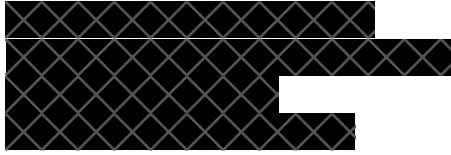


Stephen Hebert

60,100 words.



A BRIEF AND HORRIBLE RESURRECTION

by Stephen Hebert

Chapter One

Once upon a time—December 31, 2016 at 9:09am—Adam Barth simply could not with anything anymore. His mother wasn't sure that she could either, to be quite frank.

"I've mailed the letters, Mother," he said, slamming the door to Mrs. Barth's 1,600-square-foot home on the nice little cul-de-sac in the small town of Gehenna an hour or so north and west of Houston. Mrs. Barth had bought the home with the money she had leftover from the life insurance after burying Mr. Barth some twenty years ago when he'd fallen victim to the cancer. The life insurance had provided her the opportunity not only to buy the house, but also to furnish and accessorize it. The slamming of the door rattled the various wall hangings that she had collected over the years: a poor imitation of a fine German

cuckoo clock that sat silently next to a cheap clock that she'd purchased from Wal-Mart; a museum-like assortment of canvas paintings of Jesus of Nazareth—lily white and effeminate—that lined the hallway in two rows, one on top of the other, between the living room and the the three bedrooms, many of which had been plucked from garage sales, but some of which had been ordered from a website claiming to sell the lost but recently discovered works of the Italian masters; a collection of dead and decaying yellow roses, bundled and hanging upside down in the living room, roses that Mr. Barth had given her on the occasion of their fifth and final wedding anniversary; Mr. Barth's dead duck which the taxidermist had mounted on a piece of driftwood, positioning the duck as if in flight and somehow making its facial expression appear angry and even aggressive, like some tiny pterodactyl swooping at its prey.

"What letters?" She asked. "Emails?"

"No, Mother. Letters. Snail mail. Pony Express." Adam went immediately to the kitchen where he was searching through drawers. "The Internet is a corruptive force and I shan't allow myself—or my mother, for that matter—to fall victim to it. I've cut this house off completely from its demonic sway." He found another drawer and rifled through it, waving his hand through the junk that had collected there and causing an awful racket.

"What are you looking for? What letters?"

"A fork," he said, standing upright and displaying what he'd found in the drawer. "The letters," he said, brushing past Mrs. Barth, nearly taking her out with the fork, and heading for the front door. "To Lily, to Smith & Wesson, to the Democratic Party, the Clintons and a whole host of other..." He continued listing addressees as he walked out the front door, closing it behind him.

Mrs. Barth was left, standing in the living room, nothing to accompany her except the strangely resonant tick and tock of the cheap wall clock. The clock's ever-present grinding along always seemed to punctuate moments of calm and quiet in the midst of Adam's tempests. The cuckoo clock, however, sat on the wall, dormant as it had been for years, in need of repair or consignment to the landfill.

She plopped down in the tattered recliner, pulled the lever to kick out the built-in footrest which squeaked as it emerged, and carefully placed her feet on it so as not to allow the downward force of gravity to exert enough pressure on either of her legs against the footrest's worn cushion that they might fall asleep. She was not old at all, just in her mid-forties, but she was getting older and the last thing she needed was to have her legs fall asleep and then to take a tumble and break a

hip. The statistics about broken hips and their correlation with early death were alarming and the WebMD article that she'd read to that effect had really done a number on her psyche. Adam had told her that she shouldn't read such articles and that he'd felt like her habit of reading articles about death and disease had caused her to age twenty years. It was true that her hair had now gone all gray and that she had developed a way of tottering around the house, even holding on to some pieces of furniture as she walked around, concerned that she might take tumble. Day-by-day her healthy respect for gravity had grown into a fear as she read more and more about the various ways that she might meet an untimely and horrible fate. Her fascination with these topics, perhaps triggered by her husband's unfortunate demise in his youth, however, had only steadily grown and the advent of the World Wide Web had made it easier and easier for her to get her hands on this sort of material.

The front door swung open again. Mrs. Barth grabbed at her chest exclaiming, "Sweet Jesus of Nazareth! What the hell is it now, Adam Barth?"

Adam swept past her with a large package underneath his left arm and a gigantic sack slung over his right shoulder,

continuing his list of addressees from before: "...ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX News for God's sake..."

"Is that rice?"

"Supplies."

He stormed to his bedroom down the hall. Mrs. Barth started to get to her feet to pursue him, but then thought better of it. She put her feet back up, crossing them at the ankles, and muttered, "He'll be back soon enough." But Adam didn't come back and the tick-tock lulled Mrs. Barth into a quiet morning meditation.

Quiet lasted for quite some time.

Since Adam had moved back home after finishing his philosophy degree some eighteen months ago, she hadn't really experienced this level of quiet. Her son spent most of his time talking about the state of the world, pacing madly, muttering his invective against the universe. When he wasn't talking, he could be found quietly humping Lily Sommers in his bedroom down the hall, their cadence producing tiny squeaks and bumps that were always slightly out of rhythm with the clock.

Mrs. Barth enjoyed the quiet. The sunlight filtered through the filthy panes of glass on the eastern edge of the house, and Mrs. Barth imagined the surprise that all that light must experience after it travels 93 million miles to land on a dust

particle floating in her little house. Of all the places it could have landed, what a strange little journey it must have been, hurtling through space, ripping through the upper atmosphere, scattered hither and yon by a cloud or two before slipping silently between the leaves of the pecan tree that dominated her backyard—the tree that provided shelter for squirrels and doves and any number of other mostly unwanted critters—until it passed through the window this morning only to land upon that dust particle hanging momentarily in the air. *What a miracle*, she thought, folding her hands on her stomach as if in prayer and noticing the tiny oceanic rhythm of her breathing.

I must get Adam to move out, she thought and closed her eyes to allow a mid-morning nap to supply her with all of the universe's answers.

#

Adam made his way into his room and heaved the bag of rice onto the bed which jiggled and squirmed under its weight. The package under his left arm soon followed. It landed on the bag of rice and slid down its curved side until it rested half on the bed.

The bed was the same twin bed that he'd grown up sleeping on. The mattress was suspended on a metal net which had made for

excellent bouncing as a youngster but would most likely lead to irreparable back damage in adulthood. Adam had centered the bed on the wall opposite the door, and though it was only a twin, it dominated the little room. He put his hands on his hips and stared at the bed. This wouldn't do, so he walked to the right side of the bed, placed his thighs against it, and shoved it across the floor until it was tucked into the corner. This created a little more space in the center of the room. His *qi* increased palpably. He opened the package and emptied its contents on to the bed: a small, round meditation cushion and an electric rice cooker. He stepped back to the door and surveyed the room. The rice and the cooker had to go somewhere else. He was especially concerned about the cooker. It needed its own space. He wished to escape, but not to start a house fire. He imagined such a fire for a moment. His eyes blazed with the metaphor, thinking this some great act of defiance, of rebellion, of protest, but then he shuddered when he thought of his dear old mother suffocating quietly in her chair as she napped and choked on fumes. He moved the rice cooker to the floor in the corner near an electrical outlet. Better. He popped open the lid and placed the fork inside.

On the side of the room opposite the bed, a sliding door led to the bathroom. It was the sort of bathroom that also had a

door that opened into the hallway. He went into the bathroom and gathered up everything—shampoo bottles, deodorant and cologne, shaving utensils, pill bottles, emery boards. He put all of these extraneous toiletries and sundries into the box and then put the box out in the hallway. He left only a toothbrush and toothpaste, a bar of soap, a small cup, a pair of scissors, and fingernail clippers. He locked that door and went back to the bedroom.

Immediately upon entering, the bed disgusted him. *Beds are for the weak*, he thought. With that, he walked to the end of the bed, bent at his knees, and lifted the end up while pulling the whole thing toward him. The bed screeched and screamed as it scraped against the hardwoods, gouging the floors and leaving terrible scratches. He tilted the bed up and leaned it vertically against the wall, exposing the net of metal and springs to the world.

He glanced at the meditation cushion which had fallen to the side of the bed. *Cushions are about basic health and safety*, he thought, and he kicked the cushion to the middle of the room. A meditation cushion was multipurpose. Not only did it supply a platform for exploring the universe of the mind, but it also aided in improving one's posture and could be used as a pillow on the off chance that he decided to sleep.

He stepped back to survey the room once more. The bed upright in the corner didn't look great, but it maximized floor space. Aesthetics were always to be considered, but the bed was not strictly necessary. *Utility is its own beauty*, he thought. He wished he could get rid of the bed and the dresser and the nightstand too, but a perch for the lamp really didn't hurt, and he needed a place for clothes, and the bed was just too cumbersome to move now. He looked at the shadow of the bed that marked the wall where it used to be. The paint was chipped, scratched, and smoothed where the frame had rubbed up against it. He felt a tinge of shame as he considered his former immaturity: last week, those carefree days with Lily and her gentle breath. If only he had time to paint the room and prepare it just so. *Alas, midnight draws apace*, he thought, and *punctuality is paramount*. The alliteration pleased him. He repeated the phrase—*punctuality is paramount*—over and over again in his mind as a new mantra.

He paced the room from edge to edge—it took only three or four steps—and then made tiny orbits around the meditation cushion. He stopped and looked at the rice cooker. *Shit*, he thought, *I forgot to get instructions for that damn thing*. He'd borrowed the cooker from his friend, Eddie, who had once told him in a more-than-drunken stupor that a rice cooker and a 50-

pound bag of rice was all that anyone needed to survive for a year. Eddie had apparently forgotten that water was necessary for the cooking of rice, but this seemed to be a given, and Adam had quite agreed with the theory. The rice cooker doubled both as a cooking appliance and a bowl. If one grew extremely desperate, the cooker could also provide a heat source or even, in the event of some kind of sewage catastrophe, could be used to boil water thus rendering it potable. In spite of the aquatic oversight, Eddie really had thought this all through. As for the rice, 50 pounds seemed plenty. Provided he was sufficiently self-controlled, 50 pounds of dry rice could last quite a long time. Adam conjured up images of Siddhartha Gautama, pre-Buddha stage, surviving on one grain of rice per day. *If the Buddha can do it, he thought, so can I.* The thought bordered on arrogance, but it was also born out of a deep respect for the Enlightened One. Buddha was Everyman and Everyman was Buddha.

I'll figure the rice cooker out, Adam thought, The thing only has one button—how hard can it be?

Adam took a deep breath and sighed. *This is it. I shall survive.* His mind went monkey and slipped into a Gloria Gaynor song. He mentally and silently chastised himself. Time to make his plan known.

#

"Mother, we need to talk."

Adam sat down on the coffee table and put his hand on his mother's feet. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Isn't it wonderful the way they dance?"

Adam furrowed his brow and then decided to ignore her strange comment.

"You can breathe them in, I suppose," she said, "And they'd just go right on dancing until they cause a pulmonary embolism or accumulate into mesothelioma or some such dread disease. It's just the same, though." She looked squarely into his eyes. "They are part of you. They are part of me. Together. That's us being we." She giggled a little.

Adam removed his hand from her foot and brushed his fingers through his hair. "I haven't a clue what the hell you're talking about, Mother. But I do have important matters to discuss."

She closed her eyes again, but maintained a blissful smile.

He asked, "Are you off your meds?"

She responded, "Perhaps the meds are off me!" She giggled again with a touch of the mischievous school girl that she'd never really been.

Adam let out a sigh. Sighing had become a habit, the only way he could let out the frustration he felt for a corrupted and corrupting world that threatened to close in on him, to bring

its terribleness into every pore and orifice of his person, creeping into his lungs and heart and shooting up a variety of passageways right into his brain and even, heaven forbid, into his mind. So he sighed and let it all out as much as he possibly could.

"This is quite important, Mother, so regardless of your medicated or non-medicated or over-medicated state, I really must ask for your full and complete attention as well as your patience."

"This you shall have," she said straightening up her face which had started to feel slack and a little bit numb in the goofiest way. "Make waves, kiddo."

"Exactly," he shouted and jumped up on the coffee table. Feeling a bit silly for such histrionics, he gathered himself and hopped down and began pacing the living room. "It's all gone to Hell and I'm afraid I can't make waves. What can one man do? The world is a steaming pile. A narcissist in the White House, terrorists, people dying in the streets, crime, poverty, kids watching graphic violence and near-pornography on TV, low-brow entertainment devised to brainwash and inculcate us into the culture of cattle, all of it replacing the finer things! What can one man do? Nothing. And that's exactly what I am resolved to do, Mother. That's the solution. Nothing."

On this final word, he stopped his to-and-fro and squared around to face her directly.

She nodded in agreement. "Yes. Yes, of course," she said. "Let's do nothing. Just breathe it in." She relaxed her body again, which had grown tense during his monologue, and she paid attention once more to the silly numbness in her cheeks.

"I can't be in every protest," he said, "against police brutality and the military state, for example. I can't show up every time the war pigs wallow in their mire and muck. I can't feed every child or save anyone from cancer."

"To be sure, dear," Mrs. Barth said. "I know full well you can't save anyone from cancer."

Adam sighed out his frustration again, feeling it release from his toes to the follicles atop his brain.

"Maybe Lily could," she said. "If she ever gets up enough money and time to finish up medical school. She could save cancer. But you, Adam," she opened her eyes to make sure he was looking at her, "You don't have it in you."

For a moment, Adam felt a twinge of rejection in his chest—his own mother did not think him capable of curing cancer.

"This is important, Mother. Please don't interrupt."

She nodded.

"The only sane and reasonable thing to do," he continued, "is to protest it all by protesting nothing."

"That makes a great deal of sense, dear," she said.

But Adam didn't miss a beat: "Therefore, I have sent my letters announcing my intentions. I will withdraw into seclusion in my room for a period of one year. I have stocked the room with provisions. I need nothing further. I intend to sit in my room and hope that one year from now I will emerge into a much different, braver world, a world where sanity and rational thought once again take their rightful place as the sole authorities over the life of humankind, where justice reigns—" he stopped and looked at her face. "Have you fallen asleep?"

"Of course not," she said. "Go on. Go on. Go..."

"You must understand me." He crossed over to her and bent his face down toward hers, putting his hands on both of her cheeks. He spoke quite softly, "Open your eyes and please pay close attention."

She obliged.

He spoke in a low, serious voice. "You must not attempt to counteract this decision. Please do not come knocking or wanting to chat with me through the door. You must leave me alone until the stroke of midnight one year from today. Do you understand?"

"Adam," she said, "What will you do for food?"

"It's taken care of."

"Company?"

"I neither need nor want any."

"This is crazy, you know."

Adam could see the lucidity returning to her eyes as she turned all of this over in her mind.

"Why would you think this world would get better without you?"

"I can only hope," he said, "that the world will awaken, that it will come to its goddamned senses. Plus," he added, "there is always the possibility that my radical solitude will come to the attention of the news media and that the whole world will have to reckon with my absence."

"I'm not really sure the world is going to miss you, dear. Anyone who hears about this is just going to think you're crazy."

Adam shrugged off this latest rejection. "That is precisely the point," he said, "I've been driven there by the insanity of it all. Therefore," he straightened up and put his fists down at his sides, "I withdraw, not to be seen for one full year. Good-bye, Mother. Adieu, adieu, adieu."

"Good-bye, sweetheart."

Thus, Adam retired to his room, punctuating his decision with an intentionally light, but resolved, slam of his bedroom door.

#

Mrs. Barth made her sandwich by refrigerator light. She had dozed off after the silly conversation with Adam and awoken to a black living room and a silent house. Enjoying the darkness, she decided not to disturb it with the fluorescents. Instead, she padded her way to the kitchen, occasionally feeling mummy-like as she tentatively reached for the walls with outstretched arms. She chuckled at the thought of what she must look like to an outsider—a little old lady Karloff craving a sandwich like a zombie craves brains or human affection.

As she spread the mayonnaise on the bread, she noticed that the world—now made visible by that tiny, magical light in the refrigerator behind her—spun slowly. *Strange*, she thought, *I've always known that the world spun, but I've never really felt it.* She paid attention. Everything spun with the sandwich bread on the yellowed and worn countertop as its central axis. The whole earth rotated around that sandwich, revolving endlessly. She put the knife down and watched the spinning, mesmerized by the new center of the universe.

After a moment or two, she was awakened by the empty hole in her stomach crying out for sandwich. Her brain did a little battle. Was it permissible to consume this new bright center of the universe? The sandwich took on a new moral significance that no sandwich before had ever taken. Could she really risk sending the entire earth tumbling headlong into the dark reaches of the galaxy by removing its anchor?

Of course, she thought.

Atop the bottom slice of bread, she piled four rolled slices of turkey, two leaves of iceberg lettuce, a rather large slice of tomato and a single dill pickle slice for a little tart surprise right in the middle. She sprinkled some salt and pepper on the top, closed the sandwich and sliced it into four neat triangles with the knife that she had drawn from the block of knives—a most sensible and useful wedding gift—next to the sink. She returned the unused items to the refrigerator, closed the door, losing the light, and stared in the darkness at the barely visible sandwich on the counter.

She ate it.

What was her son's problem anyway? *Can't he see that this too shall pass and that—*, she stopped with a lump of sandwich partially chewed and suspended in her mouth.

She was overcome by the sensation that she'd forgotten to do something. Her gut felt empty as the world, having lost its axis, slowed its spin. She ran through the minutes of her day which had been largely unremarkable, especially since she'd spent several hours napping in the easy chair. Her thoughts flashed to tomorrow trying to conjure up her future responsibilities. Nothing there. She remembered the silly conversation with Adam. This allowed her to resume her chewing.

Hikikomori, she thought. She silently mouthed the word. She enjoyed the way the back of her tongue hit the top of the mouth on the consecutive Ks. *Hikikomori*.

What was that? She didn't know the word, but it popped into her brain just the same. How was that possible? Was she forgetting something? Did she speak another language? What was the word again? She lost it.

Bite of sandwich.

Adam's "retreat"—or whatever he had called it—was causing her distress and this was certainly the thing she must act on, the thing giving her the forgetting feeling. A mother, after all, couldn't just allow her son to give up and give in, could she? Knock at the door and ask him what the hell was the matter with him. It's the only thing to do.

But first, the sandwich.

She held up the third triangle and looked at it silhouetted against the faint streetlight that filtered through the pecan tree in the backyard and washed in through the kitchen window.

The world started spinning again.

Thank God, she thought, The last thing I need is for the world to stop on account of little me.

She took a bite and then resolved herself to walk to Adam's room and knock on the door and give him a piece of her mind. She focused. Focus. Focus. Focus. Her feet, at last, started to walk. Walking and chewing, she made her way as far as the living room. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness now, but she grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned on the television for some added light. She set the remote down and turned to the hallway that led back to the bedrooms. As she looked into the darkness beyond the hall door, once again she just knew that she'd forgotten something. In spite of the three-quarters sandwich that she'd just eaten, she felt empty inside. This world which had once spun around the sandwich now began to spin counter-clockwise around a new axis. The deep blackness of the hallway elongated before her eyes, stretching back and back and back, well beyond what she knew to be the edge of the house and eventually beyond the property line itself and eventually beyond known reality. This, of course, made little sense, but it also

seemed far more likely to her that it was true than that a turkey sandwich should be the center of the universe. The blackness continued to stretch. She remembered. *I must talk to Adam*, she thought. She willed herself to walk into the hallway, but her legs and feet didn't budge. A light blasted into the hallway as if one of the bedroom doors had been opened. Or maybe the hallway had stretched so far that it had now formed oval-shaped holes and fissures in the fabric of space-time itself just as a piece of bubblegum does when held between the teeth and stretched too far out of the mouth with the fingers.

I do love bubblegum, she thought. She remembered her father teaching her to blow a bubble. *What a damned frustrating experience.*

Again she willed her feet to move, but they wouldn't. The light grew stronger. She must talk to Adam, it was the only sensible thing to do. At last, her left foot stepped forward. *Oh God*, she thought as a wave of realization washed over her, *I'll never make it.*

She stumbled toward her chair and eased herself into it one last time. She closed her eyes and hoped that the world would stop spinning. She thought of Adam and Lily.

Her heart stopped and then she smiled.

#

Adam settled into his cushion, crossing his legs, lowering his ass on to the seat, wiggling just a bit and taking a deep breath. He closed his eyes. His body swelled as he inhaled and then sank more deeply into the cushion with the ensuing exhale. He repeated this. Each time, his body got lower and lower sinking further into the cushion until he was sure that he was neck-deep in the floorboards below him. Breathing in the love of the universe and hoping to breathe out at least as much love, he settled, settled, settled.

The election didn't matter.

This mattered.

His broken relationship didn't matter.

This mattered.

The fractured nature of the world didn't matter.

This mattered.

Nothing mattered, but this mattered.

This is this, he thought.

He focused on his breathing.

In. Out.

In. Out.

Fuck Trump.

No!

The breath. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out.

He scanned his body; beginning at the top of his scalp, he tried to feel the living essence of every cell that made up Adam, from the ends of his dead hairs down to the ends of his dead toenails. Dead. It was all simply matter, crude matter. Hydrogen. Carbon. Oxygen. A few other elements here and there. All gathered, gathering and regathering, and then it all fell apart—a random conglomeration of atoms that looked like this exactly for this moment and none else. Now this moment. Now this. Now. Now. N...

BREATHE.

In. Out.

In. Out.

In. Out.

An itch. His leg. Stuck dead. Nerves.

Nothing.

Yes.

Find it again.

Nothing.

Fucking leg!

He opened his eyes. The digital clock winked at him: 9:15. He'd been at this for nearly five minutes—what an accomplishment. The rice cooker beckoned him. He wasn't hungry. Yet, operating the thing was something to do. Don't do it. Do.

What matters? This matters. This. That. Even the other.

Especially the other. Have I done Lily wrong? A bad turn? She's fine. Pretty, young thing will be okay. A-Okay. Where did that "A" come from?

BREATHE.

In. Out.

In. Out.

9:17. Jesus. How long is a year? Damn song: 525,600 minutes. Is that accurate? The earth doesn't take exactly 24 hours to rotate, right? Who came up with that bullshit anyway? Why divide the day into eight times three? That person should be hanged. That person is dead. Reincarnated? No. That's now how it works. Except it does. It doesn't matter. Hanged? Hung? Hanged. Yes. Definitely that. Jesus. Buddha. God? What do I do for him? I've got so much time left.

BREATHE.

In. Out.

In. Out.

In. Out.

In. Out.

Thin. Stout. Skin. Pout. When? Doubt. Chin. Spout. Fin. Kraut. Din. Shout. It's done. I can't handle it anymore. 9:23.

Fuck. How much longer? The rice. The water. Don't be weak. Stay strong. Eat. Starve. Die. Love. Who cares?

This matters.

This.

Matters.

Go to sleep.

And so he did. He got up from the cushion, pulled the bed down from its position leaning against the wall, climbed atop the covers, and he slept. His final thought: "Happy New Year."

Chapter Two

Lily Sommers checked her phone again. Nothing. No missed calls, no texts, no emails. She slid the phone into her back pocket, returned her attention to the image in the full-length mirror, and admired the way the phone peeked out of the pocket, drawing attention to the new jeans and the shape of her hips.

"I'll take 'em," she said as if she were in some fancy boutique where her fashion consultant had labored for hours to find just the right pair. But no one was there to hear her declaration.

Lily returned to the fitting room and shimmied out of the tight-fitting jeans and then slung them over the door. She put her other jeans on, noting how very 2016 they felt—comfy but disappointing—and then made her way to the sales counter.

"New year, new jeans," she said to the clerk who responded in an obligatory fashion as they went through the standard rituals of the purchase—the credit card and the signed receipt and the receipt to take home which had the return policy on the back.

Dulled by the rote nature of the performance, Lily's mind flashed briefly to Pastor Steve's sermon from the past Sunday. She had managed to get Adam to church; he had been impressed with what he called "Pastor Steve's Anti-Consumerist Rant." The sermon had focused on the dangers of greed and money, tying in with what Pastor Steve called "The Liberal War on Christmas."

"Yeah, that part was all bullshit," Adam had said as Lily drove her 10-year-old Corolla back to Adam's house after the service. They always went to Adam's house, in part because Lily enjoyed Mrs. Barth's company, but mostly because she avoided her own father who was always there and always demanding of her attention. It had been that way since her mother had left on her cross-country motorcycling adventure last February and never returned. In the wake of this, Lily had kept her father and Adam apart since Adam had praised Lily's mother's cavalier, Kerouac-style attitude toward commitment and responsibility.

"I mean," Adam continued, "you can't really believe that there is some conspiracy to get rid of Christmas simply because

a few towns are putting up 'Holiday Trees' in front of the town hall."

Lily knew better than to get involved here. Trying to argue with Adam was like playing the house in Vegas—even when you're right, you're wrong. He was just that sort of a person, though he hadn't always been this way. A wave of pleasure and satisfaction worked its way up from her gut to her brain as she was simply happy for him to be engaging with and interested in what had happened at church.

Adam looked over at her. She didn't respond, so he continued: "Subtract out all of that fundamentalist bullsh—"

"Please," Lily interrupted, "You're in my car."

Adam bit his upper lip. "Okay," he said. He reset himself and then continued, "Subtract out all of that fundamentalist B.S." He paused but she didn't react. "Pastor Steve is putting something out there that I can dig—we're all robots doing what the corporations tell us to do." Lily felt him look at her. "Or doing what Satan wants us to do. Not really sure the difference between Satan and the corporations. Maybe the same thing and we're just using different words. What do you think?"

Lily, not used to being asked her opinion, played it cool and nodded. They rode in silence for a minute, but Adam, ever the antithesis of peace, couldn't handle silence for very long.

"Well, I give it my seal of approval," he said, "but with some reservations, of course."

"Of course," Lily said.

That had been a week ago, and she hadn't seen Adam since. Moreover, it had been a couple of days since she had heard from him at all.

She started the engine and checked her phone one more time—still no response. She pulled the car out of the parking spot and made her way toward the highway.

I'm losing him, she thought. She had felt this for quite a while. He had dutifully attended her baptism three months ago, but he had seemed dejected the entire time. In the car after, he'd been silent. It was her day and he couldn't muster a "congratulations" for her. His mother, of course, could do that, but Adam didn't pick up on her example. Lily had pulled into the Barth's driveway to drop off Mrs. Barth, and she had said, "Congratulations again," before closing the car door and heading up the walk to her front door.

As soon as his mother was safely inside and quite out of sight, Adam said, "So, definitely no more sex, right?"

Lily tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

"Not today," she said. "Not with you."

That had been a month ago and the coldness between the two of them had continued. They went out occasionally or watched a movie on the couch or let Mrs. Barth cook them something. They certainly shared no passion, however, no romance. *I'm to blame*, Lily thought frequently, but then she'd check herself. She'd made a choice to reclaim herself, to reclaim her body, her virginity, she was a new woman in the eyes of God and she'd be darned if Adam Barth took that away from her—again—without a ring and a ceremony. *If he loves me*, she thought, *he'll court me*.

She was cruising down the highway, remembering all of these things, feeling them again in her chest, and thinking about the blank screen on the phone in the passenger seat beside her. No calls. No texts. No emails. Cellular silence.

When she got to her house, she got out of the car and checked the mailbox. There was a small stack of mail. She put it under her arm while she carried the bag with the jeans in one hand and the key to the front door at the ready in the other. She unlocked the door and stepped into the entryway of the small suburban home that she'd grown up in. The walls were lined with family photos, pictures of she and her parents and her brother, Seth. Some of them were awkward, posed photos in front of abstract blue backgrounds, while others were shots of them at

the beach or at a family gathering. She walked past the framed images, a sort of timeline that built toward a moment about a year ago when this happy family on the walls ceased to exist, when her mother had simply decided that she was done, Lily and Seth didn't need her anymore, and she certainly didn't need her husband.

Lily plopped the bag with the new jeans and the stack of mail on the couch in the living room and walked down the hallway toward her parents' bedroom. The door was closed. Lily put her ear up against it and could hear only the whirring of the ceiling fan and the occasional metal jangling of the fan's chains rattling against the glass of its light. Lily quietly opened the door. The room was a mess, laundry piled several feet high in the corner, surfaces like the dresser covered in various and sundry items: a screwdriver, a lighter, spare change, a men's trifold wallet, business cards, pens and pencils and small pads of paper, hygiene products, a flashlight, a television that was on but muted. The sheets on the bed were piled into a ball, and Lily's father, Keith, unshaven and wearing the same white t-shirt and winter-themed pajama pants that had become his unemployment uniform, lay there, spread-eagle, mouth agape, his chest rising and falling.

Lily never knew whether to feel anger or pity.

She closed the door and walked back through the house. The communal spaces in the house—the living room, kitchen, and dining room, the bathroom just off the main hallway as well as the toilet toward the garage near the kitchen—these had all been taken care of. Lily kept those, as well as her own bedroom, nice and tidy. She vacuumed, she mopped, she dusted. The other spaces, however, her parents' bedroom, Seth's room which Keith had turned into an office, and the garage had become a total and complete mess. When her father wasn't sleeping and wasn't watching television, he seemed to be just making a mess. Lily never really saw this happening. She never noticed it anyway. She'd come home after work or after a Bible study or some other event and find some new pile of stuff in some new place. She'd open the garage and find bags of trash or recycling, or she'd find piles of plywood or a giant spool of copper wire that she'd never noticed before. Somehow, her father had managed to collect a houseful of garbage without ever leaving the house. For a long time, Lily had marveled at this, but now she was just annoyed.

She plopped down on the couch next to the bag with the jeans and the small stack of mail. "Thank you, Lord," she said, slowing her breathing and enjoying the stillness. The frantic sadness of Christmas in this newly single-parent home seemed like it might be ready to yield to the long, slow pace of a new

year. No packages to wrap, no responsibilities to take care of right this moment. She reached her hand into the bag and felt the soft denim of the new jeans. Their cost—\$129.99—represented a day and a half of work at Jose's Place, the local Tex-Mex joint where she'd waited tables when she wasn't in school. When she'd started there at 16, she'd gotten into the habit of measuring expenditures in terms of hours worked. This practice had helped her to save money as a teenager by translating the value of goods and services into time spent placating customers who came in for the \$4.99 lunch special and felt that a dollar tip was sufficient for her time and efforts. She could ask herself whether a top or a book or a journal was really worth a certain number of hours at Jose's. Now, however, she hated this habit. With her father unemployed and her fruitless student loans looming, she hardly had time to calculate how many hours those setbacks would cost her.

She glanced at her phone to check the time: 11:00am. Her father was definitely still asleep. She noticed the jeans again. They were an extravagance. Nine or ten hours of waiting on folks interested in budget Tex-Mex for the whole family would be more tolerable in these new jeans.

She turned her attention to the mail. Bills, junk, more bills. Toward the bottom, one slightly worn envelope lacked a

return address, but the writing was familiar, the all-caps that Adam used for everything. She opened the envelope and removed a short letter written on a half-sheet of notebook paper that had been torn with the lick-and-tear method. The letter was also written in Adam's caps with dark black ink. It read—

31 DECEMBER 2016

DEAREST LILY

THINGS MUST GET BETTER WITHOUT YOU I CANT BE HAPPY BECAUSE
I KNOW THAT YOU CANT BE WITH ME ~~SEXUALLY~~ BIBLICALLY I CHOOSE TO
RESPECT YOUR WISHES I GO INTO EXILE FOR THE PERIOD OF ONE YEAR
DONT COME FOR ME UNLESS YOURE READY TO ADMIT IM WRONG NOT TO
LOVE YOU IT IS A MISTAKE THEREFORE I FIND MYSELF IN EXILE UNTIL
2018 UNLESS YOU COME FOR ME I CANNOT LOVE YOU

SINCERELY

A

Lily puzzled over the letter, reading it and rereading it, sounding out portions of it in her mind and then aloud: "Things must get better without you. I can't be happy." She read it

aloud again, "Things must get better." She paused. "Without you, I can't be happy." She paused again and puzzled over the rest of the letter. "Is it 'I can't be happy because I know that you can't be with me biblically' or 'Because I know that you can't be with me biblically, I choose to respect your wishes'?" The whole thing was an unpunctuated morass of ambiguity.

She folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. Her eyes closed and she took a deep breath. She felt her hand tighten into a fist around the letter, wadding it up into a crumpled mess.

That asshole, she thought but then chastised herself immediately for slipping into her her old verbal—even if mental—habits. Thoughts can be dangerous too, she knew as she remembered well Pastor Steve's discussion of the Sermon on the Mount. *That jerk*, she corrected herself, *Trying to break up with me while not breaking up with me.*

She stood up and stormed out the door.

#

Adam awoke to the faint rhythms of a knock-knock-knocking at the front door, but he couldn't tell if it was real or a dream. For two days he'd sat and slept and sat and slept and tried to get his mind off the hunger in his gut and the frightening length of time that a year became when lived in this

austere, hyper-mindful, tortuous way. The span of time, a year, stretched out before him—no books, movies, TV, or Internet to distract from the constant flow of space-time. Just breathing, eating, and sleeping. To ameliorate things, Adam had taken the bed off the wall. Sleep was not for the weak, as it turned out, but for health, focus, and the relief of boredom. He was already bored with his feasts of steamed rice and water. He was already bored with the cushion. He was already bored with the white walls and white light, the white sink and white toilet. White and dull. He must quiet his mind and his desires for novelties and excitement. Of course, the American consumerism to which he'd been subject for 23 years was no help. Behind the dullness, behind the boredom, there seethed and breathed anger. What was behind anger? Fear? Boredom, anger, fear—they were all connected.

Another knock-knock-knocking at the door.

Mailman, perhaps. Maybe some door-to-door salesman. Do those still exist? Mormons? More likely Jehovah's Witnesses. He wondered where his mother had gone, why she wasn't answering the door. Maybe it was someone she didn't recognize. Best not to let the potential intruder know she was home. Maybe it was the police come to take him away for tax evasion or running a prostitution ring or dog fighting or some other ridiculous

crime. Adam chuckled at these flights of fantasy. They passed for entertainment in his new monasticism.

