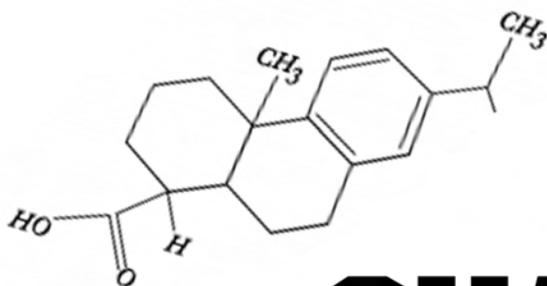


STAIRWAY? HEAVEN



CHAZ THOMPSON

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"For this is the great error of our day that the
physicians separate the soul from the body"

Hippocrates — 460 BC - c. 370 BC

OVERTURE

Yesterday a priest shot at me from his bell tower steeple.

Remain calm, he missed. Obviously a novice with weaponry, his shot went wild, ricocheted off the Kevlex sidewalk and blew out the windshield of a parked BMW Nuke. Fortunately, no one was in the car. Good luck to the owner on finding someone who can repair one of those antique pieces of nuclear crap.

Before the determined minister of God could squeeze off another round I dodged down the liquor store alley and escaped, six-pack of *Iniquity Brew* safe under my arm. A few years back I might have returned fire, might have engaged in a satisfying firefight until the novelty wore off, or one of us suffered a mortal wound. But lately I couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor devil. I mean, he wasn't trying to kill me, really. He was trying to save me.

Or at least my soul.

And souls untold.

Yes, I am that guy. I'm the guy who brought it all back from near extinction, from the cold abyss of obscurity, from the very bowels of Vatican control. I am the anti-Christ of the new millennium.

And this misguided *schmo* had me in his crosshairs. Now he'll have to stand before his papal superiors and explain his failure. I'm glad I'm not him.

So I jogged down the alley as gently as possible, careful to cushion my carbonated dinner. Since no more churches stood between the *Wrong Galaxy Liquor Store* and my apartments on La Cienega Boulevard, I decelerated and let my heart rate settle down.

New Los Angeles may have declined since its peak back in the mid-2050s, before the quakes, when it was plain old Los Angeles, but it still resonates with the phantom glory documented

in library vidy-grams and history SKaDs. The billboard screens on Sunset Boulevard have been blank since I can remember, but they'll be reborn eventually. The day will come when our economy will recharge their faces with up-to-date advertisements, revitalized aspirations and renewed superficial values.

I can see it.

I mean, I can *see* it.

For now, the streets are still obsolete Kevlar, though sidewalks have survived in their upgraded form, the hybrid Kevlex. Hard to believe this was all concrete and asphalt, once upon a time.

Maybe not so long ago, historically speaking, but kids today can't remember or relate to anything that isn't wholly synthetic or holographic. Who remembers when GSS meant *Global Scope System*, instead of *Galactic Scope System*? Who remembers any method of transportation that used wheels? Who remembers how we managed to survive before Personal Quantum Computers, before subatomic System Kaon Devices, before we began colonizing the moon and Mars? My early years might just as well have been in the Stone Age.

Yet so much has failed to endure our socio/technological progress. I suppose it's a natural reflex, inherent in our collective genetics, to mourn the passing of an era with riots and antiquated laws and myopic resistance doomed to hear the dirge sooner than anticipated.

Isn't it inevitable that science and religion, the polar opposites of society's thermo-magnetic engine, would someday dwindle and succumb to the law of entropy, to the stronger, equalizing force of modern mystic science?

Take this priest in his bell tower, for example. He won't accept the transition to the new energy of today's world. He clings to a religious principle as outdated as concrete sidewalks. His church refuses to acknowledge the cold hard facts of mystic science

as it did the theories of Galileo. What else can he do except hoist himself to the pinnacle of his limitations and exterminate any opposing realities?

Too bad for him he's such a bad shot.

I crossed the street to my apartments, warmed by the orbiting midnight moon-station only recently launched by the Academy of Nations, and stopped at the elevator. A pink soul-cloud drifted between me and the moon-station and I instinctively recited a silent prayer.

It's the least I could do.

So much has changed.

And yet so much remains unchanged.

So much unknown.

For those of us who prefer the unknown, what awaits us? Specifically, after death, what awaits us? How much influence do we really possess over what happens to us after the death of our physical embodiments?

Now, this priest in the bell tower, the one with the rifle – who could be stalking me still for all I know – is convinced we are either punished or rewarded according to the deeds we commit while alive. Fine. He's entitled.

But so many of us know better.

"How's the soul, Pete?" Isabel called from her balcony, silver bladder of *Iniquity Brew* in her hand. Short, saucy, young – younger than me anyway – she personified the archetype prostitute of our brave new world.

"Still got it," I called back, unlocking the elevator door with my com-tel wand. Why do they call them wands? More like slender, miniature bricks. Anyway, ever since I told her I was the world's final gate-keeper she started calling me Saint Pete instead of my real name, Matthias. Har-har. From apostle to saint, all because my personal desire kicked open the back door to Heaven for a stampede of weary souls to traipse in and out as they pleased.

I stepped inside, scratched my chin, realized I hadn't shaved in a couple of days and wondered if I could find a fully charged shaver. Isabel didn't mind the stubble, but sometimes I preferred the feel of smooth flesh on smooth flesh.

Call me old-fashioned.

As if you couldn't tell by looking at me. Sure, no more spiral-cut blue hair I sported as a teen. Now it's pony-tailed and a little gray in the style of our president, but that doesn't fool anyone. I'm hardly presidential material. He has more earrings. But I have more tattoos.

So how did it happen that everything just kind of collapsed in New Los Angeles? Or in the world, for that matter. I've never denied my contribution, but modesty prevents me from gloating. And those who do appreciate my unholy participation tend to wind up in bell towers with high-powered rifles.

I rode the elevator eighty-three flights up without any stops, got off at my floor and considered which room to take for the night. With ten identical suites to choose from I had a hard time remembering which one I had occupied last. Sometimes I regret including this option as part of the contract, but I knew I would need every advantage I could get over the priests who came down from their bell towers in pursuit.

Still, old age hasn't been kind to my memory, so I just picked a number between one and ten and unlocked the third door on my left. I entered, put the brew in the cooler and took a shower. Isabel would be calling soon and I wanted to have a chance to shave and clear out my psychic sinuses a little before she arrived. Sure, I knew she was a corporate officer, but what the fuck? She knew I knew. All part of the game. All part of staying alive these days.

I stopped carrying a sidearm long ago. When I discovered that few vengeful ministers actually knew what I looked like, that they were identifying me by the corporate

holster on my hip, I quit wearing the damn thing. Lo and behold, the attacks diminished. I'm ashamed it took me so long to make the connection. I stashed the pistol in one of those rooms. I forget where.

I could have had the priest in his bell tower removed, permanently, if so motivated. Back in the day, I had plenty of priests and their bell towers removed. Another contractual perk. But I learned quickly that such actions only encouraged more priests in more bell towers, so I just began to steer clear of bell towers and churches in general. Once in a while another one pops up, like the one across the street from the *Wrong Galaxy Liquor Store*.

But like I said, he missed and I got away, Scott free, soul and all.

Still, tomorrow is another day, to quote Ms O'Hara, and another opportunity for the contingent of holy vigilantes to barricade the Lord's portal against further unclassified entries.

How else can I describe their motive? Just think about the names they assigned to the miracle formula, the one I single-handedly resurrected from oblivion: *Death Cheater*, *Soul Stealer*, *False Eden*, *The Satan Pill*.

My personal favorite? The one I coined: *Stairway² Heaven*.

I like the incongruity.

The official name, the legal title registered with the Academy Patent Office and Goris Pharmaceuticals is LETRO-Z-16499/PRE-Q.

I prefer *Stairway² Heaven*.

Goris Pharmaceuticals preferred *WonderDent*. That was the project name christened by *WonderDent's* creator, Terril Bloedorn. He created the project, but not the actual product.

The substance, the recipe, the tangible result of five years of long weeks, late nights, perplexing headaches and countless debates with the Goris Pharmaceuticals Marketing Department belongs primarily to one man.

Lanier Chalmers.

Twenty-nine years old on the day he finally produced a small, if potent quantity of aforementioned *Stairway² Heaven*, Lanier Chalmers persevered where most men would have shriveled up and pulled out long before. Not only did he persevere, he documented every aspect of his progress, including the taste tests. Having conducted something like forty-six previous taste tests on *WonderDent*, before its magical transformation, the routine had evolved into a kind of sick, ritualistic ceremony monitored by holo-cameras and living observers in a dimly lit laboratory. Full of somber melodrama, the only missing elements were tiki torches and human sacrifices.

You've seen the bootleg holos, right? Who can forget the sight of Lanier, half in shadow, the other half monochrome green from some off-screen monitor, his tall frame hunched over the table? So much has been preserved in commentary of every medium, so much baloney from every angle, objectivity has been all but murdered.

If you watch that vidy-gram today you may be amazed at how little controversy truly existed in his behavior. His movements are simple. Illusionists have claimed he stole their tricks to fake it all, to somehow create a phenomenon where none actually existed, but look at it! He dips the white plastic Dairy Queen spoon into the cup of sickly green-tinted goo, raises a dab to his lips and maybe that's his tongue or maybe it's a digital glitch, but what fucking difference does it make? The stuff comes into contact with his mouth and the rest is, as they say, history.

Most of the vidy-grams circulating today don't contain any audio, and those that do require subtitles, and they always get it wrong. I've seen the original corporate-owned holo-files. He says, quite clearly, "Abrasive. Bland. We'll need to adjust with flavoring."

His lack of movement for two solid seconds has prompted

conspiracy theorists to insist the hologram is frozen on one frame and spliced with a scene created somewhere else at some other time, a scene further modified with special effects.

Again, I have seen the original high-def video holograms, and I have watched the lint drift from his shoulder to the table during those two seconds, while Lanier stands there with the spoon mid-way between mouth and table.

And here's where the worlds of suspected ulterior motives really go nuts: He falls forward, right? Face down on the table with a crunch. No one disagrees on that. But the rising fog, at first a kind of wispy mist, then a rather opaque cloud shaped something like Chalmers' body, coalesces out of nowhere and sort of blows off his back by an unseen wind.

That sequence has been dissected frame by frame, enhanced by programs usually reserved for space exploration, and no one can define the precise moment his soul completely separates from his body.

As though it fucking matters!

Let's back up a little. What do we know about this guy who allegedly figured out, albeit accidentally, how to disengage an aspect of humanity we generally identify as the soul from its corporeal host? How much does the world really know about the unwitting father of modern mystic science?

Identified early in his career as a genius, Lanier Chalmers understood biomechanics and chemical engineering in a way that astonished his peers. Unfortunately, not necessarily in a good way. His ability to hyper-focus on any given subject fueled his creative intellect at the expense of his social interactions. Not uncommon for most who suffered from Asperger's Syndrome.

So *WonderDent* became Chalmers' Everest to climb and conquer. Terril Bloedorn and Goris Pharmaceuticals threw down the gauntlet and he responded with the blind passion and confidence of a young man freshly degreed and unconstrained

socially. No wife, no children, no girlfriend, no friends of any kind, really, except one.

Lanier Chalmers accepted the proposal, the contract, the commitment to satisfy the condition established by Goris Pharmaceuticals, to develop and produce in a manner consistent with Goris Pharmaceuticals mass-marketing strategies an inexpensive toothpaste guaranteed to whiten and strengthen tooth enamel beyond the prevailing performance of any legal product available at the time.

Few corporations would have tolerated his violations of protocol, of schedules, of safety procedures. Fewer still would have tolerated his outbursts when faced with resistance or setbacks.

Yet Goris Pharmaceuticals remained committed to young Chalmers, trusting his attempts to create a product from complete scratch, without using any existing components. His success would monopolize their market share.

For a man unable to maintain any type of social relationship, Lanier managed to assemble a remarkable team of competent assistants, skilled and somehow compatible with his temperament. Over the course of five years, however, most of them progressed toward their own goals, leaving the team. And as each member departed, he or she was not replaced. By the time Lanier succumbed to his own creation, only one man remained.

Winston Hodge.

Nearly twice Lanier's age, Winston's pedigree hardly recommended him as a contemporary, let alone a competent ally to Chalmers' agenda. His concepts were outdated, if not archaic, and his sensibilities aligned more with convention than innovation.

Still, Goris Pharmaceuticals wanted a seasoned technician a little more "down-to-earth" on the team. So they listened to me and assigned my brother-in-law Winston Hodge to Chalmers' crew of hot-shot physicists and exotic conceptualists.

Conceptualist. Lanier's inventive title, that.

Ah, yes, I skipped over why Goris Pharmaceuticals would take my advice on anything.

In those days – and this all began, what, some ten years ago – corporations commonly recruited insight and guidance from individuals with my particular talent. Unofficially, they called it “peeking around the corner”.

Nowadays you know us as *telecasters*, or *deep-see-viewers*. Less honorable monikers, perhaps, than the old-fashioned *channel*, or *medium*, or the ultimate, reliable *psychic*. But no matter what I was called, the grim vision never failed to pollute my breath and brain with unwelcomed conflicts, dream-warping landscapes, and other people’s demons stripped to the bones.

