece of tragedy which I'm sure she'd already known was true but was unwilling to believe. The doctor's expression, the slow shake of his head, and the tone of his voice, combined to make it real for her. She responded by attacking the messenger, the bearer of this bad news. She launched herself at him, screaming desperately, pummeling him with her fists until all the anger turned to hurt and she collapsed against him, crying pitifully against his chest. The daughter knelt beside her mother, beside her brother's body, and wept into her mother's shoulder.

"Oh, Jesus," the cab driver whispered. "Oh, Jesus oh Jesus oh Jesus..."

The doctor looked up and regarded the crowd with distaste. "Has anyone even bothered to call an ambulance?" he asked with barely concealed contempt. A voice from the back shouted

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that the ambulance had been called and should be arriving at any second.

I glanced over at Myron. He was studying the scene, His expression unreadable. I remembered the newspaper article about the death of Duke's friend. I remembered looking through the whole paper, searching for that article, knowing that I wouldn't find it, knowing that Myron had... had *done* something. Something miraculous. The name Lazarus sprang into my mind.

I wondered if Myron was thinking any of these same things.

Suddenly, without a word, Myron stepped forward and knelt beside the boy's body. He looked at the mother and then the doctor.

"Are you the boy's father?" the doctor asked of Myron. He sounded irritated, frustrated by the crowd and by his inability to do anything to prevent the cutting short of a life that had only lasted five years.

Myron smiled serenely. "Not exactly."

"Well, then, I'm afraid there's nothing..."

"One moment," Myron interrupted, holding up a hand. He looked over at the woman and waited patiently. She had stopped crying, and now was just staring back at Myron. At last, as if she somehow knew that Myron was more than just some stranger in a crowd of strangers, she nodded.

Myron lowered His hand and placed it on the boy's chest. He raised His face and looked up into the sky. He stayed that way for a few seconds, and then tears began rolling slowly down His cheeks.

A gasp went through the crowd and when I looked down at the boy, he was struggling to sit up, pushing against Myron's hand, crying and calling for his mother. She was crying too, but this time out of the sheer joy of being the recipient of a miracle.

The crowd was cheering now, too, and surging forward, threatening to crush us all. Duke, Joan and I surrounded Myron to protect Him. In the distance, I heard an ambulance wailing toward us. Without speaking, the three of us—Joan, Duke and I—somehow decided that it was best to try to get Myron out of there. We were trying to hustle Him away when I noticed that the doctor was forcing his way through the tangle of bodies around us. He finally made it through until he was near enough that he could grab hold of Myron's shirt. Sensing danger, we fought that much harder to get Myron away; but it was Myron Himself who stopped us by simply refusing to be moved. "Wait," He said to us, and turned to the doctor, who was still clinging to His shirt. "What is it that you want?" He asked him.

The doctor stared dazedly at Myron's face. Finally, he said, "I've been practicing medicine for almost thirty years. That boy was dead. *No one* could have revived him. His brain was pulverized. What I just saw was impossible."

Myron smiled His typical smile—enigmatic and half sad. "I think I just demonstrated that *nothing* is impossible," He said plainly.

The doctor peered into Myron's eyes. "Who *are* you?" he asked, doing an unwitting impersonation of Duke on the night that *he* met Myron.

"I am the Son of my Father," Myron answered cryptically. "And I am His lamb."

Before the doctor could respond, the crowd closed in, pressing us so tightly together that I couldn't see anything. I was squeezed up against someone else until my face was crushed into the fabric of their jacket. I could barely breathe.

When at last the squeeze let up, Myron was nowhere to be found. He had simply vanished.

35. the ironic parallel

"I'd beg if you asked me to... please."

Myron sat and studied the face of the doctor, who somehow had managed, in spite of our precautions, to follow us back to the Emporium from the scene of the resurrection after Myron had disappeared.

None of us knew that we were being followed, and it had the effect, and here I can only speak for myself, of scaring the hell out of me. After all, Myron's open act of "retribution" against the church had attracted attention. I was sure that the newspapers weren't the only ones interested in learning the identity of the "madman" who went around ransacking churches... the police probably had a stack of charges that they would've been delighted to lay on Him.

There could be no doubt that today's little caper had brought *more* unneeded attention. And I was quite sure that even in New York, where virtually *anything* can happen, a story about a miraculous resurrection substantiated by a few dozen witnesses was worth some space in the dailies. It crossed my mind that someone might put the two separate descriptions of Myron together; and although the NYPD might look inept on occasion, I didn't count on them being *that* inept.

And now, here was a mere *doctor* who had somehow managed to trace us back to the Emporium. Who would find us next?

Only Myron seemed unruffled. His only thought was on the doctor himself—and the doctor's insistence that he be allowed to join us. Myron spoke at last. "Why?" He asked directly.

The doctor shifted his feet, but he never gave ground, and never took his eyes off Myron. "Because," he answered equally directly, "I've seen what you've done. And I know now who you are."

I sat upright and peered at the doctor, wondering what was going on in his mind.

Myron arched an eyebrow. "You want to join me simply because you've seen the evidence of your eyes?" He asked.

The doctor stared at him boldly, unafraid. On the surface, he seemed a kind, caring, but straightforward man. Gruff on the outside, perhaps, but sensitive and compassionate underneath. In some ways, he reminded me of Myron Himself. "No," he answered. "I want to join you because I've felt the evidence of my heart."

Myron scowled. I'd seen Him do that before, many times, most often at me. That look could be terrifying. But I'd learned through experience that if Myron gave that scowl, there was always something *behind* it; some reason for it. If you said the right thing, it would vanish like a shadow. It all depended on *you*. "But you're a successful man," He said with obvious disdain. "A doctor makes a lot of money."

Ah, now I saw it. I remembered the night that Myron explained the qualities which He expected of Duke and myself... and in a larger sense, anyone who followed Him. "You cannot serve money and serve God at the same time," is what He had said. I waited to hear the doctor's reply.

"Do you think that matters?" he answered Myron. "I've worked in the ghetto my entire life. I live in the back room of a free clinic. I drive an '87 Chevy—when it runs. My colleagues think I'm crazy, and I couldn't care less. While they're out playing nine holes, I'm usually treating a kid with rat bites, or burns, or broken arms, or worse. I know, all the time that I'm talking to their parents, that it was they themselves who usually inflicted the wounds on their

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children. Sometimes, rarely, I'm able to do something about it. Other times..." He shook his head. "So don't ask me about money, no. Ask me about how I can be a true *healer*, rather than a helpless—and that's the truth of it—band-aid dispenser."

The scowl on Myron's face disappeared, to be replaced by a smile so broad, it seemed to extend from ear to ear. "That's what I've been waiting to hear!" He exclaimed. "Welcome!" He cried. "Welcome!"

With a collective sigh of relief, Joan, Duke and I came forward to greet the doctor and offer our own words of welcome.

"I'm Marko," I said to him, extending my hand.

He took it and grasped it firmly. "I'm Doctor..." He stopped and smiled with embarrassment. "Matt," he said. "Just call me Matt."

"Okay, Matt," I replied. "Welcome aboard."

So then there were Four. And just in case you haven't noticed the ironic parallel, allow me to point it out to you...

Matt, Marko, Duke and Joan.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Okay, so not exactly the same as the original apostles... but the Four Gospels?

Considering Myron's sense of irony, I just couldn't believe that it was mere coincidence.

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36. the largest game bird in New York City

It seems to me that a long, long time ago, back when I began relating this story, I promised to do my best to tell the truth. I think that, so far, I've done that as much as I've been able to; even those things that have been less than easy to say. I intend to continue to do so. But I ask you to remember something: truth is not absolute. It's relative; without belief, it's pointless.

The world is a strange place, make no mistake about it. Do you think you know this big ball you live on? Do you think *anyone* does? Myron once said that all the mysteries are gone, that they're all dead, but that's not exactly true. In the twentieth century there are still some places on this earth that have never felt the tread of human feet. In California, host to Hollywood, San Francisco, the Oakland A's, Disneyland, and the 1984 summer olympics, there are still gigantic forests which have barely been penetrated by man. There are, in fact, huge segments of the Northwest forests—the old stomping ground of Myron and apostle—over which few people have even *flown*. This is the home of Bigfoot and maybe the grave of D.B. Cooper... and maybe not. Who knows?

Did you know that more people have touched the surface of the moon than have explored the deep trenches of our own oceans? Who can truly say that sea serpents are only the product of over-active imaginations; that mermaids are simply manatees and sea cows?

And how about this, friends and neighbors? People from all walks of life say they've seen, touched, or even ridden in UFO's. Many claim to have met aliens from other worlds... on their own home turf.

And ghost stories... how long have *they* been kicking around? Probably as long as man himself has been.

And voodoo *works*, brothers and sisters. Maybe nobody knows *how*, but work it does. All you have to do is *believe*.