He looked up at the window and jolted in surprise as he saw a face staring back at him. He knew it wasn't his own, wasn't a reflection, because the face was too pretty for that. The face could have been pleasing, but it had been stretched into such a formidable scowl framed by brunette bangs that rendered it decidedly unfriendly to Adam's eye.

"Adam Barth, open the front door and let me in," the face screamed through the window. "Let's go, coward! Move!"

Adam stretched his arms out in front of him, then rose to his feet with a creak and a crack and walked instinctively to his bedroom door. He began to turn the knob, but then stopped himself. He turned to look back at the face.

"No, Lily," he said, "I'm afraid I can't."

Lily rattled off a few words, angry but unintelligible. Adam crossed back to the window, lifted the pane of glass just a bit and said, "I'm in self-imposed exile until 2018. I cannot open the door. Have you gotten my letter?"

Lily slapped a piece of paper against the window.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Adam squinted at the paper.

"Sorry," he said, "I don't have my glasses."

"You don't wear glasses."

"True."

He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, finishing with a pinch at the bridge of his nose in an attempt to clear the sleep from his eyes. The world focused a bit better for him. Maybe he should wear glasses. Going to an eye appointment, however, would definitely be a violation of his exile. Medicine was a fraud anyway, wasn't it? He looked at the paper that Lily had slapped against the window and recognized his hurried handwriting scrawled in quick, wild angles across the page.

"Yes, I see," he said, "That's my formal letter of solution or dissolution as the case may be."

"You can't break up with me via a G.D. letter," Lily said.

Adam thought to disagree, but he knew that Lily would just come back at him and they'd go round and round. She always got the last word.

"Then I guess I haven't," he said, "Read it again and again and let me know where you stand."

"Let me inside," she said.

"I really can't do that," Adam said, "I can't leave this prison of peace and righteousness."

"Eff that! You march your carcass to the door."

Adam gave a shrug of his shoulders, closed the window, turned his back, and sat down on the bed.

He heard a scratching noise coming from the window behind him. He turned to find Lily pulling at the bug screen.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm coming in."

Adam stood up and watched her struggle with the screen. He reached casually to the window and slid the lock in place. Lily looked at him, dead in the eye. She mouthed, "Asshole," and then walked away.

Adam watched her walk away. New jeans? He cocked his head and continued to watch the wiggle of her hips until she was out of sight. After a characteristic sigh, he began preparing yet another bowl of rice. He poured a portion of dried rice into the metal bowl; the rice sang as it spilled into the little silver crucible. Then he brought the bowl to the faucet in the bathroom and filled it until it looked about right. He stuck his thumb in to measure, using the knuckle to approximate one inch. He placed the bowl in the cooker, put the lid on, and then pressed the button on the front. Nothing to do but wait.

#

Lily made her way to the front door where she tried the door knob. Locked. She looked in through the windows, but the

white, sheer drapery obscured everything inside. She could see only large lumps that approximated furniture—a couch, a coffee table, an easy chair. The television was on and its blue light bled through the drapes. Lily could not make out what program was on. She tried the windows, but all were locked. She backed away from the house and stared at the front door. *If faith moves mountains, she thought, then certainly mine can break and enter.* She climbed the steps back onto the porch, and standing just a few feet from the door, attempted to calculate whether she could get up enough steam to lower her shoulder into the thing and send the deadbolt through the jamb. Slight of frame, Lily was no linebacker and she knew she might risk deep bone bruises in trying to knock this door down, yet she also felt a spiritual need deep inside her gut to save Adam Barth from his own stupidity.

Dear God, she prayed in her mind and in her heart, Give me the means to get through this door that I may get in there and save the man I love—or at least might love if I'm not to be unequally yoked to such a turd—from an eternity in hellfire and loneliness.

She backed away from the door, turned sidewise, and squatted just a bit, assuming an athletic position like a tiny sumo wrestler ready to take on a formidable opponent. "God help

me," she said and then closed her eyes and prepared her mind to unleash her 105 pounds on the door, crashing her left shoulder into it with what would certainly be a gentle thud. She imagined her body collapsed against the porch floor as a sharp pain shot from her newly separated shoulder to her brain.

This is dumb, she thought.

She looked around her, wanting for another solution. The porch had a few pieces of furniture, a pair of Adirondack chairs and that rickety little table where Mrs. Barth kept her glass of iced tea when she decided to watch the world go by. Lily had sat in the other chair with her so many times, even before she and Adam dated, just enjoying the cul-de-sac, its squirrels and birds.

Her mind was a disorganized mess. She began to cry. She had been shut out by the man to whom she'd lost her virginity—if she didn't count all of those other guys and Lily didn't count them because they came before she became Jesus's beloved by baptism. That previous life was lost, a different Lily only tangentially related to this one who whimpered at her soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend's front door.

She sank her shoulders and lowered her chin to her chest. She wiped the tears from her eyes and then opened them. She noticed something, distorted and blurred by tears, in her

periphery. Looking down at the parallel planks of the porch upon which she stood, she saw the hedge that ran along the front of the porch. The base of the hedge bed had been filled with smooth stones the size of tennis balls in order to prevent grass or weeds from growing up amongst the bushes. This had worked for a time, but neglect had allowed some life to push through and the whole thing looked a bit of a mess.

Lily reached down and grabbed one of the stones in her right hand. With her left forearm, she cleared the tears from eyes and cheeks and focused her attention on the window immediately to the right of the front door. She leaned back and hurled the stone at the window. It sailed through the window with a crash. Lily flinched at the noise and then looked around to see if anyone on the street had noticed. She saw no one there.

Thou shalt not steal, she thought.

Breaking and entering wasn't stealing, she knew. She was just breaking and then entering. Adam had done the stealing. She was the innocent one here, so why did she keep having to deal with these feelings of conviction and guilt as if she'd done nothing wrong.

"I've done nothing wrong," she said and then closed her eyes and approached the broken glass of the window. She used her

finger to poke out some of the jagged pieces still in the pane in hopes of clearing a place for her arm to slip through. She reached in and felt for deadbolt on the inside of the door. She unlocked and it and let herself in.

I better not forget to clean up all of this glass, she thought. What will Mrs. Barth think?

#

Adam resettled himself on the bed with the bowl of rice, hoping to push Lily's frustration out of his monkey mind. Her frustration was his fault, but it would require quite the ego for him to really claim credit for the feelings of another. After all, wasn't she the product of a thousand million decisions and chance events dating back to the inception of the universe? Can his letter really be responsible for her present tizzy? "No," he mouthed and then his lips, tongue, and throat melted into an "OM" as he focused on the white wall before him until it became simply a field of white for him to take in, like a rudimentary mandala, opening into a greater existence where Adam could no longer call himself separate, but instead he was part of the natural order, stuck in a body, yet expanding into the cosmos through the cultivation of his mind and the taming of his desire.

At this moment, several events happened simultaneously:

First, the door of Adam's mind closed. The word "desire" crept into his mind, and through the tricks our flesh and blood play, Adam's desire turned sexual and he could think of nothing save Lily's body. Their sexual desire had morphed from animal to mechanical as the reality of her born-again status slowly turned both of them off, yet Adam's mind could not expunge those carnal memories.

Second, a crash, like the breaking of a glass, emanated from the front door, sending tiny but familiar vibrations through the walls. He set the bowl aside and reclined on the bed, imagining that Lily would come walking in at any moment.

Finally, Adam lost his smile. The bedroom door would be locked, of course. The terms of his new arrangement would not permit her to join him. He tried to bring the smile back again but his body felt tense. What had been a very easy and relaxed moment of awareness became an occasion for the constriction of muscles. His back tightened until he lay on the bed stiff as a carcass, as if *rigor mortis* had set in after hours on the cold table in the pale green light of the mortician's dungeon.

#

As Lily entered the living room, the blue light of the television bounced off the walls and threw her shadow fluttering hither and yon. She dropped the letter and stood still. The

smell of the place was strange and different, sour and rotten with hint of sewage. She shielded her nose and mouth with one hand and then looked with the aid of the television light at the furniture in the living room.

"Mrs. B—," she managed, but Mrs. Barth, sitting dead still in her easy chair, didn't respond. "You sleeping?" Mrs. Barth remained stoic. A fly landed on her face. The insect crawled around her cheek as the television light cast a freakishly large fly-shaped shadow across her face. Lily felt her stomach rumble and shift as bile, and the Good Lord knows what else, started to crawl upward. She swallowed, hoping she could keep everything in. The fly stopped. Lily focused her gaze on Mrs. Barth's half-closed eyes and tried to find something in them, some spark that could animate the corpse and bring it back to life, but there was nothing there, no flicker, no life, no hint of animation. Lily knew she was dead. Naturally, she began to think about how those eyes had looked at her so many times, often with impish judgment because of the volume, Lily assumed, of the squeaking that came from Adam's bed, but also with warmth as she had on that afternoon when she'd congratulated Lily on her baptism. This, if indeed anything, she had shared with Mrs. Barth: a life of the spirit. In her less lucid moments, Mrs. Barth had

connected with Lily on a level that Lily could not really explain.

Lily remembered the night that Adam had discovered that she'd been ramping up the meds that kept the Parkinson's at bay. She had grabbed Lily by the ears in an aggressive, stuttering motion and held their faces close together, her wild white curls haloing out around her round face.

"*Talitha cumi*," she said, her unblinking eyes staring into Lily's, "Arise, little girl, and witness." At first, Lily had tried to look away. She blinked, she darted her eyes all around the room, but Mrs. Barth remained locked firmly in. When Lily's eyes met hers, she could not move away, entranced, hypnotized, drawn into Mrs. Barth's little browns with their oddly dilated pupils as if they were inescapable tractor beams. The rest of the world, maybe even the universe, faded into the background, into a buttery bokeh that slowly spread until Mrs. Barth's eyes were the only things in focus.

At last, Mrs. Barth, her unblinking stare unbroken, broke her silence: "Not Mrs. B. No-no-no." Lily wanted desperately to get away, but her train-wreck gaze would not be moved. Mrs. Barth continued, "Call me Lorraine Lazar. Lo-Lo-Lo."

At this, Mrs. Barth chuckled and for the first time her eyes moved, but they did not blink.

"That's what he called me, you know."

She released and blinked, and then her hands went to her side and the universe returned to normal. Lily watched the room hum back to life. Mrs. Barth smiled at her. "Lo Lazar," she said, "That's what Adam's father called me." Her eyes went distant, soft in focus.

But now, staring out from the fleshy face lying against the back of her chair in the living room, those eyes were dead, half-open, drying out by the light of QVC and the ceiling fan's artificial breeze.

Lily took a deep breath. She pivoted around the couch, keeping her back against the wall and her eyes on the body, until she found herself in the hallway that led to the three little bedrooms including the one where Adam sat in exile. Darkness filled the hallway as the television light did not reach back to the rooms. Lily stood for a moment in the dark, outside Adam's room, looking down at the light creeping from underneath the door in a thin, orange rectangle, and spilling forward just a little before being consumed by the darkness. She turned her body squarely to the door, aligning herself, and then she drew her shoulders up and back with a deep intake of air. She made a fist and rapped at the door. The sound of knuckles on wood reverberated down the hallway.

There was no response.

She knocked again, sending the sound waves down the hall, and for a moment she worried that she might wake Mrs. Barth. But she knew that was only hope playing a trick on her. She kept her gaze on the thin, orange rectangle of light at the bottom of the door.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Nothing.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

She leaned her forehead against the door.

"Adam," she said, her voice muffled a bit by the door. "Let me in."

At last, two pillars of shadow interfered with that thin, orange rectangle of light creeping out from under the door.

"Let me in, Adam," Lily said, "Your mom's dead."

Chapter Three

"Pardon," Adam said, "Could you repeat that?"

"Open up, Adam Barth."

"Funny, I thought you said that my mother was dead."

The doorknob turned, the door cracked open, and Adam's eye peeked through the tiny opening. "Lily," he continued, "It seems you misunderstand the severity of the terms mentioned in my latest missive. My opening this door right now constitutes a violation of the strict rules of my solitude. If you must correspond with me, perhaps there is a way that we can exchange letters or something. That way we can make sure that we say exactly what we want to say, how we want to say it, and not be bothered by the immediacy of emotions and feelings getting in the way. Those are the same thing, aren't they? Emotions and

Feelings? At any rate, perhaps address your letter to me care of Mrs. Lorraine Barth, and we can continue this conversation at another time."

He closed the door.

"Open the door, Adam."

"I feel I've made myself perfectly clear. I really must follow my own commands. If I don't, then who on earth will?"

"Your mother is dead."

The door opened a sliver again. "There it is again," Adam said, "Whenever I close this door, I swear I hear your voice—muffled, of course, and slightly distant as if you have floated off into space—saying that my mother is dead. This can't be true because I can hear the damned Home Shopping Network on the television in the other room. You're just trying to trick me. Now, I really must get back to my meditation cushion as I have important interior work to take care of if I'm going to survive the Trump presidency and the nuclear winter that is likely to ensue."

He started to close the door, but Lily lunged forward and stopped it with her hand. She let out a small yelp and a groan as the door pinched her palm.

"Your mother is dead," she said, "And it's QVC, Adam. She always watches QVC." Lily paused for a moment. "Watched QVC, I guess."

"This really isn't funny," Adam said. "I don't understand why you'd use something so morbid to get me out of this room. Isn't the fact that I've enclosed myself in a tomb enough for you? Why do you have to make light of my mother's health and try to tell me that she's dead."

"Look," Lily said, her eyes narrowing as she drew her face closer to the crack in the door. "I wouldn't joke about this. Your mother is dead. You might want to get your ass out here and see for yourself."

The two stared at each other through the crack for a moment.

"You said 'ass,'" Adam said.

"What?"

He opened the door allowing the light to pour out of his prison and into the dark hallway. Lily saw that he was wearing a white t-shirt that had started to yellow in the armpits, and the collar had been stretched a bit.

"You don't use that word anymore," he said, "Except when you're quoting from the Bible."

"Come here," Lily said and held out her arms.

Adam moved toward her, but brushed past her outstretched arms, ignoring the potential embrace. He walked down the hall toward the dancing blue light of the woman selling diamond bracelets. Slowly but steadily, he entered the living room, averting his eyes from the figure on the couch, and stepped to the other side of the coffee table. He faced the television, standing directly between the screen and his mother's chair.

"Mother?" he said. "Are you there?"

He brought his fist up to his mouth, closed his eyes, and felt the breath moving in and out of his body, allowing it to blow across his clenched fingers.

"Mother, please answer."

His breath grew more ragged.

He steadied himself, inhaling slowly and deeply, focusing on the way that the air filled the hole in his chest. He turned around and opened his eyes.

"Mom?" he said.

On the couch, in the place where his mother sat almost every evening to watch television or read her stories, a waxen copy of her decaying frame lay. The figure's right arm had fallen onto the couch and the remote control for the television still rested on its lap. The eyes, partially closed, stared up

at a 45-degree angle toward the tiny little bumps on the textured ceiling.

Lily entered the living room, circled behind Adam, reached her arms around him from behind, and pulled her body against his. She whispered in his ear, "I'll help you get this all sorted out."

Adam blinked and then touched Lily's forearm. His touch was delicate, weak even, his fingers light. His hands and other extremities began to go numb as the gravity of the moment sank in.

"It's my fault," he said.

Lily gave him a soothing shoosh, and said, "No, no, no. Don't think that. This is God's timing."

"No," Adam said, "This is my fault."

Lily pulled him in tighter.

"She was old. This isn't your fault."

Adam extricated himself from Lily's embrace and walked up to his mother. He sat down on the coffee table in front of her and leaned forward, looking into her unblinking eyes.

"She was having trouble remembering her meds," he said. "I bet if I go into the kitchen her pills will all be there because she never took them."

The gravity of Adam's words landed on Lily.

"Wait," she said, "Are you saying that you put yourself into some kind of exile when you should have been taking care of your mom?"

Adam turned his head halfway toward Lily, but didn't look at her. "It doesn't sound great when you say it like that."

Adam arose and went into the kitchen. He turned on the light and went to the sink. On the window sill above the sink he kept a box with seven compartments labeled with the days of the week. Each compartment contained the pills that Mrs. Barth needed for that day.

"Can you turn off the TV?" he said.

Lily obliged.

Adam picked up the pill organizer and began opening the compartments. His exile had begun on the evening of Saturday, December 31, 2016. He had made sure that his mother took her pills on that day, and he'd refilled the container for her. He opened each of the pill compartments now and all seven were full of little capsules of different shapes and sizes. He nodded his head.

"It's my fault," he said.

Lily came into the kitchen.

"Do you want a glass of water or something?" he said. "How about a cup of tea?"

"Tea is good, but you sit down," she said and then began filling the tea kettle that always rested on the stovetop.

Adam sat at the kitchen table and rested his forearms on the flower-patterned vinyl tablecloth. The numbness pressed in from his hands and feet toward the inside of his body, spreading from cell to cell like a tiny forest fire set ablaze on the edges of the wood but working its way ever toward the heart of the forest. He went lightheaded and saw small purple circles wherever he looked.

"Lily?"

"Yes."

"I'm gonna faint."

Adam Barth slouched and then slowly oozed out of his chair, catching himself with his hands, and ultimately stretched out on the floor with his forehead pressed against the cool linoleum.

Lily rushed to his side.

He turned his head and pressed his cheek against the floor and looked at her. Tiny beads of sweat collected on his brow and he felt clammy and tingly all over.

"I'll be fine," he said.

He smiled and closed his eyes.

Lily stared at him for a few seconds and then placed her hand on his forehead, wiping the sweat with her bare hand and then wiping her bare hand on her new jeans.

"Adam?" she whispered.

He didn't respond.

She peered back into the living room. It felt eerie now. She looked back to Adam and placed a finger underneath his nose to check for breath. He was breathing slow and easy.

The kettle squealed.

Lily stood up, made herself a cup of tea, and then sat at the kitchen table, taking her seat on the side that faced the living room.

She sipped her chamomile and waited for Adam to return to her.

#

Lily drummed her fingers on the vinyl tablecloth and periodically checked Adam, noting the rise and fall of his back as he drooled on the linoleum. The light in the living room danced around in the darkness where Mrs. Barth lay. Lily tried not to look into the darkness. While she believed wholly in the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, she had no interest in seeing a reanimated Mrs. Barth stumbling into the kitchen from the living room. The thought of her franken-walk freaked Lily

out. She had never seen a dead body until tonight. Her parents and grandparents were all alive and well. She had been a toddler when her great grandmother, Violet Mercedes Sommers, had died. Lily's mother had thought her too young for the funeral, and she likely wouldn't have remembered it anyway. For Lily, death had been abstract and distant, something to romanticize and sanitize with visions of the afterlife and the beauty of Heaven, but not something to witness and appreciate with human eyes in human times. Death was inevitable, but also impersonal and to be kept at arm's length, not experienced in her life—distant and inevitable.

She shifted on the seat and felt the phone in her pocket dig into her ass. She stood up and faced the telephone hanging on the wall in the kitchen. The police would need to be called. The coroner would have to come. Adam should probably handle all of that. Lily turned to face the living room and the eerie outline of Lorraine Barth in her favorite chair. The thought of walking back through there left Lily feeling numb. She was quite content to stay in the kitchen, in the pool of fluorescent overhead lighting that separated her from the living room. The cabinets too formed a useful barrier for her. At the same time, she knew the one thing that she must do.

Careful not to come too close, she walked through the living room so close to the television that her hand brushed against its screen. Her circuitous route around the living room took her as far away from Mrs. Barth as possible, but Lily never took her eyes off the corpse. In her mind she knew that to do so would allow that corpse to revivify and come after her. Lily knew this was ridiculous, of course, but she felt it was best not to talk any chances. Keep her back against the wall to the left of Mrs. Barth, Lily made her way all the way to the darkened hallway that led to the bedrooms.

Adam's door was still open and the light from the room made the hallway look less black than brown. She peered into Adam's room. The austere new arrangement opened up a sense of wonder in her chest. A meditation cushion sat in the center of the room and all of the furniture had been shoved to the sides as much as possible. In her heart she knew that Adam could never have pulled off this exile, but she also really wanted him to. She wanted him to prove that he could do what he set out to do. It would be good for him to feel some sense of accomplishment, that he had done something meaningful and important, and that he had done so on his own.

The warmth that she had begun to feel as she thought about Adam finally doing something he set out to do began to ran cold

when she thought of the time she had spent in this room. She saw the scratchings of the tiny twin bed frame on the white paint on the wall opposite the door and immediately felt a sense of guilt, even shame, as if those markings on the wall were her scarlet letter.

"God, forgive me," she said. Intellectually, she knew God would. She also knew that she could right those days off as a different Lily, a Lily waiting to be born again into a new life, a resurrected Lily who was fresh and clean in the eyes of God's law. In her heart, however, she felt stupid.

She reached into the room and pulled the door gently closed. The hallway darkened again. She felt her way along the wall until she came to the door to Mrs. Barth's room. She opened it up and flicked the light switch inside the door to the right. Two lamps, one on each side of the queen-sized bed, lit up. The lamps had old lampshades on them, the kind with the little fringes sewed around the base. They sat on small, circular nightstands that had a flesh-colored cloth over them that draped all the way to the floor. The rectangle of the bed, covered in a sickly green quilt and a thousand throw pillows, jutted out from between the nightstands. At its end was a large wooden chest, simple in its design, little more than a wooden box, like a

casket from the frontier where any sort of ornamentation might have been seen as frivolous.

Lily crossed over to the chest, got down on her knees, and opened it up. The spicy scent of cedar rushed out of the box and filled her nostrils. Inside, exactly where Mrs. Barth had showed her, Lily found the green shoebox underneath the white, starched bed linens that had been folded crisply and perfectly so that the fitted sheets could not be distinguished from the flats. She opened the shoebox. The letter was right on top. Mrs. Barth's wild cursive scrawl on the front of the envelope read: "For Adam, when the time is right." Down near the bottom, in much smaller print, she had written: "No No No - Lily - Lo Lo Lo."

Lily ran her finger along the edges of the envelope. The time certainly seemed right, except for the fact that Adam had passed out face down on the kitchen floor in a puddle of his own drool. How long had it been anyway? Seemed like forever that he'd been lying on the floor. She wished she had taken note of the time, but she hadn't. She folded the letter once, and put it into her right back pocket with her phone and then went back to the kitchen, again staying as close to the walls and as far from Mrs. Barth as possible, but she found Adam in the same condition he had been before.

She stood in between the Barths. One was dead, one alive, and she had this terrible desire to switch their roles, make the other one alive and the other one dead. A wave of guilt washed over her, and she wondered if she should perform the sign of the cross. *No*, she thought, *it feels all wrong*. She'd never seen anyone at Connections Bible Church do such a thing, but she'd seen it in movies and it felt like this could be the sort of moment where such a ritual might make some sense. At any rate, confessing her mean-hearted desires felt right and so she lightly whispered a confession: "Dear God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

At this, Adam's body jolted and flipped over to his back. His head and hair rolled through the small puddle of slobber that had dribbled from his mouth. Lily got up, went to the sink, and pulled a couple of paper towels from the roll attached to the bottom of the cabinets. She knelt next to Adam and picked up his head with one hand while wiping the spittle from his hair with the paper towels.

Adam's eyes fluttered and suddenly opened.

"Welcome back," Lily said.

"She's still dead?"

Lily nodded. "Unlikely to change anytime soon."

She helped him to a seated position.

"I killed her," he said. "I failed to help her with her meds. I killed her."

"She was very sick," Lily said, trying to reassure him as she dabbed his face with the dry side of the paper towel. Lily felt the tiny weight of the envelope in her pocket press against her. "She left you a letter."

"Why?"

"Your mother gave it to me a few months back and said to give it to you when you were mature enough."

"She thought I wasn't mature enough?"

Lily felt his eyes gazing up at her, but she continued to work on the matted hair. Adam's hand reached up and light touch her ear. He traced a line, like he had done many times before, around the ear, pinching the lobe softly, and then down along her jaw until he transitioned to the curve of her neck. He ran his finger to the tiny silver chain, but stopped short at the tiny silver cross. His body tightened in her arms.

"She thought you were more mature than I?"

Lily snapped her narrowed gaze to his eyes and then dropped his head and let it smack the linoleum. As he reached back to rub his latest injury, Lily stood up, reached into her back pocket for the letter, and dropped it on his chest.

"I give you the letter against my better judgment," she said. Then she went to the sink and stared out the kitchen window into the darkness.

Adam started to open the letter, but stopped.

"We need to hide the body, you know," he said.

"What?"

"I killed her, Lily. Won't the authorities be coming for me?"

"It's not your fault, so just shut up. We should call the police or the coroner's office, Adam. Let them take care of it."

Adam stood up. "Absolutely not," he said. "If we get the illegitimate authorities involved, then all evidence will point to me—I could be convicted of manslaughter. Do you have any idea what the penalty for manslaughter is?"

Lily sighed.

"Neither do I, but it can't be good." He paused for a moment in thought. "Why do they call it *manslaughter* anyway? I can't be connected to such a sexist crime! I can't let that happen."

Letter in hand, he went to the living room.

Lily followed.

"You can't take your mother and stash her away somewhere. She deserves a proper burial, a memorial service. She was a great, if perhaps weird, lady."

"Of course she was and of course she does. Just look at her! She looks so peaceful. I hate to disturb her. At the same time, she spent much of her life disturbing me—constantly finding ways to drag me down."

He was standing close to her now, studying her eyes and face, pent up frustration bubbling to his surface.

"She didn't believe in me," he said. "She didn't think I could cure cancer."

"Well, you can't."

"No," he said, "But a mother should believe her son capable of anything, capable of greatness, capable of the impossible."

"I'm sure she did," Lily said, but she didn't really believe it. This sad boy and his unrealistic vision of mother's love became even more pathetic to her. He wasn't capable of greatness. He couldn't cure cancer or be the first man on Mars. Adam Barth, for all his pomp and self-righteousness, was a nobody and she would be justified in leaving him to tend to his own mess. She wondered how long a person must wait after the death of loved one before breaking up. Does it matter what kind of loved one? A parent? A friend? Weird, inappropriate uncle who

worked as a clown at your eleventh birthday when you're too old to have a clown but he set you up with the current beau, so there's an important history there? Lily shuddered as she thought of Adam's Uncle Ricky, a.k.a. "Bubbles." How long?

Something sharp pierced her heart again. The obligation to help rose up from her gut and into her head.

"Open the letter, Adam."

Adam looked at her blankly.

"Perhaps it'll change your perspective of your mother."

Adam backed away, opened the letter, and read it.

#

Dearest Adam,

This horrible diagnosis has left me no choice but to reckon with the fact that I may indeed die some day. Sadly, it may be sooner than one or both of us hoped. Doubly sad, I should say, that you have not managed—in spite of the constant activity in your bedroom—to produce a grandchild. Therefore, I desire to make plain for you the procedures and wishes that should be carried out in the event of my death.

First, the will. Upon your father's death, I produced a new will that left the home and all therein to you. This was, of course, an easy decision since you were so young and had no

siblings. In truth, I'd hoped to leave everything to your children, but you do not seem likely to produce any anytime soon; therefore, the will remains thus. Upon my death, you should contact Shirley Vogel, esquire. Your father, who referred to her as "that lawyer woman," did not care for her, but my too-oft-tamed feminist streak desires to show him—even in his death—that a woman can execute a will just as well as a man and for less money too! Call—do not text!—Ms. Vogel and she will get the process started.

In terms of other arrangements, allow me to first say that the saddest moment in my life was when you told me that you didn't want children because the Earth was overpopulated and full of corrupt and evil forces. The "bogus world system," as you called it at the time, did not need nor want another human being mucking it up. You felt this was an extremely noble position, but you do fail to recognize the potential for hope that we can find in our children. You see them as rodents, but they are our best chance to right this ship. Therefore, I request that you find some way to procreate. While you may not still be with her, I would like to go on record saying that Lily is an excellent candidate. Though she is petite, she does have a hearty constitution that will handle birth and mothering quite well.

The second saddest moment in my life was your father's funeral. The church and the house were full of sadness and his dumb friends for weeks—some of them even propositioned me during the reception and subsequent morning. Please, Adam, do not put yourself through that. Funerals are for the weak, dear. Instead, I have specific instructions for what should be done with my mortal remains. This is important to me. Do not defy these wishes.

In the event of my death, please return my remains to the ground from which they came. I purchased this house after your father's death because it rests near the woods where my mother claimed I was conceived during your grandfather's senior prom. The woods behind the house connect to the woods behind Tubman High—formerly Jefferson Davis High. According to family legend, your grandparents conceived me in those woods during their only known carnal act. Approximately nine months later, after a quick and quiet wedding ceremony, I was born.

Please return me to those woods. Choose a suitable location for my eternal resting place, create a crude marker so that you can visit often, and bury me—no embalming or casket necessary. Dust I am and to dust—and the digestive tracts of worms—shall I return.

Before entering the woods, you should know why I never allowed you to play there when you were younger. You may recall that we called them the Forbidden Forest when you were young. My mother named them so because she maintained throughout her life that my father's story of my conception was untrue. Her story landed her in electroshock therapy, but it bears repeating if only for the preservation of the family legend. My mother—your grandmother—claimed that she never met my father in those woods; in fact, she denied ever having had sex with Pappy. Instead, she says that she met her true love—a young man named Juan whom she always described as having a light touch. The visual of his hands lightly touching her bare shoulders and other parts has filled me with some consternation for some time, but now that I'm on death's door, I have found a way to move beyond that. Your grandmother maintained to her dying day that this Juan with the light touch was my real father. After that night, though she searched and searched, she never saw him again.

She told me this story in secret when I was in high school. Out of respect for her, I have decided to pass it to you and ask that you return me to those woods where my mother fell in love. While it may sound a bit outlandish, you know that I never felt a strong connection with your grandfather. Pappy was always away at work or with some other woman. I have long speculated that he

had some other family, but have never been able to prove it. The man simply wasn't there. Therefore, as time has gone on, I've come to admire my mother's story more and more. Though I've never met this Juan, I have often fantasized about knowing him. Secretly, I've come to think of him as my true father. Perhaps his spirit still inhabits the Forbidden Forest and we will find each other at last.

Adam—I know that you are inclined to think this is just the disease talking. I assure you that I am lucid in this moment and writing to you the truth. I did not tell you sooner because I honestly didn't think you were mature enough to handle the story. Now that I'm dead, I have no choice but to trust you. Earn your dead mother's trust and carry out her wishes.

With love and hope,

Your Mother

PS: Do the right thing always and do not fail to wear clean underwear whenever you drive somewhere. Should you find yourself in a horrible accident, you do not want some pretty nurse removing your dirty whites and replacing them with a bladder bag that you will use for the rest of your sad little life.

Chapter Four

"You're not thinking clearly," Lily said.

"You didn't read the letter?"

"No. It was addressed to you."

Adam held the letter out for Lily. She grabbed it and began reading it.

Adam went to the door and slipped on a pair of bright yellow rain boots that he kept there. He opened the door and propped it open with a bronze duck that his mother kept near the back door for just this purpose. He set the shovel on the ground and then went back to his mother. He looked at her for a moment as Lily continued to scan the letter, then he climbed over the body and straddled it with his legs. Bending over at the waist, he buried his right shoulder into her abdomen, wrapped his arms

around her, and pulled up, trying to lift her up on his shoulder. The body released a stench that was nearly unbearable.

In between his grunts and near-gags, he heard Lily: "This is crazy."

"Yup," he managed. "It's pretty wild. Look out."

He balanced his mother on his right shoulder like a sack of rice, her stubby legs sticking out of her frock and draping down his chest. He was already sweating.

"You can't believe that this is what she really wanted," Lily said as Adam struggled toward the door. "She was sick, Adam. The whole story is crazy."

Adam acknowledged her argument with a nod.

"It does sound crazy."

Adam didn't believe a word of it, but this solution allowed him to avoid responsibility—if he just did as she asked, then he wouldn't need to worry about whether or not he was making the right call. Just get his mother out to the woods, bury her, and try to move on.

He was on the back porch now. His shoulder already hurt and his quads quivered.

"I'm calling the police," Lily said.

Adam slowly turned around, taking several steps to do so. He looked at Lily inside the house, framed in the yellow light of the ceiling fan as she flicked at her phone.

"If you really want to help," Adam said, "You can grab that shovel. Otherwise—" he paused. He knew what he wanted to say, but he also didn't have the guts to really tell Lily what he thought.

His mother continued to weigh on him. He locked his knees in an effort to keep the muscles of his legs from giving out. How could he make it into the middle of the woods to find a suitable location to bury her?

"Otherwise—" he tried again.

Lily looked up. Adam met her eyes and he felt weak. His knees swayed; he tried to focus on what he was doing, but before he knew it, his legs were lurching and collapsing and he had the sudden sensation that he was falling in slow motion.

"Oh my God," Lily exclaimed.

Adam's knees fell to the concrete porch and his face broke his mother's fall. She now lay on top of him, arms and legs spread. Silent—except for Adam's tiny, muffled groan and whine—they lay like two pancakes awaiting butter and syrup. Lily rushed over and began rearranging Mrs. Barth's body, excavating Adam from underneath. By the time she had finished, Mrs. Barth

lay face down on the concrete and Adam lay next to her on his back. He ran his fingers along a raised ridge that ran across his face, a ridge he did not remember.

"It's just a scratch," Lily said. "Several, actually. Let's clean them up."

She disappeared into the house and returned a few moments later with a moist paper towel. "Be still," she said and lowered herself to hover over him. She dabbed lightly at the scratches on his face, clearing away the blood, and trying to remove any dirt and small pebbles from the wound. As she did so, she narrated what she was doing so that he wouldn't be surprised, but Adam wasn't really listening. Instead, as she leaned close to him to clean his wounds, he distracted himself from the pain by watching her breasts move against her thin cotton t-shirt. What had once been accessible was now forbidden.

Adam grabbed her by the wrist. "Stop," he said. "Please don't call the cops or the coroner or whatever. Just mind your own business."

He found himself resenting her attempts to help, no matter how feeble. What did she care anyway? He knew this wasn't fair, but he couldn't help thinking of her newfound religion as some kind of betrayal.