Sure, the money was phenomenal, back then. Sure, restaurants and dignitaries welcomed me with surreal reverence. Sure, I truly believed I was something special, something exalted and unique and valuable.

But after a while the gory lies, the bleak addictions, the relentless lunacy running like a river of shit through virtually every single reading infected me the way it infects every *telecaster*. We all think we’re immune, but eventually it catches up. Eventually the food, the drink, the very air starts to taste bitter, rancid as a pool of black blood. Eventually, the paranoia becomes too much. You can’t expect us to keep swimming through someone else’s fucked-up id and aura and emerge sanitized forever. It just doesn’t work that way. Eventually we all turn to our own private Edens for sanity. Eventually, we choose to stay there before it’s too late. If we’re lucky.

Still, those memories linger.

Even though I had withdrawn my services from the general public many years prior to Lanier’s contract with Goris Pharmaceuticals, I suspended my retirement on just two occasions.

No, my purpose was not to provide a job for my brother-in-law Winston. I offered his recommendation as legitimately as

any I ever made. I *saw*, with the grim vision, Lanier's unbridled concepts propelling the *WonderDent* project down more diverse corridors than Goris Pharmaceuticals could financially support, while ultimately producing nothing of value. I *saw* him careening from inspiration to inspiration, never remaining in one place long enough to develop his idea into something substantial. Without Winston Hodge ensconced in Chalmers' lab, there's no telling where the *WonderDent* project would have come to rest, if at all. Winston possessed the ability to anchor Lanier's efforts in ways no one else ever could. Winston Hodge knew how to gently remind his ward of the goal in a positive manner. Only Winston Hodge could dissuade Chalmers from an inspired distraction without triggering the hostile resentment the boy genius unleashed on everyone else.

Lanier always liked his Uncle Winston.

More than he liked me, his own father.

Goris Pharmaceuticals never objected to the nepotistic triad governing the psychic future of their prize project. Indeed, Terril regarded us as some kind of supernatural insurance of success. The only other quack paid as well as me by Goris Pharmaceuticals was Terril's astrologer, the late, great Rhonda Redondo, who endorsed Lanier without reservations.

I never told her Lanier's correct birth date, so you can lay the debacle of her approval on me too.

What do I care? Astrology is such horseshit anyway.

Do I feel ashamed that I didn't foresee the inevitable descent from toothpaste formula to hocus pocus medicine? Considering I didn't speak with my son or my brother-in-law during all those years, no. Goris Pharmaceuticals did not invite me back for an update until the poop hit the metaphysical fan. By then the new direction of mystic science had secretly taken root. By then the formula had been lost and bootlegged by careless hacks from here to hell and back. By then our skies were destined

to be contaminated with flocks of jettisoned souls of the desperate and terminal.

What I *saw* in my sessions with my only son Lanier and my brother-in-law Winston did not reveal the religious horror of this future. My psychic submersions may have introduced me to subconscious aspects of them best left obscured by their physical personalities, but no connection can be made between their inner storms and the outcome of their relationship, complicated as it was.

Still, I get the blame.

Of course, everything got worse, thanks to me. But the origin of the whole mess is quite simply not my fault.

Isabel may be the only person who understands. Despite her official association with the corporation, she never pressures me for more information than I've already provided, never requests any favors, by which I mean readings. She seems to understand the hardship, the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual strain a reading can evoke. More than Rhonda ever did while she walked the earth. More than my sister did. Or my mother. Or my wife.

All I wanted was a peaceful retirement, a calm, final retreat, permission to go gently into that good night. But the duties of a father, a husband, a son, and a brother intervened.

1

More than a hundred and ten stories high, the Goris Pharmaceuticals headquarters monolith stood almost dead center among the rows of New Los Angeles skyscrapers, all connected by the grid of high, arcing stabilization rails, like a massive birdcage over the city. Row number eleven, to be exact.

Some of us older citizens remember the two mid-century earthquakes that eliminated almost every building under twenty stories. Library history-SKaDs contain pre-holo videos of the back-to-back quakes. Short structures just vibrated to pieces, but the seventeen rows of ultra high-rise office buildings merely swayed lazily in unison on the skyline. Furniture toppled, to be sure, but the tethered ultras stayed standing, as predicted. Some folks argued that the restrained ultras re-directed all that energy back into the ground and actually caused the smaller buildings to crumble, but it's a moot point now. All those weaker buildings are long gone. Nothing but ultra-high, ultra-stable, ultra-mega-stupendous-towers stab the sky now. Darwinian architecture.

Still, I didn't look forward to riding the center dish a quarter mile up the tall atrium on such a stormy day. I removed my battered rain coat, turned my back on the window view of lightning lashing through high clouds, and concentrated on the task ahead.

My appointment for the reading had been advanced a week, bringing me out of retirement prematurely, interrupting my hasty detox and depriving me of the prep meditations I usually relied on to get me in the mood. I could still smell the *Iniquity Brew* in my lungs, though I hadn't consumed any for days. If anyone else had dared impose such a demand on me in such short notice after so many years in isolation I would have provided detailed instructions on self-fornication. But since the subject was

my only son I acquiesced with as much aplomb as Bloedorn's payment would allow.

Of course I wasn't complying just to get rich. Lanier wanted this job, whether he needed it or not. He could have taken any one, or two, of the offers filling his com-mail account. When you graduate from the Academy of Nations with one of the highest scores in history, corporations take notice.

So, why did he join Goris Pharmaceuticals instead of Zuman Inc., or Plimpton Productions, or Hodge Podge Nutrition Inc.? Goris wrote the biggest check. Simple as that.

So he interviewed with Terril, unaware of Goris Pharmaceuticals' policy to perform psych-scans on qualified candidates. They would get around to it eventually – it's a matter of law – but by then they had promised him everything he asked for and more.

He agreed, not really bothered by the idea. It just seemed a kind of inconvenience. Anyone with a career on the upper floors knew the process. And Lanier knew it better than most, being my son. But apparently no one told him the *telecaster* chosen for his interview would be yours truly.

See, legal protocol prevented me from telling him. *Telecasters* were – and are to this day – restricted from contacting the subjects of their corporate readings, before or after. So this made things kind of dicey between us.

When I stepped off the center dish and onto the marble-decked ninety-third floor I didn't see my son anywhere, but that arrangement was common. Typically I met the subject after a brief, meditative period in a room with "neutral influence". Minimum light and sound.

Back when I first began giving corporate readings, way before Lanier's birth, before his mother's issues flared, before the grim vision turned daylight dark, I could perform a reading anywhere, any time. Of course, temptations changed that. Soon

enough, I began accepting the offers of expensive, often illegal, privileges and pleasures. For a very long time I didn't understand the privileges were meant to influence my determinations. And they never, ever did. But the expectation continued to fuel the belief that I could be bought.

Eventually I figured it out, just not in time.

My ability to enter a trance became less eager, tainted by a faint but growing resistance. My dependency on external influences had begun.

Goris Pharmaceuticals relied not so much on external influences, such as money, but rather my relationship with the subject. That I received a substantial fee for my services meant to minimize everything else. Terril Bloedorn may have been overly zealous regarding the nascent mystic sciences, but he was also a shrewd, calculating businessman. So far, I had not met the man face-to-face. My only contact with him had been through subordinates. And his signature code on my account deposit.

"Mr. Chalmers?" A pleasant, prim secretary behind a sleek desk stood and extended her hand. "Welcome. I'm Julice."

Her grip was firm but detached. I knew instantly she did not endorse this process. More than likely she considered herself intellectually superior, but she could just as well have been prejudiced religiously. Either way, I was spared a litany of frivolous questions. I release her hand, which she withdrew quickly, and asked, "My room?"

She gestured down a hallway and we walked together toward a set of double-doors, the only ones with handles. I waited while she pulled one open, revealing a very large room with two hefty, cushioned armchairs facing each other, a low, wooden coffee table between them. The far wall was all transparent Kev-glass, effortlessly holding back the angry rain, and Julice darkened it to black with one finger on the wall-mounted control panel. As the room dimmed she activated two lamps, highlighting the chairs and

table with a subtle, warm glow, making the room appear much smaller, cozier.

I stepped around her and entered, getting the feel, the “vibe” as they used to say. Julice remained in the hall, watching with stoic professionalism. Satisfied, I sat in one of the chairs without looking at her. “This is fine. Thank you.”

The door closed quietly, entombing me in my temporary sarcophagus, resplendent with shampooed carpet and quiet air conditioning. Despite my lengthy hiatus, despite my history of substance abuse, despite my aversion to the seductive call of the grim vision, I descended swiftly, easily, hungrily into my personal sea of sight. Always so cold in anticipation, then so warm and languid upon immersion. So lovely. So serene and peaceful and consuming and welcoming and powerful and sensual and dominating and sweet and addictive.

How effortlessly I slipped into the sea after staying dry for so long. How deep my unquenched thirst plunged so quickly.

Yet, my terror remained on the banks of this lagoon, pacing in fear, awaiting my return.

When the door swung slowly wide I opened my eyes. Or maybe I didn't. I don't know. But I watched him enter, this stranger, or was he familiar? He took one step forward and faltered, stood erect for a moment and looked behind him in time to see the door pulled shut. He stayed that way for an eternity. Or maybe it was just a millisecond. When he faced me again he seemed to comprehend a truth hidden until now.

A gray dove glided down from somewhere and landed on his shoulder, stayed with him as he approached the chair and hesitated. Another dove eased from the heavens to his other shoulder, then a couple of sparrows, followed by blue jays and sea gulls and crows and mocking birds and more than I could identify. Maybe he sat and maybe he didn't. The birds kept swooping down, dozens, hundreds, crowding the room, swirling

around us, a tornado of wings that hummed with motion, obliterating the room completely, delivering us into a common dream vortex witnessed only by me.

A separate Lanier walked from my left to my right. Wearing a white lab coat, he was a man and a child, both in one body. He reached a table overloaded with lab equipment and studied the assortment, making some notes on a clipboard SKaD. Anxiously, he monitored a beaker of green liquid boiling on a Bunsen burner. Just before the moment of revelation he walked away, to another table, to another collection of tubes and wires, a moonshine still steaming and quaking near explosion. At the moment of climax he turned around, walked to another table, an array of computers and holo-monitors displaying three-dimensional molecular models.

The scene rotated and Lanier the child pushed the monitors to the floor, face tantrum red. He ran to a door, burst through, into a busy laboratory of assistants, who fled. Child/adult Lanier moved from one station to the next, spending just a moment at each and moving on.

When he reached the last of the stations he started all over again, racing himself to repeat his circuit, angrier and angrier. One body of child/adult Lanier continued the loop while the other body of child/adult Lanier fell to his knees in the center.

Child Lanier cried, "Mommy!" and adult Lanier simultaneously hammered the floor and screamed, "Dad!"

More child/adult Laniers circled the Laniers in the center, some of them changing direction, others falling to the floor, splashing in a spilled liquid. The running Laniers sloshed through the rising pool, a dark fluid turning crimson.

Drawn by the river of crimson I did something I don't normally do. I followed the source, took my attention from my subject and followed an element of interest to me. I followed the wide river through the phantom Laniers in chaos, toward a

hallway of closed doors and black windows.

The river narrowed, became a stream, then a sheet of scarlet pouring forth from the foot of a door at the end of the hall.

I willed the door to give way, to allow my entrance, and as I did, the universe objected. *You don't have the right!*

How many doors had I breached in my years invading innocent victims? How many psychic rapes had I committed to unveil serpents and zombies and headless memories buried not deep enough to evade my gaze? But they had all been someone else's disgraceful nakedness, someone else's bottomless well of venom, someone else's shrieking shame and hatred.

Nothing in all those years prepared me for this closet of bloody mirrors, all reflecting me, each one a different adult age, a slightly different weight and wrinkle, but all me, all butchered to hamburger. And standing behind each mirror was Lanier. A different age to match his relationship with me at the time of mutilation, but every expression identical: rage and hatred. His hands bloody, wielded knife or hatchet or chainsaw.

Beyond the reflections echoed the ghosts of arguments unresolved. Some trivial, some critical. All born of a child's uncontrollable anxiety, of impatience and fatigue and frustration and disappointment. I watched, reliving my arguments with a nine-year-old Lanier, a twelve-year-old, a twenty-year old. Down an endless hallway of doors, curses and assaults and ugly thought/feelings railed in chaos, unencumbered by social restraint, each door numbered, cataloguing the history of conflict.

I had heard rumors of *telecasters* who had performed self-examinations, who had suffered breakdowns of irreparable proportions, who had imploded into the black holes of their own super-egos, withdrawing deeper than human consciousness is meant to withdraw. But nothing could have prepared me for this saturation of unbridled contempt and hostility from my own child, and from myself.

Something in me recoiled, not from the grotesque vision, but from the blatant betrayal radiating hotly from the man in the seat across from me. And not a betrayal of the moment, but of the past. And not just his past, but mine.