So what I'm saying is, who really knows what the truth is? If someone you knew all your life—someone you respected and would believe without question if he told you that he saw a car accident on the way home from work today—walked up to you and said that he believed UFOs are real and that we're being invaded by beings from another planet, what would you say to him? What if he said he'd actually seen them and that others could corroborate his story? I'm talking about a serious, sober man who knew which side of the coin was shining. Would you believe him?

Or what if he said that his house was haunted by the ghost of Louis XIV? Or if he said that he was being contacted telepathically by the inhabitants of Atlantis? What then?

Do you see what I'm saying? Truth really *is* relative. It can suddenly come at you and it may not be anything like you expect it to be. The truth can suddenly twist, bend, or even warp into something unfamiliar and strange. Sometimes, it seems, life really *is* a walnut.

So if, as you've been reading this, you've found yourself wondering if I'm a lunatic, or

misguided, or deluded, I understand. I really do. Just remember that even though the truth can sometimes be a little hard to swallow, it doesn't make it any *less* true.

With all of that said, I now unfold some of the truths about myself, which have so-far gone untold:

First of all, believe it or not, I was actually raised in the country. I know it seems unlikely, but it's quite true. For all my apparently inbred City ways, I'm a country boy at heart.

My parents were born here in New York, and lived most of their lives right here in the city, as I've mentioned before. My father was moderately successful at his job, in that he kept us comfortable and well-fed, and he smiled a lot, which I assume meant that he was happy with his work and his family and his lot in life. His anonymous skyscraper, my childhood castle, was where he most often talked to me about what it was like to be a grownup; he never made it sound frightening or dangerous. It sounded more like a great adventure, a quest, and when he spoke about it his eyes would get dreamy and misty.

My mother appeared to be satisfied with being his wife, although with her education—a master's degree in political science—she probably could've been quite successful on her own. She took care of our home in the same way that she took care of us, with loving attention to detail, meticulously, and without any regret whatsoever.

The dream of adventure that my father bequeathed to me might have been fulfilled, and my life might have been very different, but my parents died when I was ten years old—a car accident on the thruway—and thus began two years of bitter haggling over my custody between differing factors among my parents' relatives. In the end, I was sent off to live with my father's brother in Pennsylvania. Way out in the "sticks", as they say out there. Right smack-dab in the middle of Pennsylvania Dutch Country.

Some children resent their parents' death; resent being abandoned. I never felt that resentment. I missed them terribly, and sometimes still do. I do have regrets, of course. I regret that my father never knew me as a man, that he missed out on that, and that I never had the opportunity to make him proud. Maybe I never *would* have; but I regret not having the chance to try. And I regret that I was never able to see them grow older. I've sometimes wondered what my mother would have looked like with silver hair. Yes, I regret not being able to share that experience with them.

My uncle and aunt lived in a beautiful little house set on a dozen acres of land. The nearest neighbor lived more than a mile away. For a while I guess I was in culture shock. I couldn't sleep at night because it was so quiet that the silence seemed deafening. But I slowly grew used to it, and eventually came to love it there. It was green and peaceful and people moved slowly, as if they had all the time in the world. Life was easy and uncomplicated, especially for a young boy, and it was a place of healing. I learned to live with my grief, and finally allow it to pass into memory. Slowly, very slowly, the place became Home.

After school, I worked with my uncle, cutting firewood, or working in his small field of corn, or puttering in his workshop. There was fishing and hiking in the summer and hunting in the winter. My uncle kept a few horses and, as hard as it might be to imagine, I actually learned to ride. Got pretty good, if I do say so myself.

It was my uncle who taught me to hunt—rabbit and pheasant and the wily ruffed grouse. I even bagged a few deer.

Life was good in those years. But as much as I loved it there, and as much as I loved my uncle and aunt, something still stirred inside me. As I got a little older, I guess I got restless. The

hurt that I associated with the city was nearly gone, and my memories of it had transformed themselves: I now remembered only the good things about the city. I'd all but forgotten the bad.

So when I was sixteen years old, I left a note that, in the kindest words possible, told my uncle and aunt that it was time for me to strike out on my own, and that I loved them and thanked them for taking such good care of me. And before dawn I slipped out of the house, stuck out my thumb, and headed back to the Big Apple.

I still *like* the country, don't get me wrong. If I didn't feel *something* for it, my little trip to Oregon with Myron would've been unbearable. And I've silently thanked my uncle and aunt a thousand times over for instilling in me a sense of simple decency that I might never have developed had I been raised by other relatives in the city. But life out there just wasn't the same as it was in the big town. I'm home here. It's as simple as that.

There are some basic differences, however, between the two. For instance: the largest game bird in New York is the housefly. Pigeons don't count—they're too tame and stupid. Rats are New York's answer to the cute and cuddly cottontail. Cockroaches? I suppose they're like squirrels, you know? Always after the food, the big score, and hustling it off to their nests. They get pretty good size, though. I once saw one that I swear was as big as a coffee table.

Scientists say that if there's ever a total nuclear war, the only thing that will survive is the cockroaches. Radiation doesn't hurt them at all. In fact, they *thrive* on it. So if we ever go *BANG*, cockroaches will probably take over as the dominant life form on earth. In a few million years, they may even develop intelligence. There'll be cockroach Starbucks on every corner, and cockroach Photo-Mats, and a cockroach Wall Street, and cockroach dance studios. Eventually, they'll probably develop their own systems of self-annihilation... like giant Bug Bombs, or something.

But this is the thing: practically nothing can kill them. Nothing seems to bother them at all. The funny thing is, when we moved into the Emporium, I never saw even *one* cockroach. Nor a rat, or even a lowly fly. They just weren't there. Nothing. Nada.

In a conversation with Joan one day, she happened to mention that the place used to be infested with cockroaches. She'd had her share of flies, too, and the occasional rat. But after Myron arrived, they disappeared. Just plain *disappeared*.

Which reminded me of our trip to Oregon. In all that time, while I was getting eaten alive by every form of carnivorous or blood sucking insect known to man, Myron never got bitten by one mosquito. Not one. I never even saw Him brushing them away with His hand.

So the cockroaches may inherit the earth, but when Myron moved in, they moved out.

I don't know for sure what that means... but it's got to mean something.

37. Superman vs. The Incredible Hulk

"There was once a little boy," Myron began one evening some several weeks after Matt had joined our little family and taken up residence in the Emporium.

We sat in what had come to be our customary places—myself, Duke and Joan in the straight-backed chairs that I'd first noticed on our arrival at the Emporium, and Matt in an old La-Z-Boy that we'd rescued from the curb just one step ahead of the junkman. Myron Himself stood

facing us with His back to the long counter, not far from the defunct cash register, in His traditional position as Teacher and Teller of Parables.

“Now this little boy,” He continued, “was very smart. His parents, you see, were scholars. Scientists, they were. Raised in the light of the scientific method and steeped in its lore. And they were very proud of their child, who gave every indication of being a budding genius.

“Well, one day the little boy found an injured bird on his way home from school. He quickly, but gently, scooped it up in his hands and carried it all the way home.

“He took it to his room and examined it. He quickly realized that the bird’s wing was broken. Being very smart, he fashioned a splint out of wood and tape and fastened it to its wing. Then he found a big cardboard box and put the bird inside.”

Myron let his gaze wander over us to be sure that we were paying attention. Satisfied, He went on.

“Each morning, the boy went outside and collected worms for the bird to eat. He took very good care of it. He went to the library and took out books about birds in order that he might learn more about them. He studied the books and he studied the bird. He began to think of it as a project of sorts.

“In time, the bird’s wing healed. But instead of releasing it, the boy made a screen to fit over the top of the box so that the bird couldn’t fly out.

“And then one day when the boy came home from school, he went up to his room, just as he always did, and looked inside the box. And he found that the bird was dead.”

I heard Joan sigh audibly. Myron paused to acknowledge her with a sorrowful look. I wondered what the message behind this parable was.

Myron continued. “The little boy,” He said, “couldn’t understand it. After all, he’d given it care, he’d done just what the books said to do, he’d healed its wing. He’d fed it and given it water. The bird in the box had been his project, and now it was inexplicably dead. Why did it happen? It just wasn’t fair!

“So the little boy went to his parents, the scholars, who knew so much, and said, ‘the bird is dead and I don’t understand why. What happened?’

“And his parents, who could explain how oxygen is absorbed in the lungs, or the function of the cerebral cortex, who could describe the immediate effects on brain cells when the heart stops beating, couldn’t answer the boy’s simple question... why was the bird dead?

“You see, they—who knew so much about the physical world—couldn’t know the *spirit* that was trapped in the box. How *could* they? They couldn’t see spirit under a microscope; they couldn’t prove that it existed with a mathematical equation; they couldn’t duplicate it in a test tube. How could they know that their child had taken the spirit of the bird and killed it as surely as if he had broken its neck? They were blind and deaf to it.”