Holy shit, he thought as a new realization crystallized in his mind, *I'm jealous of her new boyfriend. Jesus!* He thought about the Christian rock and/or roll that she'd forced him to endure. Most of it was just standard pop love tunes in which heterosexual romantic love was replaced by vague—potentially erotic, as he'd pointed out on several occasions—desire for Jesus. Jesus was her boyfriend.

At Adam's insistence that she butt out, Lily had frozen. Behind her eyes Adam could see her mind move, winding and grinding on what he had just said. She sat back, still straddling him on her knees, her new jeans rubbing against the rough concrete. She crumpled the paper towel into a ball in her fist.

"You're right," she said, "I should mind my own business."

With that, she stood, walked back into the house, tossed the paper towel toward the sink, and left through the front door. Adam heard her car start and pull away.

He stared up at the aluminum porch cover. Without realizing what he was doing and without breaking his upward gaze, he started talking to his mother.

"This cover over the porch," he said, "so fucking loud in the rain. Remember Ike a few years ago?" He paused for her response. "Yeah. I thought we would finally be rid of this

thing. But somehow, hurricane force winds couldn't drag it away. Every time it rained, this damn thing woke me up—it was so loud. I got used to it though, the noise. It hasn't woken me up in a long time." He paused for a moment and considered this fact. It had been a long time since the rain had awoken him in the night. Maybe it had stopped raining at night in their little corner of Texas. He verbalized these thoughts for his mother's benefit, "Of course, that could just be the reality of the drought caused by the hell-courting corporations and their insistence on money as their supreme overlord. Gotta get that asshole out of the White House, Mom, or it may never rain again. Or maybe the opposite will happen—maybe the hurricanes will come, the icecaps will melt, and humans will evolve gills."

He turned to look at her. Her face was smooshed up against the patio and her hair was a mess. Her dress, flipped up and folded over, barely covered her underwear.

"What do you think," he said, "Should I start building an ark for us?"

#

The car started easily, which wasn't always the case, and Lily was grateful that it did. Her instincts told her to run. Adam had obviously lost his mind. *He'll blame it on me*, she

thought, *The lack of sex has caused temporary insanity—as if he hasn't been taking care of himself during this "dry spell."*

She shuddered at the thought of Adam "taking care of himself."

She pulled the car out of Mrs. Barth's driveway. Her muscle memory guided her away from the house, thus allowing her to focus primarily on what she'd just experienced. Death, the letter, Adam's fall. Out of all of those thoughts, a new one emerged that took Lily by surprise. Mrs. Barth's death meant that Adam was now a homeowner. She wondered if she'd ever think of the house as truly his, but then she chastised herself—*Why should I care? Adam's out of my life. That was his choice anyway.* She thought back to his stupid, cryptic letter that he had mailed to her. *Mailed! The hell kind of a millennial uses mail! What a load of—*she stopped her thought, corralling her vile fantasies so as not to defile herself. It's not what goes into the body, but what comes out that defiles it.

She turned out of Adam's neighborhood and on to the state highway that provided the primary east-west passage through town. It was late now, after midnight; 2017 had begun and the events of the night had prevented her from enjoying the typical New Year's Eve traditions—no ball drop, no midnight kiss, no

corpse of Dick Clark or Ryan Seacrest or whomever. Adam and Lorraine Barth had stolen that from her.

She banged her hand against the steering wheel in frustration just as red and blue lights flashed in her rearview mirror. She looked up to see the squad car tailing her. *Dammit.* She pulled over, turned off the car, cranked the window down, and put both of her hands up on the wheel as she awaited the officer.

He took his sweet time.

What would she tell this guy? Was there a story that she could concoct to get her out of this ticket? What was it for? Speeding? Probably—she had been paying almost no attention to her driving. *The truth, she thought, is always the best bet.*

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

The situation dawned on her.

She looked in the driver side mirror and saw the officer's door open.

Adam had lost his mind. He was about to take his very recently very deceased mother and bury her corpse in the woods behind his house. He'd asked her not to call the coroner or the police—but here the police were calling her. The truth would be an easy way to get out of this ticket. All she had to do was

change the subject. Her mind worked quickly, roleplaying the conversation—

“Do you know how fast you were going, ma’am?”

“Not at all,” she would say, “My soon-to-be-or-maybe-already-ex-boyfriend is burying his mother’s body in the woods behind his house, officer.”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” the officer was here now and asking for her license.

She obliged.

He looked it over, shining his little flashlight at it and moving it in the light so that he could view it from different angles.

“Do you know how fast you were going?”

“No,” Lily replied and she strengthened her grip on the steering wheel.

“60 in a 45,” the officer said.

Lily nodded.

“You got somewhere special to be?”

Lily thought of Adam, his mother on his shoulder, trudging through the muddy woods, his rain boots sinking into the bog with each step.

“Nope,” she said. “I just wasn’t paying attention to my speed.”

The officer handed her license back.

"You been drinking tonight, ma'am?"

"No, sir."

He studied her eyes quietly for a few seconds. He shined the light in her face and blinded her temporarily. She did her best not to react. He put the light back down.

"I need you to be a bit more vigilant," he said. "Where're you going so fast?"

"I'm just headed home," Lily said, adopting the most polite and respectful tone she could muster. "Celebrated the New Year with my boyfriend and his mother."

"A lot to celebrate," he said and straightened himself right up.

"Yes, sir."

"2017 will be a banner year. Take the country back."

"Excuse me?"

"Make America great again."

Lily feigned a smile. "Yes indeed," she said.

"You seem like one of the good ones," he said. "Get on home and stay out of trouble."

Lily nodded.

The officer sauntered back to his squad car. Lily sat paralyzed for a moment.

The officer's squad car pulled on to the road and sped past.

Lily leaned her forehead against the steering wheel. She simply couldn't turn Adam in, but why not? Who was she to deny Lo Lazar her dying wish, even if she was bat poo crazy when she'd made it?

She reached for the key and turned it in the ignition. The car attempted to turn over, but ultimately it failed to start. She pressed the gas. Again, this was the sort of thing she'd seen in movies, but had never really had occasion to use it. The car refused to start.

Do I wait and try again?

She fell against the wheel, her forehead pressing into it, her eyes closed in anger and frustration. She cursed Adam and then instantly took it back, asking for forgiveness. Nothing to do but walk. So she got out and started to walk back to Adam's house, uttering prayers on her way, asking the good Lord to forgive her for her crummy attitude and her inability to help a friend in need.

#

The gravel on the shoulder of the road crunched beneath Lily's feet as her low-top Chuck Taylor's carried her back to whence she'd come. The road was dark, but the occasional

streetlight guided her. The lights also illuminated the detritus that had fallen to the side of the dark roads and collected over the course of months or even years as pickups driven too fast by teenage boys ejected fast food waste and empty Coke bottles and Monster cans filled with dip spit from the window. No number of "Don't Mess with Texas" signs could deter these newly testosteroneed specimens from exercising this power to trash their own habitat. What begins as an unwillingness to clean a bedroom soon morphs into a desire to bring their poor hygiene to the public, to say to the world "I control my destiny" by willfully uglifying the place.

As a teenager, Lily had become health-conscious, driven like many teen girls by the overwhelming pressure to fit in by looking as if she'd just stepped out of a magazine. Nothing too serious—no obsessions or eating disorders thankfully—because Lily remained sensible in all things and she'd paid attention to the way that the pursuit of aesthetic perfection had wrecked so many around her. Therefore, Lily's desire to be pretty manifested itself in a sensible running—or more accurately, jogging—routine, three times per week, three to four miles each time. Occasionally, she'd sign up for a 5K and she had more than once entertained the thought of a 10K, but had never taken things that far. At first, she'd run always with music,

constructing playlists on her phone and attempting to time her jog by them so that songs would change when she reached a certain house or intersection. Eventually, however, she'd ditched the headphones and decided to allow the rhythm of her feet to keep time. Doing so had turned jogging into a sort of meditation—though Adam disagreed that running meditation was possible—opening up space in her week to be present, not thinking about school, tuition bills, or her parents' recent break-up—the result of her mother's 50th birthday and newfound love of skydiving and motorcycles.

Lily had come home for Spring Break last year to surprise her parents. She found her father had been living alone and that her mother had run off on a cross-country, easy-rider-style motorcycle trek that would culminate in an epic communal experience at Burning Man. Her father was a wreck and his depression, to which he was already predisposed, landed him in bed, jobless and sad. Lily's medical school dream officially at an end.

She kicked an R.C. Cola can and stared at her feet as she continued to walk. Some of the items on the road surprised her: tiny bottles of liquor, now spent of course; hypodermic needles; some used shotgun shells. In fact, the road was strangely littered with shotgun shells. All of them empty and used,

covered in a patina of dust and grime, discarded, beat up, and alone.

She felt sorry for her father, but mostly she was angry. She didn't mind taking care of him—she wanted to care for people. She just didn't imagine that she'd be doing it while holding down a job at Jose's Place while she figured out how to finish her degree. Adam had finished, but his philosophy degree and his drive to write combined with his absolute inability to do anything that felt "corporate" meant that he couldn't hold down an actual job. Instead, he was content to live with his mother—God rest her soul—pretending to be her caretaker in the wake of her diagnosis while happily spending her money on their necessities—food, water, cable television, and subscriptions to obscure philosophy journals. Lily couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy in her gut as she considered the injustice of it all. She hated her parents and she hated the fact that her boyfriend had become a nihilist with an extreme case of failure-to-launch.

She hated that she hated all that and so she had landed at Connections Community Church, a storefront operation run by Pastor Steve DeMoyné. He had been the quarterback of the football team when Lily's older brother, Thomas, had played. Steve had been the object of her ten-year-old fairy tales.

Somehow, her happily-ever-after had turned into a prematurely balding purveyor of paradise, from happily-ever-after to the life after.

As she turned off the main road into the Barth's neighborhood, the streets grew brighter, illuminated by the strange orange glow of the lamps which were now spaced every four or five houses.

Things were supposed to improve after she found Jesus. Jesus paid it all, yet she was still having to foot the bill for her parents' mortgage while they figured out the terms of their divorce. If Jesus really had paid it all, then why couldn't she afford a car that works? Why was her parents' marriage a wreck? How could her brother, citing his married-with-children status as an excuse, leave her holding the bag.

She pounded her fist against her thigh and then chastised herself. Complaining did no good and it wasn't her way! Simply because God had claimed her and redeemed her did not mean that her earthly troubles would disappear. Jesus was killed. Same for most of his disciples. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, allowing her feet to carry her along the sidewalk without the help of her eyes.

"Jesus paid it all," she sang. "All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; he washed it white as snow." She opened

her eyes and felt better knowing that God had accomplished the most difficult things and that she would experience heaven in time.

She stood in front of Adam's house. The right thing to do would be to help out a friend, even if the friend isn't deserving. After all, we are all God's children. Lily walked up the steps and entered the house. It was as she'd left it—lights on and backdoor open. She walked through the house, noting the smooshed throw pillow on the easy chair where Mrs. Barth had met her end. She continued to the backdoor and stepped on to the patio. Adam stood there, sweaty and breathing heavily. Next to him, a red wheelbarrow pressed its slightly deflated tire into the cement, weighed down by Mrs. Barth whose arms and legs flopped out like a ragdoll, spilling over the edges of the wheelbarrow's payload.

"Let's take your mother to her final resting place," she said.

#

The wheelbarrow's partially flat tire made for slow going. It wasn't designed to carry a human body, and though it was better than stumbling around with his mother tossed over his shoulder, Adam still found himself grunting as he forced the wheel over roots and fallen branches.

It didn't take long for the lights of the house, obscured by the low-hanging oak and pine branches, to fade out of sight and out of mind. Lily had expressed concern that they might not be able to find their way back.

"What do you wanna do?" Adam asked. "Leave behind breadcrumbs? This isn't some fairytale. Besides—" he groaned as he shoved the wheel up and over another root. "Besides, we can just follow the noise of the cars to find a road."

"But I don't hear any cars," Lily said and she stopped to listen, holding the shovel upright, handle end in the ground. Adam set the wheelbarrow down and listened too. He didn't hear anything either.

"It's too late at night," he said. "By the time we're done with this little errand, traffic will be picking up and we won't have any trouble finding our way." He picked up the wheelbarrow and continued on.

In truth, he'd been in these woods a hundred times as a youth—he'd even lost his virginity back here to Adela Sanchez and her striking blue eyes which contrasted her brown, Mexican complexion. Adam thought fondly of Adela. Why, in God's name, had she chosen him? Adela had most certainly been the most attractive tenth grader in his class. She moved that summer and their meeting in the forest—one and done—had been timed just

before she moved. Adam remembered crying the day she left—he was convinced that he'd never have sex again. No beauty of Adela's calibre would sink to his level again. Of course, the real reason he'd cried was not only that Adela was beautiful—she looked at least 20 when she was only 16—but he also liked her. He really had liked her. Really. She was sharp-tongued and didn't take shit from anyone. Like most pretty girls, she rarely had shit thrown her way, unless by the other social elites who would soon learn that Adela's popularity was a force unto itself—a wild, living creature that could not be tamed.

Adam wondered what became of her. She did not return his texts or calls. Had she achieved the level of popularity at her new school that had been her destiny? Head Cheerleader? Straight A's? Or had she landed on the bottom rung of the social ladder because she was the new girl? Adam thought this unlikely. "Hot New Girl" was its own category.

Adela had probably done just fine. Why then had she chosen him as her final delight before disappearing from the hearts and minds of Harriet Tubman High? Was it pity? Longing? Anger? A desire to get back at her parents? One last opportunity to leave her mark on her old school? It didn't really matter now. That was seven years ago—enough to where Adam couldn't even remember

the circumstances of her move. What did her parents do? Why had they gone and where?

What he could remember was the feeling of skin on skin and the way the leaves crinkled, crunched, and cracked under his back, tickling him as she straddled him. His memory came in flashes, fleeting and broken because he was 16 and hadn't really understand what was going on.

Now, seven years later, here was Lily, walking alongside him, begrudgingly, but ready to bury his mother. He wondered what future they might have. Were they still together? Surely she wouldn't have come back to help if she hadn't still loved him. He tried to settle his mind as it leapt to replace Adela in the forest floor sex scene with white Lily. Taller, plainer, smarter, more faithful. That was the real key to their relationship: fidelity. Adam thought again of her born-again situation. Perhaps the fact that they had had sex numerous times would mean that she felt he was "the one." *Must be it, he thought, she has this commitment to me. It's almost marital. Convenient for now, but am I ready to settle down with Lily Sommers?*

He walked along beside her, admiring the crunch of her feet against the ground—it somehow sounded light and free—and

thinking about the way her hair always had that faint, just-shampooed smell.

Chapter Five

Jon blew out the candle fingers on his right hand and waited for his eyes to adjust to the moonlight while he hid behind a pine tree, pressing his body against it and peeking his head around so that he could see the young gardeners on their midnight mission.

Damn, he thought, I'm going to get sap all over my shirt.

He knew that no amount of fairy magic could stop that now, so he tried to ignore it and just pay attention to the humans who had wondered into his wood—on a full moon of all nights!

He considered his fortune.

In his younger days, he might have chalked this up to the intervention of some divine and powerful being: Oberon or maybe Titania, or—and Jon did chuckle at this—God herself. He had been

so superstitious, but several centuries of experience and the Enlightenment had caused him to take a far more materialist approach to his metaphysics, denying the existence of these higher beings whom he had never seen nor felt. They were quite literally fairy's tales. If he had had parents, he could imagine them using all of those higher beings as a way of teaching him rudimentary morality that really everyone knew intuitively anyway: don't use fairy magic when the sun is above the horizon; never take a magic ring from a leprechaun (if indeed they do exist); eat heavier meals early in the evening because your digestion is better while you are active through the night. These were mere common sense and Jon didn't need parents to tell him that. He certainly didn't need them to invent some divine figure of retribution to come down and frighten him into compliance.

As much as he dismissed the necessity of parents, he did often find himself longing for some genetic connection that he could count on. Jon Gant wasn't really born, nor was he raised. Instead, he had sprung into the world fully formed when an English farmer named Alden had attempted to fell a tree with a small, simple gunpowder explosive tied to its trunk. The story had never made much sense to Jon—why didn't an 18th-century farmer in England have access to an axe or a saw? In their many

fireside chats, Alden had never sufficiently explained this, so Jon just chalked it up to Alden's curiosity and pyromania. More than once, Alden had been victim to a barn fire and more than once he had blamed it on witches, even accusing his neighbors of such crimes, but the townspeople knew, just as Jon himself did, that of course there was no such thing as witches. Preposterous. A 17th century fad! Alden was likely at fault.

At any rate, Jon had not really been born. Instead, he sprang out of the exploding spirit of the tree as it splintered and burst forth from the blast, the combination of wood spirit and fire fused together, so Jon thought, to form him: Jan-Gant-y-Tan, the man with the candle hands. If there was one feature that identified Jon, it was those candle fingers which he could ignite at any moment. In truth, he could set any of his extremities ablaze, but his fingers were the safest and most practiced. Lighting his nose only served to blind him temporarily, lighting his head resulted in burnt hair, lighting his feet had once ignited some brush, thus helping Jon learn that only he could prevent forest fires, and so he'd taken to wearing shoes in recent years in order to provide a buffer against another such incident. Lastly, the lighting of his penis—and he did indeed have one—was just too awful to imagine, and

though he had on more than one occasion been dared to do it by malevolent sprites and elves, he'd never acquiesced.

Pressing now against the tree, he watched the couple, the young man laboring through the forest pushing his heavily-laden cart while the young woman walked alongside. Jon looked at her face. It was pretty, he thought, but seemed troubled. Of course, the moonlight offered little help, and without his candle fingers lighting the way, her features weren't entirely clear. The young man's head was down, so he couldn't see his expression at all, but he did hear the boy grunt from time to time, indicating that his toil was not entirely pleasurable. The couple continued into the forest, headed in the direction of the high school.

Jon slunk around the tree and tried to keep up in hopes that he might hear some conversation that would indicate what had brought them into the forest, what was their errand. *I do hope it's dark business*, Jon thought, *Some darkness or trial fraught with travail.*

No longer paying attention to his movement, he snapped a twig.

The woman stopped. She looked around, whipping her head in circles and straining here eyes and ears against the quiet darkness.

Jon stood completely still, slowed his breathing, and admired the way the young woman moved. She was standing in a clearing now, so the moonlight defined her further. He studied her figure and lithe movements, taking special note of her jeans which appeared to fit her very well. Jon liked the curves and he felt his material instincts begin to well up in him—desire, greed, longing, and lust—the traits he had inherited from humans that he'd slept with over the centuries, little pieces of his lovers that had corrupted his fairy-ness over time making him more and more human-ish. Jon wasn't sure how it worked exactly, but he could feel it happen. Whenever he slept with a human, he could feel pieces of them rub off and implant into his soul. Over time, he had gone from despising this growing humanity within him to loving it. While he was still careful about the partners he'd chosen—a fairy should practice safe sex, after all—especially since his discovery that he could father (mostly) human children, this humanizing force was certainly no deterrent. In fact, he found himself longing for it, so as he watched the young woman with the shovel, he found himself having to fight back the natural impulse to hit on her and to ignite portions of himself in a demonstrative blaze of affection and showing off.

The woman had begun moving again and Jon found himself following, but aroused as he was, he worked hard to maintain a safe distance. He knew he wasn't doing a great job at this, but he wasn't terribly interested in robbing these two of their happily-ever-after if he could help it. At the very least, he'd need to suppress the horny teenager that welled up inside of him in order to keep from ruining their evening. In fact, if he could help the couple, that would be optimal. To help was his first, most natural impulse. His growing humanity had obscured this impulse to some degree. Still, if he could find a way to help them achieve whatever brought them into the wood while also sleeping with this woman but not totally disrupting her relationship with his guy, that would be the perfect scenario. Before getting involved, however, he hoped to know more about their relationship and their errand. Unfortunately, as they tramped through the forest, these two seemed perfectly content to remain perfectly silent.

The young man heaved the cart up and over another minor obstacle while the young woman walked slowly next to him. He spoke to her. She responded, but Jon couldn't really hear. They seemed frustrated with one another. They stopped walking and at last the young man, without dropping the handles of the cart, lifted his face to look at the young woman. Jon studied the

face. It was plain, yet familiar, perhaps because he was the everyman, the average of so many Anglo faces that Jon had seen over so many years, nothing too marvelous and nothing too offensive, just plain, normal even. This embodiment of blah, as far as Jon could tell, was annoyed with the young woman. Jon saw this as a potential opening. *There is no legitimate reason for a guy with a face like that to be annoyed with a woman like this,* he thought.

In his mind, he pulled up a map of these woods. He'd lived here for 60 years now, so he knew them like the back of his flaming hand—every oak and pine, every rock and twig. He plotted a course to intercept the couple, taking a wide angle, he outflanked them and searched for a spot that was likely on their route.

#

Dear God, Lily prayed, Please don't let Adam think this is some kind of grand romantic gesture—it most certainly is not.

Adam, typically self-absorbed, could interpret her willingness to help as a statement of her devotion. It was, of course. She was trying to be a good friend, but her romantic devotion to him was officially a thing of the past. She had no interest in continuing their relationship. What was the phrase Pastor Steve had used? Unequally yoked. She would not be

unequally yoked. At first, she recoiled at being compared to a cow or an ox—what’s the difference anyway?—but the sentiment was the same. She knew that now. She was a woman of faith, a covenant woman. Adam was a pretentious wanna-be-philosopher who dabbled in the occult. She’d been concerned about his faux-Buddhism and superficial adoption of eastern philosophy, an adoption that smacked of appropriation, but now with this strange burial, Lily grew concerned that Adam might have finally lost it, that he’d finally found his way into some full-on occult activity that she didn’t understand, appreciate, or care to be involved with. She tried to think of the sermons and articles she’d read and heard on exorcism. Unfortunately, she couldn’t think of any. If an exorcism would be necessary in the midst of this ordeal, she’d be at a loss, but she felt that with the power of God she could probably wing it.

“You think we’re far enough in?” Adam asked.

“Yes,” Lily said without hesitation.

Adam had stopped and dropped the handles of the wheelbarrow. He wiped his brow with the sleeve of his right shoulder.

“Shovel,” he said and held out his hand like a surgeon awaiting his scalpel. He stared a hole in the patch of ground in front of him. “The final resting place of my mother,” he said.

Lily handed him the shovel.

Adam looked at the shovel's business end. "May you find a beautiful patch of earth for my crazy mother," he said to it.

Then he turned the shovel around, held the handle with both hands and raised it above head like a medieval knight raising his broadsword to finish a vanquished foe lying at his feet. He made his move, lifting the shovel slightly higher before plunging it toward the cart as hard as he could. The shovel hit the ground with a might clang. Adam fell to the ground yelling something about an effing rock.

Lily would have laughed, but the woods suddenly lit up as if orange lightning had struck.

"What random errand brings you here to destroy my wood?"

#

Adam shielded his eyes from the sudden light which quickly faded away leaving only the faint glow of candlelight. He blinked a few times and looked in the direction of the light to see a tall, willowy figure leaning against a tree. The figure was both masculine and feminine and appeared to hold a candelabrum in his right hand. His hand, yes, because the figure was unmistakably male, but if there had ever been an androgynous figure that by its very nature challenged the gender binary of the English language, this was it. His face, well-lit by the

candles, was not handsome; it was pretty, beautiful even, and the graceful ease with which he leaned against the tree, his legs crossed at the ankles and his right toe pointing to the ground, recalled a dancer not of the jazz or hip-hop schools but of ballet, classically trained. Adam wanted to gauge Lily's reaction to know what she was thinking and how she viewed this strange Bowie-like figure in the woods, but he could not tear his eyes from the stranger. Why? Was it fear? Curiosity? Arousal? Adam couldn't tell.

"I've asked you a question," the figure said in a soft tone that matched the glow of his candles. The timbre of his voice had change completely from calamitous to caring.

Lily stepped in front of the wheelbarrow, placing herself between the figure and the corpse of Mrs. Barth. The figure smiled a cheshire smile, drew himself away from the tree in a swift motion and took a few steps toward them.

"Who wants to know?" she said.

"Jon Jon Gant and Tan. Jon Jon the Fire Man. Wood and light. Part fire and flame, part wood and fuel, yet the same and growing more man day-by-day," he said and thrust his hips in punctuation. "I've answered your question, now you answer mine or find yourselves expelled from this place in the pines."

Lily looked at Adam, but Adam didn't really know what was best here. He flashed back to conversations with friends about what to do with beggars on the streets: don't give them money, he'd decided; and hitchhikers: best to avoid; and clowns encountered in the forest: run. None of these situations seemed quite applicable. This amazed Adam. How could it be possible that in his twenty-two years he'd never been asked to consider what to do or how to react if he should encounter a candelabrum-wielding Ziggy Stardust in the forest on a moonlit night while trying to bury his recently deceased mother? For a moment, all of higher education seemed a total sham, high school too. How could they not focus on education that matters.

Lily said, "We'll tell you our business when you tell us yours. Why are you lurking around here at night?"

"Oh," Jon said, "The lady likes to demand answers and information while supplying none for Jon Jon Jon."

He lost his smile and widened his eyes.

"It is you, fair one, who has lurked-nay!-trespassed," he said, pointing his histrionics with a finger to the sky. "You're in my wood, so you owe me some response, not the other way round."

Lily put her arm around Adam and leaned in to whisper into his ear. "Check out his hand," she said, breaking Adam's concentration for the first time since the blinding light.

"They're pretty," he said, "like the hands of a lady who obviously cares about her appearance."

"They're on fire," Lily said. "They're flaming."

Adam snapped his head to look at her as he recoiled a bit. "Really, Lily!" he said. "You can't tell me that your newfound religious sensibilities have sent you into the pit of homophobia!"

Lily opened her mouth to speak, but Adam held up a finger to her lips to hush her.

"This young man may be strangely effeminate," Adam continued, "but that doesn't mean he's gay, does it?" Adam turned to look at Jon to gauge his reaction but found Jon stoic. "Does it?"

Adam couldn't really believe he was asking this. He always fancied himself quite heterosexual, but this youth called so much into question for him.

Jon stared blankly, apparently refusing to answer.

"And even if he were," Adam continued, "To each his own. Am I right?"

Both Lily and Jon remained silent. Adam looked back and forth between them. Then he broke the awkward silence. "We've come to bury my mother in these woods," Adam said. "It was her dying wish. As far as I'm concerned, you can help or you can just mosey along. I'm quite sure you have some other place to be, a boyfriend, perhaps, that you need to get to. So, feel free to head home into his arms. Or her arms. Whatever works. Love is love."

"I told you, I am home. You're trespassing."

"Adam," Lily whispered as loud as could possibly be still considered a whisper, "Look at his hands—they're on fire!" Fear crept into her voice.

"This again?"

"You cannot bury her here."

"What the hell, man? Is this spot sacred to you or something? Or maybe this is your kitchen since you said these woods are your home."

"No," Jon said, "You cannot bury her here because it's all rock underneath."

Adam picked his shovel up and looked at the tip. It was partially bent, disfigured by the abuse he'd given it moments before.

"Follow me," Jon said, "And I can find you a better spot."

Adam tapped the butt end of the shovel against the ground a couple of times. He placed it on top of his mother's corpse, picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow, and immediately began to follow Jon as he weaved his way through the trees.

"You can't possibly think this is a good idea," Lily said.

"C'mon, Lily," Adam said. "He's going to show us a good place to bury mother."

"He's going to show you a good place to bury yourself. The man is obviously some strange serial killer demon."

"Ridiculous," Adam called out behind him. He turned around for a moment, but he couldn't see Lily anymore. She was shrouded in the darkness. He turned his attention back forward. All he could see was the vague outline of the wheelbarrow with his mother's body splaying out of it. He reached forward and straightened his mother's dress so that it didn't reveal too much thigh. Ahead of him, he could see the tall willowy shape of Jon as he walked through the forest. The light from the candelabrum leading the way. If it hadn't been for those five tiny lights, Adam might have mistaken Jon for a walking tree, a sapling on the move, but the lights helped to define his shape in silhouette so that he could make out very clearly Jon's basic anatomy: humanoid. He allowed his gaze to drift from Jon's

head down to his ass and continued to allow this strange attraction to work inside him.

Jon stopped and allowed Adam to catch up.

"It won't be too much farther," Jon said.

Adam smiled at him. "Sorry," he said, "Pallbearing is tough work."

"No doubt. Take a breather."

Jon leaned against a tree, produced a cigarette from his pocket and lit it on one of the candles. He took a drag and then looked at Adam as he blew the smoke out.

"You don't want one, do you?"

"No," Adam said, "No. Have to keep the mind clear."

"For digging?"

"Right. For digging."

"Okay."

The two stood in silence, Adam breathing slightly heavily and Jon taking in the smoke.

"You two together?"

"Pardon?"

"What's your name?"

"Adam."

"Adam. Right. First man. What's the girl's name?"

"My mother?"

"Her too."

"Oh."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"Lily and Lorraine."

"Which is which?"

"Lorraine is my mother. Lily is the other one."

"Uh huh," Jon said. "I knew a Lorraine once. That was a while ago."

"I knew a Lorraine once too," Adam said. "She's dead now." He chuckled nervously.

"Right," Jon said. The joke did not amuse him. "You two together?"

"She was my mother."

"Not her. Her."

"Oh," Adam said, "Lily? Huh." He snorted and fumbled with his hair. "It's complicated, I guess."

"How complicated can it be? You're together or you're not. You love her, she loves you. Or not. Can't be that complicated."

"It is," Adam said. "Trust me."

"Try."

"Try what?"

"Try to explain."

"I don't think so. What's it matter?"

"If I'm going to seduce her," Jon said, "I'd like to know if I'm betraying my new friend." He took a long drag and then blew a ring of smoke into the air. The ring floated slowly away from his face. Then he took a quick drag and blew smoke out again, jetting it through the ring. Jon looked at Adam and smiled.

Adam felt a tiny pit of despair—a twinge of loss and hurt—open up inside his chest. He examined the feeling, observing it as it washed over him. He couldn't quite tell if he was upset because Jon was into Lily or because Jon wasn't into him.

"We're intimate," Adam said and then immediately judged himself for producing such an awkward adjective to describe his relationship with Lily. "That is, I don't know. We've dated. Even had sex. A lot actually," Adam smiled a bit as he reminisced. "But she's changed, I screwed it up, we've changed. It's over. I think. I'm not really sure. How do you know when it's over?"

"I think you know when you know," Jon said. "Doesn't sound like you know."

Jon took one last drag on the cigarette and then flicked it into the woods. Adam couldn't help but think that he looked incredibly cool doing so. He felt smitten like the head cheerleader looking at the quarterback of the football team.

"Let's go," Jon said. "I'll walk slower. We can walk and talk. Not far. Not far."

They continued.

"I'm not sure we should leave Lily back there," Adam said.

"Don't worry. She'll find us. C'mon."

Jon began weaving again, dodging the trees effortlessly. He obviously knew every nook and cranny of these woods.

"Tell me about your mother," he said.

"She's dead."

"I can see that."

"She was a free spirit. A bit crazy maybe. She left me a letter to read after her death saying that she wanted to be buried in these woods. We live just on the south side. Why not? It's her home."

"It's my home."

"Right, but mother felt that way too. Had this crazy story about being conceived in these woods or some shit. I don't know."

Jon stopped.

"What's your mother's name?" he asked.

"Lorraine."

"Full name."

"Lorraine Barth, I guess."

"Is that a married name?"

"Yeah," Adam said, "Her maiden name is Lazar."

Jon nodded and then continued walking. After a few moments, he stopped.

"We're here," he said, "But we don't have to be."

Adam looked at him, puzzling over this latest statement.

"Grab the shovel," Jon said.

Adam obliged and then came around from the wheelbarrow, glad to not have to worry about carting his dead mother around any longer. "Where?"

"Right here," Jon said, pointing at the ground right in front of him.

Adam positioned himself near the spot, placed the point of the shovel on the ground and was just about to step on the heel and dig into the earth when Jon stopped him by putting a hand on his shoulder.

"We don't have to leave her here," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Adam!"

The deep thud-thud-thud of footsteps through the darkness, crunching leaves and brush underfoot, approached louder and louder as they came.

"Adam!"

Out of the darkness and into the small pool of orange light cast by Jon's candles Lily entered.

She punched Adam's shoulder hard.

"The fuck!" he exclaimed.

"Watch your language, ass," she said. "I can't believe you'd leave me in the dark like that."

Adam started to protest, but Lily interrupted him. "This the spot?"

"Yes," he said.

"But it doesn't have to be," Jon said.

"The heck is this guy talking about," Lily said to Adam. Then she turned to Jon, "Listen, guy. You and your flaming hand are creeping me out. Are there rocks under here or not?"

"No rocks."

"Let's dig."

Lily grabbed the shovel and got to work, breaking ground and starting a hole.

Jon put his arm around Adam's shoulder and guided him away from Lily. Adam walked with him so that they were a few yards away, just out of earshot.

"Your mother is Lorraine Lazar," Jon said.

"Yes."

"I have a proposition for you," Jon said.

Adam contained his excitement, barely.

Chapter Six

Lily enjoyed the work. Slamming the shovel into the ground felt cathartic. Occasionally, she imagined that the dirt was Adam's face or her father's. She even envisioned specific injuries that she could inflict. It was violent, yes, but she was surprised that the lump in her gut, the guilt that so easily surfaced these days, didn't rise up. She slammed the shovel into her father's full head of brown hair. Still nothing. No guilt. In fact, as violent, outlandish, and gross as it felt, Lily couldn't help but admit to herself that doing this physical labor felt pretty good. Sweat began to surface under her shirt and on her brow. She slapped the business end of the shovel into Adam's nose and wondered what Pastor Steve would think.

She established a rhythm for the work and her mind wondered more and more. After a dozen or so blows to the earth, she ceased to know what she was even doing. All that mattered was the rhythm. A little drop of sweat wound its way down her nose, the first rivulet that soon would turn into a mighty river. The sweat felt good. The work felt good. She didn't care anymore.

