

The Seven Questions of Benson Quartermaster

by Michael Broh

Here We Go

When I was fourteen, my uncle told me a story. It was of a Russian man, at that time technically a Soviet, though the terms were often used interchangeably in my youth. This Russian man was a purported psychic who had been amazing his adoring public with the ability to control moving objects with his mind. Telekinesis. This supposed psychic had dared to step in front of moving bicycles, horses and cars, with only the power of his mind to stop them. He stepped up his stunts in intensity, growing his audience with each new example of his psychic prowess. A combine harvester. A truck. Clearly, the man had a power others did not possess, one worthy of increasingly greater audience and spectacle. In due course, this psychic Russian, as my uncle told it, attempted to increase his public's adoration with a feat never before dreamed of by man. He would step in front of an unsuspecting freight train and stop it, too, with his unparalleled powers of telekinesis. He was confident. His audience was excited. And he was, of course, crushed by a train unable to combat the massive force of inertia in the short amount of time graciously afforded it by the psychic.

My uncle then followed the story with the phrase he used to follow so many stories.

A phrase that seemed to say the world was insane beyond redemption, on its way into a great abyss from which it would never return.

A phrase that followed him throughout his life.

The phrase he would say was this:

"Here we go."

The story begins like this.

A middle school gymnasium is filled to bursting with parents, siblings, and other various relatives attending what is generously called a musical performance. Attempting to force music from their instruments of torture are a collection of sixth graders who first held them not four months previous, and of whom the greatest expectation from a reasonable person would be to play sounds that more or less begin and end at the same time.

After three depressingly unforgettable selections, the band retires in favor of the middle school choir sharing the concert with them. As many members of the choir are also members of the band, there is an inevitable shifting around of students, chairs, stands, and general chaos as one portion of the concert ends and the next begins. There is a fair amount of noise associated with this chaos, but in comparison to the cacophony that had been the sixth grade band, the relative quiet is enveloping.

Students put down their instruments, don choir robes, and move awkwardly to their places on the choir risers as other choir members stand up from where they had been patiently waiting their turn, already robed. Up in the bleachers, those who are talking speak in hushed tones as if they know loud talking isn't exactly appropriate, though not patently against the rules of etiquette.

In the midst of this half silence, Jacob Gruber, a walk-on character in our story, stands up and speaks in full voice. He does not look all that unusual. Tall, just on the heavy side of fit, short cropped hair, and a sweater over his collared shirt. He does not have a wild look in his eye, does not flail his arms about, does not scream. He merely speaks to the room as if he has an important announcement. As if the conductor has called upon him to speak about a local charity while the choir prepares for their first piece of the evening.

Except the conductor has not called on him.

Standing up, he speaks in a clear voice, and there is no mistaking his words. "I'm afraid the end has come," he says. "Not for the world. I don't mean that. Though, who knows?" He smiles awkwardly, perhaps hoping for a laugh. Getting none, he continues. "I mean the end has come for me. I have, in the last few minutes, lost my sanity, and am no longer truly among you. I'm sorry to interrupt this event, but I feel compelled to speak. I find myself in a world that was formerly stable and is now anything but. I suppose I am dangerous, although I don't feel particularly so. Please forgive my interruption and abrupt exit. Please show my family your support. You shall not see me again."

Now the room truly is silent. Everyone watches in amazement as he turns around and bends over to pick up the coat he had rested, like so

many others, on the bleacher seat beneath him for cushioning. He carefully puts on the coat as the crowd continues to watch in silence. Then, as if he were simply going to the bathroom, he slips past the four or five people separating him from the nearest aisle, quietly saying *excuse me* as they turn their legs to the side to let him pass. Then he is gone, and gazes turn to his wife, Amber. She is mortified, and frozen with indecision.

The choir director grabs his microphone, desperate to distract the parents from this strange event, and to turn their attention back toward their children.

"Well," he laughs awkwardly, "that's something you don't hear every day," and there is a titter from the bleachers. "Well, um, I think the students are set now, so, um, let's get started. Our first piece really gives the students a chance to play with some interesting time signatures, and..."

As he blathers on, introducing the first piece, several men, first responders no doubt, stand up and leave the gym, sometimes moving toward the nearest aisle and sometimes just climbing over parents, their feet always somehow finding the empty spots between them. The principal also moves to leave, first walking over to Jacob Gruber's wife, Amber, and leading her out.

Jacob Gruber will never be seen alive in that town again.

This story is not about Jacob Gruber. It is about two brothers, a muse, and a conman by the name of Benson Quartermaster. It takes place in the midst of a world wide epidemic, the primary symptom of which is unadulterated madness.

Calumet Forsyth, the first of our two brothers, has not yet contracted the virus at this point in the story. He will, of course. Everyone in this story will. Every person you will come to know throughout the reading of this tale, every man, woman, and child, their friends, their neighbors, their teachers, mentors and influences, every person they know, every person they ever thought about, and every person who could in any way be considered to have some distant connection with characters

named or unnamed will penultimately contract this disease of insane visions, followed in most cases by death or catatonia. It is inevitable.

Trust me.

At this time, however, Calumet Forsyth, Cal to his friends and neighbors, walks about in the care of full sanity, tempered only by the increasingly unusual events surrounding him. I like Cal. He has a dispassionate curiosity that I find both thoughtful and illuminating. Meditative and logical.

For example.

When the snows come like a soft blanket slowly covering the earth for winter, he stands in his driveway enjoying the peace of the freshly fallen snow and considers the quiet, meditative, and healthy exercise of the shovel compared with the speed and efficiency of the gas powered snowblower. Except when the snows are excessive, he chooses the shovel. He next considers the pattern with which he and his shovel will traverse the driveway. He thinks through each possible step, each repercussion for every choice, and metaphorically plows through the final scenario in his mind, clearing the driveway with maximum efficiency balanced with minimum suffering, all the while standing in the unplowed driveway, losing heat, and failing to begin. Once he is satisfied with his plan, he turns back to the house, warms up with a cup of coffee, waiting until he is fully warmed before executing his plan, which will leave his driveway clear and his soul improved.

That is.

He thinks logically and without passion, but prefers actions that bring him peace.

Before the story is through, he will, on more than one occasion, lose his cool, as the saying goes, but he is, for the most part, a calming influence on those with whom he interacts and an excellent observer of the events unfolding around him. He also has a few good jokes.

Do not misunderstand me. He is not a strong man. He does not force his ideas on others, does not push back against ideas he does not agree with. Clear of logic though he is, it is usually the less rational path that he takes, a result of a fear of conflict, a desire not so much to please others as to *not displease* others. He has a lack of confidence that

undermines his strong mind, and forever keeps him from leading others down wiser roads.

Still, I like him.

His wife, Greta, I like not as much.

She, too, has a strong streak of the rationalist within her. She sees the world as a series of logistical challenges which can be overcome with good planning and foresight. I don't begrudge her that. Her approach to life saves time, money and work for nearly everyone she interacts with. She streamlines in a way most people can only dream of.

She is convinced, however, that life is fundamentally unfair. She is strong in her opinion that the world is populated by lazy layabouts whose primary goal is to work as little as possible, and to burden her with the work that by all rights should have been done by them. This resentment is quiet. She does not shout it from the rooftop. Nevertheless, she is ruthless in making her opinion known. It shows in her face, in her actions, and in those quiet comments meant to hurt, but which are technically innocuous. Comments that sound like, *well, she must have a good reason*, but which really mean, *obviously, she just doesn't want to do the work*.

She is charitable, but only for those who truly cannot help themselves.

What really drives her crazy, however, is that the world continues to reward the layabouts, while burdening her with sufferance.

For example.

When the snows come like a soft blanket slowly covering the earth for winter, she sees only cold and suffering. She rushes the kids into her car to drive them the four blocks to school, condemning them for oversleeping, and putting her plan off schedule. She curses drivers throughout her commute to work for driving too fast or too slow, sure that if everyone just followed the rules, traffic would flow smoothly. She curses snowplows for slowing traffic when they are in front, and for failing to clear the snow when they are not.

That is.

She sees herself in constant battle with a world unwilling to help itself, a world that could do so much more if only it would listen to her.

It's alright. She means well. She is quick to pull by the side of the road to help a broken down vehicle. She always stays to clean up. She volunteers to help with her kids' activities. She *does* the right things, it's just that she gets no joy from doing so. All of her energy goes to condemning those who do *not* help.

Like everyone else in this story's universe, Greta, too, will succumb to madness before this tale comes to a close. And her reaction to that madness will be so unlike her husband's as to hardly be recognizable as having been born of the same virus.

Cal and Greta have just left a middle school auditorium, where they were witness to the first of what will be many incidents that can only be explained by an epidemic of madness.

Here we go.

This.

The book you hold in your hands is infected. It contains a communicable virus that infects the brain, driving it inexorably toward madness. In the case of Jacob Gruber, the virus has left him effectively incapacitated to the point where the world will never again appear to him in the way he had previously come to rely upon. Fissures open up before him, incomprehensible visions invade his mind, and the formerly reliable signals sent to his brain from his eyes are now so unpredictable as to be not only useless, but dangerous. The trust that Mr. Gruber had built up with those signals over a lifetime of predictable input is broken. He has been betrayed by his own operating system, by his neurological network, by his own organs. He will not recover.

How he came to be infected was this. On a cold but sunny Sunday, after a lazy morning reading the paper and sipping coffee, Jacob Gruber walked to the library. It was a short walk, so although the cold spring wind was blowing something fierce, the brevity of the walk combined with the bright blue sky put him in good spirits. The day was his own, his family was happily occupied at home, and he would soon have several new books to bring him further joy throughout the week. He felt optimistic about the days and years in front of him, and proud of those he had left behind. It was, in short, a good day.