Myron studied each of us. Long looks of interest and understanding. He seemed reluctant to go on. None of us spoke. The parable seemed to have ended and left me wandering in the dark, trying to understand what it was that Myron was telling us.

At last, Myron spoke again. When He did, His voice was soft and sad – almost weary-sounding. “There are some things that need to be said tonight,” He began hesitantly. “This will be my last lesson. My time is coming quickly.”

All of us cried out at once—some pointless exclamation that we knew would never change anything. After all, hadn’t each of us known that this wouldn’t last forever?

"Wait," Myron said softly, and we all stopped. "There are four of you now, and four you will remain. There will be no more apostles."

"But Myron," Matt said, "there were twelve last time."

"That's true," Myron agreed, nodding. "But things are a little different this time." He sighed. "I have less time, and my final purpose for being here is different. I have no need for twelve when four will do just as well."

"Less time, Myron?" I asked. Like the others, I suppose, I didn't like the sound of that. It sounded far too final for comfort.

Myron smiled at me, then shared the smile with the rest. "No," He reassured us, "there won't be any crucifixion this time. I won't leave you at the cross. But I'm afraid I do have to leave you. You might say I have my own cross to bear."

"I would gladly go in your place," Joan said solemnly.

Myron shook His head and gave her a benevolent look. "No, Joan. This is something that I alone have to do."

"Myron... please... take us with you," Duke said.

"Your devotion is touching," Myron said, "and I love you for it. But I have to go alone." He stepped away from the counter and walked its length in slow, measured steps. "I suppose the time has come for me to tell you why I'm here," He said at last.

I nearly jumped out of my chair. I was finally going to know the reason for Myron's return!

Myron stepped across the room and stared out the window that faced the dark city street outside. He seemed, for the first time since I'd met Him, to be searching for the right words to say. In frustration, He finally just hung His head and almost whispered, "I must face the Beast."

The four of us gaped at each other in stunned silence. Face the Beast? What did *that* mean?

Myron turned back toward us and smiled apologetically. "Forgive me," He said. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh... that's another story. Still, I go before the Beast willingly. It's what I've come for. In the end, it's really the *only* reason."

"You're going to fight the devil," Duke said with sudden understanding. By the expression on our faces, I think we'd all come to that same conclusion at the same time. It was, after all, what had been prophesied—the foregone conclusion that I think collectively we'd all simply chosen to ignore, or forget, or unconsciously deny.

Myron shook His head. "Not the devil, exactly," He explained. "The Antichrist." He looked at us with mock reproach. "I'm really surprised," He said. "Surely you all knew." Then He shook His shoulders. "At any rate, the time has come. I've been waiting for four thousand years. It's about time that the issue was finally decided."

"But you're actually going to *fight* with Him? Why can't we help?"

Myron regarded me with humor and patience. "My dearest Marko," He said in a kindly tone, like a grandfather addressing his grandchild. "Always thinking on a grand scale, aren't you?" He shook His head once again. "No, Marko, this will not be like Superman vs. The Incredible Hulk. It won't shake Heaven and Earth. The skies won't open and the land won't be torn asunder. The seas won't rise and it won't rain fire and brimstone. It will be the day of reckoning, alright... but no one will know it. No one will ever even know how it turned out. If I win, they'll all be free, and the world will change—slowly, very slowly—and no one will know just exactly *why*, or *how*. But they'll find that it's a good world."

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I must've looked disappointed, because Myron suddenly laughed. "Marko, Marko," He said, chuckling, "You should really do something about your pride. You look like a little boy who just found out that there won't be any fireworks for the Fourth of July." But then, oddly, His face took on a dreamy, wistful expression, and He said, to no one in particular, "It would've been grand, though." Then He seemed to gather Himself again, and He added, "But that was never my style."

"Well, that sure does explain a lot," Matt said. I was wondering when you were going to start preaching, and doing all that other stuff. But I guess you did all that before, didn't you? It doesn't need to be done again. I suppose it's out of Mankind's hands now, isn't it?"

Myron closed His eyes and let out a deep sigh. "On the contrary, Matt," He said softly. "From now on, it's *completely* in mankind's hands." Then He opened His eyes...

And looked directly at me.

Those were the last words that I ever heard Myron speak.

7 CHAPTER SEVEN

38. why me?

When did the dream die? When did the parable really end? When did I decide to do what I had to do?

I've asked myself those questions a thousand times since I came to this place. I still don't have the answers... and I'm not sure I ever will.

I think, though, that the *beginning* of the end really came on the night when I gazed into the wax; when I gave into that temptation. I see it now as the point when I hit bottom in my fall from Grace—bad enough, I suppose; but even worse, that hazy glimpse into the future set into motion the machinery of disaster. Like pulling the chocks from the wheels of a colossal juggernaut, it took time and momentum to fully realize the proportions of my stupidity. And now, unfortunately, I have too much time to reflect on it.

Did the wax actually foretell the future? Or did I myself *create* the future? Had I not given in, would the events that the wax revealed have come to pass anyway? I ask myself these questions, too, and I think to myself: *These are the questions of a guilty mind.*

True, how true. It's so easy to wax philosophical after the axe has fallen.

I still remember the look on Myron's face as He stared at me that night after He'd revealed His mission. He'd finally laid the whole Truth down before us... He was going to fight the Beast. And I knew that *He* knew exactly what I was thinking as soon as His eyes fell on me. Maybe He knew my thoughts even better than I knew them myself.

Consciously, I was disappointed, true. I'd had an image in my mind of a grand and glorious battle between Myron and the Antichrist. Can you picture a more classic fight? But with just a few softly spoken words, Myron had shattered my illusions. Yes, I was disappointed.

Unconsciously, there were much darker thoughts forming in my mind. Myron had said that it would be a *silent* battle, the outcome of which no one would ever even know. Every human soul hung in the balance... and it would be so *obscure*, so anonymous, that not one single person would know that the battle was fought or who won.

If that happened, Myron would be forgotten. Or even worse, He would simply disappear. History would pass Him by...

And let's face it, folks... if *Myron* didn't make it into the history books, neither would *I*.

God, I sit here and I think: *How incredibly, brazenly selfish!*

But I temper those thoughts with my firm and unwavering belief that I truly had Myron's best interest at heart when I did what I did. Yes, it's true that I had selfish motivations and ulterior motives and anything else you want to call them. But at the bottom line, I thought that if Christ was going to fight the Beast, then it ought to be on *His* terms. That if He was going to do it, then He really ought to *do* it. That *everyone* should be aware of it... and be damned thankful that He was willing to risk everything—maybe even His *own* soul—for them.

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That's the way it *should* have been. And somewhere along the line—maybe the night that I crept into Joan's room and glimpsed a shadow of the future—I had decided that it was up to me, Marko Grouch, apostle and fool, to make it happen.

How could I have been so vain, so proud, to think that I knew better than He did? That His way wasn't as good as mine; wasn't *glorious* enough to suit me? Was I really that self-aggrandizing?

My pride. My damned pride; always my downfall. Oh, yes, friends and neighbors, I could be that proud. I could be that vain.

Judas. That's what I'll be known as by future generations. The *second* man to sell out Christ. But by all that's holy, I swear that I honestly believed that I was doing the right thing!

Myron Himself had given me the perfect vehicle to betray Him. Remember the church incident? God, it fit so perfectly. I didn't call the police—that wouldn't have worked at all. My intention was not to see Myron imprisoned. I *loved* Myron. I swear that I did not want to see Him hurt. So instead, all I had to do was call the mental hospital and tell them that I knew who had ransacked it, that it was a friend of mine, and that he'd confided to me that he was thinking of doing it again. I made myself sound pathetic, at the end of my rope. I told them I thought that he might hurt someone, or hurt himself. That's all it took. They were very nice; very helpful.

I know what it sounds like. I'm not without feelings, you know. But there was nothing coldblooded about it, and when I did it I felt no guilt. You see, I had convinced myself of its rightness. I truly believed that if Myron's hand was forced, He would *have* to admit who He was. He would have to declare Himself... and everything would be out in the open where it was *supposed* to be.

But instead of that, in spite of my well-laid plan, what happened? Only that the world ended, collapsed, exploded. And Myron, the King of Kings returned to earth, was committed; actually *allowed* Himself to be committed.

He said nothing when the hospital attendants came to take Him away. He could've stopped them; could've proven to them in any of a thousand ways that He was Christ. He *could* have. He *should* have. But He didn't. Instead, when they asked Him who He was, He only said, "I am the one you've come for."

I watched as they led Him to the door. When they reached it, He looked back at me with an expression of such compassion and, God help me, forgiveness, that I thought my heart would stop beating. I opened my mouth to tell the attendants to stop, that it was all just a horrible mistake, but Myron shook His head, as if to say, *if this is the way it must be, Marko, then let it be.*

Then He was gone, leaving me standing alone in the front room of Princess Joan's Wax Museum, Fortune Emporium and Boarding House.