Digging Lorraine's grave naturally led her to think about how they'd met. She pounded the shovel into the ground and threw a chunk of dirt to the side as she reminisced about the day that she'd met Adam, the day that she'd seen him getting his ass kicked on the playground after school.

At the age of ten, Lily had already started to develop. Early onset puberty meant that she not only had begun to develop breasts and menstruate, but also that she was taller than all of the boys in her class. When her family moved to Gehenna, she couldn't have felt more awkward about the changes in her body which mirrored the changes in her life. Moving from a larger city, Houston, to what felt like small-town Texas meant that she'd gone from elective anonymity to forced celebrity. She was the fourth grader with boobs. The sixth-grade boys noticed her at the bus stop and on the playground. They paid attention to her, but not the sort of attention that she had wanted.

Occasionally, however, amongst kids her own age, her added height became an advantage. The day that the Griffin boys, a pair of fourth grade twins, decided to shakedown Adam Barth on the playground before he could escape their clutches and make his customary bike ride home, was one such day where her size became not a cause for embarrassment but an asset for celebration.

Lily had skipped the bus. She often did. Her house was not that far from the school and the bus in September was always hot and sweaty. She preferred walking home because the sweat that she'd work up would be cooled by the late summer breeze that constantly swept across the fields and streets that she walked. Most of her peers rode the bus too. This provided Lily with even more occasion to forego the awkwardness of attempting to mix with her new classmates.

Not far from the elementary school was a park with an athletic complex. Inside of the athletic complex were myriad soccer and baseball fields as well as buildings with restrooms and concessions during the busy weekend youth sports extravaganzas and other important occasions like Fourth of July carnivals and fireworks. The complex, Deerwyck Park, also had a small playground with slides, poles to slide down, a miniature rock-climbing wall, swings, merry-go-round, and other assorted

play equipment for the kinder-set. On her walk home, Lily's straightest shot took her through Deerwyck, and it was on one of these warm September days that she happened upon a pair of kids kicking the shit out of some scrawny youth.

"You're such a weirdo, Barth," said one of the ass-kickers. Barth lay on the ground in the fetal position, his arms covering his face.

"Yeah," said the other ass-kicker, "You probably killed your dad with your lameness."

Fetal boy screamed back up at them, "Shut up!"

The twins laughed and continued taunting and kicking Barth while he was down. He continued protesting the brutality, screaming sad invective through his forearms which he'd drawn up to his head like a boxer in a protective stance in order to shield his face from the blows brought upon him by the twins.

Lily, looking on from a few dozen yards away, couldn't make out all of the exchange between the twins and their victim, but she could tell, having a certain level of playground savvy developed in the Inner Loop of Houston, that these jerks were up to no good. She snuck toward them and hid herself behind a slide on the playground, shielding herself from their view so that she could hear their taunts and jibes in order to see if this Barth character was worthy of rescue. Perhaps the twins had some good

reason to kick this little kid's ass. Maybe he'd done something despicable or stupid or worse.

"If you were a winner, Barth," one of the ass-kickers said, "You're dad wouldn't have committed suicide."

"He didn't," squealed Barth. As a ten-year-old boy, his voice had not dropped and though he read at an advanced level and had straight-A's in school, he sounded always like a little kid.

Lily emerged from behind the metal slide and made her presence known.

"Listen up," she said.

The twins stopped what they were doing and looked up at her.

"Mind your own damn business," one of them said.

Lily noted use of the word "damn." Clearly, this son-of-a-bitch thought he was some kind of bad ass using a word like "damn" while he teamed up with his piss-ant brother to kick the shit out of this little fucking twerp. Lily leapt into action, coming back with a flurry of curses that made the twins stand up and take notice. The sheer number of four-letter words, f-bombs, and references to various nouns flying out of their asses caused the boys' jaws to go slack, their mouths agape as they worked to understand how this girl's upbringing had allowed her to even

comprehend some of the words that came from her mouth. Even Barth, fetal and protected, drew his forearm shield away from his face in order to look up and gawk at the gangly pre-teen with breasts coming to his rescue.

"Who are you," the uglier of the two asked.

"I'm Lily Sommers," she said, "and I don't care who the hell you are. Back off."

The twins backed away.

"You might wanna run," she said.

The twins looked at her, then at each other, held their hands up in the universal sign of playground peace, and steadily walked away.

"Keep going," Lily said, watching them as their walk quickened, taking them farther and farther away.

Barth rolled over on to his back and relaxed his body, stretching out his legs and arms on the playground's wood chip surface.

Lily offered him a hand, but Barth remained still, his eyes closed. She kept her hand available, but noticed his lip start to quiver and then his upper torso convulsed ever-so-slightly.

He cried.

Lily didn't know what to do with this. She wanted to give him a hug, but she also kind of wanted to kick him and tell him

to get up and get over it. In the end, she sat down next to him, put her hand on his shoulder, and waited for him to calm down.

He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands and looked up toward her, blubbering something unintelligible, but this didn't matter to Lily as she could tell that it was some expression of gratitude.

"Listen," she said, "Those jerks won't mess with you again, and if they do, you just remind them that Lily Sommers, fourth-grade Amazon, has your back. What's your name?"

"Adam," he said.

"Good deal, Adam," Lily said. "Get up, clean yourself off, and I'll see ya around."

Lily patted him on the back and then stood up. She clapped her hands together to remove any dust that she might have accumulated from the wood chips of the playground and walked away.

That was how she'd met Adam.

As she continued to dig Mrs. Barth's grave, she couldn't help but feel like Adam was about to be as needy as ever, yet she also had no desire to return to the protector and defender role that she'd played for the bulk of their relationship.

That tide had changed when her mother had left the house and Adam had graduated and Lily hadn't and suddenly they found

themselves in a new power dynamic. Adam was a college graduate. Lily was not. Adam had a place to be that didn't demand all of his time and energy—though he often acted like taking care of his mother did. Lily, however, had to take care of her father who had become more or less useless in the wake of his wife's departure.

Now, here she was, digging a hole for Adam. As if he needed someone else to dig a hole for him.

Why was she still interested in this guy?

Why was she still dating him?

She recognized for a moment that she wasn't dating him as he'd ended their relationship with his ridiculous letter, at least that was the case according to her interpretation. This only made her angrier, causing her to slam the shovel into the earth with greater force as she considered the idea that Adam had somehow broken up with her before she'd broken up with him. How dare he!

She hurled the blade of the shovel into the ground. It stuck and left the handle of the shovel pointing straight up into the leafy canopy above. Lily held the end of the handle, slumping toward it, and then felt herself start to cry. She slid down the handle until she sat next to the shovel, wondering how she had gone from being a powerful, young woman hellbent for

medical school to some quivering mass of submissive femininity that couldn't even break up with such a loser.

She blamed Adam.

She blamed her father.

She sought solace in Jesus, thinking about what Pastor Steve would say in this particular situation, but she found nothing. This new fascination with religion, something that hadn't really been of interest to her before, made her feel stupid in this moment. This need to find comfort in a god made her feel even weaker and more pathetic. Lily came to a sudden and disturbing realization: she no longer really knew who she was. Was she the submissive female that the church asked her to be? Was she the strong ass-kicker that she'd been on that day on the playground? Was she the helpful friend shoveling out her ex-boyfriend's mother's grave while he—

Wait a minute, she thought, Where is he?

Adam had disappeared. He and Jon had wandered off somewhere. Typical male bullshit, no doubt, had led them into the forest to celebrate how masculine they were, Jon with his weird flaming hands and Adam with his unjustifiably immense ego.

Lily despised them both.

She looked up at the wheelbarrow not far from the hole that she had started and took notice of Mrs. Barth's formidable

ankles, attached as they were to the legs that sprung forth from the bowl of the wheelbarrow. Poor, Lorraine. Poor, Mrs. B. She'd lived a life dissatisfied, identifying with the men she surrounded herself with—Mr. Barth and Adam—yet would have been such a good mother to a daughter. She felt a camaraderie with Lorraine in this moment, a sense of purpose, a shared sisterhood.

It is my duty, Lily thought, to bury such a fine woman, to give her a proper burial that will allow her to rest in spite of the stupidity that had surrounded her for the bulk of her days.

Lily stood up and continued digging, throwing shovelfuls of dirt to the side, building that pile while creating negative space in the forest floor. She raised the handle of the shovel above her head, like a medieval executioner ready to plunge a broadsword into a vanquished foe, and plunged it into the dirt.

"Stop."

Lily turned to see Adam and Jon standing near her, illuminated by the strange candle glow emanating from Jon's fingers.

"We don't need to dig," Adam said, "We're moving to Plan A."

Chapter Seven

Dig far enough down in certain places in the world and you'll make a significant find. Not an archaeological find, nor a mineral find, but a magical find—the homes of the earth sprites that dwell in the tunnels and shadows far below what we typically consider the biosphere. Millennia of fairy evolution has caused them to adapt to their environment, developing a sense of smell that allows them to navigate the tunnels of their subterranean world. The tunnels connect a vast network of cities originally mined by dwarves many centuries ago before the advent of drilling technologies in the 20th century that led to the Great Dwarven Extinction Event across much of the higher latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere. The earth sprites, being reclusive by nature and not nearly as industrious as the

dwarves, waited out the extinction and then moved into the tunnels and cities mined by the dwarves, claiming squatter's rights; though, of course, no one else seemed terribly interested in these properties so recently made available to the market.

The Extinction Event had hit hardest in places where the drilling had been most active. The southwestern United States, for example, had been dwarf-free for nearly a decade by the time Jon Gant had begun searching out earth sprites to aid in his attempts to defeat death. Jon had left the confines of the forests of England, Scotland, and Wales in search of earth magic that might complement his own arboreal wizardry. He believed that if he could learn more about the mineral magics of the world, then he might just be able to combine them with his tree- and fire-spirit sides in order to create life *ex nihilo*. As he'd grown more and more human through his encounters with the women in his life, Jon had become more and more intent upon staving off death, unwilling to face its reality, and more and more creative too. His ability to move and his ability to manipulate fire made him far more powerful with the life-giving tree magic than the stationary trees themselves. He just knew that if he could create the right combination of magical fields then he could probably accomplish some pretty serious Frankenstein shit.

By the 1940s, all of the dwarves in Texas had migrated in order to avoid increased drilling in their territories. As the city of Houston exploded, the subterranean highways of dwarvendom were abandoned and eventually filled with the earth sprites that Jon found when he finally made his way across the Atlantic and the Gulf to the American southwest where he'd heard that such mass migrations might be going on. Jon had hoped to find the elusive leader of the earth sprites, a being so reclusive that his name and title did not appear in any folklore that Jon could find. But Jon had never been able to find him. He contented himself to working out their magic through his own experimentation.

Thus, on this day, when he saw this poor little couple on their strange midnight errand, Jon Gant was filled with a mixture of strange emotions. He really did pity the poor humans and their short lifespans. He had long since abandoned the notion that a shorter life was romantic because, like a firework, it was brief but fantastic. No, these poor humans were only given eighty years or so to wander the earth, hardly enough time to make a few mistakes and then correct for them.

Jon's pity, however, was tempered by his excitement. In his pursuit to find a way to extend life, it had been a rare thing for a dead human to show up in his forest. This had become even

more true in recent years as the borders of his forest in Gehenna had become more and more crowded by new home construction as Houston continued to sprawl north and west. Yes, of course, there had been the occasional time when a body had been dumped, but it had been many years since that sort of thing had happened. This was the first time in quite a while that someone had just waltzed right into the heart of the forest with a dead body.

More than pity and more than excitement, however, Jon felt something inside of his stomach and chest which he could not describe. As he learned who rode in that wheelbarrow, as he looked at her plump figure lying limp in that metal bowl on wheels, Jon felt a deep sense of attachment to her. He gazed at her face and his entire body went numb. His head and heart felt as if they were floating outside of his skin. He struggled for words to describe this out-of-body sensation; it was some new sensation brought on by a mixture of attachment, responsibility, and admiration.

What Jon didn't know at the time was that he was feeling for the first time, really and truly, love.

#

"Plan A?" Lily asked.

Adam nodded. Lily's progress on his mother's grave surprised him. He'd only been away with Jon for a few moments, but Lily had made her way several inches into the surface. She was winded and sweaty, breathless in a way that Adam found alluring. His head and heart had become a mix of tangled emotions and urges. Did he love Lily?

The answer was an unequivocal "yes," but what exactly did that mean? Lily had been his best friend for so long, but ever since she'd started in with this Pastor Steve character, she seemed to be moving away from him. This was not the same girl who had defended him against bullies and unleashed verbal fury upon them. This was not the fiery girl who had approached life with a devil-may-care attitude. Seeing her going after the earth in this fashion reminded Adam of the good times that they'd spent when she lived a more spontaneous, less measured existence.

"Jon here," Adam said, "Has made a proposal that I simply cannot refuse."

Adam stepped down into the hole and took the shovel from Lily. "We're going to do exactly what Jon says because he's going to take care of mother."

Adam held the shovel with both hands in front of him like tight-rope walker holding his pole. He looked to Jon and awaited instructions.

Jon lit up both of his hands in a dramatic fashion. Fireballs engulfed his hands as he spread them out to his sides. He stepped out from behind a tree and assured both Adam and Lily that they had nothing to worry about and that Mrs. Barth would be in excellent hands.

"What are we doing?" Lily asked.

"No fear, my dear," Jon said and he scrunched his eyes closed.

#

That was the last thing that Adam remembered. No flash, no bang, no incantations or anything, just Jon's admonition against fear followed by a deep sense of disorientation, followed by nothing, really. Adam felt nothing. Was he alive? Dead? Floating? Corporeal? He felt as if he was back in the sensory deprivation tank that he'd experimented with in college. He'd seen an ad in the student paper and had decided to give it a go because the 25% student discount was just too enticing.

He opened his eyes and saw nothing but darkness around him. No sounds, no feelings, no light. He tried to move his hand in front of his face but he couldn't even see that. He tried to

take a deep breath but he could not feel the air rushing passed his nostrils. Still, somehow, his lungs filled and he was able to breathe and to think.

He closed his eyes in an effort to calm himself. His eyelids started to burn and then glow red. He opened them again and light came pouring into his dilated pupils. He shut them again to stave off the onslaught of electromagnetic radiation. Feeling began to return to his limbs and body, and then sound returned, like a stereo slowly fading in he heard what sounded like the far off cry of an eagle. As it grew louder and louder in intensity, he realized that it was a person screaming.

He opened his eyes again to discover that the scream was coming from his own lungs.

He bolted upright and looked around him as best he could with his pupils still slightly dilated.

The place was familiar. A bright window with white, sheer drapes to his right. A door in front of him that led to what appeared to be a small bathroom. A wingback chair in the corner. The chair was covered in clothes and draped over the back were a pair of stylish women's jeans, new.

He looked on the bed next to him and saw Lily's brunette hair spread out on a pillow beside him. She was on her side, facing him, her hands clutched together at her heart. His gaze

drifted down her neck to her mostly bare shoulders, covered only by thin bra straps. She slept peacefully.

Adam returned his attention to the room.

Everything was coming into focus and he started to put all of the pieces together. The window and drapes belonged to the Barth family home. The bathroom was the master bath, the wingback chair a prized possession of his mother's as she'd received it as a wedding gift from her grandmother.

Next to him, Lily began to stir. She made a few whimpering noises deep within her throat, little noises that drew Adam's attention and that he couldn't help but think sounded cute. Her face began to twitch here and there. Her brow furrowed and unfurrowed. Adam wondered what she might be dreaming about. He thought she might be dreaming about him. Those little whimpers!

Lily started to move a bit more. Her body grew restless. She flipped on to her back and let out a great, blood-curdling scream. Adam clamped his hands down on her mouth to quiet her. She kicked and thrashed, her eyes open and darting around wildly.

"Lily, Lily, Lily," Adam said and then tried to quiet her with swooshes.

She stopped her screaming and calmed down a bit, but her eyes continued to dart wildly around the room. Adam removed his hands from her mouth.

"Where the hell are we?" she screamed as she sat upright.

"We're in my mother's bed," Adam said.

He'd realized this moments before, but saying it aloud made it much more real. He attempted to piece together what had happened the day before. He'd been in exile of course when his mother died and he'd taken her into the forest to bury her as per her final wish, but he and Lily—yes, Lily was helping him with this task—had been intercepted by a strange figure carrying candles that were somehow attached to his hands. That figure had promised to resurrect his mother with some experimental magic.

Adam burst out laughing.

Lily stared at him in disbelief and pulled the sheets up to cover any exposed skin below the neck.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked.

"I've just had the craziest dream."

He looked at her and realized that he wasn't wearing any clothes. He looked back at the chair and saw his own jeans and t-shirt folded neatly and resting on the seat of the chair.

"Did we...?"

Lily's breathing went staccato; Adam could see panic in her eyes.

Adam wanted to calm her down. So what if they had had sex? It certainly wasn't the first time.

"What do you remember last?" he asked, hoping that this would help them piece the evening together. Adam felt strange. He hadn't remembered leaving his room. He only remembered the dream.

"You allowed that demon to take your mother!"

Adam laughed again.

"Did I already tell you about my dream?" he asked.

"Your dream?" Lily said as she scrambled to her feet, taking the blankets with her and leaving Adam fully naked on the bed. She rushed to the chair, threw the blankets over her head to completely cover her and then went about trying to put her clothes on in her little linen prison.

"Yeah, with the guy with the flaming hands," he said.

"Yes," Lily said, "the guy that you gave your mother to because he promised to resurrect her. The effing demon that we encountered in the woods behind your mother's house."

"Crazy dream."

Lily threw the blankets off of her, she was now back in the clothes that she'd been wearing the night before. There were dirt stains all over her shirt and jeans.

"Funny," Adam said, "That's what you were wearing in my dream."

"We've got to go," Lily said.

"What? Where?"

"To get help," she said. "We can't just abandon your mother like this."

Adam now began to feel rather strange and disoriented again. He wondered if this too was part of his dream. Why would Lily be wearing the same clothes as the night before and why would they be more or less naked in bed together if this weren't a dream? Why had they slept in his mother's bed? It was a queen, so that was nice, as it provided a little more room than the twin in his own bedroom. His mother also used nicer linens than he did, so perhaps that would've added to the romance of the tryst that he and Lily had evidently shared. Still, doing it in your mother's bed is bit weird. Besides, where was his mother? Why wasn't she sleeping in her bed?

"Where is mother?"

Lily, now seated on the edge of the bed and pulling on her boots, stopped what she was doing and turned to look at Adam. Her face screamed incredulity.

"You gave her to that monster," she said.

Adam noticed again the dirt on Lily's clothes. His mind flashed to images of her illuminated by some kind of torchlight, digging a hole with a shovel and tossing the dirt aside.

"Jon Gant, or whatever his name is," she said and finished zipping up both brown riding boots.

Adam started to feel lightheaded. Pieces of the dream came back to him bit-by-bit and he started to assemble them into a coherent narrative rich with sensory detail: the smell of his mother's corpse, the sounds of the nighttime forest, the strange, dulcet tones of Jon's Bowie-like British accent.

"It was real," he said.

"Of course it was!" Lily stood up. "Get out of bed and let's go."

Adam scooted to the foot of the bed and grabbed his clothes off the chair and began to put them on.

"I gave my mother up to a monster," he said. "For what? So that she could be resurrected and come back to live in the era of the Trump presidency?" He zipped up his jeans and then turned to Lily. "I'm a terrible son," he said.

"Agree," she said. "I'll start the car."

With that, she was gone. Moments later, as he was slipping on his shoes, Adam heard the familiar vibration of the front door opening and closing. He tied the shoes and walked out of his mother's bedroom and down the hall toward the living room. On the couch he saw the imprint from where his mother's body came to rest and the small stain on the cushion from where her dead bowels had evacuated. The stench was palpable. He closed the back door which had evidently been left open all night, grabbed the house key from the little rack that hung near the front door and then went out to Lily's car, locking the doors behind him.

"Where are we going?" he asked as he got into the passenger seat. "Who can help us?"

Lily put the car into reverse and backed out into the street. She then shifted into drive but turned to look at Adam first.

"Pastor Steve," she said and then sped away.

Chapter Eight

The 10-year-old Corolla sped through the streets as the mid-day sun beat down on the beat-up machine. Adam looked out the window trying to understand why Lily felt Pastor Steve would be helpful in this particular case. Ever since the guy had entered their lives, Adam felt like Lily's allegiance had been drawn slowly away from him and toward Pastor Steve, like a large heavenly body exerting its gravitational pull and overcoming Adam's own meager gravitation field.

Lily orbited Steve.

Adam didn't think she realized this. When she spoke of Jesus, Adam took this as code for Steve. The two were interchangeable as far as he could tell. And why not? Pastor Steve appeared to be in his early thirties and to have it all

figured out. Each Sunday he gave some new message about how the Christian life, his version of it anyway, would lead to Heaven-on-Earth. He needed no pulpit and he needed no text or notes. Instead, he stood in the middle of a large stage flanked on either side by gigantic screens on which gigantic images that illustrated, though sometimes only tangentially, the words he spoke.

"Jesus came to give life," he would say, "and give it abundantly."

The screens flashed a large picture of a young man, decked out in hiking gear, standing at the summit of a mountain with his arms stretched to the sky. While the slide remained there, Steve would go on to describe what he meant by "abundantly"—

"We're not talking about material wealth, but that could be yours too. We're not talking about bank accounts and cars, not that those things are wrong or bad so long as all is used to the glory of God. No, we're talking about the things that last, the things that matter. We're talking about treasures stored up in heaven. Love. Peace. Patience. Joy. Forgiveness."

With each of these last nouns, the screen changed to some stock image illustration that had likely been found with a simple image search: a pair of hands positioned to make a heart, a dove holding an olive branch, the word "patience" spelled out

with Scrabble pieces, a smiling baby with arms stretched to the sky and a smile spread across her face, and a pastel cartoon of a birdcage opened and empty.

Pausing dramatically for effect and then wiping his blonde, surfer-boy hair back across his head, fixing the part that was about to come undone yet again, he'd say what he said at some moment in every sermon that Adam had witnessed—

"You just gotta to give your life over to Jesus. Put him first. Invite him in. Let him clean out your house and take up residence, inside you, in your heart, in his temple, the temple of the Holy Spirit." Then he'd close his eyes and clench his fists at his chest and say, "You gotta lean into him. Press on in and let him take over."

The images on the screen had remained steady and unchanging during this last portion. Adam thought that this probably meant Steve had veered from his script and the poor kid working the slides had not been sure what to do.

"Do you suffer from depression?" Steve asked. He opened his eyes and moved across the stage to signal a new a direction in the sermon. "Anxiety? A feeling that your life just isn't fulfilled? That something's wrong? That you haven't reached your potential? That those most important to you don't understand, or

—maybe even worse—they have abandoned you and left you alone on an island of despair?”

He walked to and fro across the stage.

“Where there’s despair, Jesus brings hope. Where there is misunderstanding, Jesus brings understanding. Where there is a deep sense of purposelessness, Jesus brings meaning; he brings purpose. He is the way and the truth and the life. None may come to the Father except by him.”

Steve was getting worked up now. The image remained the same on the screens. Steve had moved to the front of the stage so that he could get closer to that front row and look into their eyes, connecting with them.

“If your life has meaning today, if your life has purpose today, if Jesus has given you meaning, then give me an Amen.”

The whole congregation, save Adam, chimed in: “Amen.”

Their collective thunder rumbled the seat of Adam’s chair. The word “charlatan” came to mind, but Adam repressed the urge to lean over to Lily and discuss this with her. He’d save it for the car ride home where she’d let him hold forth and where they both had the benefit of having seen the whole event.

Steve continued on, explaining what it really meant to have an abundant life. As far as Adam could tell, Steve was just using the same words over and over again. If Steve had been in

one of Adam's philosophy sections at college, he probably would've been accused of circular reasoning. Your life isn't great? That's because you don't have Jesus. Why don't you have Jesus? Because your life isn't great. But this wasn't a college philosophy class, and with no one here to stop his monologue and with his audience firmly in his grip, Steve could continue on and on.

Adam turned to look at Lily. The expensive stage lighting reflected off of the set behind Steve and bathed Lily's face in a pool of white and orange light that quickly faded into darkness by the time it got past her ears. Her mouth was slightly open and she seemed enraptured by Steve's performance.

This was the moment that Adam knew what he was up against. Adam could imagine Lily's brain working overtime to create new links between Steve and Jesus. The more he talked and the more she stared, the more Steve and Jesus became one in Lily's mind. Steve and Jesus. Jesus and Steve. Stevus. Jeeves. Adam felt himself seething.

To be fair, he didn't so much mind Lily's newfound interest in Christianity. As a philosophy major, Adam could not deny the centuries of philosophical achievement that Christendom had achieved—the Dark Ages notwithstanding. He too had studied Augustine and Aquinas and the other greats. Sure, American

Christianity was the most corporate of all religions, purveyors of oppression for centuries, but searching was a natural part of the human experience, and in the midst of Lily's significant domestic troubles, religion offered as much solace as anything else, perhaps more. Religion might even be good for her. Why not give into the human herd instinct and find a community that would help you to deal fruitfully with your father's depression and your mother's absenteeism?

What he did mind, again to be fair, was the way that this blonde Bible beater enraptured his audience with his charm, with his boyish wiles, like an American Hugh Grant, pre-sex-scandal, just waiting for twenty-something women to drift toward his smile, his snare. For Adam, Steve represented everything wrong with religion. A guru without credentials. A charlatan. A mentally deficient preacher boy playing on emotion. All flash, no substance.

At last, Lily pulled the car in front of a small house in a modest neighborhood.

"Where are we?" Adam asked.

"Pastor Steve's."

"You know where he lives?"

"Of course," she said as she turned off the engine and took the key out of the ignition. She got out of the car and then

turned around before closing the door. She looked at Adam.

"C'mon," she said, "Steve'll know what to do."

The door closed with a thud, shaking the foundations of the Corolla and of Adam's heart. He looked at Steve's front door and felt a wave of nausea wash over his whole body.

#

The dog stirred underneath Steve's feet as he sat at the kitchen table, his well-worn Bible and his Moleskine journal spread out before him.

"Easy girl," he said and scratched her fur with his stocking feet. "Nothing to worry about."

He felt Jordan's nervousness. Steve had rescued her from a shelter that sought to find new homes for Greyhounds that had been abused by their owners who bred them for racing competitions. Jordan had run races for years but had also been subjected to fierce treatment by her previous owners who saw these dogs not as God's creatures but as a means to an end. Steve had adopted Jordan partially out of pity, though, as he often reminded her, he knew that God's redemption stretched only so far as humanity and that Jordan would have no share in the Kingdom of Heaven. This fact did sometimes upset Steve, but he didn't create the system; God did. Still, it seemed fitting that a human, made in God's image, ought to fulfill the duty placed

upon him from the beginning in the blessed peace of Eden: to be a steward of God's creation. Jordan was a piece of God's creation, and Steve hoped he could redeem her life, making her happy and healthy and whole.

Jordan stood up and walked toward the front door.

"Just the mailman," Steve said.

Jordan, however, either did not speak English or did not understand Steve. He watched her saunter to the front door and then take a seat in front of the door, staring up at the doorknob.

She howled. Even though Steve had been watching her, the suddenness of her barking howl surprised him and he shook in his chair, accidentally losing control of the pen in his right hand and scratching a small tear in the onionskin paper of his favorite Bible.

Someone outside knocked at the door and Jordan continued her barking, howling chorus.

"Settle down, Jordan," Steve said, "Settle down. No barking. No barking!"

He got up from the table and slid in his socks across the fake hardwood floors of his house toward the front door like a figure skater in rehab, shushing the dog the whole way. He gave

her a pet and then opened the door to find Lily with another guy who looked somewhat familiar to him.

"Lily," Steve said, "Great to see you."

She rushed inside and the young man followed after her.

Steve closed the door. "Please," he said, "C'mon in."

"We need your help," Lily said.

Steve extended a hand toward Adam, "Steve Planck," he said.

"You must be Andy."

Adam shook Steve's hand. "Adam," he said.

"Adam! Yes, that's right! Apologies."

"Steve, Andy," Lily said, "Damn. Adam. Steve. Adam. Adam. Steve. Introductions done, let's talk."

She made her way into the living room and threw herself on to one of the couches. Steve told himself to put on his pastoral care hat and become a good listener. Adam followed Lily and the three ended up in the living room.

"I can see that you're in distress," Steve said, "Wanna tell me what's going on?"

Lily unleashed a torrent of words that Steve could hardly keep up with. Among them he heard phrases like "mother died" and "fairies in the forest" as well as "resurrection" which was one of his favorite words. However, amidst all of Lily's nonsense, the word that stuck in his craw and that distracted him from her

fairy tale was "ex-boyfriend." Lily finished her story and looked expectantly at him.

"Okay," Steve said, "Let's slow all that down and tell me what happened to your ex-boyfriend's mother again." He sat down. Lily started over and this time Steve caught more of the story. It sounded like Adam's mother, Mrs. Barth, had died and her body had been snatched by a demon that lived in the forest near the high school. Moreover, Adam's mother was convinced that she was part-fairy and it is very possible that this demon body-snatcher was her long lost father.

As he listened, Steve looked Lily and Adam over, trying to find signs of substance use. No such luck. If he didn't know better, he'd say that Lily had been completely taken in by this story, this fiction, that she actually believed what she was saying.

"You witnessed all of this?" Steve asked.

Lily sighed and narrowed her gaze on him. "Steve," she said, "I don't feel like you're listening."

"Oh, I'm listening," he said, "Your story feels a little..." he searched for a word. Finally, he said: "Far-fetched."

"Hm," said Adam, making audible noise for the first time since they'd sat in the living room. Both Lily and Steve looked at him.

"Do you have something to add?" Steve asked.

"Far-fetched.?"

"Yes."

"Not unlike the story of a blue-collar Jew who came back to life in first century Palestine."

"Let's not attack the Gospel," Steve said, "I'm just trying to understand what's going on. Also, my condolences. It must be hard to find your mother dead only to have her body stolen from you while you are trying to bury her."

"Her body wasn't stolen," Adam said. "I gave her to Jon."

"Jon?"

"Yes," Adam said, "Jon Gant, or Jan-Gant-Y-Tan, as his full name goes. He told me that he could bring my mother back to life. I figured it was an easy gamble. If he does it, great. If he fails, well then I just bury the body a little later than originally planned."

Steve looked at Lily.

"We're not crazy," Lily said.

"That always ensures sanity," Steve said. While she was amped up, Adam seemed quite calm and collected, yet both were giving the same basic story but from slightly different lenses. For Steve, this all suggested that maybe they were telling the truth.

"And why did you come here?" Steve asked.

"You know all about the occult," Lily said. "Surely you do since you preach about it from time to time. Didn't you study that sort of thing in seminary? Exorcisms and such?"

"I never went to seminary," Steve said. "I don't need some school telling me that God has called me into ministry. He's called us all to his service, ya know."

Lily nodded.

Steve felt his heartbeat pickup a bit, annoyed at having to defend his lack of a graduate degree yet again.

He continued, "I've never performed an exorcism, Lily. I don't know much about demons, to be honest. Never thought I'd encounter one. Still haven't, technically speaking, but I'd like to help you out if I can. I know the names of some good doctors."

Lily furrowed her brow.

"Doctors?"

"Demons," Steve said, "can certainly be the manifestation of Satan here on Earth. I believe that whole-heartedly. Satan is at work in the world sabotaging God's creation in an effort to derail God's plan for salvation. However—"

"Back that up," Adam said. Lily and Steve turned to him. "God's omnipotent, right? Why then does he allow this war to

rage on between the forces of Heaven and Hell? It doesn't make any sense."

Lily turned back to Steve.

"Interesting take, Andy."

"Adam."

"Yes," he said, "Adam." Then he continued, "Demonic presence may be due to Satan, as I said, but it also could simply be a mental health concern. Are you and Adam well?"

"Not sure you can have it both ways, guy," Adam said.

Lily turned her attention back to Adam. Steve puzzled over this statement and waited for Adam to continue, but Adam just sat on the couch with his arms crossed looking smugly at Steve.

At last, Steve asked, "What?"

"You've created this category called 'demon' and then decided to chalk up all sorts of shit to it. These demons are malevolent spirits doing real work on behalf of Satan in the world, and/or they're simply a shorthand way for us to refer to mental health issues: schizophrenia, bipolarism, borderline personality, I suppose." Adam uncrossed his arms and sat up. He leaned forward, obviously feeling his oats, "I imagine that if we looked at the stories in the Bible where demons show up—Legion and all that mess—that you'll waffle back and forth as to whether these are real, honest-to-god demons of the Satan's

minions variety and whether they are just a primitive, pre-psychological people trying to account for broken personalities." Adam leaned back on to the couch again. "I'm just saying," he said, "It's convenient that you allow yourself to have it both ways like that. Moreover, can we just consider for a moment the damage caused by a couple of millennia of mentally ill folks being called demon-possessed? Talk about stigma."

Lily spoke up, "This is not an opportunity to impeach Adam's theology or demonology or whatever, Adam."

Adam nodded.

Lily continued, "We're trying to save your mother."

"My mother is dead, Lily. She's beyond salvation."

"No one is beyond salvation," Steve said. This was his knee-jerk reaction and he immediately wished he had taken it back.

"Right," Adam said, "Pastor Steve here to save the day, and some souls too. Listen," Adam leaned toward him, "You obviously don't believe any of this. That's fine. I'm just here humoring Lily because I love her."

Lily looked visibly shaken by this statement.

"You wanna help us or not?" Adam asked.

Adam's declaration of love for Lily bothered Steve. Was it romantic? Was it platonic? Lily had clearly described Adam as her ex-boyfriend, but maybe Adam didn't yet accept this new status. Whatever was going on with them, if he was going to continue to have Lily's respect, he would need to be decisive here and act. Sitting on the fence would get him nowhere. Doing battle with her unbelieving ex over the particulars of demon possession and the stories in the Gospel wouldn't help either. He owed it to Lily to take her seriously, even if that meant to play along with her and to help her exorcise this demon and reclaim her ex-boyfriend's mother's body. Something deep inside of Steve stirred. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew that he was also excited by the idea of witnessing a demon, of casting it out of this plane in the name of Christ.