He had intended to head, as was his wont, to the mystery section, to look over the new arrivals. Jacob was a voracious reader of mysteries and pulp fiction, so much so that the library was a significant partner in keeping him from driving his family to the poor house through book purchases. The books he would borrow today would be read by Saturday, and by the following Sunday, he would be back again for more.

As he entered the library on this particular Sunday, he was, alas, distracted by a rack of sale books, and being in a somewhat unusually dreamy mood, fingered through the books before him to see if something unusual might present itself to him. How *The Art of Caring for the Aging Garden* came to attract his attention is unknown, even by myself. Perhaps it was the bright green letters against the moss green background. Perhaps it was the overly severe and small font. We shall never know. What we do know is that he picked up the book and leafed through it. We know that he skimmed some passages at the beginnings of several chapters. We know that in order to purchase the book, he left the library to interact with a machine designed to give him access to his own money without the inconvenience of speaking with another human.

We know that by the time he finished checking out with that week's mysteries, having ultimately decided against the sale book, he was changed so significantly as to have effectively left his friends, his family, and his world forever.

He would survive his disease for exactly 9 days, 6 hours, and 23 minutes from the moment it entered his body. Although it would be hard to argue that the disease did not lead to his demise, it could not be said that it was finally the cause of it. On the ninth day following his infection, Jacob Gruber would swerve what he was certain was an abyss that had just opened up on the stretch of empty state highway in front of him. The swerve would take him to a patch of ice. The patch of ice would cause Jacob to lose control of his car, which would, without his guidance, deliver him into the abutting ditch, where his car would tilt, roll, and finally careen into the largely hidden woods below it. Over the next 46 minutes, Jacob Gruber would lose nearly three pints of blood as he waited for the surrounding demons to carry him away.

Following the incident at the middle-school, it is safe to say that Cal, Greta, and both of their children were a bit shaken up. There was a little conversation and gossip after the concert, and most tried to laugh it off, but the undercurrent of fear was palpable. On the surface, people spoke phrases like, *there but by the grace of God go I*, but in their minds, darker thoughts pervaded. Did Jacob Gruber do something to *deserve* what happened? Could it happen to *me*? The usual joyous ruckus leading into a late evening stop for ice cream was replaced by a subdued and self-conscious murmur, no one quite daring to do more than count their blessings.

Their ride home was quiet, after which each of them headed toward bedtime rituals. The kids still had homework. The grownups lay in bed for a chapter or two before sleep. Either they did not feel like talking about the strange scene at the middle school or were afraid to. In any case, it was silence that ruled the night.

The next morning, the incident seemed like a fading dream, and everyone headed into their daily rituals as if it were any other day. By mid-morning, the kids were settled in school and the parents at work.

Life must, after all, go on.

Twenty-one and one-half hours after Jacob Gruber announced his insanity, Greta Forsyth was ostensibly preparing dinner. She was standing in front of a cutting board, knife in hand, no vegetables in sight.

Cal walked into the kitchen from the children's bathroom, where he had been investigating a leaky toilet with little success. "I guess we need to replace the works, but we might need a plumber."

She did not respond.

She simply stared ahead, knife in hand, lost in thought.

"Get everything you needed at the store?" he asked.

Nothing.

"Greta?"

Catatonic.

"Greta," Cal said, "You're not acting like yourself. What's wrong?"

Greta had a reputation for being a brick, but if she was a brick, it was a delicate and hollow one made of thinnest glass. She had a quiet

calm that usually managed to comfort those around her, but it was a fragile illusion, and took all of her strength to maintain. Normally, she forced the dark feelings down, covering them with small talk, pleasant-ries, as if the innocuous words formed a protective packing around her fragile shell. Those words were gone now, her shell beginning to expose itself. She was trying to hold herself together, but was about to fall apart.

She slowly turned her head toward Cal and gave him an intense look that hid a long conversation, a series of back and forth comments between her and Cal, all taking place silently in her mind, playing out one scenario after the other, depending on which words she began with. It was clear that she wanted to speak, and at the same time, dared not let herself for fear of shattering.

Cal stepped toward her and reached out to touch her, hoping to wake her from her trance, to bring her back to reality. He was not disappointed. She flinched back violently, and held the knife up in front of her, as if she feared for her life, as if she needed to protect herself from the one man who had always made it his goal to protect her. Still, she did not speak.

Cal backed up slowly and attempted to use a calming voice. He focused his efforts on getting the chef's knife out of Greta's hand.

"Greta? What happened? Did something happen when you picked up the...did something happen at the grocery store? Are the kids alright?"

She cocked her head, almost like a curious dog. The fear seemed to dissipate as she focused on his voice. She looked confused, as if she didn't know where she was, and looked about her. When her eyes came down to the knife in her hand, she seemed entirely shocked to find it there and dropped it on the counter. She lifted her hands halfway to her face, stared at them a moment, and looked back at her husband.

"My God, Cal," she finally said, her voice half a whisper, "has the whole world gone mad?"

Cal let the silence hang in the air, allowed his wife to gather her bearings. Gently, he reached for her shoulders and tried to share with her what strength he had. Carefully, he asked, "What happened?"

Greta took a deep breath, gathered her bearings, and told her story.

"I was...I was in line at Newman's with a just a few things. Someone I didn't know was in front of me with a full cart, and I was just, sort of, watching the check out, I suppose. Sarah Markuson was at the register, and she looked really tired. She was just sort of doing her job like a robot without even looking up. It was almost as if she was *trying* not to look up..."

"Go on."

"...yes, I...well...this woman with all the groceries had a big pile of coupons and kept trying to give them to Sarah. Without looking up, Sarah told her to scan the coupons on the machine, but it was like the woman didn't understand her or something. She just kept trying to hand the coupons to Sarah. Finally, Sarah looked up at her and just...it was like she'd seen...well, I don't *know* what. She seemed like she was about to say something, and then shut her mouth. Then she looked at *me*, and had that same look of fear, or disgust, or...or just like we were aliens or something. I asked her if she was alright, but she just looked around like she was surrounded by wild dogs or something. Then she...just ran out of the store."

"Just like that?" Cal asked her. "Not a word?"

"No. Not quite. When she got to the front door, she turned back and screamed, 'I don't believe in you. I don't believe in any of you. Go away!' and *then* ran out. My God, Cal, it was just like Jacob Gruber."

Slowly, carefully, Cal took Greta in his arms.

They stood like that, with love and peace and care, for some time. For some time.

Then, in a complete change of character that can only come from a lifetime of practice, she hid her fear away, packed away her love for when it would next be needed, and found a new task to occupy her thoughts. Life, after all, must go on. With a visible shaking off of her husband, and a smile that was designed to show love and thanks, but ultimately only served to disguise her remaining fear, she sought out the vegetables she had intended to prepare for dinner. As she did so, she

turned back to Cal and said, "Oh, your brother called. Well, his *secretary* did. I left the number on the counter. She wants you to call her."

And as Greta walked away, Cal, still reeling from a rare sighting of his wife's vulnerable side, dragged his feet to the counter and stared at full sheet of white paper with only a single name and number. A name he didn't recognize. A number too long to be local. A number he did not want to see. A number he was not likely to call. A full sheet that would soon be a scrap of paper hiding in his pocket, worn with the natural oils on his fingers as they consider pulling it out and using it, but not daring to.

Greta isn't crazy. Not yet. Before our story winds to a close, Greta will murder her children to save them from the satanic monster she has failed to subdue. Their not yet fully developed pulmonary systems will fill with poison as she cowers beneath the monster, waiting for the perfect time to lunge in for the kill, a time that, sadly, will never come

Her mild catatonia was not a direct result of the disease now slowly making its way through her community, but rather, an oblique one. She had been deeply affected by the virus only in that she had witnessed the insanity of a sometime acquaintance who was herself infected with the virus.

This happened.

Sarah Markuson filled her car with fuel. As this story takes place in modern times, the process by which she did so involved the use of a machine, without the pleasure of interaction with another human. In a, perhaps, more civilized age, the dispensing of automobile fuel required such a pleasure, and afforded a customer the opportunity for a conversation sometimes referred to as small talk. An attendant of what at that time was known as a service station, would begin by asking the customer how he might help, and while doing so, might engage in conversation about the weather, a local sports team, or perhaps some other news of local interest. The conversations were rarely meaningful except in that they allowed these two humans to feel that they were part of a greater species, one with common interests and goals, and perhaps did

something to dispel an overwhelming sense of loneliness, always lying in wait to poison them.

At the time of this story, the last bastions of that civilized past in the United States were relegated to two small areas, one on each coast, where it was felt that there was still some value in human interaction. In the rest of that great land, speaking to other humans had been weighed against the valuable time lost in doing so, and had, sadly, been found wanting.

Here we go.

Sarah Markuson had little choice but to put gas in her car herself, and because she, like so many, considered her limited time to be of more value than might be gained by visiting the clerk inside the station, she did so with the use of a pump designed to eliminate human interaction altogether. It was, although not definitively so, effectively a robot. This robot was connected to a vast network of other robots and control devices, one of which had been used by an infected individual and was anxious to share what it had learned.

She fed this robot a piece of plastic embedded with a magnetic code, and it responded by asking her a series of questions.

It asked her how it should interpret the strip.

It asked her for a four-digit code to transfer funds from her banking account.

It asked her for a series of five numbers identifying the location of her residence.

It asked her if she wanted to have her car washed by a different machine.

It then instructed her which buttons to push and which levers to pull.

She made choices where appropriate and followed instructions as necessary. Upon completion of her task, she followed further instructions regarding buttons and levers, after which the machine thanked her by giving her a record of her actions which it encouraged her to save, to aid in her memory of this shared experience. She read the receipt and discarded it in a rubbish bin conveniently located adjacent to the fuel dispensing machine for precisely that purpose.