How could I have known this would happen? I should have known; should have recognized the grim future revealed in the wax. The irony was that, in my blind effort to prevent that prophecy from coming true, I had only succeeded in making it so.

But why did it have to be me, Myron?

Why *me*?

When I finally finished crying, when there were no more tears left to shed, I went into the back room. I searched for almost an hour before I found what I was looking for.

I turned out the lights and sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, holding the knife—the long-bladed dagger that Joan’s royal father had given to her—in my right hand. It was heavy, but there was a graceful balance to it. The blade wasn’t particularly keen, but it would do for the purpose I had in mind. I was numbly aware of a sense of *Déjà vu*, of seeing myself as I had in my vision, of something glinting in my hand. Something like a knife blade.

I sat like that for what seemed a very long time, although in reality it was probably no more than a few minutes. I was thinking back to a day not so long ago when I decided to go to a pawnshop to hock a diamond ring, and instead discovered the Messiah. I thought of all the things He had taught me, all the nights I listened to His parables, all the miraculous things He had shown me.

Only then did I remember the last element, which would make the fulfillment of my vision complete. I pulled the ring out of my pocket and set it on the floor before me. Once it had been the symbol of my faith in Myron; now it was the symbol of His betrayal. Judas had betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver. I had betrayed Him for one piece of gold and one piece of crystallized carbon. I stared at it, reflecting on this. It felt very fitting. I picked the ring up, placed it in my mouth, and swallowed. And as the knife blade parted the skin of my left wrist, I saw His face again, and that expression of forgiveness as they led Him away, just before the darkness swallowed me up.

39. the ravings of a demented mind

I have a doctor who comes to visit me once a week. Sometimes I hate him. Sometimes I almost like him. Sometimes he doesn’t really faze me one way or the other. He seems OK, usually, but distant. I imagine he has to be; professional detachment is a vital part of being a psychiatrist. There can be no feelings on the part of the therapist, no emotions, no personal attachments. All of the feelings must come from the patient.

Let me assure you, for the record, that I’ve been complying perfectly in the emotions department. Plenty of emotional outpouring—I’ve ranted and raved, screamed and raged, laughed hysterically for hours on end, and regressed to catalepsy. Catharsis has become my middle name.

For about the first month, I was completely out of my mind. Literally. I was confined in an “I-Love-Me” jacket, the kind that buckles in the back, and lived—if you can call it living—in the proverbial rubber room. Yes, those places really exist. I was insane with grief, anger and self-pity. How I wished that Joan hadn’t come home those few minutes too early! How I wished that she hadn’t decided on the spur of the moment to walk into the back room! And why—oh, dear God, why!—did she have to find me lying on the floor in a pool of my own blood? Just a few more minutes and it would’ve been too late... and I would’ve been spared the agony of living with the horrible thing I’d done.

Hatred and self-loathing consumed me. I hated myself for doing what I’d done. I hated Joan for *saving* me. I hated Myron (yes, I even hated *Him*) for *allowing* it to happen. My anger burned inside me like white phosphorus... like brimstone.

My grief, at times, overwhelmed me. Myron committed! Myron in a mental hospital! Those thoughts went round and round, eating at my brain, devouring what was left of my sanity. How I envied Judas’s death—at that point, even Hell would’ve been preferable to living out

each of my days with the knowledge of what I'd done. It was as if Myron had died—no, even worse, as if He'd been buried alive. And I had put Him in His grave!

It took that month, and then some, but I slowly regained my sanity. And only in thanks to one simple thought that seemed to come out of nowhere when I needed it most. One thought that I latched onto and clung to; a single piece of hope amid the rubble of a shattered dream...

This was that thought: Maybe I'd been allowed to live for a reason. Just maybe, unlike Judas before me, I'd been given an opportunity to undo the damage I'd done.

There was only one way to do that, of course. And what a task I'd set for myself! An impossible one; an unbelievable one. Because the only way I could right my wrong was if I, a suicidal mental patient, could convince the doctors that another mental patient was the Messiah. It was *more* than unbelievable—it was ridiculous!

Psychiatrists see people claiming to know Him personally every day. They probably see a lot of poor souls who believe they *are* Him. But a psychiatrist treats the delusion and never even hears what his patient is saying. And why should he? He's been trained for years to listen and not really hear—and certainly never to *believe*. It's all a hallucination, after all. Just the ravings of a demented mind. In the rational mind of a psychiatrist, life could *never* be a walnut.

So how could I expect them to believe *me*?

As long as I kept telling them the impossible, of course, the doctors would still think I was crazy. I'd have to be prepared, always on my guard, because I knew they'd use every trick in the book to try to *cure* me. I had to hold out. I had to convince them that I was right... before *they* convinced *me* that I was *wrong*.

40. the thorazine shuffle

This place, all things considered, really isn't so bad. I've been released into a ward; by comparison, after my time in the rubber room, I suppose *anyplace* would seem bearable. I have my own room, where I sleep at night, but during the day I'm allowed to go out into the Day Room and socialize with the other patients.

The Day Room is furnished with plain but sensible furniture upholstered in moss-colored naugahyde. One of the sofas has a hole worn right through an arm. There are lots of mossy chairs, and just about all of them have holes in one place or another. The furniture has been here a long time, apparently... permanent residents. There's a small console TV off to one side, which rarely plays. There doesn't seem to be much interest in it. There are two entrances or exits, one on each end. In one of the side walls there's a large window through which the staff can watch the patients. If you looked in through the window, you would see them sitting there, looking bored, but I'm sure they're actually quite vigilant. There's a TV inside that room, too, but unlike the one for the patients, that one is going twenty-four hours a day. You can't hear it unless they open the window, which is rare.

Each of the two entrance-exits gives onto a corridor. Each of the corridors looks almost identical, and therefore it can be confusing at first. A couple of times I ended up in the wrong corridor and I couldn't find my own room, but I've got it now. In each corridor there's an elevator which is opened by a key. Each member of the staff has one. No one else is allowed to use the elevators. The elevators serve as a useful reminder that, while I've succeeded in

escaping from total insanity, I'm still a prisoner; that I'll probably never be free until Myron is set free.

Patients wander up and down the corridors at all times of the day and night. They move like people in a dream; their legs glide like the joints have been oiled and they're rolling along on tiny wheels. No one here picks up his feet; they make little *shooshing* noises as they go by. When the Day Room is crowded, it sounds like a flock of chloroformed starlings trying to flap their wings. The staff has a name for the way the patients walk: the Thorazine Shuffle. They make it sound like a dance.

The thing about this place is that it's so damned *quiet*. Everything is muffled; every sound is muted, like the people, the furniture, walls and floors are all wrapped in gauze. No one actually talks here—the doctors, nurses and orderlies all murmur; the patients all mumble. I haven't heard a shout except for my own a month or more ago. The only laughter is an occasional cackle of the lunatic variety. Music is something alien and unknown... the piped-in stuff that's kept at a barely audible volume is no more noticeable than the hum of an air conditioner or refrigerator. After a while you forget it's even there. You become immune to it.

In spite of these things, the place really isn't bad. Maybe that's the problem with it—it's *too* nice. There's nothing of the real world here. No danger, nothing even the least bit threatening, none of the elements of real life that we take for granted. It's an artificial environment of pleasant blandness, and it absorbs the patients so totally that they forget that they ever lived somewhere else, that they once had *lives* out there, that maybe once they walked like other people instead of doing the Thorazine Shuffle. I don't understand how anyone could actually be cured here if they've forgotten what they're being cured *for*. Some of the patients have accepted this world as their home. They wouldn't leave if they could.

Mr. Sullivan is one of those patients. His full name is Ed Sullivan, but of course in a place like this, no one jokes about that. Everyone just calls him *Mr. Sullivan*. He's a manic-depressive who's tried to kill himself four different times by four different methods. He has moments when he's completely lucid, and at those times he's one of the few people I can have an intelligent conversation with. In these short, infrequent conversations he tells me about his suicide attempts, but the details are cut up into chunks. So far, he's only described two of the four: once he tried to hang himself and the other he used a gun. He has a little scar on his cheek, way up and back almost to his ear. The bullet stuck in his jawbone, he says with a smile, and never even touched his brain. He's been here for seventeen years, Mr. Sullivan has. He used to be a carpenter. Nowadays, I doubt that he'd know which end of a hammer to pick up.

Then there's Tony. As far as I can gather, he's a paranoid schizophrenic and an honest-to-God giant. He stands about seven foot two in his bare feet and probably weighs four hundred pounds. I suspect that the staff keeps an extra close eye on Tony, and give him a little something extra when the goodies are handed out, just to keep him so manageable. He's manageable, all right. Like four hundred pounds of smiling jello. He smiles all the time and drools almost constantly. For all his size, an eighty year old woman could probably knock him into next week—not that he'd notice.