"Like I said, I've never done an exorcism," he said. Lily's shoulders slumped. Her disappointment was palpable. "However," he said and she perked up, "I'd like to help in whatever way I can. I do know a guy who claims to have performed an exorcism. We can go see him, if you want."

Lily stood. Adam did the same; clearly, he was ready to get far away from Steve's house as quickly as he could.

"Let's go," Lily said and headed for the door.

Steve grabbed his baseball cap and his keys. As he locked the front door, he heard the car start and he wondered if he should warn them about Padre Ernesto and his wife. He turned and made eye contact with Lily through the windshield. He smiled and she smiled back.

Chapter Nine

"Right here," Steve said, pointing to a dirt driveway that veered off of the forgotten highway they'd been traveling for fifteen minutes. Lily slowed the car abruptly and turned halfway into the driveway. It bent through a series of ancient, gnarly oaks into god-knows-where.

"Should we have called first?" Lily asked.

"Padre Ernesto doesn't have a phone."

"I like him already," Adam said. "Living off the grid the way God intended."

Lily looked out the windshield, straining her eyes to see down the drive, hoping for a sign of life down the way. They had left Pastor Steve's house abruptly, but the drive to Padre Ernesto's took them some fifteen miles west, even farther out

into the country. On their way, fields littered with livestock had begun to crop up along the two-lane highway that had cut straight through the Texas coastal plain. The scrubby vegetation of the cow pastures, springing up where the cows had fertilized, dotted the landscape, but where there were no cows, forests of oak and pine and pecan full of thick undergrowth covered the land.

She pulled the car fully on to the driveway and idled across the bumpy surface winding it around the ancient oaks, their branches stretching across the driveway to create a sylvan canopy over their heads, only occasionally allowing spots of sunlight to penetrate as far as the car down below. In several spots, the driveway so narrowed that Lily had to slow to a crawl in order to make sure that she didn't lose a mirror to a tree trunk. Frequently, the branches of the oaks scraped across the top of the car. If Lily had had a nicer car, she might have been frustrated, but this oldbeater could weather whatever.

At last, they came to a small stone house situated amongst the trees. The house couldn't have been more than a couple of bedrooms and a living room. Lily noted the presence of what appeared to be an outhouse to the right side of the main home. The structure had no garage, but a large *porte-cochère* on the side of the home where rusted out peaces of farm equipment,

ploughs and tractors and such, had been laid to rest. Barrels too. Rusted out 55-gallon drums stacked like solera casks.

"Stop here," Steve said, "We should probably keep back at least a hundred yards or so."

Lily obliged, stopping the car and then putting it into park.

"Let me see if he's around," Steve said.

He opened the rear driver's side door and unfolded his 74-inch frame, spider legs and all, from the back of the Corolla. As he stood up, his head rose above the level of the door and he immediately put his hands above his head as if he were a prisoner.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked.

"He likes guns."

"I thought you said he was a Catholic priest," Adam said.

"Ex," Steve said, "ex-pacifist too. Keep your heads down."

Steve kept his hands up and his eyes on the house. He circled in front of the car and stood directly between the hood and the front door. Lily leaned to see around him, but she couldn't. She rolled down the window and stuck her head out.

The front door opened and an old man emerged shotgun at the ready. He took a few steps out on to the wooden porch, too far probably for shotgun fire, but pointing the weapon at Steve.

"You're trespassing."

"It's Steve DeMoyne."

"Pastor Steve?"

"Yessir."

The old man raised the shotgun vertically and set it on his shoulder like a toy soldier. He patted the weapon with his opposite hand. "This thing ain't loaded anyway," he yelled. "C'mon up, Habanera and I were just about to have a little lunch. Plenty to go round."

Steve called out, "I have two friends with me."

"Fine people?"

Steve looked back at the car. Adam was examining the nails on his left hand as he bit at the nails on his right. He looked up at Steve. Steve looked back at the old man.

"The finest," he called out.

The old man beckoned them to come and then he disappeared inside.

Lily and Adam got out of the car.

"Habenera," Lily said.

"Yeah," Steve said, "That's his wife."

"Padre Ernesto and La Habanera," Adam said. "These are my people."

The trio made their way from the car through the shade of the oak trees, down a worn dusty path, and up to the rotting wood porch of the house. As they stepped up on to the porch, dust puffed up from the wood which creaked with each step. By the time Lily, last of the three, stepped up onto the porch, she was certain that the slats had reached their weight limit. She felt them bend and bow as she made her way closer to the door.

"After you," Steve said to Lily and Adam.

Adam went right in, but Lily hesitated. Steve gave her another nod to let her know it was okay and she obliged.

The inside of Padre Ernesto's home was dark. There were no discernible light sources aside from the windows and a few unlit oil lamps with hurricane glass strewn in various locations around the place. The front door opened immediately into a small living room which spilled into a dining area with a tiny table just big enough for two which spilled into the kitchen where both Padre Ernesto and Habanera could be found, working with wooden utensils on something in a couple of cast-iron skillet atop the wood-burning stove. The smell of burning hickory, mesquite, and oak permeated the place, pouring out of the walls like an old barbecue joint, though the fumes were carried up a black pipe to the chimney on the roof of the house. The stove gave off a powerful heat and the whole place was made stuffy by

its warmth. Had it been January, Lily imagined it would've been cozy. As it was midsummer, she hoped that lunch would be taken out on the porch or in the shade of the oaks somewhere.

From underneath the stove a small channel had been carved in the stone floors. The channel wound all the way through the house toward a door on the far side of the living room. Lily, having no idea what the strange channel was for, assumed that that door led to the bedroom. It had to be the only other room in the house unless there were some addition added to the back not visible from the driveway.

The living room was small but cozy: a couch, well-used and worn, covered in woven geometric tapestries of a southwestern theme, a pair of chairs—one rocking and the other of sturdy wood construction with leather seat and back—and a coffee table between them. On top of the coffee table rested a small pile of books. Lily now noticed the books all over the place. The stone walls were lined with shelves full of books. In various corners of the house and underneath furniture lay books upon books upon books.

"Lovely home," Lily said.

"Please," Padre Ernesto said and he held out a hand toward the furnishings. "Sit down anywhere you like," and he turned back to the skillet before him.

Lily and Adam and Steve sat in the living room. Adam grabbed a book off the coffee table and then chose the rocking chair. He rocked back and forth vigorously as he flipped through the book, letting out an occasional chuckle. Lily looked at him.

"*The Far Side*," Adam said, "Haven't seen these in years."

Lily sat on the couch with Steve. She chose the middle spot, closer to Steve, so that one of their hosts could take the far end of the couch. Adam remained engrossed in the comics.

"Hope you're hungry," Padre Ernesto said.

He and Habanera crossed from the kitchen toward the living room and placed the skillets atop the coffee table, making sure to put small, crocheted potholders beneath them to protect the surface of the coffee table. One skillet was full of what appeared to be black beans *refritos* while the other was full of some kind of meat in a brownish gravy. Habanera went back to the kitchen, shuffled around as she grabbed a few things, and then returned with a basket full of warm corn tortillas.

"My apologies," she said in a soft voice with just a hint of a Mexican accent, "We don't have plates or knives or forks. We use the tortillas."

"Edible spoons," Ernesto said and laughed.

Steve nodded and thanked Habanera.

Padre Ernesto and Habanera both showed the way, grabbing a tortilla then using it to pinch up some meat. They rolled the tortillas and then dipped the end in the *refritos*, scooping them up. Adam, Lily, and Steve followed suit. The grainy texture of the tortilla matched perfectly with the cumin-infused meat and the garlicky beans.

"What is this?" Lily asked.

"Cabrito," Padre Ernesto said. "Enjoy."

The five munched away as Lily continued to observe their hosts and their surroundings.

Padre Ernesto may have been the oldest man she'd ever seen. He was tiny, shorter than she, looking like a piece of worn-out leather wrapped around a desiccated skeleton. He was so thin that the pockets of his eyes, larger and round, recessed well into his skull, and the eyes themselves, deep green and always darting around, bugged out ever so slightly, almost like an anime sage ultra-advanced in years. He wore a simple get-up: an off-white *guayabera* with two breast pockets and a series of beige X's stitched vertically from the pocket down to the bottom hem of the shirt. His pants were a darker shade, beige perhaps, linen and wrinkled like his skin. He moved with shaky, stuttering motions, quick and nimble but obviously hindered by age or arthritis or both.

Habanera, on the other hand, was a picture of grace. Like her husband, she too was thin with skin well-worn by age and sun, as well as a wild mane of gray and red that encircled her face like a halo and then extended down to the small of her back. She moved like a dancer, her hands flowing around the table as she pinched and scooped and brought the stewed cabrito to her mouth. Only her jaw had the arthritic shake that characterized Padre Ernesto's entire body. Somehow, Habanera had managed to stave off the effects of age in her movements. Outwardly, she was an old woman, but her joints remained well-oiled and her movements artful and efficient.

"I'm Adam," Adam said hoping to introduce himself to his new role models.

Habanera smiled at him as she chewed her food. She extended one bony index finger and placed it over her lips. "Not now," she said, "Now, we eat. Later, we talk."

Adam smiled and nodded.

#

The dragging of a body through a forest is harder work than Jon would have guessed. Though he'd certainly engaged in shady activities, mostly of the lascivious sexual kind, he'd rarely done anything that would have warranted him dragging a body through a forest. He'd done it before, of course, but it had

been a long time and this felt much harder. As he'd approached his den—a well-appointed, partially natural and partially fairy-made cave near the small pond in the middle of the forest—the wheelbarrow became unusable as the path narrowed so significantly that he couldn't get its width through the thick underbrush. Thinking it would be easier and faster going, he hoisted Lorraine up on to his shoulder and used his fairy strength to carry her toward the cave. Unfortunately, the path not only narrowed but also shortened in height. This had forced him to use an awkward crouching forward lunge walk to support the body on his shoulder while also making forward progress. His quads screamed. He typically just stooped down, half-bending at the back, but the presence of a human corpse on top of him prevented him from doing this. He eased his daughter's body to the ground, its head pointing the way home, took hold of both arms like a trapeze artist and then dragged her down the path, through the brush, and to the front of the cave entrance.

When he'd moved in some three score and ten years ago, he'd taken care to enchant the area with the proper tree magic in order to disguise it from passers-by. Because the entrance of the cave looked out toward the water—a fact he very much enjoyed during those pleasant October days when he'd drink in his waterfront view with a glass of sparkling spring water or, if he

was feeling salty, a Bloody Mary extra spicy—the teenagers who would sneak from the nearby high school to the pond to make out or skinny dip mid-day would have been a problem had he not disguised the entrance. A few well placed trees and charms did the trick, but they also provided a bit of a barrier to dragging a corpse inside.

He waved a hand and the tree branches in front of the entrance parted ways, bending and bowing low toward the earth as if performing an arboreal ballet. Jon dragged Lorraine across the threshold and into his living room, a smallish room decked with furniture that he'd made himself, a mixture of rustic simplicity and minimalist sensibilities, like a log cabin edition of an Ikea catalogue.

Just on the other side of the living room, through a small, round passageway that led underground, Jon had carved out a kitchen and dining area including a stove that he'd vented through the ceiling up to the surface above him. He brought Lorraine's body into this area and put her up on the dining table, the only surface other than his bed that was large enough to accommodate a cadaver.

He sat down at the table next to her and wiped the sweat from his brow. The room was dark, so he waved a hand and floating torchlight appeared in all four corners of the room as

well as directly above the table. In the flickering, orange flames of the magical torches, Lorraine's body took on a healthy glow, the light giving her a ruddy complexion and the bouncing shadows providing the illusion of animation to the formerly animated.

He studied her face, looking for traces of the past in her features. He searched for pieces of himself, something to prove that he had indeed achieved what he had thought impossible, breeding with a human being. Unfortunately, he could find no trace of his willowy, strawberry blonde appearance, nothing to make him think that he was involved. Yet, he did see a perfect representation of Genevieve Harker—Lorraine's mother—just somewhat older than when Jon had last encountered her. It was almost as if Lorraine and Genevieve shared DNA in total rather than in half. If this were the case, Jon wondered whether this might affect his attempts at the resurrection spell that he'd devised. He'd only know by performing the experiment.

Jon reminisced about that summer with Genevieve in the Forbidden Forest. On a clear morning, Jon sat on top of his cave, looking out over the water and enjoying the anonymity of his perch thanks to his protection charms. A young woman, pale-skinned and full-bodied, skipped into the wood holding hands with her beau, an athletic man of central European descent. They

sat by the pond, tossing rocks, chatting, and laughing. Jon got up from his view deck and made his way toward the couple, hiding himself behind trees so as not to alarm them. When he was within a few dozen yards of the couple, he sat and listened to their conversation. Mathematics and Biology, homework, and high school dances. A big batch of banal from Jon's perspective. Still, there was something about the young woman that enticed him. She was not gorgeous, not in the Hollywood sense. He didn't imagine seeing her in the fashion catalogues that occasionally blue into the wood. Yet, everything was proportional, curvy, and well-kept, though she certainly made it look easy. He could imagine her saying that she only looked this way because she didn't care how she looked. Her voice too caused him pause. She spoke with a sing-song rhythm in an alto that seemed to resonate with his heart, vibrating his ribcage in time with her perfectly commonplace speech.

Jon picked up a rock nearby and hurled it far over the heads of the couple so that it landed on the other side. Both of them looked toward the sound as they heard the rock clip and clop against tree branches and stones. They sat silent and still for several seconds before they both started laughing.

"Stay here," the young man said and he went off in the direction of the noise.

Jon moved around so that he could keep tabs on the young man who had now traveled some fifty yards from the pond. The young man looked around and then unzipped his fly and urinated on a nearby tree.

Jon waved his hand and the branches near the young man slowly, almost imperceptibly, closed in around him, creating a little wooded bathroom stall to imprison him.

Jon sprang back toward the pond where he happened upon the young woman still sitting by the water waiting for the young man to come back.

"All alone are we," Jon said.

The young woman jumped a bit, startled by the appearance of such a strange looking creature.

"My boyfriend will be back any moment," she said.

Jon nodded, "Of course he will. Of course."

He sat down next to her. She recoiled a bit but he told her not to be frightened. He just wanted to visit.

Now, as he sat at his dining room table and looked at the body of Lorraine Lazar, Jon couldn't remember what he and Genevieve had talked about during that first meeting. Mostly he just listened, allowing Genevieve's voice to vibrate his heart. Half of what she said, he didn't really understand, something

about a homecoming and the coronation of some new monarchs, and many references to the size and strength of her boyfriend.

He sighed and brushed Lorraine's hair out of her face, fixing the part and trying to make her look a little more tidy. Being dragged forcibly down a narrow, rocky path bordered on either side by coarse brush and the occasional small cactus combined with the onslaught of death had done quite a number on poor Lorraine's appearance.

At this point, Jon noticed the odor arising from the body. It stung his nose and he could feel his eyes start to water a bit as a lump leapt in his throat. He coughed and covered his mouth.

"My decaying daughter," he said, gathering himself. "Let's see what we can do about this ghastly visage of yours. Perhaps we can return you to your old form."

He turned to the kitchen and pulled several pots and a few jars of various sizes, some with lids and some without, from the cupboards and placed them on the counter, ready for use.

#

"Padre Ernesto," Steve said, reclining himself as much as possible on the couch as his body reckoned with the volume of food he'd just consumed, "Is the only person I know who has ever witnessed a resurrection."

Adam smiled. "Then it's possible," he said. He looked over at Lily and fired an arrow at her, "Looks like I made a good choice. Glad your new boyfriend here could confirm it."

Steve furrowed his brow.

Lily rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to Padre Ernesto and Habanera.

"Can you tell us about it?" she asked.

Padre Ernesto looked over at Habanera who smiled. Padre Ernesto smiled back and then put his hand on her hand, resting both on her tiny thigh.

"Why don't you tell me your story first?" he said. "You clearly have something to tell."

Adam and Lily looked at each other, trying to figure out who would start. At last, Lily said, "She's your mother."

Adam launched into the story. While he didn't begin at birth, he certainly spent an inordinate amount of time unpacking his intense personal relationship with his mother and interpreting his relationship with Lily and how it had come to bear on the situation, especially since his mother had entrusted Lily with the letter. Would the deceased like it that Lily had so quickly leapt to Pastor Steve in this time of distress? How might she take it, the dissolution of their match? Adam speculated wildly about his mother's dying wishes, never

allowing Lily or Steve the satisfaction of eye contact, but instead maintaining an intense back and forth staring contest with Padre Ernesto and Habanera. He kept as many details intact as he could including his difficulties during his self-imposed exile, the death of his mother, the wheelbarrow and the man with the strange fingers who somehow warped time and space to put him and Lily into his mother's bed, half-naked, that following morning. (This one time, Adam did break his eye contact with Padre Ernesto and Habanera in order to watch Lily squirm next to Steve as he uttered the words "naked, or at least nearly so.") He continued through their coming here, Padre Ernesto's shotgun, the lunch, and now Padre Ernesto's claim that he'd resurrected someone.

Padre Ernesto held up a hand to stop Adam and said, "Don't believe it."

"Excuse me," Lily said.

"Don't believe it," he repeated. "I never claimed to resurrect anyone. Never said that. Never done it either."

Habanera nodded in agreement.

"Okay," Adam said, "You saw a resurrection."

"Witnessed," Padre Ernesto said.

"Witnessed," Habanera repeated.

"Now, tell us your story," Lily said.

"No," Padre Ernesto said.

Steve sat up and leaned forward. He put his hands together almost as if he were praying, but then used both hands to point at his audience as he tried to plead with Padre Ernesto to tell his story: "Long ago, you told me that you'd seen this, Padre. Now my friends here need your help."

Habanera held up her hand.

"Some things," she said, "Can't be explained with words."

"Yes," Padre Ernesto said. "Precisely."

The five of them sat, huddled around the coffee table in the tiny living room with the dusty floors, fully satisfied by the meal, yet three of them deeply dissatisfied by the conversation.

Adam's thoughts and emotions were confused. On the one hand, his rationalistic, materialistic, pragmatic self didn't really believe that Padre Ernesto had witnessed any such thing, so he very easily dismissed his unwillingness to talk about it as an easy way of dodging the issue, deflecting it so that he'd remain mysterious. *Can't bullshit a bullshitter*, Adam thought. On the other hand, just a few hours earlier—what time was it anyway?—he had just given up his mother's mortal remains to a strangely attractive, if otherworldly, man wondering about the forest with candles for fingers in hopes that he could bring her

back to life. If that were possible, then maybe this guy really did have some knowledge of resurrection.

"I'll show you something," Ernesto said. His grin took on a Cheshire quality that unnerved both Adam and Lily.

Padre Ernesto stood up.

"Follow me," he said and then made his way toward the door. "Take everything with you."

Adam, Lily, and Steve exchanged glances. Steve made an upward motion with his hand and the three of them filed out of the house, following Padre Ernesto with Habanera in tow.

Adam shielded his eyes. The interior of the house had been so dark and now the bright sun burned. He walked on, into the light, following Padre Ernesto until they reached a clearing in the oaks where stood a collection of stones, piled thigh-high in a circle.

"Gather round," Padre Ernesto said, making a motion with his hands, indicating that they should come up to the pile of stones. Adam, Lily, and Steve stood shoulder-to-shoulder on one side of the pile while Padre Ernesto and Habanera acted as bookends.

On top of the pile was a large disk of rock. He and Habanera stood opposite each other. She gave him a nod, and then they both grabbed the disk, struggled to lift it, but ultimately

were able to displace the rock, letting its side slide down the stone pile and rest on the dusty ground with a tiny thud.

What was underneath was truly a marvel for Adam. When the disk was first moved, all he could see was blackness underneath. He leaned forward, bringing his face down toward the blackness. He'd never seen anything like it before. It was almost as if the sunlight were being eaten by the blackness, like some strange little black hole in Ernesto's and Habanera's backyard had absorbed all the light and eaten away the earth. Adam reached his hand toward what he was sure was the event horizon and watched it gradually disappear. By the time his elbow reached the top of the stone pile, his entire hand had disappeared.

He would have continued his experimentation, moving his hand up and down and witnessing the way in which it faded and then abruptly disappeared had he not been bumped by Lily standing next to him. She came at him from the side and he lost his balance and fell to the ground. He looked up to see Lily struggling with Habanera. Steve, who had also been mesmerized by the blackness, pulled his face away from the black hole.

"The hell?" he said.

Adam, for just a moment, fixated on Steve's use of the word "hell." It seemed so out of character and only added to his confusion.

Steve reached for Habanera to stop her, but Padre Ernesto held up a hand and Steve immediately froze, submissive and quiet.

"Back off," Lily said. She was now standing with her back to the rock pile, the backs of her legs pressed against it. Habanera was coming at her with both hands and Lily was working to slap them away.

Adam stood up.

"All right, lady," he said as he slapped the dust from his jeans. "This is weird. Give it a rest."

Habanera, however, was undeterred and Steve stood idly by. Adam looked to Padre Ernesto who stared into the black hole, seeming unaware of the commotion going on around him.

Adam resolved to separate the women. He grabbed Habanera by the shoulders and turned her, saying: "Stop!" As he did so, Habanera lost her balance, she fell into Lily, and Lily disappeared, toppling over the stone pile and falling into the black hole.

Adam yelled, "Holy shit!"

He rushed to the edge and looked into the blackness. No sign of life. Just darkness. He looked up at Padre Ernesto who continued staring into the black hole. He stood up and whipped around. Habanera now sat on the ground, reclined with her hands

on the ground behind her supporting her weight as her legs spread out in front of her. She looked comfortable, relaxed even.

She opened her mouth and spoke, "No way out but through."

Chapter Ten

Steve DeMoyne loved his parents, but like any kid, he had on occasion violated their boundaries, defied their wishes, and done things that he probably shouldn't have done.

He had grown up on the outskirts of town in a strange, liminal space that marked the threshold between suburbia and the beginnings of the country. This was Gehenna. As a kid, he'd walked his parents' property, an extensive tract of land bordered on three sides by barbed-wire fence and a definitive line of trees and natural shrubs that had grown up over the course of decades around the barbed-wire. At certain places, the trees had even grown around the barbed-wire, momentarily splitting their trunks only to be re-fused above. Steve loved to walk that perimeter and he especially loved to go up to the

northwestern side of the property where a small creek, only a few feet deep, cut the flat land. This portion of the property was not fenced, but the rule was clear that Steve could not go beyond the creek without specific permission from his parents. Steve didn't often pay attention to this rule because the odds of his parents discovering that he'd crossed the creek were minimal. So long as he stayed dry, he believed that it would be nearly impossible for his parents to tell where he'd been.

On one particular humid, summer morning, Steve would fail to stay dry, however.

With no specific plan in place except to stay out until lunch time, Steve dressed to play outside: shorts, t-shirt, tennis shoes. Before leaving the house, however, he went into the kitchen and opened the "utility drawer," as his mother called it, a drawer that contained anything and everything, a real grab-all: batteries, spare change, pens and pencils and markers, tape, thumbtacks, kits for sewing and kits for repairing eyeglasses. Steve raked his hands through the junk until he found what he was looking for, a small gold pocket watch. He pressed the button to open the watch and studied the plain face. The time was all wrong. He had just finished breakfast a few minutes before, yet this watch read one o'clock. He pulled and twisted at the dial, trying to adjust the time,

but it didn't seem to work. The second hand, however, ticked and ticked, so Steve, pleased that the watch was functioning, noted the time on the clock in the kitchen and then calculated that the watch was about four hours off. This would be good enough. He just needed some way to make sure that he was back in time for lunch.

He put the watch in his pocket and headed outside.

Summer days were hot, but glorious. No schedule other than the rhythms of breakfast, lunch, dinner, shower, and sleep. Time was his to do with as he pleased.

His parents gave him a long leash and more or less trusted him to do whatever he wanted. They had taught him about the dangers that existed on the property, the most menacing of which being the potential for rattlesnakes. He remembered the time that his father had run over a rattlesnake in his truck. His dad ground the truck to a halt on the gravel path that provided access to various parts of the property. He put the truck in reverse and backed up carefully, looking in the sideview mirror and not explaining to Steve what was going on, until the wheels were resting directly on top of the snake. He put the truck in neutral and then revved the engine before throwing it into gear. The truck lurched forward, spraying a plume of dust, gravel, and guts out behind it. His dad chuckled as he slammed the brakes.

"C'mon," he said.

They got out of the truck and went over to the tangled, dusty mess that used to be a snake.

"Rattler," his dad said. "Look here."

He picked up the tail-end of the snake and shook the rattle which was still intact.

"Hear that?"

"Yessir."

"That means danger, son."

Steve listened as his father explained to him about what to look for and where to look, rattlesnake venom, never try to kill it, just get out of there. This was good information, along with which plants and berries were edible, how to use a compass, and how to find the North Star if you ever found yourself lost at night without a compass, all knowledge that any little Texan should know.

Steve often pretended that he was lost in the wilderness in search of rescue. On this day, he was searching for water in hopes of surviving yet another harrowing experience in the middle-of-nowhere after his plane had been shot down by the *Luftwaffe* in North Africa. Though every tree in the northwest section of the property was completely familiar to him, and though trails criss-crossed the property and would take him

wherever he desired, he pretended to be lost and injured, stumbling down the path, kicking up dust and pine straw, occasionally stumbling into trees and leaning against their trunks pretending to be out of breath and out of water, wearied by his arduous journey.

At last, he came to the creek. He stumbled to its banks, fell to his knees, and scooped the cool water up to his face. He pretended to drink, but never actually drank because his dad had told him that it wasn't clean. After wetting his face and the back of his neck, he rolled over on to his back and stared up at the tree tops above him. Oaks, pines, and a few other varieties provided shade for his weary, war-torn body. He smiled and checked the watch. He'd only been out for thirty minutes. Time was on his side.

He stood up and walked upstream a bit, nearing the western edge of the property where the barbed-wire fence began extending south from the creek until it met the highway not far from where the house sat just off the road. Along that fence, Steve knew that some blackberry bushes had grown wild. He reached the bushes and looked them over, finding a few near-ripe berries. It was too early in the summer for them to have achieved their full sweetness. He popped a few in his mouth and then puckered up his face in reaction to their tartness. A soldier lost and in hope

of rescue must subsist, must stay alive, even if it means eating bitter fruit.

He went to the edge of the fence and swung himself around the fence post that had been placed in the ground only a few inches from the edge of the creek. He continued upstream, leaving his family's property behind. He'd done this many times before and knew where there was a great place to cross, a collection of stones that create a little mini-rapids. So long as the creek wasn't rushing due to rain, the current wasn't strong at all, and he could get across those stones with only the bottoms of his shoes getting wet. He did just that and found himself in a new world.

He continued walking upstream. While he'd crossed over many times that particular summer, he hadn't ventured too far from the creek because he didn't want to risk getting lost. So long as he knew where the stream was, he felt like he could get back home safely.

On this side of the creek, there was a small but discernible trail that weaved a little more north than west and therefore took him ever-so-slightly farther from the creek as he followed it. He followed the trail, but occasionally he'd look to the left to make sure that he could see signs of the creek.

This day, he wandered farther than he ever had before. The terrain continued to look familiar and after some time he more or less ignored how far he'd gotten from the creek because he felt comfortable with the trail that he was on. If the trail stopped, then he would turn back immediately and retrace his steps to the creek.

He stopped imagining that he was a lost soldier, dropping this fantasy because he had started to pay attention to his surroundings. This was new territory; he was breaking new ground, and he wanted to soak it all in, give it the attention it was due so that he could come back here some day and continue his explorations of the surrounding properties.

He checked the watch. Still plenty of time before lunch. No worries there.

As he began walking again, he noticed something new: the faint smell of burning wood. It was the sweet, pleasant odor of hickory, like what his father burned when he smoked ribs in the fall. He inhaled deeply, enjoying that smell. Now he felt a little hungry and noticed his mouth water. Perhaps out of the need to continue his exploration, or perhaps out of a foolish desire to see if there was barbecue at the origin of that smell, Steve followed his nose.

For another five or ten minutes he continued down that trail until the trees stopped and an open, treeless circle of grass lay before him. Steve stopped before emerging from the woods and into the clearing. Instinctively, he looked around and then felt his heart race as he noticed movement. In the middle of the clearing, someone moved. Steve leaned against a tree, trying to see what was going on.

The figure stood up. He was an old man, skin leathery and worn, gray and black hair arranged in a bird's nest all over his head, covering it all except his face. Steve couldn't quite make out the details of the old man's face except for a pair of rather heavy eyebrows. The man wiped his brow and bent back down, grabbing at something in the grass. He lifted it and moved it. He repeated this a couple more times, bending at the knees and then the waist, grabbing, lifting, and placing.

"You could help, ya know," the old man said.

Steve remained still. He darted his eyes around the clearing, searching for the old man's conversation partner.

"I could use some young blood," the old man said. "C'mon on outta there, son."

Then the old man looked up from his work; he looked directly at Steve and then motioned to him, beckoning him to come out from behind the trees.

Everything in Steve told him not to do it. Both parents and school had drilled into him the notion of "stranger danger." He thought of the *Berenstein Bears* story where the kids learned about strangers and suddenly the whole world turned rotten and dreary. You should never take candy from strangers or ride with them. While this situation, a stranger in a clearing in the forest asking for help, had never come up in any of these lessons or conversations, Steve's internal threat monitor, his alarm, rang loud and clear.

"If you're gonna trespass," the old man said, "You might as well own up to it. Now get outta those trees and come help an old man move some rocks."

Against his better judgment, compelled by an unknown force, Steve stepped out from behind the tree and into the clearing. He walked slowly toward the center, toward the old man. He tried to break eye contact with him, a difficult task, but did manage to lower his gaze to his feet. The grass in the field did not really look like normal grass. The stalks were spaced out a bit more, not as tightly knit, and they were thicker and shot straight up in the air about six inches and curved ever so slightly at the tip. Steve noticed the smell, even through the scent of hickory: onions. The clearing in the woods was not a

typical grass meadow, but instead a meadow of green onions growing up out of the ground.

As Steve got closer, he looked up and inspected what the old man was doing. In the midst of the green onions were two piles of rocks. The old man rearranged the rocks. He took a stone from one pile and moved it to the second, more organized pile.

"Grab a rock here, son," he said, "We're making a ring right over there."

Steve got closer and grabbed a rock from the pile.

"That's right," the old man said, "Right over here." He showed Steve where to put the rock. Steve followed behind him, with a large rock about the size of a basketball. It was heavy. He reached the spot where the old man had told him, and he let the rock fall on the ground. It landed with a thud and then rolled forward before disappearing into the blackest, deepest hole that Steve had ever seen.

The old man laughed. "Hell," he said. "Try not to do that again."

Steve didn't really pay attention. He was too busy staring into the hole. It mesmerized him. He'd never seen anything like it before. He'd seen wells and other holes in the ground that went down a ways, tunnels and such, but he'd never seen anything

like this. The rock had disappeared so quickly. It was almost as if the hole had sucked all of the light in and wouldn't allow it to come out. He strained to see the sides of the hole, but he couldn't. It looked like a flat piece of black felt, irregularly shaped, lying on the ground in the middle of a field of green onions.

"What's down there?"

"Not exactly sure," the old man said. "Might be an entrance to hell. That's what my wife thinks."

The word "hell" took Steve aback. This was not a word he was supposed to use.

"She told me to cover it on up," the old man continued. "She has as much experience with these sorts of things as anyone, I suppose. So I just listen and do as I'm told."

"Can I toss another one in?"

"No," the old man said.

"But I want to see it disappear."

"No," he repeated. "We don't mess with this. Whatever is happening here is powerful. Call it magic. Call it the occult. Call it a black hole at the edge of the known universe. Whatever it is, it ain't to be trifled with."

Steve felt something on his shoulder. The old man had moved along side him and placed his bony hand on Steve's right

shoulder. Steve looked up at him, for the first time noting how incredibly and impossibly old and weathered the man's skin looked.

"Maybe you should get on home, Steve."

Not noticing in this moment that the old man knew his name, though that fact would haunt him for some time whenever he'd think back to this whole affair, Steve remembered the watch in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at the time. It was almost lunch time.

"Crap," Steve said. "You're right. I gotta go."

"See ya," the old man said.

Steve took one more look at the hole and then turned back toward the path that he'd taken to get here and he jogged his way back toward the stream. When at last he reached the stream again, the sun had peaked, high noon, and had now begun its westward slide.

Steve found the stone path that would take him across the stream like he'd done many time before. He took his first step out into the creek and began making his way quickly across the ten-foot span from bank to bank. Just as he reached the middle, his shoe hit a slick surface and he lost his balance. He slipped into the water, falling on his left side and soaking his clothes through and through.

The water was frigid.

He stood up, dripping, and quickly sloshed his way out of the creek. When he got back up on to the trail, his tennis shoes were now heavy with water and each step squeezed more water out through the tiny little breathing holes on the tops of the shoes. He squashed his way home, wondering what exactly he'd tell his mother when he arrived, soaked and late for lunch. The story he'd have to concoct nagged at his brain, while the old man and the black hole nagged at his heart.

Chapter Eleven

"I've been here before."

Adam, Steve, and Lily stood in complete darkness at the bottom of the strange well. They hadn't fallen in so much as stumbled. Indeed, the three of them thought they could crawl right out, the tumble seemed that short, but they could neither see nor feel anything. Lily was crying, repeating over and over again, "That little bitch tried to push me in. She pushed me in." The hysterics of these repetitions waxed and waned, but they did not stop until Adam responded to Steve,

"We have too."

Lily's words stopped, but her mouth remained open. She looked at him, her brows knit in disbelief.

"The fuck are you talking about?" she said.

At this point, an exchange ensued in which Adam asked whether Lily remembered and Lily said no, and then Adam asked if she really didn't remember, and Lily assured him again that she didn't, and they went back and forth in this fashion until Lily was vehemently denying any knowledge of this dark black place.

"You were screaming then too," Adam said. "We had just struck the deal with Jon."