Sarah Markuson then proceeded to the Newman's Supermarket where she would spend the day cleaning, stocking, and tending a register. It was a small store, but not tiny. She knew many of the regular customers, and although she was not a particularly extroverted person, she would sometimes engage these regulars in small talk.

That day, however, she did not.

That day, she was infected.

That day, she was very confused by the sudden transformation of human customers into wispy clouds of darkness with ill intent. She did her best to ignore them. She kept her eyes on the groceries, on the plastic bags, and, on the rare occasion that a customer would attempt to interact directly with her, on the cash or check that inevitably followed. When she dared to look at the customers, she was filled with dread, and the inescapable sense that her soul was about to be stolen from her.

By the time Greta made it to the register, Sarah had been fighting her fear for several hours, her strength and endurance exhausted.

Outdoors at a small European cafe, a man, a scientist, the physically and emotionally distant brother of Calumet Forsyth, sits alone. His americano goes cold as he studies models on his laptop computer, far beyond the comprehension of most of the world. The sun is shining with the promise of spring, and yet this man betrays no hint that it might, in any small way, give him joy. His forehead is wrinkled, his brow furrowed, his shoulders tensed. In every way, his body language shows him to be baffled, curious, frustrated and confused. Something is wrong, and he cannot understand why.

A waitress asks him in her native language how he is doing. It would not be unusual for him, or anyone, to sit at such a cafe table for hours, slowly sipping coffee and enjoying the day. She is not rushing him. She is not even providing particularly good service, at least by the standards of those back on the other side of the world. But it is a slow time of day, she has finished her cigarette, and she is bored with the conversation that had previously engaged her in the dark interior of the cafe.

She says, referring to his now cold coffee, "Looks like you could use a warm-up."

To which he relies, "I beg to differ."

"Come again?" she asks.

"To suggest that I need warming up assumes a level of chill which I am not currently experiencing. Moreover, the temperature is a comfortable nineteen degrees which, combined with my use of this sweater should lead any careful observer to note that the need for warming up is not something I am likely to experience."

She looks at him curiously. "I meant your coffee."

"Oh," he replies, and lowers his eyes back to his laptop.

She notices the strange shapes on his computer and asks him what they are. She wonders aloud if he might be working on some sort of new shoe design.

Our scientist, aware that our waitress does not feel pressed to attend to other customers who, like him, are content to be left alone with cooling coffee as they engage in day long study or conversation, invites her to sit down. It is not his wont to be a teacher, but he does have a persistent tendency to lecture, usually in a way considered condescending by his colleagues. In the case of the waitress, however, this is probably the safe choice. He speaks to her in her native tongue, which, in the language of our friend across the sea, would be interpreted as follows.

"Imagine that you are a snowflake."

"A snowflake?"

"Yes. You are a pretty snowflake. You don't remember forming in the cloud, and you have no conception of life on the ground. You just float. Around you, billions of other snowflakes float, none of *them* remembering the cloud, none of *them* able to imagine what is, inevitably, to come. And yet it will come. It must. At some point in your future, inconceivable as it is to you today, you must land. Gravity is a force which cannot be ignored, and you must, without question, eventually settle upon a pile of other snowflakes and be crushed in the darkness of packed snow until the summer sun tears you apart."

The scientist looks at the waitress expectantly, to see if she is following him.

"I am a snowflake." She is beginning to regret engaging the man in conversation.

He continues.

"You are a snowflake. And the world you know, the life you live, is entirely in the sky. You have no memory of life before your birth, and no conception of life after your death. It is the journey from one to the other that occupies you, that comprises the sum total of your life experience."

Once again, he looks at her expectantly.

"The cloud is my birth, and the pile of snow is my death. Yes?"

"Yes."

The scientist smiles. "Now. A wind picks up during your fall, your life journey, and you are blown about with other snowflakes. It is like a disaster. You will lose many friends, you will be lost, your life will change, but you are still a snowflake surrounded by snowflakes moving from your creation to your destruction in a way not altogether different from what you have always known."

"I am in a blizzard?"

"Yes. That's right. You are in a blizzard."

The waitress attempts to contribute. "Blizzards are very dangerous. My brother lost his arm after becoming lost in a blizzard four years ago."

Had the scientist been the least bit interested in what she had to say, she would have continued without halting. The gentleman would have learned that the brother of this waitress had been driving alone on his way to meet friends for a weekend of skiing when a predictable blizzard had turned his blue skies to gray, so to speak. He would have heard the waitress condemn her brother for not paying closer attention to the weather reports and for tempting fate by traveling such dangerous roads in bad weather. He would have seen a raise of her eyebrows and cant of her head that did as much as to say, "I told him so, but the fool never listens." He would have heard how the brother became lost and drove his car off the roadway, to be buried in drifts for six days in what became bitter cold. He would have heard how the waitress's brother lost his right arm to frostbite and about his struggle to become left-handed, how he has become a burden on her mother who was old enough now that she had trouble getting around, largely because her quack doctor didn't

know what he was doing, and how this job was now the only thing that...well, perhaps it is better that our gentleman is self-absorbed, after all.

The waitress takes a breath to speak and indicates, in body language anyone with an emotional radar above 0.01 would recognize as, "I am about to speak. Please listen to me." The scientist does not recognize the pattern, but is rescued from the impending monologue by his natural desire to keep his own thoughts the focus of all so-called conversations. The words are not yet out of her mouth when he successfully regains control of the situation.

"As you blow about in the wind, you come near a desert, where instead of snow blowing about, there is sand. You have never seen sand before, have never imagined it, and yet there it is, blowing all around you, intermixing with you and the other snowflakes, two worlds swirling about each other, each as confused and out of place as the other."

"Yes." The waitress, having lost her chance to participate, has subsequently lost interest. Sitting with this customer is still preferable to talking with the cook, however, and certainly better than cleaning, so she remains and allows the gentleman to continue.

Which he does.

"Yet the wind does not cease. Soon the sand and snow are swirling together with rain and ocean spray. As a snowflake on your life journey from cloud to pile, all of these things are new to you. They are natural, they belong in the world, but to *you*, they are like space aliens, inconceivable until they cross your path. Now the wind has become a tornado, and as you swirl around with snow and sand and spray, you now see human refuse, bricks, sticks of lumber unimaginably large to you, and yet moving toward and away from you, becoming part of your formerly lonely universe."

The scientist waits for the waitress to respond. She does not.

"Now," the man says patiently, "how would that make you feel?"

The waitress, who at this point has lost interest, quickly tries to remember what he was talking about. Flying through a tornado, possibly.

"I suppose I would feel frightened," she ventures.

The man nods his head as if to say, "Hmm." Then, out loud, he says, "That's what Victoria said." He looks closely at the waitress, as if seeing her for the first time. He examines her face, her bearing, her clothes. He considers her as a valuable object worth studying, and attempts, however briefly, to imagine her as worthwhile. He then shrugs his shoulders, lets out a sigh and says, "Perhaps humans weren't born for adventure after all."

With that, he turns his attention back to his computer. The waitress, surveying his table, sees that his coffee has long gone cold, but feels no need to refresh it. Ignored, she casually stands up and walks to another table, where she engages a regular in a conversation with more than one participant.

Staring once again at his computer, problems invading him from every direction, solutions eluding him at every turn, this scientist and elder brother of Calumet Forsyth shuts his eyes hard, and wonders why his brain no longer seems to work.

I don't dislike Cal's brother. Personally, I find his lack of emotional intelligence refreshing, though I know it can make him seem more than borderline sociopathic at times. In truth, though, he is simply a man more rational than is usually deemed acceptable in modern society. To say he is logical only, to compare him, say, with Mr. Spock, for example, would be misleading. Not all logics, after all, are the same.

Cal's brother would be quick to tell us that all logical systems must be built upon a basic premise, some paramount *thing* that rises in importance above all the rest. For most of us, that premise would be something like, *people should be happy*, or *humans should survive*, or some other such nonsense. Hammond Forsyth has no such illusions. His premise, the starting point for the logical system that is the focus of his every thought, is no more nor less than this: *the nature of the universe must be known*.

His actions, his words, his very thoughts all come back to that same premise, and if something does not satisfy it, he tosses it away without care.

For example.

When the snows come like a soft blanket slowly covering the earth for winter, he sees a conglomeration of crystalized water molecules behaving as expected. He considers the barometric pressure, and whether it is rising or falling, combines that knowledge with that of the current temperature and trends for the past days, and predicts, with some amount of success, the likelihood that the snow will melt of its own accord. He then catalogs this prediction so as to compare it with measurable results, thus improving his ability to make improved predictions in the future.

Were someone to question his attitude, suggest that he was failing to see the bigger picture in life, he would look upon that someone with the sort of arrogant sustain that can only come with an intelligence so beyond the masses as to make them, in his opinion, unworthy of remark.

In other words.

Where the world sees joy, suffering, beauty and pain, Hammond Forsyth simply sees data.

Cal usually thought of his brother as an ignorant, careless, selfish, cocky, arrogant, insufferable son of a bitch, or bastard, or cocksucker, or asshole, or maybe just jerk, an epithet with which he had no doubt his brother would *beg to differ*.

Ham has little tolerance for statements that are, if only technically, inaccurate, and will vehemently deny them if given the chance. It is, perhaps, Ham's great fault that he uses the verb "beg" when in disagreements. If he were to remain true to himself, he would merely say, "I differ." His overly used phrase, "I beg to differ," I'm sorry to say, comes from my misplaced desire to give Ham some sense of humor and diplomacy, neither of which come naturally to the man.

In any case, the phrase has become inextricably linked to Hammond Forsyth, and shall remain so until his dying day, forty-two years, eight months, and fourteen days from the moment in the cafe.