Speaking of old women, there's one here who must be eighty if she's a day. Her name is Bertha. No one, at least among the patients, seems to know why Bertha was sent here in the first place, but it's fairly obvious that in the intervening years, senility has superseded whatever disorder she might've had. When I think about what might have led her to be here, I

somehow can't imagine her ever being worse off than she already is—I can't imagine her *young*, for that matter. But apparently she was young when she got here, and if she was crazy then, that craziness has been upstaged by the severity of her senility. Bertha never gets out of her wheelchair—the only patient so confined—except at night when she's lifted into bed. She's so tiny and shriveled that she must be as light as a feather. It only requires one orderly to pick her up.

Bertha hasn't got a tooth in her head, and she mumbles incessantly. Her empty gums and withered lips make it that much harder to understand what it is that she's mumbling, but she seems to be talking to someone—maybe a husband or a long-ago child. Maybe the person who put her here. Still blaming them after all these years. Or maybe she's forgiving them. I don't know, and I don't suppose it matters anyway... not to me... not to Bertha.

No one visits Bertha. No one seems to visit *anyone* here. The people in this place are forgotten, or just ignored, by everyone they ever knew.

No one's come to visit me, either, actually. Not that I expect it. After all, it was me who tore our little family apart. But sometimes I wonder where they are and what they're doing. Have they kept their faith in spite of what appears to be Myron's demise?

But I'm sure they have... who am I kidding? Myron has touched them all and His mark will remain on them forever. They, unlike me, will always be His children. They're out there somewhere, even as I'm writing these words, on the fringe, waiting and watching for some sign, some omen from Myron. They've kept their faith in Him, I'm sure of it. And although, because of my own meddling, because of my pride, their wait may very well be in vain, I wish—oh, how I *wish*—I could be out there waiting with them.

41. the only reachable human being

As I've mentioned, there are a lot of staff people in this place, and I of necessity come into contact with at least some of them every day—they don't *all* hide behind that window in the Day Room. Doctors come and go, doing their rounds, and nurses dispense medication from their little silver wheeled carts bristling with plain white Dixie Cups. Orderlies change the sheets, clean the rooms, and serve us our food. And there are students from local colleges who come here to practice in the science of dealing with dismembered minds.

The students—interns—don't really *do* much in the way of treatment. They observe, sometimes take notes, follow the doctors and therapists around the floor, and often look sheepish and a little embarrassed at being there. The rest of the time, they talk to the patients, play games such as checkers and gin rummy, and generally to try brighten the atmosphere of this dismal place. They're closely supervised, but pretty much have the run of the place; their presence—as “normals” interacting with people in desperate need of interaction—is looked upon as beneficial if not therapeutic.

During the course of a typical day, each student spends an hour or so on each floor. Each floor is a ward, laid out almost identically to this one. There are ten floors altogether, of which this is the third. The ground floor is reserved for the violent patients—the suicidal and homicidal. This is where I spent my first month. It's also the only place where the students aren't allowed to attend except under the strictest of guidelines.

Most of the doctors and nurses are more or less confined to their own floor. It's the students

who see the most of the hospital, and therefore have the most access to the greatest number of patients.

I've been getting to know one of the students. Her name is Gina. She's nineteen, in her first year of college. She still has that fresh-scrubbed, innocent look about her, and her eyes are still wide open. A few years spent in places like this, I imagine, will dull her innocence and one day, I'm sure, those wide eyes will close a little to the suffering that goes on inside these cold, clinical walls. But for now she seems to be the only reachable human being in this God-forsaken (no pun intended) place.

I admit to having a slightly guilty conscience, because I'm using Gina. It's true—I've only ingratiated myself to her for one reason... to find out news of Myron, who's locked in some other ward, on some other floor. Until now, I've had no contact with Him. The doctors and nurses are all tight-lipped; they wouldn't say a word even if they could. I suspect that they really don't *know* anything about Him—they've probably never even *seen* Him. So where could I find information about Him? Where better than from a naive student who can visit any floor of the hospital and visit with virtually any patient she chooses to?

So far I've learned nothing from Gina—they enforce the Code of Ethics here, and she sticks to it like glue. I'm not pushing it—I don't want her to feel the pressure. But the pressure is on, my friends. Slow and steady, like a rusty but dependable bicycle pump that always somehow manages to get one more tire back up and rolling. I'm not in any hurry. I've got all the time in the world.

42. the unwritten rules of psychiatry

God, what a mess!

As I'm sure you can imagine, things haven't been going particularly well in the last couple of weeks. The truth—that I'm in for a long and probably futile fight—has slowly been beginning to take solid form in my mind. I mean, I knew it was going to be hard; I'm no idiot, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. But the *impossibility* of it all is finally starting to sink in. Not that I'm giving up, mind you. But can you really blame me for being discouraged from time to time? God knows I've got enough reasons to be.

Let me give you an example:

This morning I was taken to Dr. Blume's office. This happens once a week; my regular session. Dr. Blume is the ward psychiatrist in charge of all the cases on the floor. Once each week, each patient is treated to an hour of therapy and is evaluated for progress. Therapy consists of Rorschach tests or free association or any of the tricks of the trade that a shrink has at his disposal. Evaluation, I gather, is his hopefully objective opinion as to whether you're still a lunatic.

His office is large and about as aesthetically pleasing as a cinder block. It does the job, I'm sure, but is not designed with comfort in mind. The walls are yellow-white and adorned with certificates and one large, grotesque painting of unidentified style. His desk, which seems to dominate the office, is a massive block of mahogany on which rests a green blotter, unattractive brass lamp, gold pen and pencil holder, Rolodex, telephone, and at least a thousand sheets of paper in stacks and piles.

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The patient is constrained to lie on a large, uncomfortable leather couch, while the doctor himself sits in a proportionately large leather chair.

Dr. Blume himself is a short man, generally round in shape, with thin brown hair that he keeps long enough to comb across his receding forehead. He has big eyes—they sort of bulge out—and his complexion is nearly scarlet, so that he always looks like he's just run up forty flights of stairs. He wears expensive three piece suits, usually a shade of blue. It makes him look like some sort of weird tropical fish, ruby and sapphire scales flashing and big bulgy eyes staring at you.

One other thing—Dr. Blume always smokes a pipe. His office smells like a tobacconist's shop. I think he uses it more as a prop than for the enjoyment, or the addiction, of smoking, but that's just a guess. Somehow, it seems fitting for a psychiatrist to whip out a pipe at that perfect moment when he has something relevant to say. It adds weight to it.

This morning was no exception. I was relegated to the couch and Dr. Blume took his customary seat. This didn't bother me (as I've said, it's standard procedure), except that the air conditioning was out (again), and leather can work up a brutal sweat over the course of an hour. I lay there humbly, staring at the ceiling, while he lit the Famous Blume Pipe.

Soon the smell of cherry tobacco smoke wafted through the room and a cloud of blue-gray smoke circled his head. He reminded me of a sorcerer, all silent and conjuring, except for the way he goggled at me. He concentrated on his pipe, puffing expertly, trying to get it going just right, and waited for me to begin. It's one of the unwritten rules of psychiatry, I think—the patient must always start the session. The doctor, meanwhile, must make the patient as uncomfortable as possible. This, I assume, brings out any deep-seated aggression toward authority figures.

"How's Myron?" I asked when I thought I'd waited an appropriate length of time.

Dr. Blume let the question pass. "You left off last time," he said instead, "in Oregon."

I sighed with frustration. That was my standard opening question. Each session began with it... and reaped the same results. "Yes," I said wearily. "We were in Oregon."

"This was to be some kind of test?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Something like that, yes."

"Of your faith?" It sounded more like a statement than a question. "In Myron?" That one was *definitely* more statement than question.

"Yes," I answered curtly. "I've already told you that several times before." I was tired of covering the same old ground, over and over, and spinning my wheels. "When are you going to start *hearing* me, and stop listening to everything I *don't* say?"

He straightened in his chair, just slightly, and harrumphed with a billow of smoke. "Have you noticed," he said, "how defensive you are whenever the question of your faith comes up?"

I chuckled in contempt. "I'd say it's pretty much of a central issue," I said. "Wouldn't you?"

In addition to the Famous Blume Pipe, Dr. Blume used two other props—the Famous Blume notepad and the Famous Blume Gold Pen. He put them to use now, jotting for a moment in the notepad, so absorbed in it that he almost seemed to have forgotten I was there. But I knew he was setting me up – putting me off guard. "Did you pass this test?" There it was... the jab.

But I was ready for him. I parried with an unexpected weapon: a frank reply. "I think so," I answered. "But that isn't the point. The point is that I went at all. Don't you see? I didn't

have to go. I *wanted* to. Because I believed Him when He told me who He was. I could *feel* it. *That* was the proof of my faith—that I chose to go with Him.