I searched the hall for opposing memories, good memories, and they fluttered to my feet on crusty, brittle parchment. Visions reflected on one of the frail papers, of Christmas morning, Lanier beside himself with joy over his new home-science kit. Another occasion appeared on another leaf of paper, when I brought my son and wife to a history museum in San Diego. We all marveled at the displays of long-forgotten incandescent lighting and the self-destructive automobile engine which required combustible fuel. All day, Lanier held my hand. Not because he was only eight years old and afraid he'd get lost. He held tight and squeezed every time that bolt of joy hit him. The rare touch of his skin against mine charged me with hope, with a moment of normalcy.

The parchment memories burst into flames, each one crumbling charred and ugly.

Now, I've studied a little of Jung and Freud and more recently Uthow. I couldn't be an Academy of Nations licensed *telecaster* without passing Academy psychology tests. I scored adequately enough to prove my comprehension of our deepest subconscious emotions and unsatisfied dreams. I understood, intellectually anyway, how this experience represented my son's primal, unmitigated frustrations and desires gone awry. I knew I was face to face with textbook examples of every twisted complex ever documented. But emotionally . . . how the fuck could I ignore it?

Of course, now it's one of the fundamental paradoxes of modern mystic science. But at the time, under the circumstances, I responded . . . well . . . let's just say *unprofessionally*.

While locked in this mutual nightmare with my only son, I unleashed a spiritual tsunami of swords and spears from

someplace I had never visited in myself. I watched the subconscious metaphor slice through him, knowing it was all just a dream reaction, but unable to stop it, unable to look away from the dismemberments and hacking and gore.

Here's the thing about such reflexive responses: they provoke other emotions, such as guilt, doubt, blame, confusion, and they all rebound sharply at the speed of light, chipping pieces of sanity away until nothing is left but raw loss and loneliness. All in a fraction of a heartbeat.

The shock catapulted me from my trance with a searing headache. Solid again in "corroborative reality" I studied my son for some sign of a shared experience. But of course he had not seen what I had just seen, had not any inkling of the wounds he had just suffered, or inflicted.

I resisted the urge to go to him, to hold him in my arms and sob my aching remorse for a life so abandoned.

Despite his affliction, his "uniqueness" as the counselors called it, I had failed him in so many ways. Not so different from the hordes of similar families with similar problems, or worse, but how many of those parents had ever faced their own twisted, crippled reflections?

If he noticed the tears on my cheeks he didn't admit to it. I suppose he detected the new tone of my breathing, for he said, "Are we done?"

He sounded so young, so much the youth who could have been affectionate and appreciative and happy. How could I let him go without taking his hand, without trying one more time to touch him in a way that would elicit some signal of emotional warmth? But enveloped as we were by the muted tones of artificial neutrality, I just nodded. I assume I nodded. I didn't utter a sound, and he stood effortlessly, turned toward the door.

Lanier . . .

He didn't look back. The child within him didn't look back.

The memories of the few good moments of our lives together didn't look back.

"I love you," I called, hoarsely.

But the door had already closed.



Terril Bloedorn and Goris Pharmaceuticals and my son Lanier Chalmers waited for my report, which law required to document my determination, which I always delivered orally to the company. Though legally I was allowed thirty calendar days, this process normally took about four days. Maybe seven in my heyday, while saturated in the subliminal benefits of customer appreciation.

Lanier's report remained unfinished after three weeks.

My home in the Hollywood Hills, three thousand square feet of indulgences, including an Olympic-sized swimming pool, the one I owned with my incarcerated wife, felt emptier than ever. The process of summarizing a corporate reading reminded me of a period in our lives when everyone treated us like royalty. Celebrities invited us everywhere, mostly hoping for free insight to their problems, or to display us like trophies to their friends.

Adonica loved being seen as the wife of a *telecaster* more than she actually loved me, but I didn't really care at the time. Adoration had so many avenues to me, I didn't miss hers. Lanier, on the other hand, received more adulation from his mother than he knew what to do with. Literally. However, a common feature of Asperger's Syndrome, embedded somewhere in the spectrum of autism, compromised his capacity for reciprocal expressions. It varies from case to case, but for Lanier that compromise tilted the teeter-totter of love between him and his mother so severely, her only means of coping included mountains of cocaine, vats of vodka, silver balloons of *Iniquity Brew*, and greater varieties of synthetic psychotropics than an Aztec shaman would know what to do with.

The only person Lanier ever responded to favorably was my sister's husband, Winston Hodge. This uncle, for whatever

reason, would serve to direct my son down a vocational path tailor-made for his condition.

I sat at the dining table in my Hollywood Hills home and scanned the family album of holos loaded on my com-tel wand, searching for the ones that included Winston. I needed them for my report.

It's funny how the fate of mankind hinged on this day, on this moment, on the choices hovering before me on my dining table. An old vid-dy-gram projected not just one option to offer Goris Pharmaceuticals, but two. Of course, I had no idea what the impact of my decision would be. I didn't know about *WonderDent* at the time, let alone *Stairway² Heaven*. I knew only that Goris Pharmaceuticals sought irrefutable psychic insurance that their prime candidate would be worth their investment.

I watched the vid-dy-gram, watched heavy-set Winston playfully lumbering around our back yard in pursuit of my ten-year-old son. I turned the sound up on my com-tel wand so I could hear Lanier's giggles. Every time they circled the yard, Winston closing in, only to fake a clumsy fall so Lanier could get away, every time my son ran to the other person for comfort.

My younger sister, April.

April hated children.

Rather, she hated the idea of having her own children. As long as she could be in the company of kids and leave when she wanted, then she could tolerate them. I watched her laugh as Lanier hid behind her, hugging her legs, and considered her as his watchdog.

More than one acquaintance had commented how closely my wife resembled my sister, how my choice of companion reflected as much about my relationship with April as it did with Adonica. Aside from the physical resemblances – they were both blonds, both rather svelte, sharing clothes and cosmetics during their college years – they mirrored each other's appreciation of

the intellectual, at the expense of the emotional.

Though April's husband had been a successful chemical engineer, the inspiration for Lanier's vocation, she was the stronger-willed of the two. After all, he worked for her company.

As did I, before my talent of insight led me elsewhere.

Could I lure her away from her lucrative nutrition empire? Could Goris Pharmaceuticals share her interests, even at a cost?

Her hand stroking my son's head: a superficial gesture? He darted away as Winston lunged, and her laughter appeared genuine enough, but I couldn't be sure. Not with the tainted history we shared.

Still, I would need to consult with both of them. I couldn't make an offer to Winston behind her back. The Goris Report would need to wait another week. I shut down my com-tel aps and headed for my garage.

Something about riding in a vehicle with no steering wheel still bothered me, even though they had been around since before Lanier's birth. I had learned to drive on an old nuclear Toyota, back when they still used tires and steering wheels. This new, anti-grav shit bugged the hell out of me. I cued the navigator display and sat back, not relaxed, just reclined.

"April Hodge," I said, and braced for the acceleration.

"Home or office?" the genderless voice asked.

"Uh, home." She could be at either location, but I didn't want to call and tip her off to my visit.

The car shot forward, giving my stomach a start, and I adjusted the seat to suit my aging spine. Traffic collected on the freeway but I didn't care. I was in no hurry.

When my com-tel wand vibrated and announced, "Witherwood Penal Facilities," I wondered if this would be that last call I would ever receive from them.

"Yes," I replied.

The cabin speakers crackled briefly, making the connection,

and another genderless voice said, "This is Witherwood Penal Facilities confirming your appointment for Tuesday, May ten at fourteen hours. Please confirm by speaking yes."

So my once-voluptuous wife still looked forward to my visits, sporadic as they were. "Yes." I doubted the automated system could interpret my fatalistic response, but it was worth a shot.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," I hurried to express with exaggerated sincerity before the voice could disconnect, just to fuck with it.

Adonica's parents had passed away a few years earlier, one after the other, leaving only me as the face of freedom, the only evidence that civilization still functioned to some degree. And she survived as evidence that civilization still knew how to draw the line somewhere. Every visit with her felt like a warning.

Still, I missed her. I just didn't want to admit it. So I got stoned by myself and bought a car she never saw.

A Zenith Hydra VII, a snazzy two-seater, I'd never driven it with another person. So the second seat served as a receptacle for my vidy-SKaD and com-tel wand and groceries and candy wrappers and whatever wouldn't fit in my pockets. Today that included an unopened silver bladder of *Iniquity Brew* and a present for my sister.

Not a present in the conventional sense. I mean, she did have a birthday coming up on the last day of the month, but the gift on the passenger's seat didn't really come from me, it came from our mother. And Mom didn't really give it to me to give to April. She didn't give it to me at all.

Right after my stormy reading at Goris Pharmaceuticals I rode to the Seaside Retirement Commune in Santa Monica, near the beach. April and I had arranged Mom's placement there at the onset of her condition, some six years earlier, expecting her to succumb in short order to the typical ailments associated with Alzheimer's Type 9. We thought she'd be dead inside a year.

Did she fool us.

I know that sounds heartless, but April and I were going through our own crises at the time, had already invested more revenue and time than we could afford. Our father's death had left Mom with enough resources to endure for quite a long time, but those resources were nearing expiration. She was seventy-three years old when we decided her best options, economically, were to jettison her expensive home and move into something more affordable, like a retirement commune.

But she continued to live, if not as engaging and connected with her surroundings as most of us. Medications helped mitigate some of the mental confusion and slow down some of the organ failures, and the staff served far beyond our expectations to keep her healthy. But ultimately, Mom was a just a tough old bird.

Of course, she was in no condition to offer feedback, but just sitting close to her, absorbing the emptiness, the pained suspension of awareness, helped me recover. Compared to her, I had no reason to complain. At least I could walk away from it. At least I could pop open a bubbly balloon of *Iniquity Brew*, sip and inhale and drift off in a sublime haze of calm. At least I could kill myself if I decided to.

But Mom just sat there, day after day, eyes as hard as stone, mouth a grimace of forgotten expectations. Why was she so fucking healthy?

I thought about strangling her, maybe waiting until after her lunch, when her attendant left us alone, but I never had the balls for murder.

Not yet anyway.

I stared at her neck, wondering how much it would take to just rob her of all that anguish, how much pressure it would take to cut off the air flow of such a frail throat, and I noticed her necklace. One of the attendants must have thought she needed a little decoration and so dressed up Mom's morning

by just that much.

A small, ivory cameo of a Roman goddess in profile hung from a thin gold chain. If she ever wore it before, I never noticed. Not that I had committed her entire inventory of jewelry to memory, but it got me thinking about her collection and what it might mean to April.

I looked around her room and located a couple of jewelry cases, each stuffed to overflowing with bracelets and earrings and necklaces and items unfamiliar to masculine eyes. With Mom sitting in her chair next to a window which faced the sea, I picked through the bounty, searching for an item suitable for bribery.

Too harsh a word, bribery. More like manipulation. I didn't know yet what type of manipulation may be required, but it never hurt to be prepared. In this case it would come to mind while writing my Goris report. If I could lead my punch with a token of family history, the blow might not draw as much blood.

I wrapped the set of diamond earrings and matching necklace in a tissue and put them in my pocket. Mom blinked once, perhaps her gentle endorsement, or her muted attempt to kick me in the nuts, I'll never know. I kissed her forehead and left her in the company of her window.

When I arrived in April's driveway, stopping abruptly behind the massive Recreation Pod Winston bought for their next vacation trip, the gift wad of tissue fell to the floor. Maybe I should have invested in a cheap jewelry box of some kind, but I didn't want her to think I had just gone out and bought something at a store. Better that she believed I pilfered it from our mother.

I walked around back to the broad teak deck and knocked on the French doors, ignoring the clear chill gusting up from the beach behind me. I hated visiting her oceanfront home, especially in the winter. The sky could be clear and bright, as on this day, but the wind off the waves carried an icy breath of discontent.

By the time Winston answered, my nose was beginning to

run and I considered wiping it with the gift wad of tissue.

"Matt. Come on in." He retreated a step, holding the door wide. "You're looking better."

Their den smelled of wood and sand and lots of lovely aromas associated with the California coast, so naturally I had to fuck it up with my mildewed raincoat and rank jeans, which I hadn't washed in a week. "You moved things around."

He closed the door, sealing out the wind. Though Winston was big, to put it politely, he always seemed fit. He looked as good in casual t-shirts as some guys looked in tuxedos. Even without a single tattoo or piercing he was too straight to look hip. "Not for a while. You haven't been by in a long time." He gestured toward the open chef's kitchen, all granite and walnut and stone. "Something to drink?"

I waved off his offer. "April here?"

He snorted. "You kidding?" He removed a wine bottle from a low cabinet and filled a tumbler. "You haven't heard about the new campaign. She's blasting a hundred and seventy five locations with something called *Fena*, or *Feena*, or something. Synthetic sugar substitute. Just got approval from the ANFDB."

I wasn't interested, but my thoughtful pause encouraged him to continue.

"I helped at first." He sipped his drink and sat on a stool at the granite center island in the kitchen. "I did some prelim work, but it's less about the product these days. More about the marketing plan."

"Listen, I need to talk to you guys." I looked around for a place to sit, decided I didn't want to.

"I'm right here."

"Yeah, well, I wish she was here too." Hand in my pocket, I fiddled with the wad of tissue. "Shit."

"Is it Mom?"

I shook my head.

"Addy okay?"

"I guess. Next visit in a few weeks."

"So?"

"She's going to spring a vascular if she's not included."