Hammond Forsyth used the phrase incessantly as a child, and always in an attempt to bring greater accuracy and precision to the world he inhabited. As a child, Ham abhorred metaphor and hyperbole, and would *beg to differ* at every opportunity. Needless to say, such behavior did not win him any friends. Fortunately for Ham, he desired none.

As to his difference of opinion with Cal, perhaps we'd best take the points one by one.

For example.

Son of a bitch, or *son-of-a-bitch*, or *sombitch*, if you prefer, all lay the pith of the epithet upon our subject's mother, a saint wholly undeserving of such disdain.

Bastard has similar implications.

Cocksucker implies that any person who practices fellatio is disdainful, an implication which seems deeply unfair. Add to that the certain knowledge that Ham has never practiced such a sport, but who would not consider such practice abhorrent so much as unnecessary, and we are once again left with an epithet of little to no value.

Asshole has fair implications of selfishness, but has the added suggestion that the subject of the epithet acts with purpose, something which, in the case of Ham would be wholly complimentary. Also, Ham would likely point out that the anatomical location from which the metaphor receives its punch is unfairly maligned for its smell and tendency to transmit disease, while its value to the body as an outlet for waste, as well as to the useful bacteria for which it provides shelter, is kept artificially low.

Jerk lacks power, and Ham would only see it as a function of change in acceleration anyway.

Perhaps we'd best leave it at *something or other*.

Is he *thoughtless*? Not really. He thinks all the time.

Is he *careless*? Only of the important things.

Is he *selfish*? He would allow his body to die a horrible death if he were distracted by another problem. He doesn't act for his own gain, nor does he act for the gain of others.

Is he *cocky*? Not on purpose.

Is he *arrogant*? I suppose that to earn that title, you must intentionally desire to prove yourself smarter than others. He has no such desire. He is simply unable to imagine that you are capable of thinking on his level.

That leaves us with *insufferable*. Perhaps this one is fair, after all. While a person *can* in fact suffer the pain that is a conversation with Hammond Forsyth, one rarely *desires* to do so.

That is.

The best we can do, without fear of a reasonable reprisal from the object of our insult, is to say that Hammond Forsyth is an insufferable something or other, a description with which even Ham cannot *beg to differ*.

Still a little spooked by Greta, not less so for her ability to so easily pack away her emotions, Cal attempted to find his calm with some family conversation. "So how was school today, Clyde?"

Clyde shrugged his shoulders.

"And by how was school, I mean, tell me something that happened in school today. Something you learned. Something you did." It was Cal's usual approach with Clyde. Jessi, his daughter was the talkative one, and would dominate the conversation soon enough. Once she got going, Clyde would be able to slide into his usual comfort zone of silence. Cal always started out the dinner conversation by trying to engage the boy first.

Clyde had a mouth full of lettuce and croutons, salad dressing dripping down his chin, but spoke anyway. He had to repeat himself twice before anyone could make out what he was saying.

"Police came to school."

Cal and Greta froze.

"Police? How come?"

"Some sixth grader went nuts or something. I guess he ripped all his clothes off and ran screaming around the school. We were all locked in the classrooms."

Clyde shrugged his shoulders and went back to his salad. Jessi jumped in.

"It was Alex Myendorff. His sister is in my health class. They pulled her out of school after lunch. I think he was sick or something. He was all hyper and whatever, and they had to shoot him up with drugs in the gym."

Greta immediately stood up. "Those idiots! Why can't they..." she shook her head. "I mean how hard is it to..." her eyes opened wide. She turned toward the family computer just outside the kitchen and began reading emails. Everyone at the table was silent, waiting for her to say something.

"My god," she said, her voice raised in anger, "Do they think we all just sit around checking our emails all day? And a lockdown! They can't bother to make simple phone call?"

"What is it, Greta?"

"It's an email from this morning. It says that a student has posed a possible danger to the school, and that until the situation is resolved, the school is on lockdown. It also says that the students are not permitted to use their phones until the situation is resolved. Then here, about fifteen minutes later, we've got another email apologizing for unnecessarily worrying anyone, that the student has been taken to the hospital, and that school will continue as normal through the end of the school day. Idiots!"

Greta soon enough went back to the computer for the rest of the evening and engaged in what is, at times, the most dangerous hobby known to modern man: internet research. She explored the depths of madness through the use of the world's largest collection of opinions, looking for some clear solution she could catch hold of. It mattered not what was true, what was conjecture, and what was knowingly false and manipulative. She had confidence that she could parse truth from fiction and teach her friends and neighbors the truth of what had happened that night. As usual, she believed that only she could do that. What she dismissed along the shadowy paths of the internet we shall never know, but somewhere in her exploration of the dark reaches of the largest congregation of unsubstantiated ideas ever known to man, she came across her Grail.

She had reduced her fear to a problem, the problem to a solution, and the solution to a task. The task was clear, simple, and as usual, would have to be executed by her, since no one else would likely bother to do the actual work.

How Alex Myendorff came to be infected was this:

He was locked in his room. Not literally locked in, but for all intents, purposes and practical effects, one could not question that he was, at least from the perspective of his parents, inaccessible from the outside. His door was closed, and therefore, according to the principles his parents had instilled upon him, his privacy was assured. He sat on the floor, surrounded by dirty clothes, books, toys, garbage, and this and that, his eyes focused on the device in front of him. The device was a laptop computer, so named because it could, in some circumstances, be used while resting on the users lap. This was generally impractical due to the heat generated by the device while in use, and users typically took the less painful approach of resting the device on a desk, or floor, or bed, or pretty much anywhere they could effectively reach it without burning their lower limbs.

His device, as usual, was connected to millions of other devices sharing information with each other, resulting in a library of sorts, but one in which talking among patrons was not frowned upon. This particular evening, Alex Myendorff, twelve, after spending much of his evening studying photographs of adult naked women, had casually moved on to another area of the library, this one concerned with light science and puzzles designed to pass the time. Of the many puzzles and curiosities he studied that evening was an ancient puzzle that had reportedly been studied by great scientists for centuries. The solution was included on the same page as the puzzle, but Alex challenged himself to find the solution himself. For seventeen seconds. Then he read the answer and was just as confused as he was before he read it. Then he read a joke about robots.

It was in those seventeen seconds of thought that the physiology of Alex Myendorff was irrevocably changed, such that in four days time, he would see the world as it truly was: a hostile environment where swarms of flying, chitinous insects starved for food chased humans for their clothing, constructed as it was from materials considered by the bugs to be a great delicacy. Naked and safe in the center of his middle school gymnasium, he could nought but laugh as insect covered authorities told him everything was going to be ok. It was not until they

attempted to wrap him in an infested blanket that he resumed screaming and fighting.

Unlike his captors, Alex Myendorff was aware that once the bugs became sated with cotton, they would turn their attentions to their next basic need, human liver. In his hospital bed, covered in bugs, he could feel rogue explorers crawl into his orifices and work their way into his abdomen.

Whether or not he is in danger from these creatures matters less than that he believes he is, for the mind is a dangerous thing. Four days after his incarceration begins, for it will be no less, his liver will cease to operate, and his mind will find the peace all men long for but fear to find.

By the time Greta went to bed, she had committed to memory a series of questions, posited by a team of researchers at a small liberal arts college in Minnesota, part of a study done in the early 1980's. She tried the questions on her husband.

A guinea pig.

Lying quietly, each ostensibly reading their respective books, she asked him, "What color is this?"

Cal was in the middle of a paragraph at that moment, and muttered only, "Huh?"

"Cal."

"I'm sorry, what?" He looked over to see her holding the glass of water she always kept on her nightstand, freshly filled and still sweating with condensation.

"Cal, what color is this?"

"What color is that?"

"Yes, Cal. What color is this?"

The glass had no discernible color, nor did the water within it. She had chosen the object for that very reason. It was part of *the test*. He looked at her in confusion, and she met his questioning look with a bold stare of her own. They eyed each other in silence, each quietly evaluating the other.

"Cal."

"Yes, Greta."

"What color is this?"

"That glass?"

She did not reply.

"Why?" He asked.

"Why."

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Why do I ask?"

"Yes, Greta. Why do you ask me to tell you the color of your glass?"

The room had become tense.

"Do I?" Greta responded, as if she, herself, was confused by her own question.

Cal was at a loss. He thought back to the evening before, to Jacob Gruber's confession of madness, to their lack of conversation about it, to their awkwardly silent ride home from the concert with the kids. He thought of Sarah Markuson and Alex Myendorff, and Greta's catatonic moment earlier that evening. He began to think that Greta might be more profoundly affected than he had previously expected. She was, but not in the way he had feared.

Cal pressed back. "You do. You ask me the color of your glass."

Still holding the glass between them, she said only, "What color is this?"

Cal gave in, and chose to take her seriously, if only to figure out where she was going. "Well," he began, "I don't suppose it has any color."

She carefully placed the glass back on her bedside table, saying only, "Hmm..."

As they continued to sit in bed, silently, Cal considered asking her again about her question. Why had she asked it? What did she intend to learn? He was preparing himself to do so, imagining her possible responses when she interrupted his thoughts with another question.

"Where is the North Pole?"

Cal feared the worst.

"Greta, are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine, Cal. Never been better. Now please answer my question."

"Where is the North Pole?"

"Yes, Cal. Where is the North Pole?"

Cal had seen Greta like this before. She had some idea in her mind, had rustled up all of her confidence to back it up, and would not stop until she had put every bit of effort she could spare into playing it out. He was faced with a not unusual choice between fighting his wife's instinct and losing, or playing along and bringing her new mission to conclusion as soon as possible. He chose the latter.

He answered her question.

"At the northernmost location on Earth."

It was followed with another.

"How big is an antelope?"

"I don't know. Three or four feet high. Maybe two hundred pounds."

And another.

"Is a lemon drop sweet or sour?"

"Both, I suppose."

And another.

"Why do birds fly south?"

"To escape the cold."

And another.