“Sure, I could’ve given up anywhere along the way. But I *didn’t*.” I narrowed my eyes and leveled them at him. “And I won’t *now*”

My counterattack went unrewarded. “You walked all the way across the United States because you believed this Myron was the Messiah?” he asked blandly.

“Why *else* would I do something that...” I bit my tongue. I’d been about to say *that crazy*.

The good doctor paused and smoked reflectively for a few seconds, staring at a certificate that hung on the wall beside his desk. He was a master of the dramatic effect. “How about,” he began at last, turning toward me once again, “you had just come off a bad marriage, you were unemployed, you were depressed, and you had no plans? Just as a few possibilities?”

I shook my head and felt my face redden with anger. “No!” I shot out. “I only went for one reason—because Myron was... no, Myron *is* Christ!”

He jotted again in the Famous Blume Notepad, no doubt noting my continued refusal to face reality, and then he tapped out his pipe in the tall metal ashtray that stood beside his chair. He stared thoughtfully at me—or as thoughtfully as he *could* with those goggle fish-eyes—until I had to look away. The man should have been an actor—he was the perfect practitioner of the pregnant pause. “Has it ever occurred to you,” he said at last, “that you were in a very impressionable and vulnerable state at that time?”

“No,” I answered resolutely.

“No, it hasn’t occurred to you... or no, you weren’t impressionable and vulnerable?”

“What the hell does it matter!” I cried. “What difference does my state of mind make... or my motivations, or whether I loved my mother, or any of your psychiatric mumbo-jumbo? I *believed* in Him, Doctor! I still *do*! More so than ever. My state of mind—then or now—isn’t even an issue!”

He arched his eyebrows in an imperious ‘I’ll be the judge of that’ way. He looked like a carp that had just been clubbed in the head. “I don’t agree,” he said. “If you’d been more... *resilient*, you might not be here now.”

“I’d probably be here no matter *how* resilient I was,” I returned bitterly.

He busied himself with the Famous Blume Notepad again. Once again, I felt that I was being set up, and I was determined to undermine it. “Let me ask you something, Doctor,” I said, lying there on his big leather sofa, feeling the sweat stick my shirt to my skin. I felt like a fly on flypaper. “Do you believe in God?”

He pocketed the Famous Blume Notepad and Pen. It was clear that my session was almost over. He looked thoughtful, like I’d finally touched home somehow. “Yes, I do,” He answered sincerely, and for a moment I felt an irrational hope bloom inside me... but then he slammed me back down to earth. “I believe that *we’re* God,” he said. “Us. The human race. *We* created the world we live in, such as it is. We alone are responsible for our actions. We hold the power of life and death over the entire planet. What more could a god be? If we need something more, then maybe it’s a scapegoat. Something to ease our guilty collective conscience. Whenever we mess things up, we blame God or the Devil. But no, I don’t believe they’re out there. Not really. In the end, we have only ourselves to blame.”

His answer didn’t surprise me. It simply echoed what Myron Himself had said a long time ago, only coming from him, it sounded even more hopeless.

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I left the session feeling more depressed than ever. Dr. Blume had reminded me of the futility of my situation; of what I was up against... what *Myron* was up against.

But that's what he gets paid for, isn't it? To make lunatics like me see the reality of the world? Well, friends and neighbors, I wasn't about to let him talk me into believing it. If I did, I suppose that would mean—in *his* opinion, at least—that I was cured.

I walked around the corridors for a while, slowly allowing my depression to lift. When I felt better, I took myself to the Day Room, hoping to catch someone—hopefully Mr. Sullivan—in a relatively sane moment.

There he was, thank God, waving me over from one of the mossy chairs. “Good to see you, Marko,” he said in a lucid voice. “This place has been dull this morning—no one to talk to.”

“How’ve you been, Mr. Sullivan?” I asked, smiling and pulling a chair closer. “I just finished with the Famous Blume Pipe.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, that’s *some* excitement, at least. If it weren’t for those damned eyes of his, I’d almost look forward to one of our little visits... that’s how boring it’s been around here.”

“I kind of think of him as the enemy,” I said. “Each time I leave I think, ‘I’m never going to beat him’. He knows all the right buttons to push. He’s *good*, damn it all.”

“I believe,” Mr. Sullivan said, “that he assumes too much. He assumes that just because someone’s *here*, they *must* be crazy.” He looked me in the eye very purposefully. “I myself make no such assumptions,” he said.

I’d told Mr. Sullivan about Myron when I first came to the ward. It’d started out with me telling about my meeting Myron in the pawnshop. At that point, Mr. Sullivan had been listening attentively, but as the tale progressed, I could see him slipping away, falling back into his strange, manic world. By the end of the story, I was completely sure that he would never even remember it; he just sat there staring. It was like talking to a mannequin.

Now, by the way he looked at me, I knew that I’d been wrong. He *had* heard what I’d been telling him...

And he *believed* it.

Great. I’d convinced another lunatic, who even as I was thinking this, was slipping away again—this time, not into silence, but into the gory details of Suicide Attempt Number Three.

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43. shaved ice and Nietzsche

It's beginning to dawn on me what an odd situation we have here. Think about it for a minute... here, locked up in the same institution are two people, one of whom believes himself to be Christ and apparently refuses to prove it (obviously, if He had, I'd be out of here), and a second who believes the first to be Christ and *can't* prove it.

I wonder what the people in charge (whoever they may be) think about that. I can just picture it when they have their meetings—and I'm sure that somewhere they do get together to review cases. Although the doctors on each ward are isolated from the others, I imagine that there must be some sort of regulating body that is intimately aware of every single case in the hospital. I'll bet we're a hot topic. Can you imagine the theories they've come up with to explain how we've fed off each other's delusions? They probably figure we've been having some kind of mutual parasitic relationship of the neurosis—the messianic complex supporting the ultimate supplicant and vice-versa. It would certainly explain why they've kept us apart, without word of how the other is doing. It would be, of course, the therapeutic thing to do.

But sometimes, when I'm lying in my bed, alone in my room, I wonder if even one of those doctors might be having doubts. I sometimes think—a foolish thought, I know—that maybe there's just one doctor who can't sleep at night because he's thinking *what if what those two neurotics are saying is true?*

Yes, what if?

Well, then, the doctor might say to himself, the best thing we could do is what we're already doing—keep them apart. No telling what they might do if they ever got together again, is there?

True enough.

And, of course, the doctor might continue, they could never be released. Let them talk to anyone they want in here... who's going to believe them? What would it matter if the other patients believed them?

Yes, like Mr. Sullivan.

But not out there, he might go on. If it is true, then the truth stays here.

Sure. We wouldn't want the truth spreading around, would we? It's one thing for a man of science to acknowledge a Christ that lived two thousand years ago, even grudgingly, but it's a whole 'nuther matter to say, *yup, we've got the genu-wine messiah locked up in our insane asylum and it looks like we're not quite as in control as we thought.*

No, I don't suppose that would do at all, because science would suddenly find itself walking not merely on thin ice, but on *shaved* ice. None of their pat answers would fit anymore—not in the face of a walking, talking God-come-down-to-earth. He would defy explanation as easily as He defies gravity. His every breath would be an anachronism; His every step a widening chasm in the fabric of their logic. And let's face it, folks—subtract logic from science and you're left with a big fat Zero.

That thought has occurred to me. Maybe someone is afraid of the truth. Maybe someone is afraid of *us*.

That's quite a thought, isn't it? God versus man's quest for knowledge. God versus man's need to be godly. What was it Dr. Blume had said? *I believe that we are God*. Yes, maybe that's what it all boils down to—man's unquenchable thirst for all the answers. That was why men built the Tower of Babel... and why God made sure that it would never be finished. Was progress really evolutionary, or was it a conscious effort to attain the stature of omnipotence?

So what if someone programmed a computer and asked it, "Is there a real God?", and the answer popped out *yes*? What would that mean?

It would mean, of course, that we could never be Him. Perfection can never be imitated; there is always a flaw in the copy. It's the reason why master rug-makers thousands of years ago always made one small intentional error in their works. They knew it then... but it seems to have been forgotten in the centuries between. Proof of a Supreme Being would mean that the position was already filled. We would always be flawed, something impossible for man's enormous ego to accept.

So what do you suppose the computer programmer would do upon receiving his answer? Go running out, calling far and wide that God, Nietzsche notwithstanding, was actually alive and well and residing on Main Street, Heaven? Not on your life! He, being a good man of science, would tear it up, bury the truth, shred it, and go mad. Or simply choose not to believe it.

And that, my friends, is the situation we have here—Myron popping out of the computer and me crying out the truth. What could be more dangerous to the thinking, logical mind? Put into simpler terms, it means this: that even if I do convince them of the truth, Myron and I may very well never leave this place. In the end, we may both be buried here.