"You," Lily said, "You had just struck the deal."

"Fine. I had just struck the deal." Adam tried to look and feel around, but he couldn't. "It was just like this. We were in a sort of sensory deprivation tank and then boom, we were in my mom's bed."

There was a noticeable silence here. Adam smiled as he imagined what Steve's reaction might have been.

Steve spoke up, "I used to think this was serious proof of the occult," he said. "I call it Purgatory."

Adam did his best to ignore Steve, trying to feel around his body for any kind of sensation, but he had lost even the ability to feel his arms and legs move. Again, as before, he was floating or perhaps even disembodied. This idea unnerved Adam. He'd identified deeply with his body and felt strong urge to get it back.

"Can you feel your limbs?"

No one responded.

Adam tried to speak again, but then he realized that he wasn't actually hearing himself. He was just hearing his thoughts. The longer he stayed in the black, the less body he became, the less he was able to do anything. He was becoming all mind.

While the thought of a disembodied Adam unnerved him, the thought of an Adam all-mind allured him. If he no longer had to deal with the constraints of the body—input and output, sleep and exercise—what could he accomplish? What amazing feats of mental strength and fortitude could he claim? Wasn't this really what he sought after in his self-imposed exile? Like Siddhartha, he had wanted to tame his body in hopes of expanding his mind while also getting the hell out of dodge for the insanity that the 45th president of the United States would no doubt bring upon the world.

All-Mind Adam began to fantasize.

Cold-fusion.

Time Travel.

The Cure for Cancer.

The End of Nuclear Proliferation.

A Red Dye That Wouldn't Fade in Hot Water and Turn All of Your Whites to Pink.

Income Tax.

Oh, the thinks I could think, he thought, paying homage to Dr. Seuss and figuratively patting himself on the back for his child-like whimsy.

Adam noticed the blackness around him start to change. If he paid very close attention, he could see some color, tiny variations in the blackness around him, variations of deep blues and reds, like the surface of Rothko canvas when observed from just a few inches away. As Adam thought of Rothko, the world began to change again. Now the tiny variations became the canvas and emerged in large square blocks not only of deep colors but also of brighter ones, greens and even yellows. Large squares of color faded in and out of existence in a 360° panorama. Adam spun his gaze—if indeed the mind can “gaze”—all around to witness the strange creations.

He felt a sense of euphoria.

Everything was wonderful.

Until it wasn't.

It is an odd thing that humans do when riding the crests of the waves of life. During these peak experiences, we occasionally stop to remember areas of our lives where things aren't so great, the troughs. Adam did just this. Instinctively, perhaps, or maybe out of some long-established habit, he

countered the sense of euphoria with the darker parts of his reality, and the Rothko blocks faded back into the blackness.

First, he realized that an Adam all-mind, though able to accomplish incredible mental feats, could never possibly share them. He could devise a plan that would allow all nations to stand down their nuclear armaments. Yes. But without the ability to write, how would he communicate that the United Nations? He could invent time travel, but could never draw the schematics for the machine and never bring it to humanity. He could cure Parkinson's Disease, but no one would ever know.

This, of course, made him think of his mother, and without him realizing it had happened, a gigantic representation of the face of Lorraine Barth now appeared before him. She stared blankly forward, not seeing All-Mind Adam since there was nothing to see, smiling but with downturned brows that belied that smile. She was sad. Adam really saw his mother and understood the smallness of her life. He was sad too.

The gigantic face began to recede. Adam longed for it to come back. He wanted to see his mother and he wanted to see her happy again. He wanted to make it better, to make it right. The face continued receding beyond even the grasp of Adam's mind until it was a tiny little star in an otherwise blank sky. The star turned orange, like a red giant, like Betelgeuse, and then

it came toward him or Adam went toward it. Whatever the case, the star grew larger and larger until it consumed Adam.

His eyelids burned and his right shoulder ached as it was wedged against a cold surface. Adam opened his eyes to see that he was in some kind of stone chamber, lying on his side. Around the room, suspended strangely in space, were small balls of fire that looked like torch-less torches. These torches provided light for the room, causing it to glow a deep orange-red. Adam lay against the stone floor, just a few inches from what looked like a very inviting carpet. He rolled over on to the carpet and looked up. Above him hovered the tall frame of Jon Gant.

"Hello, Adam Barth," he said, "I'm glad you're here. I need your help."

#

The silence unsettled Lily.

She called out for Adam and Steve, but no response came back to her. She screamed. Nothing. Then screamed again and began to realize that she'd lost the sensation of her jaw opening and of her diaphragm forcing air up through her windpipe, past her vocal chords, and out into the world.

There was no world.

Lily screamed some more.

In the deep, there's no one to hear you scream, she thought.

Unsettling.

She waited. She looked around, but could see only blankness, only nothing.

Perhaps this was death. Perhaps she had fallen to the bottom of the weird well and her spirit had commingled with Adam's and Pastor Steve's for a brief moment after they'd joined her and now she had at last given up the ghost. This had been a relatively pain-free end, so that was good. Of all of the horrible ways to go, evidently falling into some kind of backwoods black hole was not the worst.

If only everyone had had some experience similar to this, then perhaps they would learn not to fear death so much. This situation was certainly freaky, no doubt, but it didn't hurt. Isn't that what most people fear? The pain of death, of separation? What was death if not just some new childbirth but in reverse? Everything was birth and everything was death. Not so much something to fear but something to endure.

As she philosophized about death, the black canvas remained all around her, unchanging, as if she were looking out on space a billion billion years from now after the universe's expansion had resulted in sad starless nights because the light of every

star had either faded in their final fits of fusion or had receded so far that they no longer had enough time for even light to reach anything resembling an eye. Nothing. No matter. Just thought. The end of evolution. The death of life. But then comes the resurrection.

The meaninglessness of all of this from her new vantage point struck her. If there were no redemption, no resurrection, nothing to allow humanity to rise above, then what is the point? She'd never melted into such existentialism, but she recognized it from her AP Lit class where she'd been exposed to Ionesco, Sartre, and Camus. She'd written them off as whiney Europeans at the time, but now that she had evolved to a state where she could properly see the meaninglessness of it all, she began to understand their angst and despair. More or less.

This is why we need the resurrection, she thought. Without the resurrection, death becomes meaningless. Everything is dying. Everything is birth. We're born dying. If death is meaningless and we're born dying, then we've been running around in meaningless circles our whole lives. Unless, of course, there's resurrection, redemption, rebirth into life eternal.

As she continued to think about redemption and life eternal, the canvas in which her mind was suspended began to

turn gray. It brightened and brightened until it was blindingly white.

What does it mean to be redeemed? Forgiven, she thought, to be redeemed is to be forgiven.

She inhaled sharply and felt air rushing into her throat and down her esophagus and into her lungs. Her chest expanded and she let out a gasp. She stood in front of a familiar looking door. Her eyes adjusted slowly to the light. It felt like late afternoon or early evening as the sun behind her cast a long shadow across the door.

It was her door.

She opened it and walked inside to see her father in the living room carrying a pile of woman's clothing.

"Lily," he said, "I'm glad you're here. I need your help."

#

Steve sat at the foot of the cross looking up at his crucified king. The entire cosmos around them exploded with starlight against a velvety black canvas.

Steve had been here before, many times since that day that he'd discovered Padre Ernesto covering the hole in the green onion clearing in the woods. In his many trips to this place, he'd learned to control his mind and project his thoughts and feelings. Each visit, as he'd learned to control the space, he'd

been able to add to the canvas that he now saw. At first, the crucifixion scene was only rudimentary, the mental equivalent of stick figures. Over time, Steve had refined it, adding detail after detail. The starlight came as a he thought about the sun going black and a total eclipse coinciding with the moment of Christ's death. Then he'd added detail to the scene itself: two thieves on either side of Jesus, a distraught Mary at his feet. These were the major elements. Then he'd started to refine those: the grain of the wood on the cross, splinters that caught on Christ's back as he lifted himself up to breathe, the length of the needles on the crown of thorns, the size and nature of the wound in his side, the dripping of blood from his wrists and feet.

Though the canvas was completely static, Steve's mind had created such a lifelike vision that it seemed to move. The stars seemed to rotate around the cross, as if it were True North.

Steve knelt—as much as a disembodied pastor could—and prayed.

He always began with the Lord's prayer, but then would allow his heart and mind to take him wherever they would. He was careful, however, to keep his mind focused on the dolorous Christ on the cross, the Christ of his creation, lest he lose this vision.

As he did this, his mind caught on a particular line of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, they will be done." He turned the line over and over in his mind again and again. As he did so, it morphed slightly: *thy kingdom come thy will be done thy kingdom thy will thy will be thy will not my will thy will not my will but thy will. Not my will, but thy will. Not my will, but thy will.*

The new phrase became a mantra for him and he repeated it, leaning into it, trying to keep his attention and focus on the vision before him. He felt a deep longing well up inside him. He stretched his mind out toward Jesus like a tentacle that extended directly from his brain to the heart of Jesus uniting them.

Suddenly, it snapped. Everything went blank except the face of the Middle-Eastern man on the cross. Jesus opened his eyes and burned a hole in Steve.

"Stephen DeMoyné," he said, "I'm glad you're here. I need your help."

Chapter Twelve

Lily's father, Keith, stood in the living room of their house with a gigantic pile of women's clothes in his arms. Lily stood in the front door, confused in every possible way.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked.

"Moving on," he said. "That's why I need your help. Follow me."

He walked toward the back door, passing the blank walls where family portraits used to hang, their silhouettes still stuck on the walls like ghosts of pleasant family pasts. Lily noticed their absence, but didn't have time to ask questions because her father continued parading toward the back door. She felt like her family was slowly but inevitably disappearing and she alone was interested in preserving its history. Lily tried

to put this out of mind as much as possible, so she followed her father, grabbing minor garments—socks, panties, and the like—as they slipped out of the pile and fell on the floor behind him.

“A little help here,” he said, nodding his head toward the door.

Lily rushed around him and opened the back door. They walked out to the center of the backyard where Keith chucked the clothes on to a big pile of debris that included more clothes, pictures, file folders full of documents as well as other papers, small knick-knacks and keepsakes, a leather purse with matching wallet, shoes, lots of shoes for every possible occasion from running and cycling to nights out to boots for a variety of weathers: wet, dry, horseback. Lily recognized all of this stuff.

“What are you doing with Mom’s stuff?”

Keith stood in front of the pile, resting his hands on his hips and looking down at the collection of ex-spousal detritus that littered the backyard. He breathed heavily. He’d clearly been at this for a while. He wore his post-breakup uniform: a pair of worn and faded Christmas-themed pajama pants with tiny little Christmas trees and snowmen printed all over, thick wool socks, and a plain white t-shirt with just a hint of yellow around the pits. It was January, and the air probably a little

too chilly for just an undershirt, but Keith didn't seem to be bothered by the cold at all. If he was, he wasn't letting on and it fit right in with his blasé attitude about his own hygiene; he just didn't seem to give any shits anymore. His salt and pepper beard hadn't been trimmed in a while and his jet black hair rested haphazardly all over his head. Lily wondered if he'd showered this week. He typically needed reminders from her about these sorts of things, but lately she'd been performing a series of experiments in an attempt to determine if Keith would take care of his own personal hygiene without her prompting him.

"I had a vision today, sweetie," he said. "More like a dream really." He looked up toward the sky. "To be honest, I'm not really sure what's a dream and what's real anymore. I feel a little like that philosopher guy. What's his name? You know it." He looked at Lily. "Which one is it?"

Lily said, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The guy," Keith said. He took his right hand off his hip and rubbed his eyes with it. "He determined that he couldn't prove that the world around him wasn't an illusion or a dream or whatever. Ultimately, he said that he was real only because there must be a thinker to do the thinking that he'd been thinking."

"Descartes."

He snapped and pointed at Lily without looking at her. "That's the guy," he said. "I feel like that guy these days. What's real? Are you there? Who knows? None of it really matters, though, right?"

"I don't know, Dad," Lily said, "I feel like I matter."

"That's not what I mean," he said. "This," he pointed at the pile, "This doesn't matter. She's gone and she's not coming back and there's really no reason that we need to keep thinking about her, no reason that we should be reminded of her, because that constant memory, the keepsakes and the stories, they are what keeps her around. Her ghost or her spirit or whatever. If we get rid of the stuff, then we stand a chance of getting rid of her." Finally, he turned to look at Lily. "And that's what we need, don't you think? We need to rid ourselves of her."

Lily crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders with her hands to stave off the chilly January breeze.

"I don't want to get rid of Mom," she said.

"I know you don't," Keith said, "But don't you feel like she got rid of us?"

Lily did feel this way. She hadn't spoken to her mother in a few weeks. She'd tried to call, but her calls were never answered and her voice messages and texts hadn't been returned either. For months, she had sent her mother a daily message,

telling her that she loved her and asking her to come back. Then as the hope of her coming back began to fade, she'd progressed to simply asking for her to call. Sometimes her mother would make the call within a day or two. She always had an excuse for not calling. She was in an area with no signal because she'd been out backpacking or kayaking or canoeing or surfing or whatever. If her tales were to be believed, then her mother was living an incredible adventure. Lily, however, didn't really believe them. In part, she didn't believe them because she couldn't understand how two human beings—her mother and the man she'd run off with—could possibly afford to go on continuous adventures supporting themselves with odd jobs along the way. The bulk of her disbelief, however, stemmed from her not wanting to think of her mother living such an incredible life while she and her father suffered at home.

"Me too," Keith said.

"I didn't agree with you," Lily said.

"Yes you did. Just not vocally."

Keith walked away toward the door on the side of the house that went directly into the garage, thus leaving Lily to stare at the pile of her mother's belongings by herself. She knelt down and started to pick through it. Near her foot was a photograph. Her parents stood on a beach, looking at the camera,

smiling. Behind them, Lily made out the Flagship Hotel: Galveston, Texas. Her parents looked so young. Her father's hair was cleanly cropped and his face shaven. He was shirtless and though the photograph didn't show his whole body, she could see that his shoulders and chest were muscular and fit. Her mother wore a bathing suit with thin straps that went over her shoulder. Her shoulders looked soft in contrast to her husband's. Their faces were framed by the chocolate milk water of the Gulf of Mexico behind them. They looked happy.

Lily tossed the picture on top of the pile and sorted through some more of the material. She found a pair of shoes that she liked. Her mother's feet were a half size smaller than her own, but these black heels with the super cute holster around the ankle with the tiny silver buckle on the side could be put to use on a special occasion. Lily grabbed the shoe and stirred the area of the pile where she'd found it, looking for its match.

She started to feel silly. When would she have the opportunity to wear these on a special occasion. Would her father take her out to dinner the next time she won "Server of the Month" at José's Place? Would Adam care to take her some place nice? Some place that actually had waiters rather than places where you could get up and get your own refills? Probably

not. Maybe she could wear them in mourning at Mrs. Barth's funeral. Of course, Mrs. Barth wasn't having a funeral because her body had been stolen by some strange sylvan sprite who had somehow zapped Adam and Lily into the beyond and back to Adam's house after stealing his mother's body.

Lily knew it was way too early to tell, but she started to lose hope that 2017 would be better than 2016. So far, 2017 really blew.

"Look out," Keith said.

Lily stood up to see him approaching quickly with a pair of old, beat-up, metal gasoline canister, one in each hand.

"Scoot back," he said, "I don't want to splash any of this on you." He set the canisters down and began unscrewing one of the caps.

Lily stood up, still holding the black shoe, and backed away. This was the most alive she'd seen her father in months. As he removed the caps, she could see resolve in his eyes. There was a spring in his step, a bounce that she wouldn't have recognized if she hadn't known the man prior to last February. He moved with purpose around the pile, splashing gasoline on to the remaining pieces of his wife that still polluted the house and the that they'd shared for more than twenty years. Lily loved watching him do this, loved the sharp smell of the fumes

hitting her nose, loved the idea that they might be able to exorcise the demon that had taken up residence in their house for the last 11 months.

"That's enough, Dad," she said.

He tossed one empty canister back toward the house, toward the door to the garage.

"If you're gonna do something," he said, picking up the second canister and adding to the fuel, "then do it all the way."

He made short work of the second canister, tossed it back toward the other, and then pulled matches from his pocket.

"Let me light it," Lily said.

Keith looked at her smiled.

"Let's both do it."

Lily nodded. Keith handed her the matches and she lit one. Keith lit his match with Lily's and said, "To new beginnings." They both tossed their matches on the pile and flames erupted into the sky with a rush of hot air stinging their faces as the gasoline caught.

Lily looked over at her father. He stood, his right hand in a fist at his mouth, half-hiding a gleeful smile, the firelight dancing in his wide eyes. He laughed, giddy at the flames,

watching his little backyard erupt into fire, carrying his ex-wife's memory up in smoke.

Lily wanted badly to forget her mother, to move on. Her absence had loomed so large in their home, casting an unavoidable shadow. While she mourned the loss of her mother, she also celebrated what could be her father's liberation. She hadn't seen him like this in so long. He looked happy, really happy. These emotions overwhelmed her and she felt that familiar swell in her chest, catch in her throat, and the uncomfortable stinging in her nose and eyes. She cried.

Keith put his arm around her.

"It's gonna be okay, kiddo," he said, "I think we're gonna make it. I don't need you to take care of me, at least not until I'm back in diapers again."

Lily laughed through the tears. She wiped them from her eyes.

The heat was starting to build, so they took a few steps back. Lily looked at her dad again, but noticed a strange, flickering orange light behind him. She leaned forward to look around him.

"Shit!"

Keith's gas canisters had left a small trail of gasoline leading back to the house. The dried, brown grass—made so by the

long months of gray canopied skies during the Texas winter—of their yard had started to burn its way back toward the house. The wooden fence that divided their yard from the neighbor's was right next to that trail.

"We need a fire extinguisher," Lily said.

Keith bolted for the garage, but the line of fire made it difficult to get to the door. He and Lily both ran into the house.

"Under the sink," he said pointing into the kitchen. Lily ran into the kitchen while Keith hurried past her and opened the garage door.

"Fuck!" he yelled.

Lily, pulling the small fire extinguisher out from under the sink, turned to look at the door that led from the breakfast nook to the garage. Her father stood next to the open door, his body silhouetted against the orange glow of fire in the garage. Lily pulled the pin from the fire extinguisher and ran toward the garage. She began spraying the extinguisher at the base of the fire. Unfortunately, the Sommers family had always kept a messy garage, full of scraps of wood from various projects, including several square yards of lattice-work that he had planned to use for ivy before his wife's departure had robbed him of his desire to garden.

Lily's extinguisher kept the flames from creeping toward the door, but the rest of the garage was rapidly heating up. She could see black smoke start gathering along the ceiling where the heat was causing the paint to bubble.

The smoke alarms howled as smoke began to sweep over Lily's head and into the house.

"Forget it!" her father yelled grabbing her shoulders and trying to turn her away.

Lily's brow was now sweating and turning black. She continued spraying the extinguisher wildly at the burning wood, scraps of carpet, and other junk that had collected near the door in the garage.

"Let's go!" Keith yelled.

The extinguisher emptied.

Lily squeezed the handle a few more times but nothing came out.

Keith grabbed her by the arms and forcibly moved her toward the front door as he told her that the house was a lost cause. He pushed her all the way to the front door, Lily struggling the whole way, fighting him, pounding at his chest and arms, yelling at him: "You did this! You did this!" She didn't even know what she meant by it, but she yelled it anyway.

He opened the front door and pushed her out. She fell on her back and covered her face with her forearms, her hands still clutching the useless extinguisher.

"We've gotta get into the street," Keith said. He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to her feet. He put his arm around her shoulder and jogged her out to the street. She fell to her knees and then spun around to look back at the house.

The flames were erupting out of the garage door on the side of the house, licking around the roof. The little glass windows along the top of the big garage door exploded, causing both Keith and Lily to tremor. Flames spit out of those windows.

"You got a phone?"

Her father's voice was calm, measured, drab.

Lily stood up and reached into her back pocket for her phone. She tried to unlock it so that she could call 9-1-1, but the screen had been severely cracked during one of her falls.

"You should always use a phone case," Keith said.

Lily turned to him. She could barely see him because her eyes were so full of angry tears.

"Says the guy who just put our entire lives up in flames."

Keith laughed.

"Why the hell are you laughing?"

"Looks like we will be literally moving on," he said.

Lily suddenly became aware of the weight of her right hand as it hung to her said. She swung it and landed a loud slap directly on his cheek.

Chapter Thirteen

Adam found himself strangely attracted to Jon-Gant-y-Tan yet again. *Odd*, he thought. He'd never really dealt with homoerotic feelings before, so having them swell up inside of him twice within about 24 hours felt quite strange to him. While he wasn't particularly homophobic, he also didn't really like his sexuality suddenly being called into question. He'd never really thought about it before. He had always unquestioningly followed the heteronormativity that had been put before him since he was a small child. Now, for the first time, he was faced with the prospect of a homosexual love affair and he really didn't know how to deal with it. Did he really find Jon attractive? Or was it just that he was the most feminine, yet masculine somehow, man that Adam had ever met?

Adam really didn't know what to make of any of this, but it also didn't matter, not a wit. As Adam thought about all of this, he failed to recognize that it always took two to tango, and his preferred—or his questionably preferred—dance partner was not into him. Jon was all business.

"Follow me," he said, gliding through the torchlit cave.

Adam followed, but couldn't help but allow his gaze to drop, first to Jon's ass which rocked left and right as he walked, and then down to the strangely tantalizing stilettos that Jon wore. *Who wears heels in their own home?*

Looking around as they went, Adam had indeed quickly surmised that this must be Jon's home. The decoration was spare and tasteful, all wood furniture and functional. The floating torches weirded Adam out a bit, but why start questioning all of this insanity now. Everything simply is, right? Besides, the light that the torches threw around the room was perfectly delightful, like having mini fireplaces stationed all over the place.

Jon led Adam through a series of rooms, all smooth stone walls and immaculate stone floors. A pair of torches guided them, one floating fore and another aft, creating a little processional as they made their way through the warren. Jon's heels clicked pleasantly against the stone, yet with enough

reverberation and depth to clue Adam into the fact that they were walking with a purpose.

"Something's not quite right with the resurrection spell," Jon said.

Adam didn't say anything.

"I'm hoping," Jon continued, "That you can help me out here.

Adam had always been unwilling to admit when he was out of his element. Moreover, he certainly was not interested in letting someone as enticing as Jon know that he had no idea how to work a simple resurrection spell.

"Don't worry," Jon said, "I know that you have no idea how to do any of this."

Adam felt a sense of relief.

Jon stopped and turned toward Adam. "I may not have been completely forthright with you from the start, Adam," he said. "I have no idea how to do these things either. To be honest, I don't think they can actually be done."

As he spoke, Jon gestured with his hands and for the first time Adam noticed that his entire right hand was made up of candles. Not fingers. Candles.

"You have candles for fingers," Adam said both thoughtlessly and as a way of processing the strange fact that

he had somehow missed in spite of Lily's attempts to show him exactly this fact.

"Yes," Jon said, "I call it my 'light touch.' Lily told you that but you weren't paying attention. You don't pay much attention to her, you know. I can tell that and I've spent about a quarter of an hour with you."

This comment, even coming from such a creature, annoyed Adam. "What the hell do you mean?"

"I'm not really sure that this is the time to get into this," Jon said, "I need to show you your mother."

Adam was torn. On the one hand, he very much did think this was the time. If Jon was going to impeach Adam's boyfriend—nay best friend!—credentials, then he'd better damn well explain himself. On the other hand, this whole mess had begun when Adam's mother had decided that now would be a good time to die and leave him holding the bag, feeling guilty, carrying her body into the forest, and ultimately providing him with the excuse and opportunity to allow this resurrection, which he didn't really even believe in to begin with so it totally didn't surprise him that Jon was having some kind of trouble here.

Adam decided not to confront Jon.

"What's up with mother?"

"You'll see," Jon said, "But I do need to warn you before we go in there, you may not like what you see."

Jon pushed aside a solid wood door and ushered Adam in with a gesture of his candle-hand. The door opened not into a room immediately, but into a small passageway, so small that Adam had to duck as he walked through it. The passage was just a few yards long, but the other side appeared dark except for the familiar orange firelight glow on the floor. As Adam got closer, he realized that the entrance had been obscured by some kind of curtain. Adam stopped at the curtain.

"Don't be shy," Jon said, "Boldness is usually rewarded."

Adam looked at Jon, but he couldn't really see him in the dark passageway save for Jon's high-heels illuminated by the light that slipped under the curtain. He turned back and took a deep breath. Something inside of him told him to prepare for the worst. He reached for the curtain, felt that it was heavy, like a carpet, and pulled it back to reveal a domed room, again with the stone ceiling and floor, but hanging from the dome were a series of tapestries, four in total, one on each side of the room. Elaborate patterns and figures adorned the tapestries. None of this, however, held Adam's attention. In the middle of the room sat an old wooden wheelchair, the sort that Adam imagined belong in a late 19th century mental institution with

restraints to keep patients from falling out and harming themselves, with a familiar figure, Mrs. Lorraine Barth, Adam's mother, sitting up, her head leaned to one side so that her cheek rested on her shoulder. She had a quilt spread across her legs. Leather straps kept her arms in place on the armrests. Her chest and ankles appeared to be buckled in as well. In the warm glow of the torches, she looked warm, comfortable even except for the position of her head which Adam imagined would lead to quite a crick in the neck.

Adam took a step into the room to get a better look. Jon put his hand on Adam's shoulder.

"Adam," he said, "We can figure this out together."

Adam looked up at Jon's strange eyes with their wild silver eyebrows.

"I'm just happy to see my mother," he said.

Jon smiled at Adam, but his eyes remained very sad.

Adam walked into the center of the room. Mrs. Barth sat on the wooden wheelchair. She wore the same dress that she'd been wearing when Adam had wheeled her out into the forest. Her hands were folded in her lap, and though her eyes were closed, Adam could see her chest gently rise and fall: she was breathing!

"Holy shit," Adam whispered. He couldn't take his eyes off her. "You've done it."

He started to reach his hand out to touch her, but then found himself slightly creeped out by the idea of his undead mother. He looked back at Jon who gave him a reassuring nod. Adam touched his mother's hands. Warm. She was alive. Breathing and alive.

He turned back to Jon. "I shouldn't wake her," he said, "She must need rest."

Jon took a deep breath. "I don't know what she needs."

Adam knelt in front of the chair to get a better look. He studied every square centimeter of his mother's face. He tried to take in all of the wrinkles, the crow's feet around her eyes, the smile lines, and the lines that seemed to hover just beneath the surface but had been obscured by Mrs. Barth's slight chubbiness. Adam noticed that her brow was furrowed, creating more lines along her forehead than he was used to seeing. Normally, especially on the drugs that she'd been prescribed as her Parkinson's had advanced more and more, she appeared serene to the point of loopiness. Back then, only a day or two ago, that serenity and loopiness had enraged Adam, frustrated him. Now, however, he longed for it. He wished for a little bit of calm and he wished for the perspective that his mother, with her artificially enhanced dopamine receptors, often presented to him, a perspective that always saw the best, always saw the

world for the incredible creation that it was, devoid of pessimism and hatred if only we'd let it.

All of that was gone now. She looked worried.

"What's wrong?" Adam whispered to her, but quietly and carefully so as not to wake her.

"What's wrong," Jon said, "I suppose must be seen to be believed." Jon reached down and moved Adam's hands from Mrs. Barth's. "Kindly step back a moment."

Adam obliged.

Jon gently lifted Mrs. Barth's top hand and then positioned his thumb and forefinger like a pincer around the fleshy part of her hand between her thumb and forefinger. He squeezed and Mrs. Barth opened her eyes and erupted to life. She tried to come out of the seat. The veins in her neck and face grew large as she struggled against the straps that kept her tied neatly to the chair. She looked at Jon and let out a roar as she puffed up her chest in an effort to break the restraints. Her eyes were wild yet dim, darting back and forth, taking in the room in its entirety. Adam couldn't help but feel that she was looking for signs of danger. After a few moments, she calmed her body, but those eyes kept working the room, and her breath came in a loud, forced, irregular staccato.

Adam realized that he had backed into one of the tapestries and that his mouth was agape. He closed it and tried to calm his own breathing.

Meanwhile, Jon had barely moved since awakening Mrs. Barth. He still knelt down in front of her, watching her, occasionally checking the buckles on the restraints to ensure that they would not give. When he was quite satisfied that all was well. He turned to look at Adam.

Adam tried to speak but he couldn't.

Jon spoke instead, "You're probably going to ask me what's wrong with her. It's a reasonable question."

Adam nodded.

"Yes," Jon said, "See, I don't really know. You must really understand that it pains me greatly to say that and it pains me worse to say that I appear to have..." Jon paused here. He obviously knew what he wanted to say, but this whole affair had done on a number on his pride. "...I appear to have *botched* the job."

Adam cocked his head at Jon, skewing his left eye toward him in a tiny gesture that indicated he really needed more information.

"I thought that by combining my fire and tree natures with some mojo that the earth sprites had showed me that I would be

able to bring her back." He looked back at Mrs. Barth. "And I did," he said. "Sort of."

Adam was finally able to speak, "What have you done? What's wrong with her? What are earth sprites? How do we fix this?" The questions came tumbling out of him as if the dam of his vocal chords had just given way to a torrent of floodwaters.

Jon waited, stone still, looking at Adam. Once Adam's questions had stopped and his breathing had slowed, he said, "I don't really know. I'm afraid, she's not quite herself, is she? I suppose I don't really know what she was like before, but I'm assuming—nay, I'm hoping—that she wasn't like this."

Mrs. Barth had completely stopped resisting her restraints now. Her eyes continued to dart around, and she occasionally let out a tiny whimper and chuff that came from deep down in her throat. It sounded almost like a woof. Adam couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"Mom," he said.

She looked up at him, but he could register no hint of recognition in her eyes. He had seen despair and despondency before, mostly in Keith Sommers as he had resigned from life in the flood of his despair. For a fleeting moment, Adam considered the similarities between Keith and him. Two despairing

individuals in need of solitude, one pathetic and purposeless, the other plainly heroic.

Mrs. Barth barked, bringing Adam's attention back to her. He'd enjoyed the momentary distraction in which he once again to center stage in his thoughts, but he knew that his mother's state was more important than his own musings.

He'd seen despair and fear before, but he'd never seen a human being perform in this way. She didn't even seem human to him. She was other, animal, animated but lacking something, lacking that divine spark that separates humans from beasts. Adam chastised himself for this sort of thinking, as if there were any real difference between humans and other mammals aside from an augmented prefrontal cortex that mysteriously conferred upon humans a sort of consciousness that is otherwise unheard of in kingdom *Animalia*. Ridiculous.

No, there were no bones about it, this creature before him did not recognize him and though she looked about the room and breathed and her heart ostensibly beat and pumped blood throughout her body, she was not his mother.

"A soul," Jon said, "I believe that's what she requires."

"Soul?"

"Yes," he said, "You know. That thing that differentiates us from them."

Adam turned to look at Jon. "I'm sorry," he said, "Who exactly is 'us'?"

Jon responded, "Sentient, conscious beings. Humans, of course, as a lower form of such beings, require a soul."

"Lower form?"

"Yes, certainly. Then you have your middle forms like sprites and such. Then we can work up the ladder until we come to fairies—like me—angels above that and then the incorporeal life forces that shape all of our existence. God, if you will," and Jon shook his head, "But I probably wouldn't. I'm not too keen on the existence of the big G."

Adam turned this over in his mind.

"Surely," he said, "The 'soul' is just some by of our consciousness."

"Oh, that's a plausible theory," Jon said. He stood up and crossed over toward Adam and stood next to him. "But the existence of incorporeal life forces, what you might call 'Nature' or even 'Evolution'—he pronounced this in a British way and Adam couldn't help but notice how it sounded like he said "Evil-union." Jon went on, "The existence of these has shown that forces from beyond come together to form a sort of quintessence that confers upon our personalities—which are of course the result of your moderately formed prefrontal cortex

and my ginormous one—a personal, individual, unique existence that goes beyond the body. Dylan Thomas called it ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.’ Most others have called it spirit or soul or even ego, depending on what you make of Freud and Jung and that lot.”

Jon was stroking the tapestry, paying little attention to Adam and Mrs. Barth; he seemed to bask in his own glory, like a modern physicist who had traveled back in time to elucidate quantum theory for a wide-eyed neophyte physicist named Isaac Newton. Adam couldn’t help but feel his sexual attraction for Jon wane as he began to realize what a pompous asshole he was.

“Alright,” Adam said, “What I’m to understand here is that my mother’s body has been successfully reanimated, but her soul or spirit or whatever, that remains lost, no longer attached to her.”

“In theory,” Jon said as he closely examined the pile of the tapestry with his fingers. “Yes. This is my working hypothesis.”

Adam looked back at his mother. She was staring at him, staring a hole through him, her eyes like drills boring right through him, excavating into his chest and searching for oil in the vicinity of his heart. *She hates me*, he thought. Yet, he also knew that she was just a scared animal, unsure of why she

was a prisoner in this weird little cave with carpeted walls and floating fire.

"I must be honest with you, Adam," Jon said. "I have no idea how to fix this."

He wheeled around, turning his entire body to face Jon squarely. This startled Jon and he stopped his superficial examination of the tapestry. Adam's pity for the imprisoned animal in the chair transformed into rage for the fairy monster that stood before him.

Adam seethed, "But you said that I could help."

"In theory," Jon said again.

"Keep talking."

"Well," he said and then took a deep breath. "You see, I want very badly for your mother to be reunited with her soul."

"Why should you care?"

Jon smiled a sweet smile and put his hand on Adam's shoulder. Adam recoiled and slapped his hand away.

"What you may not understand," Jon said as he checked his hand that Adam had just slapped and then examined his nails, "Is that I'm your grandfather."