"How big is heaven?"

Cal was stymied.

"How big is heaven?"

"Yes, Cal. How big is heaven?"

"I have no way of knowing."

"Thank you, Sweetheart. Just one more."

"Just one more question?"

"Just one last question." Then she was silent. Cal waited. She waited. They both waited, but neither spoke. Perhaps they were both of afraid of what they might say. Perhaps Greta was as worried about Cal's responses as he was about her questions. Was she mad, like Jacob Gruber? Like Sarah Markuson? Could Cal raise two children on his own? Could he afford care for her when the insurance ran out? Did it even cover mental illness? His mind was racing in all directions at once,

doing what it could to distract itself from the panic trying to force itself in.

Greta's thoughts were inscrutable.

She continued to stare. To wait.

But it was she who was to speak next. She who had introduced *one last question*. It was almost as if they had entered into a staring contest. A contest of wills. First person to blink loses. First person to speak forfeits. And yet, Cal wasn't really playing. It was her game. Her rules. Cal was only looking for the way to best pacify her. Did she want him to speak, or stay silent? Which was the least worst option?

Cal dared. "Greta?"

"Yes, Cal?"

"You said you had one last question."

"Yes."

One more pause. Then, "What is the meaning of life?"

Cal fell silent again. Answers raced through his mind. Answers trite, profound, meaningless and esoteric. He thought of the circle of life, of his family, his job. He thought of poor Alex Myendorff, and about a party Cal went to in high school. He thought about walking the dog.

Cal sought for the least worst answer, the response that would please Greta, lower her defenses. The answer that would put the catechism behind them and lead to a proper conversation about what had driven it in the first place.

Cal was about to say something about the little things in life, about moments, about reverence. He was about to say something he would undoubtedly regret moments later when he would come up with something better, stifling his first thought. Before he answered, however, he was thwarted altogether by Greta, who leaned to her bedside lamp, turned it off, and with a kiss to his cheek, said, "Goodnight, Sweetheart."

Cal put down his book, turned off his light, and stared into the darkness. There would be no proper conversation that night.

This.

Greta's questions were, in fact, from a study meant to determine, without question, the degree of mental illness harbored by a given

individual. The study was either a rousing success or a dismal failure, depending on how you define success. It helped the aforementioned (but not yet named) college gain access to a major grant from the federal government not previously attainable. With the help of clever attorneys, the college used that money to build new dormitories, which in turn attracted wealthier students, which in turn allowed the college to raise their tuition, which in turn allowed the college to increase the wages of its administrators.

Here we go.

The study was also bunk.

The author of the study was a conman by the name of Benson Quartermaster. Benson Quartermaster had begun his professional life as an errand boy at a charitable foundation, with a promising future of a good living wooing the wealthy in the name of worthy non-profits. He soon learned, however, that there was a fortune to be had for an unscrupulous man, if only he knew how to ask for it. He dedicated his life to asking for it, not for the good of charity, mind you, but for his own personal gain. It was a dangerous career choice, but a potentially lucrative one, and Benson took to it with abandon.

Town to town, university to university, Benson Quartermaster honed his trade and lined his pockets. Town to town, he built both his experience and his bank account. With the use of false but impressive credentials, he would present himself as some expert or other, and work the system in a way only the unscrupulous could. Fearful of the law, he would temper his winnings for the sake of continued freedom. He would walk away from each new job as soon as he could get some money in his hands, but always before his shenanigans could be discovered. It was a niche trade that served him well. In the spring of 1983, the still unnamed college in Minnesota was ripe for the picking.

Benson Quartermaster's grant request for this particular institution of higher learning involved the proposed hiring of a large number of students to present a random sample of citizens with a survey of his own devise. These student minions would then visit institutions of mental health and present those previously diagnosed as mentally ill with the

same survey. The intention was to use this data to find a new tool for diagnosing mental illness.

Bunk.

Upon receiving his first payment, modest but not insignificant, Benson Quartermaster predictably quit town. The college, in its own way as unscrupulous as Quartermaster, determined that the wisest thing to do was to use a teaching assistant to complete the study, collect the rest of the grant, and file the study only where required for the receipt of funds. The study was also used to inspire a long overdue gift from a previously miserly donor who had been waiting for just this sort of study before giving his fortune to this institution. He used the study to prove his own sanity to his wife who had always claimed he was not in his right mind, although sadly, he could not successfully use it to disprove her own.

Years later, as part of an investigation into junk science and worthless studies, a budding Minnesota journalist discovered the closeted study and used the questions as part of her three part piece for a St. Paul weekly magazine. As an intern for the magazine, she received no pay, although she expected that the piece would be the catalyst she needed to jumpstart her career as a professional journalist. It was not. She eventually gave up on journalism and focused her writing skills on marketing the organic honey for what would become her family side business. Too bad, really. The piece was quite good and had insights into the dark world of non-rigorous science that wouldn't be embraced for decades.

A decade went by, and the piece was plagiarized by a student for a paper on oddball studies. The student was a bit of a slacker and had the idea that if he could come up with the weirdest selection possible of unusual studies, his professor would be so entertained that his research would never be questioned. He was right. In fact, several of the studies mentioned in his paper never existed at all, save in the student's imagination. The student received a B+ for the paper, a grade widely acknowledged to be commensurate with a clever interpretation of a given assignment, though not otherwise exceptional in any way.

In the late oughts, this paper was discovered by an upstart blogger with little moral compass. Like the budding journalist turned honey marketer from decades previous, he hoped to gain fame for himself through his writing. Unlike our Minnesota heroine however, he had no desire for discovering truth and sharing it with a wider world. Rather, he shared the study as legitimate science, in the hope that it was just sensational enough to be shared by the ignorant masses and grow his following, which, of course, it did.

By the time Greta read the survey, it seemed by all rights to be part of a legitimate study done by legitimate scientists at a legitimate institution of higher learning.

It was still, of course, bunk.

Benson Quartermaster received neither shame, fame, nor notoriety from any of these writings. He had a moderately successful, albeit criminal career, and avoided capture by keeping his ambitions low. Like everyone else in this story, he will eventually succumb to an infectious madness. By the time Benson Quartermaster faces his own insanity, he will have forgotten all about the study, and wish only that the demon kicking him to death would hurry up and get it over with.

The journalist turned honey marketer will lock herself and her grandchildren in the cellar, kill them in the mistaken belief that they have asked her to do so, and then kill herself in remorse for the deed in a brief respite from her madness.

The plagiarist will die of thirst in his own backyard, perched in the canopy of a burr oak.

The blogger will freeze to death on an icy Lake Michigan beach, waiting for the angels before him to carry him away.

Cal fingered a scrap of paper in his pocket as his mind wandered. From thousands of miles away, a woman's voice rang in his ears.

"Dr. Forsyth's office."

"Um, yes. This is, um, Calumet Forsyth. I got a message to call here."

"Please hold."

Moments later, Cal was connected with his long lost brother.

"*Who* is this?"

"Your brother."

"..."

"Calumet Forsyth."

"My brother?"

"Yes, Ham, your goddam brother. Listen, I don't know what you want, and I don't care. You left us all a long time ago, and nobody wants to hear from you again. How dare you call me? How dare you try to crawl back into my life? You call me again, you send me a single letter, let alone to my children, and I'll have whatever police they have over there haul you into some cockroach infested prison on a trumped up charge and leave you to rot for the rest of your life. Or better yet, I will personally track you down and tear out your heart, if you even have one. Now get out of my life and stay out!"

And with that, the conversation ended.

And Cal snapped himself out of his daze.

And he fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.

And he told himself. "Later. I'll call him later."

And so, our story is nearly begun. But before we can begin in earnest, it seems only fair that we meet the fourth member of our quartet.

Let us call her Scherzo.

The muse of Hammond Forsyth is a fickle piece of work.

She comes when she comes, and she leaves when she leaves, and woe to the man who dares tell her to do otherwise. Still, she likes Ham and needs no encouragement to spend her days with him. She likes that he is not easily distracted from the task at hand, unless by her. She likes that he listens to no one, unless to her. She likes that she has no rival from love or hate or fear or joy or ambition or contentment. That he is oblivious to her presence only increases her interest in this subject whom she considers to be gloriously pliable.

Hammond Forsyth is not a machine, of course. He does not think when told to think, and rest when told to rest. Like his muse, he considers himself in full charge of his own destiny. Though he would never

admit it to himself, would in fact be ashamed to admit to such a lack of control, he is, like so many artists, scientists, and thinkers, wholly dependent upon his muse for his greatest achievements.

But even a muse desires change from time to time, and Hammond Forsyth's personal goddess occasionally takes her leave.

When she fails to visit him, when he notes the emptiness but fails to define it, he turns his attention to the mundane but necessary tasks of detailed experimentation and analysis. Such are the primary jobs of every scientist, methodical, repetitive, exhausting, and sadly necessary. Of course, like so many professionals at his level of experience, Ham often uses assistants to carry out the daily tasks that constitute 98% of science, preferring, whenever possible, to interpret, study and solve. A more carefree man than he might dare say dream. When his muse fails to visit, however, such dreaming is usually fruitless, and the exercising of these monotonous tasks keeps his mind busy while waiting for her return.

On rarer occasions, Ham rests his mind altogether. Though he doesn't know it, he misses her, and is in his own way seeking her comfort. He finds himself unable to concentrate, even on the most mundane tasks, and takes to an unconscious search for the keeper of his soul. Such searches are rare, but not extraordinary. After a boldfaced but failed attempt to bully through the absence of his muse at the cafe, he might commence his search with a long walk through increasingly empty streets, perhaps landing at a grassy patch where a few older locals are playing bocci. He might perch himself on a short stone wall abutting the field and watch the players, strategizing the game in his mind. Or he might walk on, searching for the elusive peace he only finds when she is by his side.