The tissue ripped, spilling diamonds into my pocket.

"I get it." He stood, opened the fridge. "Hungry?"

"I need someone to stabilize Lanier."

He removed a frosted container, dumped some salad onto a plate. "Define stabilize."

I summarized my reading for Goris, leaving out all the shit about me, and came to the point after about fifteen minutes. "I'm pretty sure I can convince Bloedorn and Lanier to put you on board. You have the skills."

"Come on, Matt. I'm about as far out in the pasture as you can get." Still standing at the counter, he picked at the plate of salad. No dressing, no spices, just plain, so he could use his fingers without getting messy, I guess.

"It doesn't matter, Win. Your real purpose is to keep him focused. He's different with you. You know what I mean."

"I see why you wanted her here." He set the plate in the sink and stared out the window for a few minutes. Sail boats braved the wind about a mile out. "It's not about the money, you know."

"Of course I know."

"I haven't been in a lab for months. She just . . . you know."

I didn't know, but I could guess. Tough decision to make, between two pity positions. "You can always tell us both to fuck off, you know. Just fucking retire."

Turning his back to the window, he crossed his arms, looked at the ceiling. "I can't retire."

"Sorry to put you in this position. Just trying to help my kid."

"I need to talk to April."

"Maybe I should talk to her first." The sweat on my palms saturated the tissue.

"I think it's better if I talk first. Approach this from a different direction."

Would the diamonds help if they came from him? I doubted it. "How much time do you need?"

He looked at his com-tel wand on the counter next to him. "It's thirteen-two now. She has a church meeting about sixteen. How about next year?"

I laughed out loud, unexpectedly, and I loved the feeling. The guy really adored my little sis, but he understood her eccentricities with a flavor of cynicism I never mastered. "Call. Don't send me a fucking note, please. Take however much time you need. But my report is due in a week."

He nodded, ending the conversation, the visit.

I let myself out and strolled through the scalloped dunes to the breakwater, where some neighbor kids and a spry pup chased each other in and out of the waves, indifferent to the chilly weather.

Adonica and I had brought Lanier and a schoolmate, Lonzie, to the beach when he was seven or eight years old, but he freaked at the waves so we left without getting wet or even spraying sun screen. Apparently, the depth and mystery of the ocean was more than our son could comprehend and reconcile intellectually or emotionally. Lonzie didn't care, but he was normal. He quit hanging around with Lanier after that.

I never told my son about the theories that some day our home would be under miles of cold salt water.

The kids' pup pranced over to me and barked, inviting me to chase him, but I turned toward the sunset. The silhouette of a sailboat balanced on the horizon, inviting me over the edge of the world. The dog barked again and I hurled my wad of tissue-encrusted diamonds into the sea.



On the day Mom's doctor informed April and me that our mother, Roanne Chalmers, would soon begin deteriorating mentally and physically at a rapid pace, our reactions pretty much summarized the differences between our base core beliefs.

I immediately activated my com-tel device, pre-wand era, when they were still projection-pads, and jumped on the GSS. I researched everything I could about Alzheimer's Type 9. With few, esoteric exceptions, none of it portrayed a positive outcome. I lacked the scientific insight of Winston or my son, but I trusted the objective studies and treatments. I believed our established medical community knew everything there was to know about her condition. This from a psychic wacko addicted to a variety of substances, who cheated on his wife and spent fewer and fewer conscious moments in what most sane people consider reality.

April went to church and prayed.

Today, of course, we know that neither choice was better than the other. Today we recognize all belief systems are equally valid. To be fair, April did not doubt the strength of science and medicine. In fact, she had learned, through her background in nutrition, how to augment medicine with treatments not yet endorsed by the Academy of Nations Food and Drug Bureau.

One would think, given our mutual occupations, that our responses would have been the other way around, that I, the loony *telecaster*, would have been the one trusting the unverifiable powers of the Almighty, with April researching all avenues of medicinal treatment.

Go figure.

Maybe it's because corporate religion, April's crutch since before our father died, so vehemently rejected my method of spiritual access. Pope after Pope after Pope repeatedly condemned

telecasters as evil, and one of them even singled me out by name. Pope Alfonse, I believe.

His birth name was Peter, but since the Vatican's founding father was the renowned *Saint Peter*, no one dared use that name, out of reverence, or fear, or who knows why. So he renamed himself Pope Alfonse, after his strongest influence, his father.

I never considered April a devout Catholic, but her reliance on scripture and gospels according to a small assortment of indistinct sources certainly conflicted with my rather brazen claim that humanity didn't require an organized corporate doctrine to enjoy a satisfying life or, worse yet, afterlife.

So is it any wonder she perceived the woes of our family as the result of my sinful beliefs?

While I waited for Winston to consult with my sister and return a verdict, I lounged in my rundown living room. Or as I called it, my *dying* room. Sober just about a month, I had forgotten how dull life could be, how much I loathed my own company. But since I might be required to perform another reading soon, should Winston and Goris accept my recommendation, I couldn't leap off the wagon just yet.

So I watched old family vidy-grams and ancient 2D videos and reflected on April. Not out of some melancholy desire to repair our mutual derision, but to develop a strategy should she convince her husband to reject my offer.

Up until Dad died from some bizarre liver cancer we never did quite understand completely, April and I had been pretty tight. She's the one who introduced me to Adonica, a fellow UCNLA student. The campus had just been re-designated a New Los Angeles university despite all the public protests and student rallies, which was where my sister and my future wife had met. So April came home with her friend, whom I fucked almost immediately, completely ignoring her interest in politics and her new age health theories.

We woke up in my bedroom, hung over, late for class. She was late for class. I was late for nothing. Dad always said I was good for nothing.

“Can you give me a ride?”

She looked at me like I’d asked for her kidney. “Don’t you drive?”

“Legally?”

She pulled the sheets up to her mouth to hide her grin of disbelief, but her smile crinkled her nose. How many spiral-cut, blue-haired, twenty-two year old men could claim they didn’t have a license to drive? Suppressing a laugh, she asked, “Why don’t you get a license?”

Why didn’t I have a license? Same reason I didn’t have a diploma. Same reason I didn’t have a job. Same reason I didn’t have a future. “I swore I’d never get a license until they stop making cars with nuclear engines.”

She almost bought it. I swear to god it took almost a full minute before she threw the sheets over my head and jumped out of bed. “You don’t care about nukes.” Before I could clear the blankets away she was dressed in jeans and blouse. “I’ve got to get to class.”

“Then what?” I grabbed a beer bottle from my bed stand, but it was empty.

“Then I go to work.”

“Where?”

“With April.”

“You work for my sister? Doing what, growing alfalfa sprouts?” I threw a pillow at her.

She caught the pillow and swung it like a bat, nailing me right in the face. “I do her books, asshole.”

Coughing, I pushed the pillow aside. “What books? She doesn’t make any real money.”

Adonica sat on the bed, blond hair splashing on her

shoulders like a waterfall, and pulled her shoes on, exposing a shooting-star tattoo on her ankle. "Are you kidding? If she gets two more employees she qualifies for Level 3 health insurance. You ought to apply."

"You're still drunk."

She stood, looked around for her com-tel pad. "Seriously." There, on the chair. "By the time she graduates we'll be billionaires."

"Then why bother graduating?"

Her laughter, my first memory of her laughter, just blew me away, like the first time you hear a song you know will stay with you forever. But she stopped laughing abruptly. "Are you really that stupid?"

"Come back to bed. Let's fuck some more." A noise from somewhere in the house caught her attention. "It's just Mom. Come on back to bed."

And if I ever develop Alzheimer's Type 9 like Mom ended up with, I will never, ever forget what Adonica said next. Clutching her com-tel pad, she leaned over me, letting her blouse fall open, breasts not hanging, but just sort of . . . reaching out, and said, "If you want the best fucking blow job anyone in the world will ever get, go to work for April. I will suck your dick until the moon explodes." And that kiss. No hands. No rubbing. Just lips.

I created April's research department by fourteen hours that same day. I got my driver's license a month later.

The pay was considerably less than what the current head of research is earning, but it contributed significantly toward my adolescent vices. And no matter how much April promised me, it fell far short of the attention I would receive from Adonica.

However, contrary to my future wife's optimistic assessment of April Nutrition Industries, we were not billionaires upon their graduations. Close, but not quite. And not that I cared. My duties as Research Manager required less skill than my sister

deserved, though I performed adequately, surprising us both from time to time.

Then so much happened all at once, like so much destruction during a nuclear detonation.

Dad got sick and died.

The period of his demise seemed to take less than a week, but it must have been longer. His unexpected illness and death coincided with my marriage to Adonica, and April's marriage to Winston, who had been with her company about a year. We would have postponed our respective nuptials if providence had allowed, but our collective denial just made everything too miserable to cope with.

So our ceremonies were less celebratory than we had hoped for.

Adonica and I wed at a chic, hip chapel at the coastal hamlet Big Sur in North California, with the rhythmic crush of waves lulling the intimate collection of friends and family into a hypnotic stupor. Even the minister seemed on the verge of forgetting his routine. Or maybe he'd just indulged in too much weed that morning. Somehow, bride and groom managed to exchange vows and kiss and accept the decree of marriage and dance at a modest reception. We drank way more than we should have and passed out the minute we collapsed in our cottage suite.

Four days later Winston and April entered into holy wedlock at the Sacred Lamb Cathedral in Pasadena with an audience of some two hundred friends, family, and employees. The forward motion of their event plowed over our father's funeral services the following day. Their honeymoon prevented them from participating.

I remember very little of Dad's graveside eulogy, delivered by a series of middleclass salesmen he'd worked with many years ago. One by one, they recited their respective impressions of a distant, occasionally witty, workaholic who insisted on a burial

instead of a cremation, just to inconvenience as many people as possible. The master of ceremonies told canned jokes and interviewed attendees, claiming it was all part of the deceased's final request. If Dad could have been embalmed with his middle finger erected at God I'm sure he would have done it.

Yes, I was severely snookered during his service, but that's not why I can't remember. The accident erased a substantial amount of memories before and after.

I'm told, by my wife and others, that my father's coffin had been arranged on a platform over his open grave. The insurance report described it as a kind of table, wider than the opening of the grave, with the oak and bronze coffin resting on top. A tasteful fabric valance concealed the grave, apparently an effort to prevent those in attendance from understanding Dad's eternal resting place was simply a hole in dirt.

The distance from the ground to the table was measured at just under one meter.

Whereas the insurance report discreetly avoided why I approached Dad's coffin, Adonica told me I simply stood up, at some point between speakers, staggered toward the coffin and gave it a kick. I may have uttered a curse, it seems likely, but no one can confirm. Nevertheless, my heel connected not with the coffin but with the table, which listed away from me, setting the coffin into motion.

Dissatisfied with this minor disruption, I swung my foot again, missing everything entirely. Off balance, I spun around, back to the grave, face to the crowd. Instead of dropping to my knees so I could beg forgiveness of everyone, I fell backward, onto the platform, compromising its structural integrity.

As my weight skewed the table more and more, the distance between my heels, at the edge of the grave, and my elbows, leaning against Dad's coffin, expanded. Adonica later told me this is when the master of ceremonies finally jumped into

action. Alas, he failed.

The side of the platform I had kicked buckled completely, dropped to the ground and the table became a ramp for the coffin. Though April wasn't present, I'm sure she would have enjoyed the sight of me being swallowed by Mother Earth, only to be followed down by Dad's casket.

As I said, I remember very little of this day and I certainly don't remember hitting the bottom of my father's tomb.

Most people think a grave is simply an excavated pit, but there's more to it than that. Health laws mandate the coffin be sealed in a concrete vault. So when I fell the two meters, I didn't land on soft dirt, I hit solid cement.

The insurance report did not indicate the total weight of Dad and his coffin, but I doubt it just landed flat on top of me anyway. More than likely, it sort of shimmied its way down, scraping one side, then the other, oscillating into position on top of my ruptured body.

Cemetery maintenance crews struggled for something like thirty minutes hoisting Dad out of his new home. My wife, fortunately nowhere nearly as stoned as I was, activated her emergency beacon call.

Remarkably, I suffered just a broken arm, severe bruises, and the predictable concussion. I remained in a coma roughly three days.

And when I awoke everything was different.

Winston called the day before my Goris Report was due to be registered with the Academy Department of Psychic Records.

“Sorry it took so long.” He sounded depressed.

“No problem, Win.” I sat up on my couch, rubbed the afternoon sleep from my eyes. Though I could hear his voice, I couldn’t locate my com-tel wand. “Is she divorcing you?”

His sigh from somewhere out there made it sound like my dying room was breathing its last breath. “This is really hard, Matt.”

It had to be somewhere in this mess of dishes and clothes and take-out food containers. “Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m home.”

“No, I mean . . . what did she say?”

“I think she’s going to sue me.”

“Seriously? Divorce?”

“Breach of contract. My term with Hodge Podge doesn’t expire for two more years.”

I sat on the coffee table, conquered. “You don’t want that.”

“I told her I wasn’t leaving the company.”

“Okay. And?”

“Conflict of interest.”

I stood up. “Winston, can you go on visual?”

“What?”

“I lost my fucking com-tel. I can hear but I can’t find it. Maybe if you go viddy.”