Adam could feel his eyes grow wide to the point where he momentarily wondered if his eye sockets could actually accommodate this widening or if his eyes would soon fall right

out of his skull. He realized, of course, that it was true. He thought back to the letter that his mother had given him and her reference to "Juan with the Light Touch" that had supposedly impregnated his grandmother in this very same forest. At the same time, he also realized that his homoerotic feelings were now mixed with incestuous feelings, creating in him an insurmountable feeling of "ick." This was bad. Very bad. He'd never been attracted to a guy before and the guy that first catches his eye happens to be his true grandfather.

"This is some fucked up shit," Adam said. These were the only words that he could really think of to describe the whole situation.

"Lorraine is my daughter," Jon said. "I didn't even know that I could reproduce, certainly not with a human, though there may have been something particularly special about your grandmother. Perhaps she was a Demi-human, I don't know. Anyway, I'd like to have a relationship with my daughter. I'd like to see her reunited with her body so that I can get to know her." His eyes looked mournful, truly sad for the first time. Adam, as emotionally unavailable as he could certainly be, knew that Jon was being completely honest, even vulnerable with him in this moment. "I feel," Jon said. He struggled for the next words. "I feel," he said, "I feel like I've been an absentee father. Like

I abandoned her. She lived right there this whole time, just on the other side of my enchanted little wood. I could've reached out to her." He hung his head. "I just want to know her." Then he looked over at Lorraine. "But that is not my daughter."

Adam agreed, but he didn't give Jon the pleasure of verbally agreeing. This was not Lorraine Barth née Lazar. This was animated meat. For the first time in a long time, Adam came to think that just maybe there was such a thing as soul. That was what separated the meat from the human.

"How do we get her back?"

"I don't know," Jon said, "But I have an idea. I'm glad you accessed that portal on the old man's property to get here."

"What's the idea?"

"I'm wondering if some presentation of love, of filial love, might somehow help Lorraine's soul to find its way back to her body. If you, in some way and somehow, could show her that you, her son, really loved her, then maybe she'd come back."

"What about her father's love?"

"She doesn't know me," Jon said. "But she has a deep and lasting relationship with you forged over the course of twenty-something years, right? She knows you. She loves you, Adam. Perhaps you can help her find her way back."

Adam thought about his relationship with his mother. God, she had annoyed him. Yet, he also knew that she loved him, that she cared for him. She was realistic, of course. She didn't think her son was fit for royalty or Nobel Prizes. She made that clear often with her cutting remarks that asked him to tone down his ambitions. Sometimes, god damn it, he felt destined for greatness, but she acted like a great weight attached to his ankles, dragging him back down to reality. But when she'd gotten sick, that had changed. Everything had changed, but Adam had never taken the time to notice or appreciate it.

"How do I do that?"

"I don't know."

Jon paused for a while, not sure what else to say.

"Talk to her, for a start."

Adam walked toward the creature in the wheelchair. He knelt down in front of her, just as he had done earlier when she was sound asleep. He tried to grab her hand, to hold it like a doting son would, but the body of Lorraine did everything in its power to keep that from happening. Adam held up his hands and made shushing noises with his mouth to try to calm the wild animal. She settled down.

"Mom," he said, "I love you, ya know?"

Chapter Fourteen

"Did you ever follow this stream any further up than just where the trail stopped?"

Steve said, "No. Never did."

"C'mon then."

He and Jesus were walking up the creek that Steve had explored as a kid, the creek that had formed the border of his parents' property. The sky was still dark, yet the stream and the woods were illuminated as if it were noon, the shadows of the trees coming straight down provided some shade and much needed coolness. Steve looked up and saw that the sun was eclipsed. It's heat still blasted the surface of the earth, but its light was confined to a shimmering corona and a thin, bright band surrounding a black hole. They walked upstream, past the

worn path that Steve had always used to get to Padre Ernesto's property. They skipped across rocks, dodged tree limbs, and made their way slowly north and west, snaking with the contours of the creek. Steve had no idea how long they'd been walking, but he'd guessed at least 20 minutes, yet the sun remained hidden behind the moon, like a giant hole had been punched in the sky. If he looked hard enough, he could make out a few stars or maybe planets that had powered through the sun's eclipsed rays to make themselves visible to his human eyes.

"Eclipses are pretty cool, eh?" Jesus said.

Steve agreed and they kept walking.

"Amazing that the Earth and the moon," Jesus said, "are the exact right distance from each other so that the moon and the sun appear to be almost the same size from Earth." He shook his head and smiled in appreciation. "We didn't even plan that."

Steve said nothing.

"You gonna talk or what?" Jesus said. "You're hanging out with me. Don't you wanna pick my brain, learn a thing or two."

"I guess," Steve said, "I guess I'm intimidated."

"Nope. That's not the word for it."

Steve wanted to ask him how he could possibly know, but then he remembered that he was talking to Jesus, the Christ, the

Messiah, the Lord, God Incarnate. If any human being knew what Steve was thinking or feeling, it would likely be him.

"Try again," Jesus said. "Find the right word to describe what you're feeling."

Steve searched around in his brain. He knew what he wanted to say, but he didn't feel right saying it. He felt like Jesus might take it as an insult.

"I won't be insulted."

Steve didn't believe him.

"I'll help you out then," Jesus said. "How about 'weirded out'?"

Steve nodded.

"I can't hear you nod," Jesus said, "But I know you did. Anyway, I can understand why you might be 'weirded out.' You've taken a myopic view of this whole thing. This sort of corporeal experience with me—be it real or not—isn't supposed to happen. Am I right? This is me operating outside of your box."

"Maybe," Steve said.

Jesus stopped and turned around to face Steve. "Listen, kid. It's me. Okay? No need to obfuscate. I know what's up. At the same time," he continued, "No need to flatter me or whatever. Just be you. I've been telling you through all of that evangelical mess you're involved with that I love you just the

way you are. I knit you in your momma's womb, kid, and I knew what I was doing. Let down your guard and just be Steve DeMoyné for a little while."

Steve nodded.

"Now you feel intimidated and humbled."

Steve gave him a puzzled look.

"I should stop doing that," Jesus said. "How about this: you speak openly and honestly and I won't read your heart-mind like that. Deal?"

Jesus held out his hand and Steve shook it and agreed. They continued walking, but rather than Jesus leading, they now walked side-by-side. Jesus took the position on the left, closer to the stream, and Steve stayed at his right hand.

"Here we are," Jesus said.

The stream came to an end in a large pond ringed with pines and oaks and assorted brush.

"I've prepared us a spot over here."

Jesus walked over to the right where there was a small spot, almost like a beach, with a canoe, a blanket, and a fire. He grabbed the back of the canoe and pushed it toward the water.

"Hop in," he said, "Let's go fishing."

#

After about thirty minutes on the water, Steve and Jesus had caught three large fish and had paddled their way back to the shore. Jesus put the fish near the fire and tossed a knife down next to them.

"Get to work on those, if you don't mind."

He began to tend to the fire, spreading the coals out a bit more. Steve grabbed the knife and began making a mess of the fish. He was not accustomed to gutting and scaling. Jesus finished up his work on the fire and looked back at Steve and chuckled. "You're doing fine, kid," he said.

Jesus produced a few items from near the blanket: a small parcel with what appeared to be corn tortillas and salsa as well as some kind of cabbage slaw. He took the tortillas, wrapped them in foil, and tossed them near the fire. Then he took the cabbage slaw and salsa and wafted the aromas to his nose.

"This is my favorite," he said, "Fish tacos. Fresh fish. A little cabbage and salsa. Fresh corn tortillas. So good."

Steve felt himself getting hungry.

Jesus continued, "That bread and wine bit was good. I'm glad everyone does that. But I really should've taught them how to make fish tacos. I kind of did actually. You know the part I'm talking about."

Steve racked his brain. "You taught who to make fish tacos?"

"The disciples," Jesus said. "Well, Peter and John. You know the scene. That beach where I asked Peter if he loved me."

Steve remembered. It was at the end of the Gospel of John. Peter, who had three times denied Jesus just before his death, is given a chance to redeem himself. Jesus three times asks him if Peter loves him. Peter says yes each time.

"I remember that part," Steve said. "They were out fishing and you helped them to catch some fish and then you ate together."

"Exactly. We grilled up those fish and ate them with some warm pita. Not exactly a fish taco, but the closest that one can come in the ancient Near East, I suppose. If I'd shown them how to make this, just imagine the culinary advancements they could have made."

For a moment Jesus stared off across the water and allowed his taco muse to enchant him. He smiled and then let out a few short giggles through his nose. He put the fish on the fire.

"These shouldn't take long," he said. "While we wait, let's get down to business. You know why we're here?"

"You told me you needed my help."

"Yes, exactly."

Jesus poked at the fish with a stick, rearranging them on the fire ever so slightly.

"Your friend, Adam Barth," Jesus said. Steve's snort interrupted him a bit. "Oh, come on, man," Jesus said, "he's your friend. You don't really know him, but he's your friend."

Steve said, "He's an arrogant unbeliever who has completely mistreated his girlfriend."

"Okay," Jesus said, "Judgmental much?"

"Touché."

"At any rate, he's begun to mess with some very powerful forces."

"I know," Steve said, "I wish I'd been there to stop him."

Jesus nodded. "Be that as it may," he said, "You weren't and we can't go back and change that." Jesus stopped for a moment. He smiled, poked at the fish, and then looked back up at Steve. "I suppose we could change that, but that's not the plan, so we won't. Besides, that's not what I want you to do anyway."

At this, Steve perked up. He wondered what it was Jesus wanted him to do. This whole exchange seemed strange to him. This Jesus, the way he spoke, his quasi-"bro" attitude, his nonchalance around his own power, all seemed somewhat off-center to Steve. This was not the hammer-swinging adopted son of a carpenter that he'd envisioned when he preached the crucified

Lord at Connections Community Church. Steve expected some more fire and more conviction from him. This Jesus seemed to have neither fire nor conviction. He was laid back. That's what really rubbed Steve the wrong way. This Jesus didn't seem ready to bring fire from Heaven.

"Beer?"

Jesus held up two bottles of beer with one hand, the longnecks clutched between his fingers.

Steve didn't respond.

"Suit yourself," Jesus said.

He popped the top of a Corona Light, dropped a lime wedge that he produced from nowhere into the narrow opening, and then he took a swig. He picked the stick back up and tapped it twice on one of the logs. The log transformed. Seconds before, it had been a cracked, charred out log ready to disintegrate into ash, but now it had been renewed.

Steve's initial reaction was that it was a miracle. Then he called it magic. Then he remembered that this was all in his head, right? This whole place, everything that happened in the black hole was ultimately a manifestation of mind. If that was true, then why had his mind invented Jesus in this way. Why wasn't he seeing and talking to the Jesus that he knew, the

Jesus that he imagined, that had comforted him night-after-night? Why would this bro-Jesus show up?

"So," Jesus said, "Mr. Barth is messing with some serious stuff and that's where I need your help." Jesus deftly flipped the fish. "I want you to help him."

Steve asked, "What are we talking about? Grief counseling?"

Jesus laughed, "No! Not at all. I'm going to teach you the secret to resurrection and then you're going to help him to restore his mother."

"What?"

Jesus repeated himself, word-for-word.

Steve stood up and backed away. "You can't be serious," he said.

"I'm dead serious," Jesus said. He pointed at the log in the fire and said, "I make all things new. Why not this? Mrs. Barth still has a part to play."

"I can't resurrect a person."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to help Adam. More accurately, I'm asking you to help me help Adam."

"Why me?"

"Because it will change you. This is a two-for-one situation for me."

Horror welled up in his soul as Steve realized that he couldn't possibly be talking to Jesus. This invented God that was just some strange manifestation of his mind was offering to work a miracle through him. Not a miracle, no. Magic. Dark forces from some demonic beyond.

"Get behind me, Satan," Steve said.

Jesus laughed, "I thought you'd say that." He grabbed a tortilla from the foil, pulled a chunk of fish off the bone with the stick, put the fish in the tortilla and held it out for Steve. "Here," he said.

Steve didn't take it.

"You're just in my head," Steve said, "Like some demon."

"How can you be sure?"

"You don't look like Jesus. You don't sound like Jesus. You don't talk like Jesus."

"Do you really believe any of that?" Jesus asked. "C'mon. Do you know what I looked like or sounded like? Of course, not. Plus, aren't I everyone?"

Steve didn't know how to respond.

"I'm the Son of Man, Steve DeMoyne. I'm all people everywhere. I came to you looking like this white 21st century dude, but I could easily have taken a completely different form."

Jesus took his right palm, the hand not holding out a fish taco for Steve, and put it on his forehead. He wiped down his face and it transformed from the slightly goatee'd white face into that of a black woman.

"I have to say," Jesus said, "That feels much better."

Steve's mind raced. Was he in need of an exorcism? How had this happened? Should he never have trusted Padre Ernesto and his black hole of bullshit.

"Get behind me, Satan."

"Stop saying that," Jesus said. "It's not your line and I'm not Satan. Satan doesn't exist."

Now Steve knew that he was right.

"Who are you then?"

"I am the Messiah, Steve. The Christ. The Son of Man. The Daughter of Women. I hate this gendered bullshit. You get the idea. Alpha and Omega. First and Last. Cosmic. Wisdom and Word. I live inside you."

"How do I get you out of me?"

"Why would you want that?"

"Because I don't believe a word that you are saying. You are obviously a demon," Steve said. "You come offering me power, asking me to participate in your magic, asking me to damn myself

by putting myself in league with Satan. You deny to me that Satan even exists. What could be a greater lie?"

"All you have to do to be rid of me," Jesus said, "is ask. I'll leave, but I can guarantee you that I'll also come back. I can also guarantee that you won't find what you're looking for without me."

"You offer me happiness on top of all of that."

"That's not what I said. I didn't say you'd be happy. I said that you wouldn't find what you're looking for."

"What's that?"

"I told you earlier that I'd stop speaking your thoughts. I also don't intend to speak your heart, especially if you don't want me there."

"I don't."

"Then enjoy the tacos."

Jesus stood up and his entire body transformed into that of a black woman with dreadlocks and traditional west African attire, bold geometric patterns and bright colors. She looked at him with a sad sweetness in her eyes. "There's no way out but through," she said.

Then she turned around and walked toward the pond. Steve watched as her feet broke the surface of the water. She kept walking. Soon the water was up to her knees and then her hips

and her stomach. She didn't waver, didn't falter, didn't look back. She just kept going until the water was up to her chest, her neck, her face, and finally the top of her headdress disappeared below the water.

After a few moments, the ripples on the surface of the pond died down and the surface returned to the perfect, smooth, reflective glass that it had been when they first arrived.

The fire continued. The fish burned.

Steve believed in his head that he had done the right thing.

Chapter Fifteen

The following morning, Lily and Keith pulled up to Adam's house in the Corolla. Lily had tried to call Adam several times, but true to form, Adam didn't seem to have his cell phone on. She put the car in park and looked over at her father. He had fallen asleep during the short drive. His hair was wild, sticking out in every direction like a mid-60's Dylan hopped up on amphetamine, insomnia, and the muses. His face, smudged with ash and soot, looked serene. They'd spent much of the evening with police and fire marshals discussing the cause of the fire. There would be a fine for producing such a fire in their backyard, a definite no-no within city limits, especially in such a tightly sewn neighborhood. She would pay the fine, of course, because Keith didn't have work, didn't have an income.

In this moment, however, she saw peace on his face, maybe even a tiny hint of a smile. What was it that he'd said while watching their life go up in flames? Lily tried to remember because it struck her as the strangest thing.

"This is one of hell of an exorcism."

Yes. That was it. For the first time in months, Keith Sommers had been happy.

"We're here," she said and she gave him a little nudge on the shoulder.

Keith grunted a little bit and then licked his lips. Lily could see how dry and chapped they were. His face was red, mild burns from the heat. He'd stood as close as possible to the fire as he could without hurting himself in order to feel its warmth. She'd tried to get him back from it several times, but he refused.

"Dad," she yelled, "You're going to burn yourself!"

"It's beautiful!"

Symbolic? Yes. Beautiful? Not really.

Now the whole car smelled like campfire. She grabbed a piece of her hair and drew it across her nose, inhaling. Campfire. She hated when it was in her hair. She wanted nothing more than a hot shower and the sweet, cool feel of cotton sheets on her skin.

Keith rolled over on his side to face the door, turning his body away from Lily. She got out of the car and walked up to Adam's front door. She knocked several times, but there was no answer. She tried the knob and it was open. She walked into the house, into the living room, acknowledged the stain that Mrs. Barth had left on her chair, and continued right past it to the hallway with the three bedrooms. She opened the door to Mrs. Barth's room where she had awoken the day before—was it only a day?—with Adam—had she *slept with* Adam or just slept with Adam?—and entered. The bed was still a little messed up. The sheets looked so inviting. She fell face first on them and immediately lost consciousness.

#

Keith Sommers awoke in his daughter's Corolla. He had been crammed into the front seat and lay awkwardly on his right side facing the passenger-side door. The sunlight burned his eyes. His face felt chapped and raw from the heat of the previous night. He noticed the angle of the sun. High. What time was it? Noon perhaps. What time had they left the station? Ten? Had he been sleeping in a Corolla for two hours? *Might as well get used to it*, he supposed, *Lily and I will probably be living in a car for a while.*

"Well," he said, "Fuck."

He stretched as much as any grown man could in the passenger seat of a mid-2000s Corolla and then he sat up but couldn't bring himself to look out the window. Lily had driven him to Adam Barth's house. That asshole. Why the hell was his daughter involved with him to begin with? This son-of-a-bitch—he stopped himself there. He hated that phrase, especially since Lorraine Barth always seemed like a perfectly lovely, if a bit eccentric, woman. She was what he called "a lady."

This had been the plan, coming to Adam's. Keith had hated that idea, of course. He'd hoped for years not only that Lily would see this loser for what he was, but he'd also hoped for years that they'd not even be friends. Lily seemed to take some special pity on the boy. *Yes*, he thought, *"boy" is the right word*. Keith started to make a catalogue in his mind of what it took to be a man. This depressed him as many of the stereotypical categories like the ability to support a family or even just to get up in the morning, did not apply to him, so he stopped.

This had been the plan, coming to Adam's.

Keith looked at the little house, its landscaping, shrubs that guarded the front steps, the furniture that sat on the porch and looked out on the cul-de-sac. The thought that Adam

Barth owned a home while his own home had gone up in flames really ate at him. Adam didn't deserve this.

Still, the glory of the flames the previous night had filled him with a manic euphoria that he hadn't felt in a long time. She was gone. All of her.

Back to the plan: shack up at *chez Barth*.

Hell.

He steeled himself with a deep breath and at last opened his eyes to take in the house that might be his place of rest until he and Lily could figure things out. It didn't look pretty.

Specifically, the young man dragging what appeared to be an unconscious woman into the house was not pretty. In the grogginess of too little rest in a cramped space, Keith failed to recognize at first what was obviously Adam Barth dragging what appeared to be his mother's dead body into the house. He was flanked by a tall, willowy gentleman—yes, gentleman—who was obviously providing no help. Keith's initial instinct, being a Texan gentleman, was to get out and help the young man with his load. Then, however, he remembered that this was Adam Barth. Then he also realized that dragging your mother's dead body back into the house from wherever it had previously been was also an

incredibly strange action and one that was both strange enough and gross enough that he'd rather not be involved.

Adam held his mother by hooking his arms underneath hers. She faced out toward the street, and he dragged her backwards into the door with her heels dragging and bumping along the ground.

The willowy gentleman turned around as Lorraine's feet disappeared into the house. He looked around and then made eye contact with Keith. His gaze narrowed. He made a small motion with the strange-looking fingers on his right hand. The door to the house closed and the gentleman started down the front steps maintaining his unbroken and unblinking gaze. He bounded or floated or whatever—Keith couldn't quite come up with the right word but in his mind he had this vague impression that the gentleman's movement was some sexy shit—his way to the passenger side of the car. The gentleman stood just outside the door and he looked down at Keith. The gentleman made a circling motion with his strange, deformed index finger. Keith rolled down the window.

"Hello," Keith said.

"Good day," the gentleman said. "What's your business here?"

"Friend of the family," Keith said.

"Most excellent," the gentleman said. "Perhaps you should find another occasion for this social call."

"Well, this isn't exactly a social call."

"Fancy that."

"Right. My house burned down. My daughter, Lily, thought we could stay here for a bit."

At the name of his daughter, the gentleman's eyes brightened.

"You're Lily's father," he said.

Keith nodded.

"Where is that delicious creature? I'd love to see her again."

Keith remained silent. This odd reply froze him. Who was this guy? Delicious creature? Had to be some kind of sexual predator, right? How did he know Lily? What strange bullshit had Adam gotten her into? He began to question everything about his daughter's life. She clearly had the worst judgment when it came to friends.

He started to open the door. The gentleman put his hand against it and held it closed. He smiled at Keith. Keith pushed against the door, but the gentleman's force was absolutely solid. Keith maintained eye contact with him but shoved his whole weight against the door in hopes of getting it to budge.

It did not give at all. The gentleman maintained his mysterious grin.

"Your daughter, Mr. Sommers," the gentleman said, "Where is she?"

"Couldn't say."

The gentleman chuckled.

"You're lying," he said. "I don't like lies. Misleading truths? I love a good misleading truth. Deception can be fun, so long as it's honest. Playful and honest. Lies, however, lies are dirty and damnable."

Keith noticed the way he pronounced the N in "damnable."

The gentleman asked again, "Where is your daughter?"

Keith smiled and nodded, trying to disarm the gentleman who was starting to cause quite a panic in him. "I can't say," he said.

The gentleman laughed. "Thank you," he said. "Yes! That's exactly right. Because no self-respecting father is able to tell someone he doesn't know where his child is. Right?"

Keith remained stock still.

"Excellent," the gentleman said. "Well, given that you're asleep in the passenger seat, I imagine she must have abandoned you here and gone inside. That's unfortunate because she's about to see some things that she shouldn't, but those are the

breaks." The gentleman looked up toward the house. "I do look forward to seeing her again. Lovely creature, she is. Good day!"

With that he bounded or floated or whatever toward the house.

Keith opened the door and stumbled out of the car.

"Leave her alone," he yelled at the gentleman.

The gentleman whirled or spun or whatever around and looked at Keith. "You needn't worry, Mr. Sommers. She will come to no harm. However, I don't suggest you come inside as you'll see the horrors yourself, the ones that Lily is not meant to see, the ones that really no one should see. Lily, however, I imagine can handle them better than most. She has a special constitution, one that few realize, I imagine. She keeps it hidden beneath that pretty girl surface. Don't you agree?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"She's strong," the gentleman said.

Keith squinted his eyes in disbelief.

"Who the hell are you and how do you know my daughter?"

The gentleman took a deep breath and brought his right hand to his chest. "I do apologize. Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. Sommer. I'm Jon Gant."

He held out a hand. Keith looked at it and then tentatively shook it. The hand was strange, hard and waxy, unlike any human hand he'd ever felt.

#

Lily awoke to some noise in the master bath.

"Adam," she said.

The noise stopped.

Lily had burrowed herself down into the sheets, covering her head completely in order to block out the offensive rays of the sun that angled their way through the pecan trees in the backyard, then through the windows shaded by a thin layer of muslin drapery that diffused them throughout the room like a photographer's soft box. The warm afternoon glow wreaked havoc on Lily's circadian rhythm when all she really wanted to do was rest and retreat, forget about all of the weird and strange that had happened and find some solace in the wonderfully cool and comfortable sheets of her boyfriend's—ex-boyfriend's?—recently deceased mother's bed.

She reached her hands up toward the top of the bed, swimming her way out of the sheets, and half sitting up to see a strange sight. The aforementioned (ex-)boyfriend stood still and frozen at the entrance to the bathroom, slightly hunched over, his back facing her.

Lily's gut told her to offer up some vapid greeting like "what a day" or to ask Adam about how he slept. Vapid. Vacuous. Pointless, really. Why ask him any bullshit question as if things were normal? Instead, she asked exactly what she wanted to know.

"What're you doing?"

Adam remained frozen as if he were a weird hunchback deer in headlights trying to hide what it hid between its hooves. She watched his spine rise and fall gently with his breath, faintly reminiscent of some hulk from behind standing over his vanquished foe or a gladiator about to turn around to unleash his fury on his enslaved opponent.

At last, Adam responded: "Nothing." He took a few breaths and then continued, "You probably need some more sleep, yeah?"

His voice struggled as he was out-of-breath. The words came easily but he'd obviously been laboring.

"What're you doing?"

"Wait," he said, "I'll only be a moment."

Lily heard some more fumbling and wiped her eyes to help them adjust to the light. Adam disappeared into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. Lily sat up fully and stretched first her arms and then her back with a series of twists and arches. When she opened her eyes fully, Adam stood in the door

to the bathroom, leaning against it, a worn and weary look on his face, but a slight smile curled across his lips.

"What?"

"I just like the way you move," Adam said.

"What're you doing?"

"Right," Adam said. He walked forward and sat down on the bed, turning his torso toward Lily. "Something very strange has happened."

Lily swung her legs to the side of the bed, pushing her feet beyond the covers and letting them fall to the floor.

Adam looked a bit dismayed. "What are you doing?"

"That's my line," Lily said. With that, she stood up out of the bed, fully-clothed, sooty top wrinkled. She had the grace of a wet cat emerging from a pond. "I have to pee."

Adam stood up quickly and walked over to the bathroom.

"This one's occupied," he said, "Use the other."

"Occupied," Lily said, "by whom?"

"I do love the way you drop those objective case pronouns," Adam said. He smiled a poker player's smile and said, "I could listen to you say 'whom' all damn day."

"Out of my way," Lily said. She approached the bathroom and reached her arm out to push Adam aside, but he wouldn't move.

"I told you," he said, "It's occupied."

"By whom?"

"Don't make my heart flutter."

"Move."

"Occupied."

"Who is in there?"

"Jon."

"Jon?"

"Jon."

"Jon from the forest Jon?"

"Jon from the forest Jon."

"Fine."

Lily walked toward the door to the hallway so that she could relieve herself in the other bathroom, the one attached to Adam's bedroom, his place of self-imposed exile. At that moment, however, Lily heard the front door open, then a few footsteps thudding on the living room floor followed by the shutting of the front door. She froze and then turned to Adam.

"Who's out there?"

Adam shrugged.

"Adam," the unmistakable voice of Jon called from the living room. "Lily's most mundane father stalks us in your driveway."

Lily stared a hole through Adam.

"Who's in the bathroom?"

Adam curled his lips under his teeth in an act of defiance, not wanting to speak. Lily barged toward him and asked him again, "Who's in the bathroom?"

"I can't let you in there, Lily," Adam said.

Jon burst in through the bedroom door.

"Lily," he said, "Dearest!"

"Open the door, Adam."

"I can't do that," Adam said.

"Oh Adam," Jon said, "She's going to find out soon enough. Let her see your little secret there."

Lily winced at the phrase "little secret." What could be there? Another woman? A lover? Adam, idiot he may be, couldn't possibly cheat on her. Plus, what would she care? She'd put him in the rearview since his dumb equivocal letter stunt. This kid had gone off the deep end. They could remain friends, of course, especially since Lily needed a place to stay and an entire house on a nice little cul-de-sac in a fine little town in Texas had just fallen into her (former) best friend's lap. It wouldn't matter if there were some woman behind there.

Why had she jumped to that conclusion? In what universe would Adam have disappeared into the black hole in Padre Ernesto's yard and come out on the other end with some woman in

tow? Maybe that's just it. Maybe the hole shows you where you need to go. Maybe Adam needed to cavort about with some other women in order to really understand what he'd passed on, to understand that Lily Sommers was the bomb-dot-com and he'd screwed all that up royally. Royally!

Yeah. None of that really made sense. There couldn't be a woman back there. At least not a lover.

"Out of my way."

"Out of her way, Adam," Jon said, "Who knows? Maybe she can help."

Adam pursed his lips and exhaled sharply through his nose as he looked Lily squarely in the eye. They were within kissing distance but this was decidedly less than hot for both of them.

"Fine," he said through gritted teeth.

Adam moved out of the way and Lily reached for the doorknob and opened the door. The bathroom was dark, so she flipped on the light. The room was flooded with the orangey glow of the incandescents that lined the mirror above the sink. Something inside grunted and then let out a minor hiss.

Lily's stomach jumped and turned. Whatever Adam had in here, it didn't sound human. In truth, she had expected that Adam had nothing in there. Perhaps he had just taken a dump and he was trying to keep her from experiencing the pungent odor.

But, no, that wasn't the case. Something was in here. Something alive.

Lily leaned her head in and looked to the left where the toilet was. Sitting atop the toilet, leaning back against the tank, was the corpse of Lorraine Barth, her head flopped over to the right, slack-jawed, mute, pale and dirty, yet clearly breathing. Breathing. Breathing!

Lily jumped back.

"The fuck!"

Adam switched off the light and closed the door.

"Isn't it marvelous," Jon exclaimed.

"You weren't supposed to see this," Adam added.

"It worked?" Lily asked.

Adam cocked his head to the side. "Not exactly," he said.

"We should barricade this door."

"The door opens in," Lily said.

Adam's expression grew puzzled and confused.

"The door opens into the bathroom," she said, "You can't barricade it from out here."

Adam nodded.

"Why would you want to?"

"Mom," Adam said, clearly searching for words. "Mother," he continued, "is not exactly as we'd expected when we turned her over to Jon here."

"We?" Lily said.

"I."

"You."

"Yes," Adam said, "Me." He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes. "Things have gone horribly wrong."

"Imagine my surprise," Lily said.

"It's a positive step," Jon said.

Lily and Adam both turned to him, "Shut up!"

Lily's mind raced. This woman was clearly alive. She saw and heard the breathing. At the same time, she didn't look well. Nor did she sound well. The grunt and the hiss and the look all added up to something having gone terribly wrong. This is not what they had expected, what Adam had expected when he turned his mother's lifeless corpse over to Jon.

"What's she like?" Lily asked.

Adam looked around the room, darting his eyes to all corners, before he answered: "Animal."

"Well," Jon said as he swaggered into the room in full regalia, "Animal is probably a kind way to describe it. Monstrous might be a better word. Monstrous. Yes." Each time he

said "monstrous" his eyes glowed and the smile on his face grew greater and greater until it stretched from ear-to-ear as he said it again and again.

Adam shot him a shut-the-fuck-up look.

Lily had positioned herself back on the bed. Sitting seemed like a good place to be. She reached instinctively for the small silver cross that hung around her neck, a gift from Lorraine.

Chapter Sixteen

The sun was high, shining right down on top of Steve's horizontal body, its disc burning red and orange and purple through his squinted eyelids. Noon probably. Steve pulled his phone from his pocket to check. He rolled to one side to get a look at it without the oppressive sun blinding him. 12:01pm. He looked at the date but it didn't make sense to him. He wasn't sure how long he'd been down the hold in the black. The so-called Jesus had left him sitting by the strange pond and he had finished his fish tacos and thought about what Jesus had said.

Steve struggled to his feet. The ordeal had weakened his body. It always did. He always came out feeling a little groggy and tired, like he hadn't slept well after eating a particularly salty meal that left his body feeling slightly larger than when

he'd gone to sleep. He pushed at his stomach. On the inside, it felt empty; on the outside, however, it felt squishy. Water retention. Why does mystical inter-dimensional travel like that cause bloating? Who knows? At this point, at least for Steve who had become practiced at this particular form, it had become well-established that such mystical mobilization led to some serious munchies on the other end.

Motivated by the thought of food and the desire to get back to his car and get home, Steve began to walk toward Padre Ernesto's house. "Walk" is really a strong way of putting it. He didn't walk so much as stagger or stumble, kicking up little bits of dirt and rock as he made his way through the strange clearing with the sporadic green onion shoots that shot up through the ground. He thought back to that day when he was just a kid, when he'd smelt the green onions and seen Padre Ernesto for the first time. The Earth had traveled tens of thousands of miles around the sun again and again some 15 or so times since then. Undoubtedly, from a cosmic scale, he was at a very different point in space-time as the Earth had moved and moved and the sun had been dragged many millions of miles around the center of the Milky Way galaxy by that point. Yet, here he was, standing in what felt like the exact same spot on Earth. What a strange trip.

His stagger developed into an amble and then a walk and eventually he started to feel a bit more normal. Bloated still, of course, but he could now feel all of his limbs properly and operate them without much thought. Walking came easily to him again. As he passed through the pines, he patted some of them, feeling their bark. He had found long ago that this always helped him to regain normal feeling in his hands after a trip into the black.

It didn't take long before he began to smell the hickory burning at Ernesto's place. Ernesto always had a fire for cooking, boiling water, and if the weather deemed it necessary, for heat. No heat necessary today, but along with the smell of burning hickory, Steve began to notice something more savory as well. Umami? He'd learned the word recently and misapplied it to anything savory.

When at last he reached Padre Ernesto's house, he saw the frail old man standing outside. He had a large fire, contained by a metal ring some 5 or 6 feet in diameter. Over the ring he'd built a spit and a grill. Presently, he stood next to the roaring fire, cranking the spit with his right hand as the flames licked and kissed some carcass that had been skewered onto it. Steve walked right up to the fire and made eye contact with Ernesto. Ernesto gave him a slight nod.

"Raccoon?" Steve asked.

Ernesto nodded.

The two of them stood in silence. It wasn't really silent though. The fire crackled, the juices dripped from the raccoon carcass and sizzled in the fire, the wind occasionally blew through the pines and oaks, shaking the leaves and rattling the needles and reminding Steve of where he was. In fact, as he watched the slow rotation of the animal on the spit, turning and turning at the same rate by Ernesto's practiced hand, he became a bit mesmerized. If not for the chatter of the trees, he might have been lost, hypnotized.

The rotation stopped. Ernesto lifted the entire skewer out of the vertical forks that held it in place and carried the roasted raccoon toward the house. Steve continued to stare into the fire.

"Put that pot on," Ernesto said, "and then come have some lunch."

Steve grabbed a large pot, probably at least three gallons, and placed it near the fire. Then he turned and walked into Ernesto's and Habanera's shack.

Habanera already sat at the little table in the main living area. The table was set for three. In addition to those places,

a small pot of beans mixed with some onion and other vegetables as well as a plate of wild berries sat on the table.