It may well be that the only way out—for either of us—is to be *cured*.

44. the crux of the problem

Gina came to visit me today. She hasn't been around much lately; I assume she's been working another ward—another floor, maybe. I was in a foul mood when she arrived—I'd just finished another senseless, seemingly endless session with the Blume Pipe. As always, I left more depressed than when I'd gone in. When I first began seeing him I had felt only a vague discomfort around him. He seemed almost laughable, with his unmistakeable effort to conform to his own stereotype of the *proper* analyst. But by this time, I had begun to see him as the enemy—the front line soldier in the Army of Logic who opposed me on the strange and surreal battlefield where we fought what was to me a spiritual war.

Gina poked her head into my room and smiled. "Hi, Marko," she said brightly.

I turned and gave her a surly look.

"Uh-oh," she responded. "Let me guess... today was your session with Dr. Blume."

I nodded. "Of course," I said to her, aware of how dejected my own voice sounded. I was sure that my expression matched it quite nicely. "The man drives me crazy." The irony of that statement caught me by surprise and I actually laughed out loud.

Gina's smile, which had faded a bit, returned even more brightly than before.

"I'm serious, Gina," I continued, fighting hard to keep my grim visage. "I'm so tired of beating my head against the wall, that I'm beginning to lose my will to keep fighting."

Gina finally came into the room and sat down in the single chair that shared space with my bed. She gave me a thoughtful look. "I've always been confused about why you think of therapy as a battleground," she said, almost apologetically. Gina, I had learned, didn't like confrontation. I supposed that she would have to overcome that weakness if she ever planned to be a full-fledged, effective therapist.

"I don't *think* of it as a battleground," I responded. "It just happens to be the place where my own ideas are ignored, my faith is belittled, and my hope is bashed on a weekly basis."

Gina did just what I would expect a fledgeling therapist to do—she smiled and did the 'positive reinforcement' thing. "Marko," she said, "no one wants to deprive you of your faith. You're entitled to believe anything you want to. That's your right."

I laughed, then. I suppose I shouldn't have, because Gina looked like I'd sucker-punched her. "Look, Gina," I said immediately. "*Blume* patronizes me... I don't expect it from you."

"Ok," she said. "Understood. I won't talk down to you. But I really don't get it." She gave a kind of half-shrug, and I could see that she was being sincere.

"No one understands. That's the problem," I explained. "That's the *whole* problem... it actually is the crux of the problem. No one understands."

Gina nodded. "Well, I can see where that would be frustrating... personally, I *hate* when I'm trying to explain something and the other person just doesn't get it."

"But in my case," I said, "the fact that no one understands makes a literal difference to the whole world...not just because Dr. Blume doesn't understand, but because *no one* does."

Gina regarded me with that clinical gaze that I'd come to recognize so well. She didn't have to say anything... I knew she was thinking:

See, that's what we're all talking about, Marko... that's why you're here.

I let the moment pass. Finally, my voice lowered in a conspiratorial tone, I said, "Gina... did you find out anything about Myron?"

She slumped visibly, closed her eyes, and let out a sigh. "Marko, I've told you—even if I *knew* anything, I couldn't tell you. You *know* that..."

Now I shook my own head. "Gina, I know He's here. They brought Him here first, remember? And He's the whole reason why *I'm* here... don't you get that?"

She was clearly frustrated, grasping for a way out of this conversation. "Marko," she said, her voice shaky with emotion, "you have to understand this—I *can't* tell you. It would not only be unethical, but it would be..." she looked for the right words... "against your clinical interest."

I absorbed those words and rolled them around for a moment. It suddenly occurred to me what she was saying... that she *did* know that He was here, and that she was adhering to what I had previously thought was only a theory, but now realized was a reality. We couldn't know that the other was here, because that would feed *our* reality. The truth had to be stifled, and Gina was buying into it. "Gina," I said, pleading, in almost a whisper, "I just want to know that He's ok. *Please*."

Gina's face was a torment of emotions. At last, she sighed and very slowly closed her eyes. She looked as though she was on the verge of crying. I felt sorry for her, but I just couldn't let up. God help me, I knew she was on the verge of breaking and I was determined to finish this.

"Gina... *please*."

At last, she broke. In a tiny voice, she said, "He's alright. He's three floors up. He's alright, I promise. They're getting nowhere with him, though. He just sits there, saying nothing."

Nothing at all.”

I felt my heart beating for the first time in months. I felt bad for Gina, but it had been worth it. Myron was alright... that was all that mattered.

“Thank you, Gina,” I said softly.

She got up from the chair, looked at me with a recriminating expression, and without a word she walked out of the room. Instinctively, and with regret, I knew it was the last time I would ever see Gina.

45. an unexpected visitor

I can’t remember how long I’ve been here. Time seems to have sort stretched out and altered itself, and I haven’t felt the inclination to mark the days... but time has certainly passed.

It must have been months. Since being here I’ve chosen not to cut my hair or to shave; now my hair is well beyond shoulder-length and my beard is long and unkempt. I kind of like looking biblical and apostolic... it lends itself to what the staff sees as my disorder and I see as my faith. It suits me.

I was sitting in the common room this morning, just allowing the time to flow slowly past me. A few of the residents *shooshed* by, in slow motion, like carp in a lethargic river, and I watched them with disinterest.

I’d been sitting there for an uncertain time when one of the social workers approached me. It was Julio—a young and earnest Hispanic graduate from CUNY. Julio was always in a hurry, always rushing to get wherever it was that he needed to be next. In this place, where life moved at a snail’s pace, he almost seemed to be unnaturally fast by contrast. He steamed up to me and extended a hand for a shake. Julio always needed to have some sort of social ritual in order to interact with the patients. “Hiya, Marko,” he said cheerfully. “How’s it going, my friend?”

I took his hand and he squeezed my own tightly. “I’m surviving,” I responded.

He finally released my hand and said, “Well, there’s a visitor here to see you, man.” He smiled, assuming that he’d just told me very good news.

My expression must have betrayed my confusion, because Julio’s smile slipped a bit.

“A visitor?” I asked. “Who’s here to see me?”

“I don’t know,” Julio answered. “I was just told that there’s someone here to see you. I’m supposed to take you to him.”

I shrugged. No way to find out who it was but to go and see...

“Lead on, then, Julio,” I said as cheerfully as I could. But I didn’t feel cheerful. If anything, I felt suspicious. My guard was up, though I had no real idea why. Instinct, I suppose. I walked along behind the ever-rushing Julio until we came to the visiting quarters. We stopped at Room #1 and he gave a quick subdued knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer, he opened the door and ushered me inside.

I was disappointed, but not surprised, to find Dr. Blume sitting in one of the chairs inside Visitors’ Room #1. He instantly rose and waved me further in. “Ah, Marko,” he said magnanimously, “thank you for coming.” He waved a hand to his left, where the unexpected visitor was sitting. “This gentleman has come to meet you. Allow me to introduce you.”

I took in the visitor with a mixture of surprise and consternation.

"This is Father Callahan, Marko," Blume continued without missing a beat. "He is the Pastor of the church that your friend vandalized."

But I already knew that, even before Blume spoke. It couldn't be anyone else, after all, could it?

"Hello, Marko," Father Callahan said, rising and offering his hand to me.

For a moment I wasn't sure if I should shake it or look for a ring that he expected me to kiss. I opted to shake his hand. "Hello," I said simply. "I wasn't exactly sure what this was all about—though I think that I probably knew deep down inside—but I wasn't going to say any more than was necessary. I had nothing to hide, but I wasn't going to give him anything to use for whatever purpose he had come here for."

Father Callahan cleared his throat softly and began speaking. "Marko, Dr. Blume thought that it might be beneficial for me to come and talk with you. He hasn't told me anything specific about you, and he hasn't betrayed your confidentiality... I hope that you will trust me enough to accept that as the truth. If you wish to leave, I would not be offended. But I would like to help if I can." He peered into my eyes, with an expression that I was sure had come with a great deal of practice behind it. I decided that, at least in general, the man was trustworthy. I was sure that he was a worthy shepherd for his flock, and that they would trust him implicitly with their spiritual lives.

But I thought back to the first day that I met Myron, and the lunch that we shared together that day. I remembered the power that Myron exuded, that I felt all the way to my very soul as I sat across that table from him, and I was sharply aware that that sense of spiritual power was missing in Father Callahan. He probably was a very good priest, and probably served his parishioners well... but, well... he was no Myron.

"No, sir," I said as respectfully as I could. "We can talk. It's ok."

Father Callahan seemed surprised and pleased. "Thank you," he said. His voice was soft and reassuring. "Well, let's start with you," he went on. "How are you doing?"

I chuckled. "Well, I can't leave here," I responded. "So things have been better."

He nodded. "I can't argue with that," he said with a smile.