Since the day Adonica went to the store and never came back, I began losing things. First, I misplaced my auxiliary data chip. I liked to keep a separate one around for personal info in case my com-tel was lost or stolen. Isn’t that what they tell you to do? Keep your credit accounts, your I.D. authorizations and all that shit

on a separate chip? So I did. And I lost it. The day after they arrested Adonica.

I found it eventually, only to lose something else. And most often it was my com-tel wand. No one could understand how I could misplace something so big. At least once a week. And when you lose your com-tel wand you lose everything. Communication, car, files, keys, every-fucking-thing.

"How 'bout now?" Winston's voice wavered, as though he were in motion, probably waving. "I can't see you anywhere. It's dark."

"Up the feed. Max it out." I scanned the furniture.

"I'm as bright as I can go. Can't you follow the sound?"

"The acoustics here . . . I can't tell." I squatted in the center of the room and slowly rotated. When I designed the damn place I never considered having to search for something strictly by ear. Adonica and I worked on the layout together, one of the high points of our marriage, just when I really started receiving recognition, just before the perks began fucking everything up. "Look, Win, just tell me what you need to tell me. I'll find the fucking thing . . . wait!"

Between the couch cushions something glowed faintly. Then I saw the nose of the wand, audio projector blinking. Easy to miss while standing. I threw a cushion aside, revealing Winston's three-inch holographic image hovering over my wand-light.

"Okay," he said. "I see you now. Can I kill the vid now? Battery low."

I picked up my wand. "Sure. Thanks for helping."

His image disappeared.

"Still with me, Win?"

"Still here."

"Can we cut to the chase?" I sat on the couch, ready to go back to sleep.

"It's complicated, Matt. She's willing to release me from my term and accept a position with Goris, but only on condition that you are not involved."

I grinned. Only because I had no plans to be involved in the first place. "Why would I be involved?"

"How should I know? This request is coming through you. We assumed you had some connection."

Suddenly this was feeling better. "Just the reading, like I said. I am not on Goris payroll. I have nothing to do with their operations. I have never even met the head of the project, Terril Bloedorn."

"If you can com-mail or vid-note me what you just said, I'll forward to her."

"Is that all?" I set my com-tel wand on the coffee table.

"You sound relieved."

"All that's left is the reading."

A pause. "I thought you already did the reading."

"They'll probably want me to read you too, Win."

Longer pause. "No offense, brother-in-law, but can they find someone else to do it?"

"Not my call. For some reason they chose me to read my own son. I'll make the request in my report if you like."

"Please."

"I totally understand, Win." My turn to pause. "If they deny your request are you still on board?"

"I just . . . and for . . ." His battery was dying.

"Win, you're cutting out."

". . . get back to . . ." Then silence.

Well, nothing to do but send my disclaimer to his com-mail account and hope for the best. I still had a few more hours until my deadline to submit. Enough time to finish my report and hope for the best.

All this for a fucking tube of toothpaste.



Lanier graduated high school just two days before his mother, my wife Adonica, was sentenced to twenty-nine years of security housing at Witherwood Penal Facilities in Delano, South California for the death of Viviana Snarey.

I attended both events.

Our son refused to observe the sentencing, on the advice of his counselor, opting instead to fly to Bermuda for some time alone, or so I was told. In three months he would leave for Stanford-116.

Viviana Snarey's parents and husband did appear for the sentencing, also on the advice of their counselor, in order to obtain "closure".

The jury had been unanimous in its decision against the woman who, under the influence of various intoxicants, caused the untimely death of Ms Snarey. Absolutely no doubt remained regarding the cause, since the unfortunate deed occurred in the middle of rush hour traffic on lane four of the southbound San Diego Freeway at eleven-twenty-two in the morning. It was witnessed not only by dozens of passing motorists, but was captured on county-operated observation cameras. However, the foginess of the motive left a lot of room for the defense team to recommend a plea of Unintentional Manslaughter.

Whatever. The jury didn't buy it, so they put her away.

The prosecution argued her severely intoxicated state did not deserve accommodation since she deliberately entered into said state, or something like that.

Objectivity is difficult for me, all things considered, but my guilt, though not at issue legally, has stayed with me all these years.

Tell you why:

The four of us, the Snareys and Adonica and myself, had been up all night together enjoying a variety of substances. Indeed, we had shared many nights of such activities.

Brent Snarey and his wife had been introduced to us through the host of an event honoring homecoming vets, some months earlier. I had been hired to do a few readings, which went well, as they usually did, even if the whole thing was beginning to turn me green. The restaurant provided libations, and my wife and I indulged excessively as usual. The Snareys, welcoming a cousin or neighbor or someone, indulged equally. Somehow we ended up at the same table.

And somehow I ended up sleeping with Viviana.

Those days remain kind of fuzzy for me, so I can't explain the big attraction. Viviana was rather plain, if charming and apparently available, despite her marriage to Brent.

Nevertheless, we screwed off and on whenever the opportunity presented itself, including the night prior to her death. When Viviana left with her husband that morning, Adonica still had no idea.

I would discover later, during one of our legal conferences with her attorneys, that Adonica discovered evidence of my indiscretion in our bathroom. I believe it was a used condom that failed to flush and Viviana's underwear in the trash.

So when she said she was taking our Electra/Nuke to the store, back when they still allowed nukes to be driven on public roads without special permits, in the days before tires and steering wheels and acceleration pedals became obsolete, I figured she was off to buy some shoes or something. So what if she'd had a little coke and booze and *Iniquity Brew*. Never stopped us before.

Instead of driving to the store she drove to Brent's and Viviana's home in Beverly Hills. According to her testimony, she called Viviana in advance and invited the woman to join her on her so-called shopping trip.

Somewhere on the aforementioned freeway, my wife stopped the car. Right in the middle of traffic.

The anti-gravs avoided colliding, naturally. They either braked or steered around her or took some other evasive action. The manual vehicles, still allowed to co-mingle with the new anti-gravs, required human interaction to avoid an accident.

Adonica explained under oath that she did not reveal her motive right away. She ordered her passenger to exit the vehicle. Viviana understandably refused. A verbal argument ensued, wherein Adonica produced the evidence she'd found in the bathroom.

Ashamed, but still refusing to leave the car, Viviana began crying. Adonica, as viewed on massive-screen monitors in the courtroom, got out of the car, went around to the passenger door and physically removed her ex-friend.

We all watched the quarrel, the brawl on the Kevlar freeway, the force and intent as Adonica shoved Viviana into the path of an oncoming Nissan Atom. Not a terribly beefy auto, but sufficient as a weapon, even when traveling slower than the speed limit.

Viviana's death occurred almost immediately.

I'm allowed to visit Adonica every few months.

I'm not allowed to come in contact with her, except under stringently supervised arrangement, and for only thirty minutes, max.

Rarely do we need more than ten minutes.

Every month she loses more skin tone, more light, more energy. On May tenth I entered our visitation room, a cubicle divided in half by a clear Kev-glass barrier, and debated whether to inform her of our son's pending position with Goris Pharmaceuticals.

Sobriety in the slammer, especially for someone who will likely never join society again, seems rather pointless when you

think about it, but it certainly improved my wife's awareness of things. Which, in this case, only amplified her suffering.

Every time we approached the Kev-glass wall, she put her hand against the barrier first and I matched my hand in position on my side. Microphones and speakers managed our conversations.

"You doing okay?" I asked sympathetically.

"No." Even over the speaker she sounded empty and dry.

"What can I do?"

"Kill me."

After years of this we had finally stopped re-hashing our pre-prison problems, had beaten to dust why I had strayed, why she had done what she did, until the entire mess just kind of exhaled from our lives altogether. Of course, we weren't living together.

"How's your mom?" For some reason she preferred leading our visits focused on someone even worse off.

"Same." Always the same answer.

"How's Lanny?" She couldn't speak his name without tearing up. He had never visited her. Not once.

"He's getting a position with a big company."

"Really?" Seriously interested, relieved, excited. The first time since . . . ever.

"Pharmaceutical company. Big corporation." A solid future in soul theft.

"Fantastic."

And not quite a done deal yet. "Still have some things to work out, but it looks pretty good."

"Is he happy?"

How was I supposed to answer that? I'd given up trying to gauge Lanier's emotional barometer eons ago. Was he still butchering me in his id? Probably. Did he hold his mother in the same closet? Probably. Did this give him some sense of internal

satisfaction? "He seems to be okay with everything."

She didn't know how to read that but decided against probing. "Can you com-mail some more pictures? Or vids, or something?"

I'd already sent her everything I could find. "Sure."

"I wish I could touch you."

In the five years since her trial I hadn't touched anyone. "I'll see you in another month. Maybe—"

She let her hand drop from the Kev-glass. "It's not the same, Matt."

I kept my hand in position. "I'm sorry."

For a moment she just stood there, gazing at me, thinking, reminiscing, daydreaming, her blue eyes pulsing now and then with something like anticipation, like undulating voltage, her life energy on a rheostat she couldn't control.

Though nearly the same age as me, early fifties, she seemed older and younger simultaneously, aged in a way that robbed her of maturity and experience. A child senior citizen.

I pulled my hand from the Kev-glass. "I'll find a way."

The voltage came up in her eyes briefly. A smile. Not in response to what I said, but to what I wanted.

An officer opened the door behind me, and I couldn't tell if it was man or woman. The officer didn't say a word, just stepped inside, holding the door wide, out of my way.

I looked at my wife. "I'll find a way."

Again she smiled.



My second trip up the Goris tower center dish coincided with a mild trembling earthquake which may have been hardly felt on ground level, but set the high stories waving like a field of tall bamboo. I gripped the brass railing with one sweaty palm and tried to focus on something stable, but everything out the windows was in motion. My free hand gripped the folder containing twenty-seven pages of single-spaced text as required by law. One of the few times in my life I touched actual paper.

When the platform hissed and clicked into position I walked quickly to Julice's desk. She didn't bother to stand, barely glanced at me, and said, "Mr. Bloedorn is waiting in your room, Mr. Chalmers."

I hurried past her, sensing a relationship in the stages of breakup. For a moment I considered offering her a consoling message, then remembered her brief handshake. I could make a believer out of her or leave her to her prayers. Or her philosophies.

Fuck her.

Instead of the dark, calm chamber from a month or so earlier, the room had been converted into a bright conference arena with an immense, granite-topped table. The windows were about seventy-percent clear, revealing stalks of ultra-highs weaving gracefully in sync against a background of clouds.

Though Terril Bloedorn sat alone on the window side of the table, he had brought into the room with him the anxieties of countless executives and investors all condensed into his stomach. A thin fellow, not too tall, dark complexion, probably European, though his accent was as American as mine, he vacillated between friend and foe. After inviting me to sit, without standing himself, he seemed disturbed that I didn't follow his favorite team, the New Los Angeles Dragonz, and every quarterback metaphor he

threw at me fell flat like a slab of cold liver on the polished table top. Every now and then he absent-mindedly stroked the gold team badge pinned to his lapel.

When he settled into anxious silence I began my presentation, paraphrasing the report, which neither of us consulted. I didn't need to be reminded, I knew what I wanted to say. I always did. I always finished within twenty minutes.

He said something about Lanier not living up to an end-run T.D., but I didn't get it so he re-phrased. "So you're telling me Lanier is a poor choice."

"I didn't say that." My seat was different than the one I had used during my reading of Lanier. Less comfortable. "I said that unless he is supported by a stabilizing influence, he could exceed your budget without developing any fruitful results."

He tilted back in his chair and thought for a moment. "What's the difference?"

I'd been in this exact same position enough times, always splitting hairs to satisfy everyone's best interests. "As I outlined in my observations," I gestured to the spread of pages on the table between us, "Lanier possesses an abnormally aggressive drive when appropriately stimulated. What I saw during my session is this drive provoking him into a multitude of directions without completely satisfying the conditions of any specific target."

Bloedorn brought all four legs of his chair to the floor. "You just described my nephew."

"I don't know your nephew."

"He's six years old."

I folded my hands comfortably on the table. "Are you asking me for justification of what I witnessed?"

He leaned forward, just as comfortably. "I'm asking you for your insight. It's what we're paying you for."

"My insight suggests applying a stabilizing factor. Your primary option is to accept him as assigned without modification.

If so, my *insight* suggests you will endure multiple target processes without achieving the specific goal outlined in your contract. An alternate option is to withdraw your offer and pursue another candidate.”

“Where does your stabilizing factor apply?”

I shuffled through the papers, located the one I wanted and rotated it on the table until he could read it. “This is a unique reading for me, Mr. Bloedorn. I have never before possessed the resources necessary to satisfy a condition of my own recommendation. As I outline here,” I tapped the paper, encouraging him to read along, “Lanier Chalmers exhibits exceedingly refined focus when supported by the influence of one Winston Hodge, an experienced bio-physicist of considerable renown. Winston also happens to be Lanier’s uncle.”

Bloedorn picked up the single page and sat back in his chair, eyes following the words I’d just spoken and more. Much more. “This Winston Hodge. Your brother-in-law.”

I nodded.

“Currently employed by Hodge Podge Nutrition.” He put the paper down and leaned toward me. “A position he is willing to relinquish?”

I nodded. And my bowels growled.