Today, she will not come.

Today she is angry.

It was a dangerous idea, and she should have kept it to herself. She should have kept her big mouth shut. Should have kept her thoughts to herself. But dangerous or not, inappropriate or not, she did not keep it to herself, and dammit, he should have listened. Fuming, she stomped off to wherever her people go when they stomp off to bask in the glory

of the universe or some other such garbage, while she gathered her thoughts. She would not return soon.

And Ham is on the verge. He can feel the idea just outside of his reach, floating somewhere north of his cerebellum, not quite daring to venture to his temporal lobe. He had it, had seen it, had known it, figuratively held it in his hand, was doubtless of its existence. It was...was...something important, something...but also...also ridiculous. He tried to fight through it with the waitress, teach, explain, come around to it from the side in the hope of finding the key thought that eluded him, but there was no hope. Had he taken the gift when it was offered, he would now see the world as no one ever had. Now he can only grasp in frustration, the epiphany fading like last night's dreams after morning coffee.

He walks to the short stone wall he remembers, but the old men are nowhere to be seen. The clouds have rolled in, and the day no longer shows promise. Perhaps he had best go back to the lab, after all, crunch some numbers, numb his mind. As the sky grows darker, he sits on his wall, a curious look on his face, still searching for the lost epiphany, losing steam.

He doesn't know it yet, but he is perched on a precipice below which is the crevasse known as *crisis of faith*. He does not yet know he ever *had* faith, but he will soon. For the love of his life is gone, and she isn't coming back.

How Big is an Antelope?

How Hammond Forsyth came to be perched above a crisis of faith was this.

The computer display that had at first gained the attention of the cafe waitress in the yet to be named European town contained a problem that had been dogging the scientist for the previous twelve days.

The laptop displayed clues, clues which did not seem to relate to each other, but which all, in their own way, seemed to suggest that there was more to the universe than had been previously believed.

It was a dangerous idea made all the more dangerous for Ham's lack of understanding. On the laptop was trial and error. Educated guesses. Scientific rigor without the benefit of reasonable hypothesis. Blind swings of a piñata stick, wishing without hope for a rain of truth to pour out from above.

Bunk.

The dangerous idea had presented itself twelve days before.

Dr. Hammond Forsyth had taken a rare break from work at the scientific facility that had first brought him halfway across the world from his childhood home. He knew from experience that there could, at times, be value in taking his mind off track, distracting it just enough to come at a problem from a new direction. He wasn't struggling with a particularly difficult problem at the time, but he felt his mind was not as sharp as it should have been, so wisely took a short break.

He read a passage from a book that had followed him throughout his life. This passage was a collection of thoughts from an ancient man of wisdom focused on the idea that the world was a single organic unit, working together in body and mind for purposes unknown. As the guru put it, at least in translation, *the world is one*.

Ham had read the passage innumerable times before and knew every part of it intimately. On this day, he did not read the lesson straight through, but rather skipped, as he often did, back and forth, hovering over a given paragraph or sentence for deeper reflection. It was a type of knowledge that Ham was never quite comfortable with, but which he knew did in fact speak to the nature of the universe in its own way. The

readings, the thoughts, the pauses between them, often inspired him and brought about new approaches to old problems with which he had been trapped in loops of repetitive thinking.

He rarely wasted much time with the book, seldom more than ten minutes. This day was no exception.

In the midst of a thought about a butterfly poised on an ancient stone, the idea came flying at him like a meteor crashing to the earth. It walloped him. Sitting in his office, book in his hand, he suddenly, and without warning, saw before him the true nature of the universe. It was awe inspiring. It was indisputable. It was terrifying.

His mind was filled with a mixture of joy and fear. Joy of having at last seen the truth he had been seeking his whole life. Fear for what the truth meant to all of existence. It was a volatile mixture bubbling over and threatening to blow his mind apart, a concoction far too terrible for the masses of mankind to face. Such knowledge could only drive men to madness. No ordinary person could accept it. No sane man would share it.

No. It was too much.

Dr. Hammond Forsyth, scientist, logician, the pinnacle of rational man who had spent his life shunning all but rational logic, who had never once shied from facing a fact, who thought nothing of fear and only of truth, closed the book and shut his mind. Even he could not face such a terrible truth.

He opened a desk drawer and buried the book deep inside. He went back to his computer and buried his brain in the mundane calculations and data analysis that form the majority of any scientist's work, and are often the bane of his existence. He left the thought outside his mind, erecting a barrier to keep it from threatening him again. When it knocked, he plugged his ears and pretended he hadn't heard.

The next day, the idea still dogged him, and he put it away.

And the next.

And the next.

Then, after three days of ignoring what might possibly have been the greatest gift of his lifetime, he chided himself. What could he possibly be afraid of? Surely, he could *understand* something without sharing it.

Surely, he was strong enough to face a terrible truth without tempting others with it. He had never shied away from a truth in his life, and he would never forgive himself if he did so now.

And so, after three days of hiding from this new and frightening awareness, he dared to open up his mind, to relive the epiphany and dare to study it. Slowly, carefully, he searched the shadowy corners of his mind, like a man trying to remember a dream after his mind has truly woken, all but a few images forever elusive. He tried to calm himself, to relax into the memory, to relive the moment of insight, but the epiphany came not. He took long walks, tried to relax his mind. He pushed his mind, forced it to its limits. But the epiphany came not. He prayed to gods he did not believe in for one more chance. He slammed his fists on the desk. He pulled out every former study he had worked on in the hope of finding some clue that would bring back the world changing knowledge. But the epiphany came not.

He dug back into his drawer, to see if the book might once again inspire him.

The book was gone.

This.

When Calumet Forsyth was fourteen years old, his brother Hammond surprised him in the midst of furtively ogling a magazine that was, at the time, giving him great pleasure. Cal had parked himself in a rarely frequented corner of the finished basement, a forgotten corner with bins of toys and books from earlier childhood, already dusty with age, and was sitting on the carpet leafing through his magazine in low light.

In my own youth, I was fortunate enough to have gained possession of a few magazines categorized at that time as *men's interest*, magazines that proved far more fruitful than the fashion magazines and catalogs that riddled my sister's room, and which had served as a poor substitute when times were hard, so to speak. Although not all boys of my generation had the good fortune to have *men's interest* magazines in their possession, there can be no doubt but that the vast majority of them wished they had. It was considered *normal* by most, *typical*, *conventional* even, although likely *perverted* by the standards of caricaturish

teetotaling schoolmarms as portrayed in the myriad of *losing your virginity* movies of the same era.

Cal's tastes varied somewhat from convention.

At the moment when his brother Ham surprised him, he was studying a quarter page photograph in a trade magazine called *Aggregate World* that he had stolen from his local library nearly three months previous. The photograph was of a new suburban development in which an exciting new shape of curb was being experimented with. Well, perhaps not exciting to you and I, certainly not to me, but to Cal, the excitement of the photo bordered on erotic.

He imagined himself sitting in the freshly mown grass along the parkway, underneath the shade of the first small bloom of the adolescent tree, his hand feeling the soft curve of the cement that formed this virgin cement. He could feel the subtle divots in this border between street and grass, each one giving him the sensation of closeness to his world, and combining to wrap him in a feeling of warmth and comfort. When he fantasized about curbs, such as the one he was studying at that moment, he was at once exhilarated and ashamed. Perhaps it was that he felt no right to such good feelings, and so was ashamed of experiencing them. Perhaps it was that he felt deviant for finding such joy from an apparently mundane subject. Or perhaps he was just shy. In any case, he was secretive about his habit, and more than a little ashamed.

At the time of his discovery, he thought he was alone in the house. His parents were certainly still at work, and his brother would have been either at the chess club or science lab. It was a day like every other, and in being so, assured his privacy. To answer for the risk that he might be discovered, he chose his corner of the basement to appear as if he were just bored, and had picked up some old magazine that had probably been laying around for years. He told himself that if he *were* discovered, he would just play it off that way, and therefore arouse no suspicion. In fact, he had *kept* the magazine in a bin of children's books down in that corner, so that it might look like it had been there as long as everything else.

When Ham surprised him, Cal failed to execute his plan as hoped.

Ham walked into the basement, and Cal froze. He just sat there on the floor, magazine in his lap, frozen in fear. Ham walked right up to him without saying a word, kneeled down before an old toy bin, and dug through it. Finding his prize, a spiked wooden ball, the spikes rounded with years of handling, he stood up and left the room. Cal wasn't sure if he'd been noticed or not. He wasn't sure if he had looked nonchalant or suspicious. If he had been outed or was still safe in his secret. He closed the magazine and put it back in the usual hiding place, no longer assured that it wouldn't be found. Suddenly, the old bins weren't as ignored as he imagined, and they were certainly no longer safe. The rest of the day, his stomach churned in fear for what his brother might say, or that his magazine might be discovered before he had the opportunity to finally dispose of it.

That night, he stayed up until everyone had gone to sleep, and another hour after for good measure, quietly walked downstairs, each creak of each step sounding like a fire alarm, not even daring for one last look, put the magazine into his backpack, snuck out of his house, rode his bike to the library, and with a combination of relief and regret, dropped the magazine into the book drop contraption, putting, he thought, his fetish forever behind him.

The fetish, of course, continued to follow him through life, though not in a debilitating way. It was more that he found a small thrill when looking at a well designed curb, in the way others might upon looking at a beautiful sunset, or when listening to a particularly moving piece of music. And it was no accident that he found himself, as an adult, in a career that found similar trade magazines occasionally finding their way onto his desk.

In one way, however, the incident was a transforming moment in his life. Prior to that moment, he had accepted the distant and uncommunicative nature of his elder brother as the natural state of the world. Cal had no other siblings, no other experiences to show him that his relationship with his brother was unusual. For Cal, it was just the way things were. Natural.