Habanera motioned to Steve to come sit next to here. "*Venga aquí,*" she said. "*Venga, venga, venga...*"

Her words trailed off as she repeated them over and over again, softer and softer, until at last Steve was in his place.

Ernesto joined them, bringing the entire skewer and placing it on a large plate in the center of the table. He cut some meat off the carcass and created a pile of roasted raccoon slices on the plate.

"Take," he said, "Eat."

Both Steve and Habanera began to serve themselves.

Steve marveled at the couple. They had carved out their little place on this Earth right here. They didn't need hardly anything from the outside. They trapped wild animals for protein, kept a goat or two for milk, foraged the area for vegetables, and planted a small garden in the back for the vegetables that didn't grow wild nearby. They drank water from the stream. They bathed in the stream too. That water was always cold, but they'd grown accustomed to it, Steve supposed. They did this even in the winter. He wondered if they used soap. How did they brush their teeth? Ernesto over the years had shown him much of their life, but he obviously hadn't shown it all to him.

Ernesto broke the silence, "It's all over you."

Steve looked at him. Ernesto was chewing a piece of meat, a little bit of it sticking to his lower lip as he gazed at Steve's face.

Steve reached up and wiped his own mouth. Ernesto laughed.

"Not the food," he said.

Steve puzzled at all of this.

"What's all over me?"

"In the black," Ernesto said, "You experienced something very different. Something you hadn't experienced before. Right?"

Steve nodded.

"The only way out is through," Habanera added in her Cuban accent.

"What does it mean?" Steve asked her.

She repeated herself and smiled. Without breaking eye contact, she slipped a spoonful of beans into her mouth and chewed them with a strange circular motion of her jaw, like a cow working its cud. Steve nodded at her, hoping she might go back to her silence. She obliged.

Steve returned his attention to Ernesto. "It moved," he said.

Ernesto nodded in acknowledgement.

"Before," Steve continued, "It had always been static, still, still-life perhaps, a tableau that I'd built with my mind for worship and adoration. This time," he broke off here as he searched for words. Ernesto made a circular motion with his hand and nodded, indicating that he'd like Steve to continue. Steve was glad for it. When sitting with Ernesto and Habanera, he was never quite sure if he was supposed to speak or maintain their high standard of silence. Steve liked to talk. He was glad to talk. That's how he processed things. "This time," he continued, "This time it moved and I wasn't in control of it. This time," he paused again trying to decide if he really was going to say what he was about to say. For some reason, the thought of it embarrassed him. It seemed childish or dramatic or stupid, he wasn't really sure which. Perhaps all of them.

"Please," Ernesto said. "Finish the thought."

"This time," Steve began again, "This time, I saw Satan."

Ernesto narrowed his gaze as a smile crept across his face. He flicked at the tip of his nose with the knuckle of his forefinger as his whole face slowly morphed into a joyful expression. Then he burst out laughing, almost uncontrollably.

Steve's first thought was that he'd never seen Ernesto out of control. Everything that this man said and did, as cryptic as it might be, stemmed from his deep sense of purpose and control.

To watch his entire body shake and writhe, to see him throw his head back against the back of his chair and put his hand to his belly as he laughed, was just odd.

Steve looked over to Habanera. She appeared to take notice. She simply ate her food.

"What's so funny?"

Ernesto held up a single finger, apparently asking for a moment so that he could regain composure. Over the course of several seconds, he did so and then responded.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Believe what?"

"That you saw Satan?"

"Of course," Steve said, "He was in the guise of Jesus but he was asking me to do things that Jesus would never ask me to do. Strange things. Evil things."

Ernesto reached across the table and grabbed Steve's forearm with his right hand. He took the middle finger and forefinger of his left hand and pointed them at Steve's eyes.

"Do you think Satan is something you can see, something you can feel?"

"In that other space," Steve said, "Yes."

Ernesto leaned back and took those two fingers and tapped his chest with them. "Satan exists only in here," he said.

"Satan is not a thing to be felt or seen or even heard, Stephen."

"You don't believe Satan exists in the world," Steve asked.

"Of course not," Ernesto responded. "These crude labels of 'good' and 'evil' are unnecessary when you come to understand that all is one, that we are not distinct, that we are not separate." He snorted a bit. "I listen to you and I hear ego talking."

They ate for a moment or two. Steve felt anger welling up inside himself. He knew this was not an appropriate emotion. Ernesto meant him no harm, no malice. Yet, he felt like a child sitting in front of a father who not only withheld vital information, but also gloated in his superiority. Steve hated feeling this way. Therefore, the anger grew inside. He knew better than to act on it, however. So he ate. Thankfully, Ernesto broke the little silence—

"Tell me," he said, "What did this Satan say to you? What supposedly evil deed did he ask you to perform?"

Heartened by the fact that Ernesto had used the label "evil," Steve answered, "That's just the thing. Satan asked me to help bring Adam Barth's mother back to life. He said he was going to teach me how."

"Allow me to understand," Ernesto said, "A figure in the shape of Jesus Christ—or at least your personal image of Jesus Christ—appeared to you while you were in a mystical state and told you that you could aid in the resurrection of a human being."

Steve nodded.

Ernesto shot a look to Habanera who simply smiled back at him.

"Stephen," Ernesto said, "Is Jesus the Lord of Life?"

"Of course."

"Then why do you question the Lord of Life when he asks you to bring life into the world?"

This question landed heavily on Steve's chest, causing it to constrict and squeeze his heart. It was a good question, an angle he hadn't considered while he was sitting on that beach with Satan-Jesus.

"What's your heart doing?" Ernesto said. He reached across the table again and poked Steve in the chest as he said, "What does your heart tell you is true?"

"I don't know," Steve said.

"You will."

"There's no way out but through," Habanera said.

"Very true," Ernesto said, "Very true, my dear."

They continued eating in silence. Steve tried to shift his attention away from what had been said. He wanted out of his head, so he looked for ways into his body: the feeling of the floor against his feet, the chair against his back, the food in his mouth, the taste the smell. The beans really were delicious. He avoided the berries, never trusting that he'd not end up with some deadly berry, even though Habanera and Ernesto obviously meant him absolutely no harm. He ate the raccoon meat and although it was stringy, the hickory smoke and the salt that Ernesto had put on it deeply satisfied him.

But this was just a passing desire. He could only stay with his body for a moment or two before his mind took control and began to race with the possibilities. What if he really had had an encounter with Jesus and he had rejected him? He was no better than Peter. Why should he expect to be better than Peter? Peter was an apostle! Yet, Peter was also a buffoon and a coward who rejected Jesus. *I too am a sinner*, Steve thought, *Why then am I so surprised?*

At the same time, of course, Padre Ernesto could be full of it. Ernesto could simply be leading him down some strange path. Ernesto lived with this crazy woman—his wife?—out here in the middle of nothing with nothing, total lack of conformity, total abundance of anonymity and loneliness. Why should such a man be

trusted? Wasn't he clearly insane? Clearly. Right. Yes. Insane. How could this advice of his be trusted?

This was Steve's head, of course. His heart, however, was something entirely different. In his heart, Steve knew. Not the kind of knowledge that you know because you read it in a book or saw it on TV or in a documentary. That's not knowledge, that's information. Steve had knowledge. Steve had wisdom. Steve had conviction and he was convicted. *Convicted*, his heart said, *Yes, that's the right word.*

The trio finished their meal in silence. Steve wasn't sure how long that took. Five minutes? Ten? Thirty? Who knew?

"You've given me a lot to think about," Steve said to Padre Ernesto.

Ernesto smiled and then placed a single finger in front of his lips. Steve nodded. Ernesto motioned toward the door. Steve stood up, put his hands in front of his chest as if in prayer and then gave a slight bow, a silent "thank you" to his host. Then he turned to Habanera to do the same. Habanera smiled.

Steve walked out the door and stood on the porch. He looked at the empty driveway and remembered that he had not driven here. He had come in Lily's car. Anger grew inside his chest. He felt a bony hand on his shoulder and he turned to see Padre Ernesto standing behind him.

"Do you know where I come from?" Padre Ernesto asked.

Steve thought for a moment, imagining the possibilities. Surely Padre Ernesto would say something outlandish. Steve responded, "From the stars."

Ernesto chuckled. "Yes, yes," he said, "Of course, we are all stardust, aren't we? But that's not what I meant."

Steve shrugged.

"Ohio."

Steve's brow furrowed and his eyes became quizzical.

"I grew up in Ohio," Ernesto said. "Do you know what they call people from Ohio?"

Steve didn't respond.

"Buckeyes," Ernesto said. "Do you know what a buckeye is?"

Steve shook his head. Ernesto smiled.

"It's a useless nut."

He patted Steve on the shoulder several times.

"Enjoy your walk," he said. With that, he turned back into the house and closed the door behind him.

Steve walked down the dirt path, underneath the sprawling branches of the oak trees that formed the sort of tunnel from the county road out toward the odd little shack in woods near the creek. When he got to the road, he realized that this was the longer way. He could cut through the forest, back to the

creek, cross it and go back by way of the house that the grew up in. This would probably save him ten or fifteen minutes at least. He stopped walking and stood on that empty county road, undecided. Behind him was the shack and in front of him on one side the road was the thick wood and on the other side a cleared pasture, empty and broad, several acres of knee-high grass dotted with an occasional tree, protected by a barbed wire fence. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and pressed the voice activation button.

“Call Lily Sommers,” he said.

“Calling Lily Sommers,” the phone responded.

He held the phone to his ear and listened to the ring and waited for Lily to pick up.

But she didn't.

He decided to walk down the road rather than through the woods.

Chapter Seventeen

Adam stood in the kitchen with Lily. He had found a salami in the refrigerator and was cutting it into small pieces.

"Do you have a larger knife?" Lily asked.

Adam held up the knife and looked at it. "It is cartoonishly large and menacing, isn't it?"

Lily nodded in agreement and Adam went back to his work. First, he'd cut the round sausage into discs about a quarter of an inch thick. Then, he'd cut those discs into quarters. The salty, fatty meat had created a slimy film on his fingers that he really didn't like.

"It smells like burps," Lily said.

Adam nodded in agreement. Why did cured meats always smell like something foul that the body produces? Perhaps because

cured meats were indeed foul bodies in and of themselves. This still didn't explain exactly why these damn things were so savory and delicious.

"Why should we love feasting on the rotting flesh of other animals?"

Lily shrugged. "Why is human flesh detestable?"

"That's just the thing," Adam said, "It obviously isn't to her." He waved the knife in the general direction of the bedroom where his zombified, carnally resurrected mother sat, locked in the master bath while Jon, her father, sat gazing at her.

"When she's not drugged, she goes straight for me," Adam said. "Yet she doesn't seem to be at all interested in..." He paused mid-sentence, distracted by the feeling of the fat on his hands, and rubbed his greasy fingers against his greasy thumb. "She doesn't seem at all interested in Jon."

"Jon's not human," Lily said. "Strange how in just forty-eight hours that now comes out so easily: 'Jon's not human.'"

"Strange," Adam said.

He went back to his cutting and Lily slipped up on to the counter. Adam could see her out of the corner of his eye.

"What does this do to us?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Can a born again Christian hang out with someone who has attempted to resurrect his mother using the magic of a woodland fairy who may actually be his grandfather?"

"A fair question," Lily said. She patted a little rhythm out on her thighs as she swung her legs back and forth, gently banging her stockinged heels against the cabinets for added bass.

Adam finished the salami and used the knife to scrape it from the cutting board on to a plate.

"Do you think she'll like cheese?"

"Yes."

He went to the refrigerator and grabbed a large block of cheddar and went to work on it, dividing it into small squares of similar size and thickness to the salami.

"You aren't answering my question," he said.

"I said she'll like the cheese."

"No," Adam said, "The question about what this does to us."

"I don't have an answer to that."

Adam nodded.

"She's not your mother, Adam," Lily said.

"I don't have a response to that," Adam said.

"It's not a question," Lily said. "It's a fact."

"Maybe."

"Whatever that thing is in there, that thing that seems intent upon eating her own flesh-and-blood son but is ultimately satisfied by salty meats and cheese, whatever she is—and I do use that pronoun loosely here—she, it, whatever, that thing is not your mom."

"She certainly looks like Lorraine Barth, doesn't she?"

"Looks can be deceiving, numb nuts. You can feed her. You can clothe her. You can keep her sedated in the bathroom. Bathe her. Dress her. Store her up in your attic like Norman Bates or whatever, but you're not going to escape the fact that she's not your mother."

"Not yet."

Lily slid off the counter and crossed over to the kitchen table as Adam finished with the cheese, sliding it on to the plate with the salami.

"Want any of this?"

Lily shook her head. The idea of sharing a meal with a zombie caused her to lose her appetite.

"I'll give it to Jon then."

He started to leave the kitchen with the plate, but Lily reached out and grabbed his forearm. "Wait," she said.

Adam looked at her. He knew Lily so well. She was obviously trying to hold it together, trying to use all of her humor and

wit to keep the air light. Or at least she had been. Adam tried to give her a taste of her own medicine.

"What?" He said. "Mother needs her afternoon snack."

"Jon doesn't know what he's doing or what he's done. He's toying with the rotting corpse of your mother. You can cut up snacks and keep her in there, and you and Jon can keep trying to bring your mother's soul back to her body or whatever it is that you're attempting, but you're never going to get her back. It doesn't work this way. It can't work this way."

Frustration puffed up in Adam's chest.

"You telling me to give up?"

"Exactly."

"Can't say I'd expect anything different from you, Lily."

He walked out of the kitchen, feeling triumphant for putting Lily Sommers in her place. What did she know about any of this? Here was a twenty-three-year-old woman who had become so lost in her own mess of a life, blaming others for her misfortunes, for her having to drop out of college, telling him to give up. Lily Sommers, the give up artist.

#

Jon perched in the bathroom, his ass in the sink, his feet drawn up on the counter, and his knees up around his eyes. He hugged those knees and peered over them at the sedated and

slightly slobbering body of his former daughter. Though he smiled behind those knees, inside he felt disappointed. Having a half-human daughter was not nearly what he'd expected. Of course, he also hadn't expected for this thing to go so horribly wrong that she'd come back without any kind of spirit. Lorraine Gant/Lazar/Barth was now little more than animated flesh reduced to its most basic instincts and drives: eat, drink, survive. What other base drives might exist in her? Reproduce? That thought caused Jon to shudder.

He leaned back a bit and the faucet dug into the small of his back. He liked the pain. It took him out of this moment and allowed him to think of something else which was welcome. Since his little spell had gone wrong, he'd really only been able to concentrate on what exactly he was going to do with this undead daughter who seemed intent upon killing her own son. He needed something else to think about and the feeling of a faucet digging into his back did the trick. For a moment, until his gaze drifted back to Lorraine and he mused about the times that could have been if only he hadn't been an absentee parent. But, of course, he hadn't really known about her, had he? Surely that would get him off the hook for never raising his own daughter. Yet, at the same time, shouldn't a father know? Shouldn't he have felt, by magic or by some parental connection, that

Lorraine was out there waiting for him? He stopped feeling the faucet against his back and only felt the sting of regret.

Damn, he thought, I'm already back to thinking about her again.

He considered getting out of there and going for a walk. Fresh air might do him some good. He might go back out to the woods, regain some energy and vitality by communing with the trees. This horribly decorated little hovel in which Adam and Lorraine lived was indeed depressing. He didn't mind the eight-foot ceilings or the layout. It really was the decor. These people had no taste. Plus, every stick of furniture felt old and all of the surfaces just a bit dingy.

Someone knocked at the door.

"She's still out," Jon said.

The door opened, revealing Adam with a plate of meats and cheeses.

"Oh joy," Jon said, "Snacks."

"For her," Adam said, "Not you."

"Too salty anyway," Jon said and he felt the flesh around his stomach. "I'd hate to bloat at a time like this."

Adam raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips together in an expression that communicated precisely nothing to Jon.

"Any ideas?" Adam asked.

"Exactly none," Jon said.

The real problem was that he hadn't considered the fact of the spirit, the fact of the soul. Human beings had this thing and he really didn't know anything about it. Where did it come from? Where were they stored? How were they generated? Were they unique or would any ol' human spirit infused into this body do the trick?

"Spirit," he said. "Breath. Animus. Soul. Life. The touch of the divine—if you will—that brings you humans out of the realm of the animal and into the ethereal."

Saying it aloud helped. He'd never really went in for such things, the idea of souls and such smacked too much of religion. These humans had attributed all of this creation to some god or collection of gods, but Jon knew better. Marx was right. Those were merely superhuman images projected into the sky in order to give meaning to the meaningless. Certainly there was no God out there pulling these strings.

Yet, he still couldn't quite explain that human spirit.

"How could you not think of that?" Adam asked.

"Because I didn't think it existed," Jon said. He looked at Lorraine. "But it must. Else I can't explain this *thing*," he gestured gently toward Lorraine as if she were some cute caged

animal, a hamster or mouse, not the rabid wild thing she'd become.

"Domestication."

The voice came from the bedroom. Adam pushed the door open to reveal Keith Sommers lying on Lorraine's bed.

"What?"

"Domestication," Keith repeated. "Is that an option?"

Jon asked, "Are you suggesting, sir, that we try to tame my daughter?"

"If she's animal," Keith said, "maybe she can be tamed."

"Adam, close the door on that asshole."

#

Lily made herself a cup of tea and stood at the kitchen window looking out at the big pecan in the backyard. How many times had she and Adam made out under that pecan tree? How many times had Lorraine Barth stood right here, working at the dishes or dinner, as they did so? What a different world she lived in now. Just forty-eight hours ago, she'd had it all figured out. Now she'd met a fairy, been through some kind of black hole, watched her entire life burn to the ground, and come to her ex-boyfriend's house to discover that he and the fairy had somehow turned his mother into a zombie.

Maybe Adam was right, she thought, Maybe we all should've just ducked out of 2017, gone into some kind of exile, hibernation, or whatever and re-emerged in 2018 in hopes of a fresh start.

The idea, of course, had seemed ridiculous when she'd first read Adam's letter. Now, however, she stood at this sink after she had passed over a threshold into a new world in which maybe the Christian myths that she'd bought into in 2016 weren't so cut-and-dried and didn't provide her with the answers that she'd hoped to find.

After all of the action and excitement of the previous day, they now camped at the Barth house, minus Pastor Steve—who really had a lot of explaining to do given that he'd somehow hidden the existence of that weird-ass portal in the woods and the ex-priest and his wife or whatever she was—and Lily knew exactly what had to be done but didn't know how to convince Adam of it. Hell, she shouldn't even say it. She couldn't bring herself to say the words to his face. Thinking them was difficult too.

She sipped the tea and watched a squirrel race across a branch. It stopped and stood. It looked toward the window. Lily waved at it. The squirrel skittered up the tree and disappeared into the branches and leaves.

In spite of all of this madness, in spite of everything feeling topsy-turvy and upside down, the squirrel reminded Lily that the most important things were true. While the stories that she'd collected as the explanations of her life—the stories of her parents, of Jesus and God and the Bible, of her ill-conceived romance with Adam Barth—had clearly been proven incomplete at best, the most basic and most important fact still remained stalwart and true. Life has purpose and for humans that purpose stretches beyond mere survival. The prophet Isaiah told her that she had been “knit in her mother’s womb” and that she was “fearfully and wonderfully made.” This had never felt more true to her. Whatever God was, she knew that she'd been made for a purpose and that she didn't merely have to survive and reproduce. She knew that on a cellular level, the ultimate drive of all life was to survive. Part of that survival required reproduction, required the passing of the genetic code. That was life: DNA. The code passed down, replicated, kept alive.

Her life, however, was something more.

Mrs. Barth had known that. Lorraine had known that. Lo had known that. Yet, where was she now? Yes. A body in the bathroom sedated on Benadryl and slaked with greasy meats and cheeses. That was not Lorraine Barth, however. How could she convince

Adam of this? What would it take for him to do the thing that Lily knew he must do?

She sipped the tea again. As she placed the mug back on the kitchen counter, she peered over at the knife and the cutting board that Adam had left behind. The surfaces of both were covered in a whitish film, fat greased over.

Perhaps it wasn't Adam's task. Perhaps he couldn't do it. Perhaps she was in fact here for a reason.

#

Those chunks of salami could definitely be used as treats, Keith thought as he reclined on the bed trying not to count the bumps in the drywall on the ceiling.

He had recently watched a documentary on the National Geographic Channel about the Soviet silver fox experiment in which Russian biologists tried to figure out how many generations of breeding it might have taken for humans to domesticate wild dogs. The experiments found that just a few generations of carefully selective breeding led to the selection of traits deemed favorable by humans. Were humans naturally as wild as dogs? *Probably not,* Keith thought. *Therefore, wouldn't it be a lot easier to domesticate a wild human? You might not even need to breed; you could just jump right into training.*

He wondered if Adam and Jon found the idea offensive, the idea that Lorraine could simply be trained like some animal. Still, that's what she looked like to him, an animal in need of a good master. She was all nature and no nurture.

Adam emerged from the bathroom.

Keith, not straying from his soft focus on the ceiling—during his unemployment he'd become a master of soft focus on nothing for hours at a time—asked, "You ever read Gilgamesh?"

"Of course," Adam said, heading straight for the door.

"Enkidu," Keith said.

Adam stopped, Keith couldn't quite see this, but he could hear it.

"What?"

"Enkidu."

"What about him?"

"At the beginning of the story, Enkidu is created by the gods as a match for Gilgamesh. He's a mighty man who can defeat this Babylonian king, the king who has lost control because he's become so corrupted by his power."

"Right."

"But there's something a little wrong with Enkidu isn't there?" Keith waited for a response but Adam gave none. "He's

all nature and no nurture. The story says he's a beast essentially, an animal, ya know?"

Keith sat up and looked at Adam who had stopped in the doorway and was squinting in confusion at him.

"Keith," Adam said, "My undead mother is in the bathroom, passed out on the toilet, with a fairy who may be my grandfather, if he and my grandmother are to be believed. I enjoy a literary lesson as much as the next guy, but what the hell are you going on about?"

"Maybe your mother is Enkidu," Keith said. "Maybe she's human in the purest form: all nature and no nurture."

Adam pressed his palms against his eyes and then drew them down his face, stretching the skin around his eyes until they looked somewhat ghastly. He continued pulling his hands down until his fingers drew his smile into a frown. Keith reflected on the gesture. At one and the same time it looked both natural and yet absolutely horrifying.

"You don't like the idea," Keith said.

"In day full of the most horrible things," Adam said, "that just may end up being one of the most horrifying thoughts."

Keith puzzled at this.

Adam asked, "Do you remember how Enkidu is tamed?"

Keith looked back up at the drywall on the ceiling in hopes of finding an answer.

"The wild Enkidu is tamed by the priestess," Adam said.

"Yes!" Keith said, remembering the story. Then his heart sank and realized why Adam was horrified.

"That's right," Adam said, "The priestess tames him by fucking him for several days straight in what must have been the most epic of orgasmathons. Are you suggesting that someone attempt to bang humanity into my undead mother?"

Keith thought on this for just a moment, trying not to picture the beast in the bathroom. He looked at Adam who seemed to expect an actual response to his question. At last Keith said, "I'm not volunteering for that mission."

"Neither am I," Adam said.

Adam turned to walk out the door, but stopped again. Lily stood in the doorway, blocking his exit. She held a large knife in her hand, pressing the flat of the blade against her chest.

#

Lorraine's jaw was now slack and a little slobber had dribbled out of the right side of her mouth. If she'd been a little toddler, Jon would've thought it cute. Instead, however, daughter or not, it was gross.

Still, he reached out with a hand towel that had been hanging next to the sink, and he cleaned up her face. She stirred, snorting in a rather unladylike manner as Jon wiped the spittle from her chin and then the mucus from her nose. He folded the towel over in half and stood next to the door, looking at Lorraine's body as it slumped across the toilet. He smiled and took a deep breath. Then he remembered the towel in his hand, the saliva and the mucus. He looked back at Lorraine, and feeling a little disgusted, he opened the door and slid out into the bedroom.

"The hell are you doing," Adam said.

Lily stood in the doorway, clutching a large knife to her chest.

"Have you chopped more treats?" Jon asked.

"Exactly!" Keith said.

"No," Lily said, "We've all read or seen *Old Yeller*. We know exactly what needs to be done."

Adam, positioned between Lily and Jon, held out both of his hands. "Hold up," he said, "Let's just calm down."

"Excuse me," Lily said, "What makes you think I'm not calm?"

Jon said, "What exactly is this 'Old Yeller'?"

Keith began to speak but no one listened because Lily brandished the knife.

"End this," she said. "End this." She was looking directly into Adam's eyes and Jon began to understand what was going on. "Your mother lived a good life. Don't make her finish so poorly like this."

"Pause," Jon said, and he pushed forward, shoulder to shoulder with Adam. "If I'm not mistaken, you are suggesting that we end young Lorraine's life?"

"Her life has already ended," Lily said.

"March into the bathroom and see for yourself."

"I've seen," Lily said, "Thanks."

"Good," Jon said, "Then you know that we are steps away from achieving what was once thought impossible."

"It is impossible," Lily said, "At least without a miracle from God. That thing in there deserves to be laid to rest. She deserves to be Lorraine Barth, the woman who birthed worthless Adam here and who spoke to me as I tried to figure out what the hell I'm doing in this world."

"Lily," Adam said, "Your hands are shaking."

"Adam and I," Jon said, "Are in the midst of a grand experiment that may result in the full restoration of a human

being: a resurrection. How can you so casually wield that knife and ask us to 'old yeller' this woman?"

"She's not a woman," Lily said.

Jon agreed. "No," he said, "She's just a little girl."

Lily turned to Adam.

"Please, listen to me, Adam. We need to put your mother in her grave. We need to end this. The animal in there is not Lorraine Barth. It is not your mother."

Adam turned from Lily to Jon and then turned back to Lily and then back to Jon. He turned back to look at the closed bathroom door. He didn't know where to look or how to be.

"No," he said, "We've got to keep trying."

Jon smiled. His grandson's validation meant the world to him. He had never experienced this kind of pride before, pride in kin, because he'd never had family. Now, at last, he had someone who was part him. He began to think of what he and Adam could do, especially if they did resurrect Lorraine, the moments they'd share and the wonderful times they'd cherish as he taught Adam how to kindle his fairy DNA into the flaming magic that he knew so well. His whole body grew warm. He tempered himself in order to make sure that he didn't catch any of his appendages on fire. Then he crossed to Adam and gave him a hug.

At first, Adam stayed stock still. Jon could feel how rigid his body was, so Jon deepened the hug and nuzzled his face into Adam's neck. After a few moments, Adam's posture softened and he reached his arms up and hugged his grandfather for the first time.

This beautiful moment, and momentous it indeed was, soon ended, however, when the sound of clanging porcelain rang from the bathroom. Adam's body stiffened again. Jon turned his head as the bathroom door swung open.

"Holy shit!" Adam yelled.

Lorraine stared right into Adam's eyes. She inhaled and then leapt straight for him. Both Adam and Lorraine fell to the ground, Lorraine's hands clasped around Adam's neck while he tried his hardest to push her off.

Jon ignited the fingers on his right hand and held them to Lorraine's forearms. She didn't flinch but intensified her squeeze.

"Get off of him," Jon said, "That's your own flesh and blood, Lorraine."

He got down on the floor next to her.

"Do calm down," he said to Adam whose wriggling and sputtering was distracting him. "I'm trying to have a conversation with your mother."

For a brief moment, Jon thought himself a real parent. Then he returned to his work.

"Lorraine," he said, "Look at me." She did not. He repeated himself. After a few more tries, he slapped her right cheek. She growled and turned to look at him. "Adam is your son. You really mustn't choke him to death."

Lorraine turned to look at Adam. She smiled and then continued her work.

By this time, Adam was looking quite rough. His face was red, his eyes had begun to bulge slightly, and his chin and cheeks were covered in spittle that he'd ejected from his mouth as he gasped for air and attempted to communicate. He kicked at his mother but nothing could stop her.

Jon slapped her again.

"Lorraine!" he said. "Get off of him at once. As your father, I am ordering you to do so."

Lorraine paid him no heed. Adam's eyes rolled into the back of his head and his eyelids fluttered and then shut. His body began to calm as he passed out.

Jon slapped her again and she screamed, released Adam, stood up and screeched again, reaching for something behind her, something on her back. Jon couldn't tell what was going on. He

looked up to see Keith standing over all of them, a bloody knife in his hand.

"This is some crazy shit," Keith said.

Jon ignited his right hand and began walking slowly toward Keith. He stepped over Adam's passed out figure as Keith stepped backwards up on to the bed. Lily started for Jon, but Jon held up his flaming hand and she stopped.

"You stabbed my daughter," he said as he turned back to Keith. "You stabbed my baby girl."

"Someone had to stop her," Keith said. He held the knife in front of him, pointing it directly at Jon.

"Do you really think you can kill me with that thing?"

Keith looked at the knife. "I don't know," he said, "and I don't really want to find out. Let's get the zombie back in the bathroom or let's finish her off or whatever, but we can't let her choke Adam to death."

Jon was about to say "you're right" when the still irritated flailing and screaming undead corpse of Lorraine Barth crashed into his back, knocking him over on to the bed. Keith fell on top of him and yelped as Jon's hand burned a hole in his t-shirt. He dropped the knife.

Jon held his hand in the air, careful not to catch the sheets on fire.

"So sorry, squire," he said as he rolled over to address Lorraine.

At the same moment, he heard Adam, who had apparently regained consciousness, say in hoarse and hushed voice: "Stop."

But it was too late. In the commotion, Lily had grabbed the knife and stabbed Lorraine repeatedly. Now she sat on top of Lorraine's body, straddling the zombie as it wriggled meekly, its strength waning as blood stained its dress and the carpet underneath.

"It's time to let go," Lily said.

She held the knife edge to Lorraine's neck and then sliced violently across her throat. Blood spurted out as Lorraine passed out and her body stopped moving.

The blood continued to flow for quite some time. How long? It didn't matter.

Lorraine Barth was dead again.

Chapter Eighteen

"Refill?" Lily asked, holding a pitcher of iced tea in her hand.

"Yes," Steve said, "And sit with me."

"I will when I'm on my break."

Lily refilled Steve's tea glass, pouring more ice into it so that the glass's contents were now more ice than tea. He hated that, but what can you do. Ask for less ice, perhaps. He grabbed another tortilla chip, scooped up some salsa, and then put the whole chip, salsa and all, into his mouth. The crunch was satisfying. He thought back to when he was a kid and he'd pretend that he was a dinosaur, a big carnivore, like a t-rex, and he'd pretend that the chips were his prey. The salsa was there blood and the chip was the crunching bones. He'd bite down

on it and let the salsa squeeze out from between his teeth. His mom would get so frustrated with him when he'd allow the salsa to dribble down his chin and stain his clothes with little red dots. This memory made him smile a little bit.

It had been a few weeks since he'd talked to Padre Ernesto about his vision of Jesus. In the meantime, he'd made a request to the elders at the church for a couple of weeks of vacation. They asked him for a reason and he said that he just needed to take a little time to straighten out his head. This was true, of course, but what he hadn't told them was that he had slipped into an alternate dimension or whatever where he'd met Jesus or Satan or someone who claimed to be able to teach him how to resurrect humans. He left that part out. The elders had approved it. Steve spent a week lining up the worship services, arranging preachers and musicians and putting together orders of service so that they wouldn't have to do much but follow the script. Then, he drove. He just got in the car and for the next two weeks just drove around in larger and larger circles, making turns whenever he felt like it, but heading mostly northwest. He did this for 6 or 7 hours each of those days and then would stop off at a truck stop, lock his doors, and then nap for a few hours. Sometimes he'd get out and walk, or he'd read a book.

Mostly though, he just thought about what he'd seen and what Ernesto and Habanera had told him.

"No way out but through," he'd mutter and then return to his book or his walk or his driving or his sleeping or his eating.

He didn't really know where he was, but he was confident that when he was ready to get back home he'd be able to find his way with the help of the GPS on his phone.

After nearly two weeks of fast food, bags of potato chips and Funyuns from various gas stations, and untold ounces of Coca-Cola, Steve pulled into a Flying J in Amarillo, Texas, in order to gas up, feeling bloated and gross. As he pumped the fuel, he decided it was time to go home. When he got back in his car, he plugged his home address into his phone, got some basic directions, and hit the freeway. He drove straight to Jose's Place where he thought Lily might be on a shift, and he sat down, requesting the hostess put her in Lily's section.

Lily interrupted Steve's reminiscing by sitting down in the booth across from him, grabbing a chip, and telling him that he looked terrible.

"I feel like shit," Steve said. Lily raised her eyebrows. "God will forgive me for that," Steve said.

"Where you been? You disappeared on us."

"Around." He took another chip. "How's church been?"

"Dunno."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't been since I cut Lorraine Barth's throat."

Steve's eyes widened and he could feel his jaw going slack.

"You really don't know what happened," she said.

"Oh my God," Steve said. "I'm so sorry?"

He really wasn't sure what to say. A member of his congregation just divulged that she'd murdered someone, but is it murder if the person is already dead? Did Lorraine Barth actually come back to life?

Lily recounted the tale for him as quickly as she could.

"How's Adam?"

"Always a pastor," Lily said, crunching her way through another chip. "Always trying to take care of your sheep and find the lost." She chuckled a little. "Truth be told," she said, "I have no idea how Adam is doing. He told me that he couldn't get the picture of me killing his mother out of his head. Haven't seen him since he booted me and Dad from his place."

Steve nodded. Then he furrowed his brow. What was she talking about?

"Oh yeah," she said, "My house burned down." She stood up. "It's been a hell of a couple of weeks. Gotta get back to work."

People need their tamales."

Steve grabbed her forearm. "Wait," he said. "What if I told you that I had a vision of Jesus and he told me that I could resurrect people?"

Lily looked at him, but he couldn't read her expression. To Steve, she seemed resolute and somehow much older than when he'd last seen her.

"I'd tell you you're crazy," she said.

With that, she slapped his check down on the table, and walked away.

Steve reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. The bill was a little less than \$10, but all Steve had was a twenty. He dropped the twenty on top of the check. Then he got up and left.

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