For a long moment he just stared at me, neither smiling nor frowning, just stroking the Dragonz pin. Perhaps he wondered if I could read his mind. Perhaps he wondered if he could read mine. “And I have your guarantee—”

“I never guarantee my results. Read the contract.”

Again, he spent some time in thought, tapped his fingers on the granite table top, stroked his lapel pin.

“Allow me to put things in perspective for you,” I intentionally kept my tone professional. “I get paid whether you accept my recommendation or not. I am not contractually obligated to provide a resolution for you, only to provide data to assist you

in coming to a reasonable conclusion.”

“And if I accept your recommendation, company policy stipulates a separate reading for Mr. Hodge.”

“I have no control over your policies.”

“But you stand to gain from another reading.” He smiled. “For another member of your family.”

“Who would rather submit to this process with an alternate *telecaster*,” I said. Shifting my tone, this time to very friendly, I added, “Which brings to mind, Mr. Bloedorn. Why me? I’m not the only active *telecaster* in the directory. Your subject is my son.”

The effect was instant and precisely what I hoped for. He returned my smile with a smile and sat back in his chair. “This may come as a surprise to you, Mr. Chalmers, but I believe in what you do. I’ve witnessed too much evidence, which I won’t go into. I’ve researched your field.”

“Then you know the risk of a *telecaster* reading a relative, let alone two.”

He waved it off. “It’s not my risk. It’s yours.”

Ah, well, yes, he *had* done his research.

“Still, you’re aware of the Non-Specific Influences clause.”

He pushed the papers aside. “Can he do it or not, Matthias? He’s your son. And Winston Hodge is your brother-in-law.”

“Does that mean you won’t honor his request for a different *telecaster*?”

“I’d like to keep both readings confined to the same perspective. The same non-specific influence.”

I sighed, chalking up a loss for Winston. Oh well. Tough luck. “Lanier can do anything he wants. This place is like a candy store. He wants to taste everything. Winston is the shopkeeper.”

“Does your brother-in-law appreciate his position would not be one of authority over anyone except your son?”

“He does.”

His expression didn’t change until he stood, then it

evaporated. Approaching the seventy-percent clear window, he said, "I want this project to succeed very much. I know toiletries sounds mundane to the outsider, hardly warranting such intense analysis, but when you're up here, with a view like this, every breath you breathe is important. Even something as trite as toothpaste carries substantial weight." He looked down. "And it's a very long drop."

I stood up too. "I'm not here to represent my son."

"It makes no difference to me if you are."

"Then I'll leave you to your work."

He did not return my remark, but I stopped at the closed door anyway.

"Your secretary, Julice," I said, not looking at him. I wanted to force him to vocalize this exchange.

"What about her?"

"She's going through some hard shit right now."

He took a moment to place the nature of this dialogue into context but couldn't do it. "I wasn't aware."

Then I did look at him, catching him off guard. "Take her out to dinner. You have a future together."

I stepped out, closed the door behind me without informing him what type of future they would have together.

7

Some people believe every time a coin is flipped the universe divides, creating a path for each result, creating one universe responding to heads, and another responding to tails. And every decision resulting from the flip creates another diversion, and so on. Some people believe an infinite number of universes exist, each responding to each choice within a choice within a choice.

Quite a concept, even if it turns out to be fiction.

I learned of this concept from a group of physicists I happened to meet during one of my readings, a long time ago. The occasion was the birthday of a young lad, Simon Quelly, who had just graduated from Stanford-116, a prestigious college of the sciences in Stanford, North California. The same university Lanier would attend. The celebration had been arranged by his contemporaries, who bombarded him with an assortment of advanced paradoxes and complex formulas while getting him drunker and drunker.

Before we settled down for the reading, Simon, a stunningly good-looking chap who did not fit the visual cliché of a nerdy physicist, wanted to know how I did what I did. Sitting next to me at the head table, he nursed his own private bottle of champagne. Other than bloodshot eyes barely open and just slightly slurred speech, he showed no signs of inebriation.

I admitted I had no idea.

This seemed to trouble him. "Such a shame, unable to corroborate this amazing ability." He turned his chair away from the rest of the group, gestured for me to do the same, which I did. "You know, Houdini promised his wife he would contact her after he died. They agreed on the signal. But he never contacted her, according to public record anyway."

I nodded. "So I've heard."

"So we can't confirm the nature of human energy once a body has expired. Not by employing conventional tools." His cranium throbbed with equations which he struggled to formulate into a coherent sentence. "Yet, what you appear to do, which has been verified under well-documented conditions, is supported by a variety of quantum theories which may also suggest post-death human energies may somehow . . . survive. Endure."

I shrugged.

"Here's the thing," he scooted closer to me, as though the conversation could be interpreted as heretical. "When we perform experiments, I mean, to validate theories or disprove them, our expectations can," he looked around, searching for the word, "skew the outcome."

I caught the eye of an elderly physicist across the room, whose sympathetic expression implied he tolerated Simon Quelly's naïveté like a seasoned guru.

"I'm over-simplifying, naturally," Quelly continued.

"Naturally."

"But objectivity, when it comes right down to electrons, is subjective." He took a sip of champagne, which drizzled down his chin. "I mean, experiments, back in the, what, nineteen-forties, confirmed that electrons take every possible path toward a target. What was his name . . ." he closed his eyes, and I sensed how important this moment of doubt was to him. "Richard Feynman. Brilliant. He said electrons behaved differently depending on who was viewing them. Or something like that."

He went into a very detailed, very boring summary of Feynman's formula of electrons, how they indeed shoot straight forward at a designated target, but arrive there only after "sniffing out" every direction imaginable. Sounds crazy but, as Feynman himself said, quantum mechanics describes nature as absurd from the point of view of common sense.

Listen: Common sense doesn't mean what it used to mean.

On the day of Simon Quelly's twenty-sixth birthday – the same age as me at the time – he suspected his years of study had led him down a personal path of realization which challenged the validity of the path itself.

A handful of professors and students rescued me, escorting Simon to the piano, where they sang ancient Tom Lehrer songs, leaving me to meditate before the reading.

And I thought about his notion that all choices, everywhere, by everything and everyone, were just splayed out there, right down to the electron, just waiting for a cue. In classic physics, this is a quandary examining the quality of chance, but I mean to examine something else.

Empowerment.

If this is true, if all paths exist all at once for everything and everyone, what is to prevent us from consciously selecting the outcomes we prefer, as individuals? Of course, common experience tells us the act of "choosing" an outcome we prefer isn't always so successful, but what if the fault lies in our method of choosing? We all assume we want what we want, but what if we are unintentionally preventing the desired path to manifest by virtue of our preoccupation with the obstacle?

Modern mystic science has delivered to us more than disconnected souls, thanks to my son and me. By giving substance to what was often regarded as merely concept, revolutionary ideas and possibilities have suddenly unveiled themselves, no?

It seems to me, then, that our best option is to focus on the outcome which serves us best. I mean each one of us, personally.

Simon Quelly swam through my secret vision alone. Literally swimming, arms and legs pumping for all they were worth. Fully clothed, he could have been going up or down, I couldn't tell. The oxygen in his lungs seeped from his mouth in tight, small bubbles, drifting off in all directions. Electrons in search

of their homes.

His desperation could have been for his own life or someone else's. He seemed to be searching. How much of this was real and how much was metaphor? Sometimes the line blurred.

My own body felt the need to breathe, the bruised ribs, the sore skull, and more. Still, we swam. We reached for something, sky or companion, not sure. Either way, the light dimmed too soon.

Simon Quelly's atoms and electrons scurried off in more directions than I could follow. Some went backward in recollection, a honeymoon, a wedding, a birthday party, a graduation, a bicycle lesson, a birth. Then everything rebounded forward, none of it changing, right through to the slide off the mountain road, into water black as coffee.

And again everything retreated, all the way back to being born, and rocketed forward again, into the lake. And back again. And forward again. And again. And again. And again.

Someone was shaking me. *Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!*

With more effort than ever required before, I pushed away from the clench of the vision, jumped free with both feet, gasping for air.

I awoke alone on the stage, standing before a room of quiet professors and students and Simon Quelly, all staring expectantly. No one near me. No one helping me recover.

How could I tell him every one of his electrons was heading in the same fucking direction? How could I tell him I didn't know the point of the choice? How could I tell him I didn't know where his "human energy" would wind up?

It wouldn't be the last time I witnessed unavoidable death. And it wouldn't be the last time I lied about it.



April refused to talk to me.

As usual, she blamed me for everything going wrong in her life. From her point of view, every electron in the world was against her, leading her constantly uphill, against the wind, in the sand, without shoes, without an ounce of muscle for resistance. And somehow I was behind it all. I had rallied the electrons to resist her.

Hail Almighty Matthias! Commander of all electrons!

As far back as Dad's death from the obscure liver cancer, somehow I had caused it. And after his funeral, the one she didn't attend, after my accident, after I awoke to a brave new world where I saw with double vision, above and below the water-line, I became the enemy of free choice.

Winston had a hard time looking me in the eye, on the one occasion we actually met prior to his corporate reading. Technically, we were legally prohibited from speaking to each other, but the encounter occurred apparently by accident, and I would have graciously avoided him had he not grabbed my arm in the crowded mall.

I had just bought a new sleeve for my com-tel wand, the one I kept losing. The new sleeve emitted a very shrill sound and flashed brightly when activated by the spoken request, "One two nine locate Matthias." Each wand sleeve was programmable to respond to the owner's name.

I had no idea why Winston was at the mall.

"Matt." He tried to sound spontaneous and casual, but his posture seemed cautious.

"Hey Win. Hey, we're not supposed to communicate."

"I know. Sorry. Yeah, we better not be seen together."

I turned to leave.

"Matt, can I ask a favor?"

I slowed to stop, nearly collided with a woman and her kid. I tried to resist the feeling of manipulation, or something like it. "What?"

"Whatever you . . . see . . . can you . . ."

"My readings are confidential. But pertinent information goes into the report."

"And everything else?"

"Stays in here." I tapped my temple.

"Absolutely everything."

"Sometimes even I can't retrieve it." Absolute fact. Unless I committed my experience to text file or viddy-gram, it was like trying to remember random numbers to a combination lock or a garbled password applied only once to an online porn account.

Or unless it's really, really bad. The really awful memories I can't forget. The shit I want to forget but can't.

"April is really burning about this," he said.

"I'm not surprised. You can always pull out."

"No I can't." He glanced around the mall, not so much paranoia, just avoiding me. "April's thinking about taking the company public. She needs the capital. And I need to work somewhere. Stockholders aren't going to want me around."

"Then just sit back and enjoy the ride. You've seen what I do. Does anyone walk away with a limp?"

He laughed a little. "Sometimes, yeah."

"I can't talk to you any more, Win. If I get audited . . ."

He stayed quiet, turned and walked off into the mall crowd.

The next time I saw him we were sitting across from each other in a dark room at Goris Pharmaceuticals.

No storms, no earthquakes, no hangovers. This would be my last reading for a while, hopefully forever. I would have time for plenty of hangovers. The two payments from Goris would

bolster my savings for many years. If I ran out of money I could sell the house in Hollywood Hills and . . .

And what?

Crawl into a hole somewhere and try to forget.

Winston's reading was the one I wanted to forget the most.

Some people are extremely bland when I view them with my grim vision. Hardly any drama. Hardly any aspirations. Hardly any interests or motivations or regrets or sins. I run the risk, sometimes, of inventing issues when the canvas is so blank. I can't help but project some of myself onto the poor sap in the hot seat.

My vapid brother-in-law fit into that category. I knew this even before the reading. Any time I shared his company I sensed his blandness, his unity with the low frequency hum of the universe, uninspired. Not that he didn't enjoy life, he just didn't jump up and down about it. He was an easy person to be around because his inner voice sang at such a low volume.

At first I couldn't see him at all. He sort of blended in with the background of empty space, like a chameleon. And when he finally appeared, when I allowed his inner vibe, his second-level essence, as I call it, to appear, he was naked.

Not that I cared. Such visualizations occurred frequently. For one thing, the second-level body didn't necessarily match the real one. I've read women, for instance, who were, by social standards, outright grotesque, but their second-level selves were beautiful, gorgeous.

Winston's inner, second-level persona resembled his actual one close enough, I suppose. I didn't really dwell on it. Eventually his inner image dissipated as I sank deeper into my vision, seeking his connection with my son and Goris Pharmaceuticals.

I didn't need to search long. I saw them together, Lanier and Winston and the team, engaged in lively discussions and sessions at mark-up boards, filled with equations and molecular

models and formulas and theories. I saw the team marching together in one unified direction, led by Winston, followed by Lanier, followed in turn by another Winston.

So he appeared to be serving two functions. Maybe one for Lanier personally, and the other for the team in general. The *WonderDent* group stayed together and on task as they performed activities I couldn't identify. One by one, the team members began to disappear. This didn't diminish the focus of the team's goal, however. Eventually, all were gone except Winston and Lanier. Two Winstons, rather.

And then a third.

This third Winston appeared away from the other two, the Winstons involved with *WonderDent*, and for a moment I considered dismissing this aspect as a personal disconnect, which wouldn't affect my report or recommendation. Then a second Lanier appeared with the third Winston.