Father Callahan cast a glance toward Blume, who had sort of blended into the background as much as it was possible for him to do so. "Would you mind telling me why it is that you were committed?" he asked. The glance appeared to be another effort to reassure me that it was safe to reveal whatever I wished to reveal... that Blume wouldn't interrupt or interfere with what I had to say.

I looked over at Blume too, but my expression was a bit different from the good priest's... it betrayed my distrust of him. "He honestly hasn't told you?" I asked.

Callahan shook his head. "Not a word. The only thing that he told me was that you had had some sort of relationship with the person who ransacked the church. Maybe that's a good place to start."

I thought for a minute and decided to go ahead. I wasn't sure what the outcome would be, but how could it really make things any worse? So I said, "Well, yes... I knew Him. *Know* Him."

He smiled, a clearly practiced but nevertheless genuine smile.

"I was hoping," he said, "that you might be able to shed some light for me on *why* he did what he did... and of course on how that event brought you here."

I answered as truthfully—and as *minimally*—as possible. “Myron did what he did because He believed it to be the right thing to do.”

He raised his eyebrows a bit. “I’m not sure I understand. Why would he think such a thing? It’s just a church. Many people look to our church as their spiritual home. Why would he feel the need to destroy it?”

I hesitated, thinking hard. I began to wonder why the priest actually cared about Myron’s motivations, or my own predicament. And why would Blume want to involve the priest? Blume was an atheist, for God’s sake... why should he even care?

“Myron,” I said finally, “described what he did as the equivalent of Jesus chasing the money-changers from the Temple. He believes that the Church has strayed.”

“I see,” the priest said, nodding. “Very interesting. So he sees himself as the judge of the Church?”

I nodded back. “I guess you could say that,” I answered. “But I think it’s more like He’s the Landlord.”

Callahan seemed taken aback for a moment. Then he squinted at me and leaned forward a bit. “Do you mean what I think you mean by that?”

I nodded firmly. “Yes,” I answered plainly.

The priest stroked his chin thoughtfully, his eyes never leaving me. “Surely you understand the significance of what you’re telling me...”

I nodded once again. “I understand the significance of it... do *you*?”

I watched his expression change as he struggled to find the right response to my question.

“You know,” he said at last, “that as an officer of my Church, I have to tell you that claiming to be the Messiah is considered heresy. The Catholic Church recognizes only one God... one Christ.”

I shrugged my shoulders, overcome with indifference. “It doesn’t really matter what the church’s position is,” I said. “Not to me, and not to Myron. I know who and what He is.”

“And what—if I may ask—makes you believe what this Myron claims?”

“You really don’t understand, do you?” I asked, trying very hard to conceal my anger at him. “*This Myron*,” I went on, “has proven to me who He is without any effort... without trying... without ever feeling the need to do so. But I believe in Him.”

The priest leaned back in his seat and appeared contemplative. “Hmm,” he said. “So your means of demonstrating your belief in him was to have him committed...”

Inwardly I fumed, but I struggled to keep my composure so that I could respond. “I had Him committed, yes... but not because I doubted who He is. I did it because, like Judas before Me, I was too proud to accept His plan.” I held my hands out palms up, spread my fingers out of frustration and desperation, and cried, “I thought I knew better!”

“So what happened?” he asked innocently.

“Everything went wrong,” I answered honestly. I expected Him to declare Himself... but instead he allowed Himself to be taken away. So I slit my wrists.”

The priest nodded. “And so here he sits. And so do you.”

I covered my face with a hand as tears began to slide down my cheeks. “Yes, here he sits.”

“So, Marko,” the priest said quietly. “If he really is who you think he is, why is he still here? Why doesn’t he just do something to fix what you’ve done?”

“I don’t *know*!” I cried.

“Well, then,” he said in a near whisper. “Why don’t you do something to help yourself?”

I slowly took my hand away from my face and peered with renewed suspicion at the priest. “Like what?” I asked.

“Well, Marko, I’m sure you know that your delusional belief in this Myron is the reason why you’re being kept here. It represents a risk to your safety. It’s already been the reason for a suicide attempt.” He mustered up a compassionate gaze for me. “All you would have to do is recognize your own delusion and they would release you.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and slowly shook my head. “My God,” I said in a near whisper. “You’ve seen Him. You know the Truth.” I opened my eyes and leveled my gaze directly into his face. “You’re *afraid* of Him. You *know* that what I’m saying is true! You hypocritical bastard...”

Father Callahan slowly stood up. “Surely you know how ridiculous that sounds,” he said.

Dr. Blume rose with him, silent and grim-faced.

I turned to Blume, my face betraying my rage. “I knew that you and the entire scientific community would resist belief in Him,” I spat out. I turned back to the priest. “But *you!* You know... and yet you refuse to see, refuse to believe.” I shook my head once again, never taking my eyes off him. “You would prefer me to betray Him for a second time rather than accept the Truth. You disgust me. And you’ll be rewarded for your cowardice and your lack of faith. Believe me, Father. You and the rest of the Sanhedrin will be rewarded.”

Without waiting to be invited to leave or to be excused, I left the two of them behind me, standing in the visitor’s room like statues dedicated to shame.

46. defying gravity

As Jerry Garcia once said... *what a long, strange trip it’s been.*

I’ve finally found peace, and despite my anger, my outrage, my disgust at the priest, Father Callahan, I ultimately have him to thank for my newfound serenity. At the time I had no idea that he would have such a profound effect on me. It took a few more months of struggling, of trying to wrap my own insignificant brain around the fact of Myron’s existence, before I finally realized the importance of what he said to me that day.

He, the representative of organized religion, had tempted me. He had offered my own personal worldly salvation in exchange for the sacrifice of my belief in Myron. Why? Because he knew that I was telling the truth. Because he had already met Myron and had been touched—influenced—by Him. And because he was as afraid as anyone else of the Truth because the Truth of Myron’s existence would cause change. And there is nothing as frightening as change.

It still worried me why Myron had allowed Himself to be taken, and had done nothing since, and I had to understand that because it was so crucial to the understanding of why I remain here. Why did He not demonstrate His sanctity? Why did He not *show* them who He is? I knew that it would have been easy for Him. So *why* was He silent? Why?

Over the course of the last few months, understanding has slowly dawned on me. And when at last understanding came to me, Myron’s Truth illuminated me and washed over me and I was finally... *finally*... able to receive His blessing.

You see, I realize now that it was my fate—my role—to do exactly what I did. I was the mechanism of Myron’s plan. My weaknesses—my pride and my reluctance to accept Him for

what He truly is—had made me the only person who was fit for that role. Like Judas before me, I simply did exactly what Christ expected me to do. That doesn't make me feel any better. I'm filled with a sense of shame that I could be so weak that I played that part. Knowing that it was meant to be—that it was a *necessary* part of Myron's plan—does offer me a small ration of redemption.

You see, it was always Myron's plan to be committed. He had told us that the battle He was destined to fight would be a silent one, one which no one would even be aware of. He would fight the Beast—the Antichrist—and this was to be the battleground. This is the place of His choosing, and I have provided it to Him.

He is doing battle with the Antichrist—and the Antichrist is *us*... the scientific mind, which cannot accept that which can't be proven, and the religious mind, which can't accept anything which doesn't conform to dogma.

This morning I awoke to a kind of confirmation of my understanding. It was a sign from Myron that He is with me...that His love for me is undiminished and his forgiveness is absolute.

I awoke early. The morning sun was just beginning to peek into my room and the world was quiet as it can only be quiet just at sunrise. I lay there for a few minutes, awakening slowly and lazily. It was only when the sun reached just the right position, so that the rays entered through the window at just the right angle, that I noticed something glinting on the floor halfway between my bed and the door.

Curious, I threw back the sheet, hauled myself out of the bed, and padded over. Bending down, I picked the object up. I straightened, peered at what was grasped between my thumb and forefinger, and smiled. A grateful tear trickled down my cheek.

It was the ring... the ring that had led me to Myron, that had symbolized my faith in Him, and which had ultimately been sacrificed in my betrayal of Him. "Thank you, Myron," I whispered. He had returned it to me, a symbol of my redemption.

So now, I stand here at my window and I look out at a distant, unknowing world that doesn't look back. I know that it doesn't matter that they don't realize what is at stake within these walls. I know that my own existence, or that of anyone else out there, is ultimately of little consequence in the grand scheme of things.

I also know that three floors above me, Myron is fighting the battle that He was destined to fight. People come and people go, observing Him, trying to comprehend Him, trying to understand the bird that they have imprisoned in the box, and walking away unable to fathom His *spirit*. Perhaps one day someone will recognize Him for who He is, and will not be afraid to speak the truth out loud. Then again, perhaps not.

But I'm consoled with the sure knowledge that He is sitting up there, calmly defying gravity as surely as He defies logic—the ultimate enigma.

For now, at least, that is enough.