After the incident, however, as Cal became equally distant from Ham for his own reasons, as he watched at every passing in the hall for

some sign that Ham saw Cal's guilt, that he knew his dirty secret, he began to truly question that emotional distance for the first time. His feelings became of mixture of relief for not being noticed, and *resentment* for not being noticed. Over time, the resentment became the dominant thought, to the point where he had trouble watching his brother walk past him without deep feelings of anger.

As a matter of survival, Cal forced himself to ignore Ham altogether, to pretend he was no more than a distant relative, a boarder in his parents' home, a disinterested stranger who just happened to sleep across the hall.

By the time the events in our story began to unfold, Cal had completely written off his so-called brother, not as if he were dead, which would by nature illicit some required sympathy, but as if he had never existed.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when the book of ancient wisdom that Hammond Forsyth was so anxious to find arrived in the mail addressed to Cal's son, that Cal discarded it immediately, before his son could ask questions about the uncle he didn't even know existed.

Ham *was* distant and uncommunicative, not out of shame or regret, but rather because it was in his nature.

Three and one half years, to the minute, prior to the birth of Calumet Forsyth, the world was blessed with the birth of the human boy destined to be Calumet's elder brother. The boy's parents, in memory of a romantic walk along the lakeshore followed by a night on the town that led to declarations of love, named this first fruit of that love for Hammond, Indiana, the town in which that love had been born.

It was the irony of his life that Hammond considered his name to be eminently logical, an appropriate label defining the location of his origin, and not a daily reminder that it is the power of love from which we all spring.

Hammond Forsyth was a quiet soul, prone to giving thought to his classwork and scientific study, to puzzles and observations, and oblivious to anything resembling human needs, emotions, or intangible feelings. That he had a younger brother, he would never have denied,

not as a child nor in adulthood. To say that he cared for his younger brother would, however, have been inaccurate to the point of fabrication. The sum total amount of care shown to Calumet Forsyth by his elder brother Hammond might best be expressed by the phrase *none at all*. He was not mean or cruel toward his sibling, never hurt him, never stole his things, never insulted him, or in any way gave Cal the negative attention so typical of elder brothers. Rather, he failed to notice his brother at all, the way I fail to notice a harmless bacterium on my living room sofa. As we have seen, this was hard on Cal, but the pain was tempered with the knowledge that his brother treated everyone this way, without prejudice. Ham's ignorance of Cal was, in modern parlance, *nothing special*.

On the day that forever scarred his younger brother, Ham had been looking at the effects of friction on different objects, and had sought out an old toy he remembered from his early childhood to help in his experiments. Although Ham could not have been said to *notice* much, it could never be said that he failed to *observe* pretty much everything. He focused his mind on the things that were important to him, but such focus never prevented his collection of data, which was constant and without pause. He had never given the toy much thought, but he still knew just where to find it. Similarly, he would have known just where to find an outdated copy of *Aggregate World*, were he to be in need of it.

The toy was exactly where he expected, and he completely failed to *notice* his brother, in this case sitting on the floor right next to the toy, furtively reading the outdated edition of *Aggregate World*.

The list of things which Dr. Hammond Forsyth *observed* but failed to *notice* was so long as to be nearly incomprehensible. A short selection from that list included:

His brother's marriage,

The political upheaval leading to impending war in a neighboring country,

The names and ages of his only niece and nephew,

The devastation of his assistant's ancestral home due to fire,

The death of his father,

The death of his mother.

At the time of this story, Hammond Forsyth is a physicist at an important laboratory in Europe, where he studies things, makes discoveries, and basically performs work that no appreciable portion of the earth's seven billion humans can comprehend, nor see the value of if they could. That he was destined for the world's most coveted scientific award was certain, if destiny can be described as what *ought to* happen, rather than what *will* happen. Unfortunately for Ham, he had not yet received such a prize prior to the beginning of this story, and it is necessary for the conclusion of this story that the world as he knows it, as Cal knows it, as you and I know it, cease to be, replaced as it must be by a world of madness and death in which such prizes are no longer relevant.

This.

Dr. Hammond Forsyth had a secretary that suffered from her own version of Prossy's Complaint. Without daring to truly hope, she was quietly in love with the doctor, and served him loyally because of it. She cared for his health, adjusted his clothing, made sure he ate well, and in every way but one acted the part of a loving wife. That the romance she dared not dream of would never be did not stop her from caring for this man as if he were her own. She settled for the role of mother, rather than wife, and accepted the inevitability of his own life sentence to bachelorhood.

She did not know much about his family, as Dr. Forsyth rarely spoke of them. She occasionally asked him about his history, but he would generally just wave her off as if to say, "Don't bother me with trifles." Occasionally, she pushed her luck, but had always been, without exception, shut down.

She might say, "Where *did* you grow up, anyway?"

To which the good doctor would reply with a dismissive wave of his hand.

She might then persist with, "Oh, surely there can be no harm in talking about your childhood."

And the doctor would *beg to differ*. "Were I to take a pause in my study to reflect upon my past, my study would suffer not only from the

direct interruption, but also from the inevitable time lost in ramping back up my train of thought. It may well be that the successful completion of this particular study will lead to a breakthrough only if done so within a given time restraint, now threatened by the interruption in thought I have taken to give this response, which you should have been able to deduce yourself with your not inconsiderable abilities in logical thought."

She did not press him often.

At the time that his current crisis of faith was just beginning, however, on this day when the doctor was slightly out of sorts, he would respond to one of her inquiries in a less than usual fashion. She had no way of knowing this, of course. She merely forgot herself and began chatting with the doctor as if he would respond to her small talk. She had no real expectation that he would speak, but at the same time refused to accept that she must spend her entire work life in silence.

"My nephew graduates high school in a few weeks," she said. "I suppose I should just send him a check, but I want to do something nicer. Maybe a check and some special book. Do you have any family, Dr. Forsyth?"

It was an innocent question to which she expected no reply.

This is where Ham would normally have brushed her off. He was a busy man, of course, a man wrapped up in important thought. He neither had the time nor the patience for small talk. He certainly did not have the interest. That day, however, in fact for the whole week, he had been out of sorts. The person he had been, the person she had come to know, was not present. The person in front of her was a stranger, and to his secretary's astonishment and pleasure, he replied absentmindedly in a way wholly uncharacteristic. "I have a brother. I suppose his boy is graduating about now as well."

The secretary, while pleased to hear him continue the conversation, was taken aback. Rather than being prepared for casual small talk, she was instead expecting the usual careless remark, and prepared herself for such. When the conversation continued, she was struck dumb, and had to remind herself that she had begun it. Nervous but determined, she boldly moved forward.

"Will you be sending him a gift?" the secretary asked cautiously, preparing herself to be dismissed at any moment.

"Oh, I suppose I should," Ham said, almost in a trance.

She could have left things there. Perhaps *should* have. The doctor was clearly not himself, and what was needed was sympathy and insight on the part of the only person that even mildly cared for him. Her excitement, however, at finally breaking through some small part of the doctor's protective barrier blinded her to any such worries, and led her to throw caution to the wind.

"Would you like me to take care of it?" she offered.

"If you like." The doctor, Hammond Forsyth, was then prodded inside his mind, as if a bucket of cold water had just been thrown at his face. He woke himself up and threw the stranger to the door. His well honed persona, his worser self, kicked in as if on auto-pilot, leaving his well meaning secretary to fend for herself.

"Now please, don't bother me. I have much work to do." And with a wave of his hand, he ended the conversation for good.

The secretary was not entirely put out. She had prepared herself for the inevitable dismissal, and was still riding high on the rare moment of shared conversation with the subject of her admiration. She now had clear permission to delve just a little bit into the doctor's life, and she was infused with a new energy. It would no longer be inappropriate for her to research the doctor's family, to discover his home town, to learn a little more about this man who had effectively been her ward for the last decade, but who was still basically a stranger. Ethically, she was now free to investigate, as long as it was to the purpose of following his official instruction: send a graduation gift to his nephew.

She did not discover much, but she did find an address and telephone number.

And so it was that this woman who took care of so many parts of this absentminded scientist's life also attempted to reconnect him with his family. She decided that a gesture of sentimentality was in order, and helped the doctor to pass down an important talisman to the next generation. She knew of his mildly sentimental attachment to the book he kept buried in his desk drawer, *The Art of Caring for the Aging Garden*,

and also knew he would never truly miss it. It was a collection of philosophical essays both ancient and modern, just the sort of book that would serve a young man beginning his journey into higher education.

She dug out the book, scrawled an inscription she thought might sound like the doctor's voice, and mailed it to his nephew in America.

She then made a note to purchase a new copy of the book and slip it into his drawer.

A week later she would further her attempt by leaving a phone message for the doctor's brother. Two weeks later, on her way to the bookstore where her replacement copy had now arrived, she would be struck by a car while attempting to outrun a twelve foot horned beast only she could see, but which would not slow in its determination to hunt her down.

That Calumet Forsyth's brother had sent his nephew a thoughtful graduation gift might have been touching had not the gift come six years too early. Instead, it was the only communication of any kind from the man in the lifetime of the children, and was received with exasperation and confusion.

Cal never let his son see the gift. Peremptorily, he walked to his local library and hid the book amongst the others on the sale shelf, an area he considered to be of the lowest possible status for a book save, perhaps, for the shelf of a thrift store. He had the satisfaction of having thrown it in the trash without any of the guilt he would have felt in doing so. A book is, after all, a book, and an educated man can hardly dispose of one in good conscience.

Sadly, the books on that particular shelf were doomed to a different type of disposal after their obligatory two months on the sale shelf. To where they would be taken is a secret no decent reader would ever care to know.