You know how sometimes in dreams, things that would seem weird in reality don't seem weird at all? Maybe you're talking with a schoolteacher who has three arms, or you're riding an oversized pigeon to the dentist office, or something like that? Within the context of the dream we tend to accept it.

For a moment I didn't notice the weird thing. Or, rather, I noticed, I just didn't care. It was not pertinent to the reason for the reading.

But just as I followed the river of blood during Lanier's reading, I turned my attention from the professional aspect and followed the third Winston and the second Lanier. They strolled outside, near a beach, but not April's beach house. Like Hawaii, but not Hawaii. I would later identify the location as Bermuda.

Winston and Lanier stood on the sand watching the sunset, holding hands.

I can't say I ever envisioned my son getting married, or attached in any meaningful way with a woman, but only because

of his affliction. I assumed his personality would always challenge his romantic relationships as it had challenged his parental relationships. So this display of affection surprised me not because of the gender, so much, but because of my son's ability to connect romantically *at all*.

Lanier's ardent attention on the husband of my sister eclipsed everything else and set the whole scene wheeling around, smearing sky and beach and birds and ocean into a whirlwind of color. My interest in this dynamic pulled me into their vortex of rendezvous, some benign meetings for dinner or café coffee, some evenings at the theatre, some shadowed sexual engagements, and some not-so-shadowed.

Keep in mind, I'm no prude, and I'm certainly no saint, but this was my son and his uncle. And my son appeared so fucking happy, how could I ignore that? And Winston appeared so fucking animated. These two men, this second Lanier and third Winston, could have been two completely different people than the ones I knew.

The spinning colors and secret trysts blew around me like a storm, leaves and debris flying topsy-turvy everywhere. The leaves fluttered close, some of them Tarot cards.

I had never employed the use of devices such as cards, but a *telecaster* I had met once, Rhonda Redondo, used Tarot, astrology, numerology, and a shit-load of other ologies to supplement her readings. She tried to get me interested in Tarot, spread them out on a table once and went through them one by one.

I immediately forgot most of them.

Until now.

One of airborne cards tumbled close to me, growing larger and larger to make its point. A Three of Swords.

A majority of the Tarot requires some serious insight and study to interpret symbols and meanings, but the Three of Swords

is pretty straightforward. The card displays a huge heart, the universal symbol of love, or close relationships, or family, or all of the above and more. Three medieval swords spear the heart, one on each side and one down the middle.

The massive card became a door blocking me, then creaking open to an unlit hallway. I reached for the handle, but the door closed, refusing me. The door didn't just close, however. It fell forward, on top of me, crushing me, squashing me like my father's coffin, sweeping me from the vision.

Sometimes it's hard to tell when I've exited a vision. More than once I've awakened, or thought I'd awakened, only to find myself in another dream-state vision. When I stared across the dark room to Winston's wide, petrified eyes, I wished I was in another dream within a dream.

Perhaps he didn't know I had finished, or he knew damn well I had finished. Perhaps the accusation in my eyes scared him.

In all my readings, corporate or personal or whatever, I always, *always* released my subject, either with word or gesture or no communication whatsoever, to leave ahead of me. I never removed myself from a session first.

Until now.



Dad's burial casket left a two-inch scar on my scalp, but no other permanent physical evidence of my misbehavior.

Adonica said she stayed with me in my hospital room the entire three days of my coma. She said April and Winston, fresh from a short honeymoon, paid one visit, and didn't talk much, except to say a prayer, apparently more for my sister's benefit than mine.

I can't pinpoint exactly when April fully committed herself to the teachings of her church, since I never paid much attention to her religious inclinations, even while serving as her Research Manager. Neither one of our parents paid attention to it either. Up until the moment I woke from my three-day coma, I didn't give a shit about anything religious or spiritual in nature.

Some folks who experienced similar life-changing traumas claim to have had dreams during their comas wherein they were given the choice between the tunnel of light or back to Earth. Some claim they encountered a council of warm and fuzzy beings who explained the meaning of life in cryptic detail. Still others relate floating above themselves, viewing their bodies from "on high" for unspecified periods of time before resuming their lives.

Sorry, my non-conscious days remain a blank to me. Mundane, I know, but that's all there is to it.

Upon opening my eyes, however, the world as I had known it definitely changed.

Not that the change was visible right away. Hell, I didn't even know where I was at first. No one was in the room with me except this beautiful blond with the tattoo of a shooting-star on her bare ankle, asleep in a torturous guest chair next to the wall. I wanted to get her attention, but an assortment of tubes and cables in every orifice of my body restricted my movement. So I tried to

remember the events which had placed me in this room, in this bed, in this condition.

I couldn't remember a fucking thing.

I tried imagining what I might have done. A traffic accident? A bar fight? A plane crash?

And I couldn't remember my name.

The worst moment of panic in my life. Without a name I had no identity, in a quiet hospital room with one sleeping person. I couldn't even check my com-tel.

I know this sounds stupid from the perspective of common sense, but I knew I was alive because I couldn't move. If I were dead I should have been able to do all sorts of things, unconstrained by physical reality. So I wasn't dead.

And I hurt.

My head, my ribs, and my left arm in wrapped cast, all ached terribly.

Somebody had written something on the synthetic wrap, but the scrawl was upside down. I tried to focus, tried to lift my arm. No good. It looked like a heart, scribbled with blue marker next to some words. And a cross. Had I forgotten a language of hieroglyphics? I could think in words, so I knew I could communicate if it weren't for all these fucking tubes.

That first letter: J. I remembered J. The rest, not so sure. The last letter looked like an S, the same upside down as rightside up. It took me forever to piece it all together.

Jesus.

Someone had written "Jesus" on my cast.

Hallelujah.

No idea who.

The effort drained me and I fell asleep.

I remember dreaming, but not the specific dreams. No epic transformations. No conversations with prophets or deceased celebrities. Just whispers. Voices low, reverent.

A shadow passed over my closed eyelids and I blinked. More whispers, another shadow, I blinked again, opened my eyes.

That's when Adonica screamed.

Another woman, a nurse, approached, checked the monitors bedside, just to be sure I wasn't faking it. Yes, I was really awake. I was really alive.

"Welcome back."

I still couldn't speak. My throat was unbearably dry, my chest ached. My head ached. Everything ached. More than before.

Adonica remained by her chair, allowing the nurse to take my blood pressure and other vitals. I watched her, hoping she wasn't my sister, my mother, a relative who would object to me fucking her.

She paced in place, anxious to reach me, but a doctor arrived, refusing to be impressed by my apparent recovery. He mumbled with the nurse, verified the conditions to assure I wasn't somehow cheating the system. He shined a pen light in my eyes. Still dubious, he looked at me very sternly.

"Do you know who you are?"

I tried to nod, tried to lift my free hand and gesture to the tubes.

"We'll take care of that as soon as we can." He took my pulse, just to look busy. "You can understand me?"

I nodded.

He glanced over his shoulder at Adonica. "Do you recognize her?"

I stared into Adonica's wonderfully blue eyes. A smile like Christmas morning. I wanted to know her very much, to search her body for more tattoos, but I could offer only an expression of apology.

"It'll come to you." He put my wrist back in my lap and left the room.

That's when I remembered something about him. He

owned a dog. A black Labrador with a bad hip. What else? Blackie? He named his black Lab Blackie? What a lame fucking name. The doctor, whose name I did not know, had told me he'd just taken his dog Blackie to the vet, but her kidney failure was untreatable.

So I had one memory to hold onto.

I couldn't wait to tell him. *I remember you. Or at least your dog.*

The blond with the beautiful eyes and luscious mouth and the shooting-star tattoo and those sacrilegious curves waited and waited and waited for the nurse to finish her routine, to just get on with it and leave already.

Did she remember Blackie too?

The nurse adjusted my covers and I caught that whiff of vinegary, bandaged skin that hadn't been exposed to air for a long, long time, and I wondered how many years I'd been suspended with Blackie. How long had everyone been waiting for me?

At last, the nurse ducked out and this blond Christmas gift came to my side, tears leaking down her cheeks. She held my one free hand, careful to avoid the IV.

"I love you," she sobbed.

Holy fucking Christ, she loved me. I must be some fucking movie star or politician to win such a companion. The monitors accelerated, numbers jumped, the world thumped in my heart. She loved *me*?

"I thought . . ." she choked, reflecting on some bad memory. "I thought you . . ." But she couldn't finish. "I'm so glad you came back."

Me too.

The doctor returned with the nurse in tow. They still looked at me like I'd done something wrong.

"Let's remove some of this," he said.

They moved tediously slow. I couldn't wait to remind him of Blackie.

When all that remained was the catheter and the IV and the electrodes and some connections I couldn't identify, I felt like I'd arrived from another planet.

"Are you thirsty?" The nurse held a cup of ice water.

They ramped my bed up to sitting position and adjusted my blanket. "Not too much," the doctor warned.

I accepted the cup, took a sip of the most deliciously cool liquid ever, careful not to barf it right back up.

The doctor evaluated my ability to swallow. Satisfied, he considered another test. He looked at the blond, then at me again. "Can you tell me what you remember?"

"Blackie." What a relief to say the name out loud.

The blond looked like I'd slapped her.

"What was that?" The doctor didn't share my enthusiasm, and that scared me. Maybe I had come back from death into someone else's body.

"Blackie," I repeated. "Your black Lab."

He stepped away, turned to the nurse and the blond for help, then back to me. "How do you know about Blackie?"

"You told me," I whispered hoarsely.

He shook his head in denial or dismay. "We've never spoken."

I wanted to laugh, but my bones hurt too much. "Her hip. Her kidney. You took her to the vet."

"You must have me confused . . ." He thought it over. "Her appointment's Friday."

Had I awoken into a world where time went backward? The memory remained clear. "He couldn't do anything. You said the vet couldn't help."

But he wouldn't have any of it. He lifted my wrist again, took my pulse again. "You've suffered quite an accident." Releasing my hand, he sighed, trying to think of another way to gauge my mental capacity. Inspired, he said, "Do you know

your name?"

"Sure," I admitted,

They all waited.

"Jesus."



My oral report to Terril Bloedorn on my reading of Winston went a lot quicker than my presentation on Lanier. A mere seven pages of text sat on the table between us. Neither of us glanced at it. I couldn't wait to go home and get seriously blitzed.

A woman I didn't recognize at first entered after me, sat in the chair next to Terril, and for a moment I thought he had invited his grandmother to our meeting. He didn't introduce her and I didn't recognize her until about half-way through my short speech.

Rhonda Redondo and I had met roughly thirty years earlier, during more turbulent times. We were so much younger then, so smooth of skin and free of scars, though Rhonda was older than me and more experienced in the psychic arts and sciences.

Lanier had not yet been born, I had barely begun pitching my services to the world at large, Adonica and I had yet to succumb to the downside of cupidity. Our marriage survived adequately on my wife's income from the newly-christened Hodge Podge Nutrition Inc. and my own burgeoning profits. I had just quit as April's Research Manger, irritating my sister sorely.

Our federal government had initiated an investigative study, headed by a very stern counsel of bureaucrats, to evaluate the mystic sciences. As usual, the Fed wanted to regulate everything so we had to submit to its scrutiny and its policy. Licenses would be required. Guidelines would be established. Fees would be levied. Fines would be imposed.

An assembly of so-called professional psychics was called to Washington DC to facilitate the process. It felt like a massive tax audit.

At some point I was assigned to a focus group which included Rhonda, a seasoned psychic who considered the whole investigative circus beneath her. In those days her hair was very

long, half of it purple, the other half green. She wore a short, tattered house dress over jeans and high heels. A tattoo of all twelve signs of the zodiac in a circle adorned her right upper arm. The Tarot card of Death was tattooed on her left arm. Most of the time she kept to herself, reading her Tarot cards.

During an unusually extended period of hurried waiting, our group was sequestered in a dull, over-air-conditioned room with a cheap table, stiff chairs, and no windows. I sat next to her, nibbling on some unhealthy snack not sanctioned by Hodge Podge Nutrition Inc., and glanced at the cards curiously.

“You’re new,” she said without looking at me.

“Think they’ll send me home then?”

“You’re also a smartass.”

“Your cards tell you that?”

She looked at me. “Your mouth tells me that.” She dealt a card onto the table: The Fool. A young lad in medieval peasant’s attire with a hobo’s bindle – belongings folded into a bandanna tied to a stick on his shoulder – stepped blithely forward, eyes on the sky, unaware of the cliff before him.

“If I couldn’t do what I do I’d swear that was a trick.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You have no respect for your gift.” She returned to her cards, retrieved the ones on the table and shuffled. “That makes you dangerous.”

I munched whatever it was I was eating. “Some gift. I didn’t ask for this.”

“Yes you did.”

I laughed. “Sure. I asked for the concussion, the broken arm, the coma.”

“Sometimes we ask too hard.” She dealt out more cards.

I finished my snack, wadded the bag loudly and tossed it to the floor somewhere near the corner trash can, where the wrapper unfolded itself just as loudly. The other *physic specialists*, as the Fed identified us, tried to ignore me.

Rhonda sighed with disgust. "You need discipline."

"Yeah. My father thought so too."

"A wise man, your father."

"He's the reason I'm where I am today."

She cocked an eyebrow at me. Another sigh, and she spoke to an unseen observer. "Why do I invite this into my life?" She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Eyes still closed, she shuffled her cards a few times and dealt one face up on the table.

Seven of Cups. The image depicted the silhouette of a person examining seven floating cups, each filled with desirable and not-so-desirable icons. Women. A castle. Jewels. Prestige. Snakes. For me, the scene evoked a kind of metaphysical supermarket, where the customer may observe and presumably indulge in any of the available wares – what pessimists generally identify as vices.

Rhonda's mouth turned down in disgust. "Another fucking daydreamer."

"Would you like me to sit somewhere else?"

She collected the card, shuffled some more. "Doesn't matter. For some reason I attract daydreamers."

I assessed her ridiculous hair and attire openly. "Hard to believe you attract anyone."

She set the stack of cards on the table in front of me. "Shuffle."

"Fuck you, I don't need your cards."

"I know that. Shuffle anyway."

I looked around at the room of psychics and charlatans. Some pretended they understood. Some pretended they didn't understand. Some yawned. I picked up the deck. "How many times?"

"Whatever. Just shuffle. Stop when you want."

So I shuffled. I stopped counting at six, but kept shuffling anyway. The exercise had a calming effect and I allowed my vision

of her to expand, to explore. A naughty thing to do without an invitation, spiritually speaking.

A part of me hoped I wouldn't detect anything, that our mutual association with the unknown canceled each other out, but her life came to me easily. Her childhood had been one of affluence, of social superiority and indulgences. Not political or religious or corporate or entertainment, but some kind of royalty, maybe a foreign dignitary. She spent a lot of her youth traveling.

Whether Rhonda opened up to me intentionally or not, I couldn't be sure, but the process of viewing her kept me quiet and peaceful for a few minutes, which everyone in the room appreciated.

Without paying much attention to my shuffling, I stopped and placed the deck on the table.

"Cut them three times," she said.

I did.

"Re-assemble any way you want."

I replaced the three stacks in different order.

Rhonda reached over and flipped the top card face up: Judgement. Archangel Gabriel descended from the clouds, blowing his horn for gray bodies rising from their earthly crypts. *Ready or not . . .*

A shadow passed over Rhonda's face and she turned the card face down on the stack. "Shuffle."

Again I shuffled, again I counted to five or six and kind of drifted off, learning more about her. While still a teen she received an invitation to an esteemed college, an invitation she rejected. More traveling, this time as a young adult, in the company of . . . what, gypsies? Europe. America. India.

I stopped shuffling, cut the cards three times and put them back together.

As before, she flipped the top card face up.

Judgement.

She stared at the card for about a minute, glanced at me and repeated, "Shuffle."

Once more I shuffled, once more I relaxed to her story, her gradual rise to recognition and respect and success. Though she moved in secret circles her name preceded her. Multiple opportunities of marriage presented by a multitude of suitors all met with rejection from her. Just when I turned toward the hallway of her future, she spoke.

"Your card."

I opened my eyes. "I thought I decided when to stop shuffling."

"You stopped shuffling two minutes ago." Her faint smirk suggested she'd offered me as much as she wanted to.

As before, I cut the deck three times, reassembled them and waited for her to turn the top card.

"You turn it over," she said.

By now the entire room of "specialists" were on their feet, watching. I flipped the top card.

Judgement.

Before the momentum of such an odds-breaking result could stir the group's reaction, she turned the card face down, flipped the entire deck over and fanned it face up across the table, assuring everyone – maybe even herself – that the deck was not *all* Judgement cards.

"Is this part of your act?" I had to admit I was impressed.

"Act?" She scooped up her cards with a scowl. Her temper dared not escalate before such an audience, but reining it in took some effort. "I've seen a card turn up twice like that maybe six or seven times. But three times in a row? Never." She didn't shuffle her deck, just weighed it in her palm.

"So that kind of makes me special?" I beamed.

"It doesn't make you anything except what you are."

I looked at the group and feigned naïve interest, leaning

conspiratorially closer to Rhonda. "So what does it mean?"

"In your case," she countered my melodrama with an urgent, theatrical whisper, "it means you're an asshole."

Applause around the table. I gave a little bow from my seat and edged away from Rhonda. "Thanks. A revelation."

Our com-tels and vidy-SKaDs had been confiscated pending completion of our testimonies, even though the bureaucrats insisted this was only an evaluation and data-collecting conference. So I shut my eyes and tried to relax.

Everyone returned to their mutual places of boredom, muttering among themselves about their own experiences with mystic science, with the government, with grocery shopping.

"It means your energy will be focused on resurrection, on reconciliation, on redemption." Rhonda whispered so softly in my ear I could have been dreaming I heard her voice. I'm still not sure. I kept my eyes closed.

Resurrection, reconciliation, redemption meant nothing to me in that room on that day or the days that followed. Over the next week or so Rhonda would discuss the entire seventy-eight cards of the Tarot, especially the twenty-two Major Arcana, the trump cards, the heavy-hitters of the deck. She described the Fool's journey step by step, card by card, every image representing an ascending phase of enlightened attainment.

At times I recognized my own struggles in the archetypes, which at once amazed and insulted me. That the entire range of the human psyche could be reduced to just twenty-two stages made me feel small and insignificant. The precision of these stages, however, just fucking knocked me out.

I forgot all except the Death card, and only because it was tattooed on her arm.

As we faced each other across the granite table at Goris Pharmaceuticals I wondered if she remembered me. She'd let her hair grow out gray, had gotten it trimmed a little, and her dress

showed more taste and expense. Her long sleeves hid the tats. How much had I changed? A few more tattoos and piercings. Same pony tail. Facial hair had come and gone a few times, but other than that maybe just weight gain and wrinkles.

Lots of wrinkles.

"As you know," Terril wanted to wrap this up, but one last issued remained, "Academy law prevents us from asking a candidate his age or even birth date until after any level of psychic evaluation has been performed. Normally, we would close this portion of the eval and call the candidate back in to obtain this information for an astrological profile. But since you, presumably, can provide such data we are within our rights to direct the request to you." He gestured toward Rhonda and adjusted the sports pin on his lapel.

She smiled. "My name is Rhonda Redondo. Nice to meet you Mr. Chalmers."

Too far apart to shake hands, I nodded.

"I have requested Ms Redondo's participation," Terril continued, more interested in his sports pin than in our conversation, "to supplement your input."

I shrugged. It's happened before. No big deal. "Doesn't affect my paycheck. Have at it."

"What is the subject's birth date?" She asked, her voice a ragged replica of what it once was.

"Which subject?" Of course I knew which subject. I was just being a prick.

"I'm sorry. Your son. Let's begin with him."

My first impulse, to blurt out January one, twenty-eighty-five, faltered. Too obviously false. "March eight, twenty-eighty-nine."

"Do you remember the time of day? And the location?" She kept her hands on her lap, not typing anything into any devices. Maybe recording?

“Three-thirty p.m. Burbank. It was sunny. About seventy-two degrees.”

Her pause, those eyes staring straight into mine, did she know it was all bullshit? For a moment I feared she already had the information and might be testing me, my validity.

“Nice, Mr. Chalmers, but not necessary.” She faced Terril. “Not exactly the fit you were seeking, but acceptable.”

Like the abrupt woosieness from a sugar drop, my grim vision stomped down on my brain, and I knew these two people at the table with me were related. They lacked any physical resemblance to one another, but somewhere they shared a bond. Not mother and child. Maybe cousins, or aunt and nephew.

Terril nodded his thanks to her and turned to me. “And your brother-in-law?” He indicated I should give the information to Rhonda.

“I have no idea when Winston’s birthday is.”

Terril thought a moment, fingered through the papers on the table.

“I never mentioned his birth date,” I offered. “I wasn’t aware it would be significant.”

He looked at Rhonda, who shrugged it off.

“If Mr. Chalmers’ vision revealed nothing,” she began, “I see no reason to delay a decision. Unless he’s a Sagittarius.” She looked at me with zero interest. “Do you think he might be Sagittarius?”

“No fucking idea.”

Again she shrugged. Apparently she didn’t share her relative’s concern, or she didn’t really trust my contribution to begin with.

Terril’s gaze at me seemed more pointed than usual, telegraphing a message I couldn’t decipher. I felt him pushing me out the door, hand over my mouth. “It appears we are done then, Mr. Chalmers.” To Rhonda, “Unless you have any questions.”

Rhonda tilted her head like a puppy learning a new trick, very coy, very cute. "Just one, Mr. Chalmers." Or like a cobra. "What ever happened to you?"

Flipped coins and electrons gone awry, that's what happened. "I just got tired of the whole thing."

She nodded sympathetically. "I can relate. It wears on you after a while." She looked at Terril, placed her hand on his. "It's why I invested everything I had in a little known pharmaceutical company."

His sigh weighed with undisguised embarrassment. Clearly anxious to end the meeting, he stood, stuttering, "And the world is a better place for your decision, Rhonda."

She held onto his hand just a moment too long, making his premature release obvious and painful. "Hopefully a little healthier, anyway," she muttered, mostly to herself.

Too stunned and amused to move, I watched them avoid each other while he collected the papers and she pushed her chair back, standing. This guy hadn't attained his exalted position in the company as a result of honest qualifications. He was banging this old crone, who put him in charge of a project no one else wanted. He'd convinced himself he could make something of this endeavor and either outlive her, maybe even marry her and inherit her portion of the company, or at least use his success to obtain a better position in another company.

Or maybe he truly loved her, with all his heart.

Either way, he wanted something more. Something to do with the New Los Angeles Dragonz. I didn't have the heart to remind him his favorite team was going bankrupt.

"I have to ask." I really wanted to bask in this absurd romance as long as I could. "Why come to me when you had the amazing Rhonda Redondo right next to you? I mean, who can compare?"

Her charm drained completely. "Have you renewed your

license this year, Mr. Chalmers?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm surprised at your ignorance of corporate law preventing exclusive readings by any employee, appointed board member, owner or co-owner, or family members related to employees, appointed board members, owners or co-owners."

Oh yeah. *That* law.

"My input is off the record," she didn't seem to enjoy admitting this, "which carries no formal influence."

No "formal" influence. What a crock. They were breaking the law by having her present as an astrologer. Their lack of further dialogue, or even movement, suggested it was time for me to leave.

When I passed Julice on my way to the center dish down, I sensed some emotional relief, and wondered if Terril was burning his proverbial candle at both ends. This could explain the emotional commotion in their future.

All three of them.



Two months after Goris Pharmaceuticals hired Lanier and Winston to lead a team for an ambitious project supported only by football-obsessed Terril Bloedorn and his elderly bedmate/boss Rhonda Redondo, I put my Hollywood Hills home on the market. I wish I could say I had to. I wish I could fault my wasteful habits or debts owed which had emptied my financial accounts, or some imposed penalty for deeds not remembered but finally catching up with me.

Alas, I just wanted to erase as much of my history as I could.

The taste of my son's romance with my brother-in-law, of my wife's dreary future, of my mother's perennial decay, of my sister's self-righteous accusations, turned my stomach with every swallow. Every single fucking day was just another barefoot step on a carpet of broken glass I couldn't sweep away.

So I signed into [gss.SellYourHouse.gov.acad](https://gss.sellyourhouse.gov/acad) and posted the data with pictures. Some automated virtual agent took care of the rest. I chose the lowest of the three listing prices offered, wished I could lower it even more, but we lost that right decades ago.

I followed the prescribed checklist and hired someone to clean my house. I hired someone to paint, inside and out. I hired someone to clean the pool. I threw away almost everything I owned. I did throw away everything Adonica had owned. I invested a healthy chunk of my recent receipts on renovations and cosmetic improvements.

After six weeks no offers came in.

I upgraded my government online-property-selling subscription from *Basic* to *Premium* to reach a wider audience.

Six more weeks, still no offers.

No one wanted an old-fashioned home made from old-

fashioned materials instead of the new space-age stuff with its magical ability to make the walls go from clear to any color of the rainbow or any texture programmed into the architectural software. At half the cost.

And since homes had long ago been rendered fireproof – indeed, since fire itself and most combustibles had long ago been rendered unavailable domestically – the common homeowner enjoyed the government’s guarantee of safety and protection under any and all circumstances. Personal property gained an official shield against not just accidental damage, but premeditated damage as well. Insurance companies loved that.

So somewhere in the middle of a five-day binge on every inebriant available, I went online and bought a class-M army surplus tank. The whole transaction was highly illegal, but the seller delivered as promised, no questions asked, and succeeded in withdrawing anonymously. I would later describe the dealer as a tall undersized male who may have been female between the ages of eighteen and seventy-six.

The dealer briefly instructed me how to start the engine and steer the fucker and nothing else. I didn’t care about the cannon, the guns, the radar, the navigation computer, the communications console, the climate control. Just the fucking gas pedal.

With sufficient enthusiasm, if not sobriety, I climbed into my class-M army surplus tank and drove it into my Hollywood Hills home.

The effort completely flattened my house, depleted my account and subjected me to an assortment of violations which put me in jail for ninety days. It could have been worse, but since I had shown a conscious effort to prevent injury to fellow citizens and surrounding domiciles, the judge showed leniency.

Except for the lack of hard drugs, I loved my cell.

No incestuous relatives. No criminal relatives. No dying