Of what the book itself was comprised, it is necessary only to know that it contained such wisdom as can only be collected over a thousand years, and which always circles back to the same thought. A thought that has teased mankind for millennia. A thought embraced by men of the spirit, feared by men of the mind, and ignored by men of action. A

thought for which the brother of Calumet Forsyth often reached, but never quite allowed himself to accept.

The world is one.

Such was the book contained in the only communication Hammond Forsyth had bothered to make in the lifetime of his brother's children.

Such was the book which Cal discarded without ceremony.

And such was the book which carried madness across the world.

Cal fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.

From thousands of miles away, a woman's voice rang in his ears.

"Dr. Forsyth's office."

"Um, yes. This is, um, Calumet Forsyth. I got a message to call here."

"Please hold."

Moments later, Cal was connected with his long lost brother.

"I.B. I expected to you call earlier. I was just checking to make sure your son received my gift. My secretary can be very inefficient."

Ham was as dismissive of his secretary as he was of everyone else. No surprise there.

"No, Ham, he did not. Clyde did not receive your gift. I discarded it before he knew it had come. Also, he has not graduated high school. He hasn't even *started* high school. That you treat me with such arrogance I have long accepted. That you dare to treat my son in the same way is not worthy of his knowledge. He is better than you. I am better than you. And neither of us want anything from you. It's too little too late *superior brother*. Why don't you crawl back into your hole and save the world from itself or something?"

And with that, the conversation ended.

And Cal snapped himself out of his daze.

And he fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.

And he told himself. "Later. I'll call him later."

Greta had a secret. It was this.

She was an imposter.

In her heart, she was a lonely failure undeserving of love or respect. She had no taste, no tact, ate too much, thought too little, and had no sense of her place in the world. She would, she believed, die alone, oppressed by loneliness and despair. Even as her acquaintances praised her, even as she grew her social circle, even as she cared for her family, she knew she was no more than a middling actor, just barely fooling the world that she was confident, competent, and full of care. She did not deserve praise, did not deserve trust. In no way did she believe she deserved the confidence of the world. And yet, she fought for it without rest.

She covered up her insecurity, donned her mask, and dared to face the world. She painted a smile on her face, breathed deep, and walked on stage, ready to play her part to the death. Yet, inside, in the untouchable, unreachable, unseen but never fully hidden inside, she knew it was all a ruse, and that someday she would be found out.

This happened.

Two years after graduating from state college, Greta met Calumet Forsyth at a party where she was performing admirably. She had renewed acquaintances and introduced herself to strangers. She had been careful with the wine, so that she might maintain control of her act. She had been reserved with the hors d'oeuvres, careful to taste the host's offerings without calling attention to herself as the glutton she believed herself to be. She related a story she had not told before, at least to this group of people, and was well prepared to discuss a new television series that was now all the rage. When Cal first saw her, he saw an intelligent, confident, beautiful woman, everything she wished to be, everything she wished the world to see, everything she knew would forever elude her.

Cal fell in love, and Greta let him.

She went to the movies with him. To dinner. Went to parties with him as his girlfriend. She smiled and talked and held his hand. He spoke to her of his past and she reciprocated in kind. It was a well executed courtship. Greta knew she did not deserve him, but decided to stay until he found her out.

She wanted to love him. She wanted to care for him. She wanted to give herself over to this man who had given himself over to her. She

wanted to take the leap, dare to risk showing her true self to the one person who might forgive her. Who might love her in spite of her faults. Love her for who she truly was. It was all she wanted in the wide world.

Sadly, what we want and what we dare seldom meet in the cold light of day.

She did not. Dare. She did not dare to love him.

She held him. She comforted him. They married and made babies. Bought a home. Made new friends. They built a life together, this imposter and her lover. But she never brought herself to care. To trust. To love.

She had not the courage.

She was a rising tide of fear and self loathing surrounded by a levee not three inches higher. He was a flock in the valley below. She believed he was in love with the levee, but would run for cover if the waters behind ever broke through. Brazenly, she faced the world, the levee shored up, the mask locked onto her face, playing the part she never truly believed in, and determined to stay in character until the final curtain.

Even at the bitter end, as the carbon monoxide lulls her into a final sleep, she will face the flame spouting demon threatening her children as if with the shell of courage from which she was made, rather than from the core of fear so effectively hidden inside.

So it was that Greta, her fear successfully suppressed by a combination of sheer will power and her embrace of Benson Quartermaster's diagnostic technique, moved on with her life as if she were in complete control.

Cal could claim no such advantage.

That he had been spooked by Jacob Gruber, there could be no doubt. That the further stories of madness dotting his landscape made him fear for his family, he could not deny. Once in the grocery store. Twice in the school. These were no aberrations. Something strange was happening, and he could no longer be certain that his family was safe, which of course, they were not.

He might have done better to think more of himself.

While his mind wandered through the mire of fear induced fantasy, while he imagined the horrible futures that might be in store for his wife and children, reality hit him full force in the chest with a baseball bat.

Well, Dundee McNair did, anyway.

Dundee was Cal's boss at Cahill Architecture and Engineering. He was a good man and a thoughtful manager. He never got overly emotional, and Cal usually knew where he stood with him. He felt lucky to work with him, but their relationship had always been a little awkward, their meetings never quite infused with the comfortable rapport Cal had felt with others at the firm. Still, Dundee was a reasonable man, and Cal had no reason to complain.

Cal had recently been asked to take the civil engineering lead on the design for a hospital renovation, and he knew the client had met with Dundee the day before. He assumed he was called in for some follow-up.

They met in the conference room where drawings for the project were laying on the table. The baseball bat, a souvenir from the founder's boyhood days, was still on the wall. Dundee seemed friendly enough. At first.

"Come in, Cal, come in. Sit down. I'll get the door." As Cal sat down at the glass table, Dundee crossed behind him to close the door. "How's that stormwater issue coming? Any more problems?"

There was something in Dundee's voice that put Cal off, and he began to get nervous. He stumbled a bit, and said something like, "Fine. Fine. I'm just getting started really, but nothing I'm worried about."

Dundee hovered awkwardly, said, "Good. Good," and just sort of stood there, his back to the door, standing across the table. "Good. Good."

They stared at each other a bit, awkwardly, each waiting for the other to speak. Finally, trying to sound casual, Cal said, "Anything I can do for you, Dundee?"

His boss didn't answer right away. He just stood there staring, vaguely shaking his head, as if to say no, but not saying it outright. Cal thought about forcing some rapid conversation, perhaps about his

approach to some of the calculations, and some possible higher end choices for the client. Something, anything, to kill the weird silence. Cal was just about to speak when Dundee broke the silence in the worst possible way.

"I've got some bad news for you, Cal."

"Bad news, Dundee?"

"Very bad news, Cal."

Here we go, Cal thought. He was never up much on the overall health of the firm, but he was smart enough to know that with the economy in the tank, nothing was certain. He hadn't heard any rumors, but he was no fool. There is always a first layoff that starts the rest of the rumors going. At the moment Dundee opened with *bad news*, Cal believed he was the first.

His mind raced.

How long can I afford to be without work? Where can I apply? Will I have to move back to consulting? Can I make enough money that way? I still have two years until Jessi will be in college. Is it enough time?

He was hardly listening at that point, so sure was he of what was coming.

Dundee said nothing. With an odd, almost shifty look in his eyes, he carefully moved along the side wall, circling the room. It was obviously hard for him. Cal had laid off people himself in the past, and had a strange sense of empathy for him at that moment. He almost felt worse for his boss than he did for himself.

Such was the nature of Calumet Forsyth.

Circling behind Cal, Dundee grabbed the baseball bat off the wall, and came back to where he started, his back to the door. Finally, he spoke.

"Cal, I need you to stand up."

"Stand up?"

"Yes, Cal. Stand up. Slowly."

Here we go, Cal thought, and stood up. He expected the next words would be something akin to, "I need you to clean out your desk," but fate is rarely so kind as to give you what you expect.

"The very bad news is this, Cal. As I stand here speaking to you, apparently the friend and colleague you have known for over five years, presumably unchanged from the last time you saw me, unchanged and predictable, what you cannot know is that my eyes have been opened. Unlike you, I have been cursed with a view of the world as it truly is, and am saddled with the knowledge of just how dangerous is this place in which we find ourselves. As you sit in this room, in the reality you have known throughout your life, a reality as safe as it is predictable, as I stand across from you, intellectually aware of the truth that you know and see, I simultaneously experience the horror of the true reality crushing down upon us. I will, of course, do all I can to save you from it, unaware of it though you may be."

All this time, he was moving slowly toward Cal, the baseball bat in his hands rising almost imperceptibly.

"You are currently perched upon a precipice, below which lies an abyss of fire and pain so great you can not envision it from within the reality you inhabit. I beg you, do not move. Do not shift your chair. The precipice is not static, nor is it inanimate. The abyss seeks you, and your every movement alerts it. Wakes it. Dares it."

Cal's mind awoke. He did not seem to be getting fired. Something else was happening. Something very strange. What had Dundee just said? It definitely did not *sound* like he had been fired.

"You are, unbeknownst to you, surrounded by creatures all too ready to heave you over, drawing you into their reality of pain and torture forever. Hold still."

Cal fell back into his chair, and Dundee immediately began pummeling him with the bat. The back of the chair was some protection, but he was wide open on his chest and took several hits dead on. Doubling over in pain, his mind raced. His boss was actively trying to bludgeon him to death. Cal was looking down at the floor, desperately trying to plan his next move when his thought process was once again interrupted by searing pain, this time from a blow to his back, now fully exposed.

Cal dove off his chair and under the table. He crawled for the door and miraculously found that Dundee did not pursue. He scrambled through the door, closed it behind him and shouted for help. Architects,

engineers, designers, interns and receptionists all rushed from their desks and collected near the conference room.

They stood looking through the glass wall that kept the room fully exposed, and watched in horror as Dundee McNair, partner and lead architect, swung the baseball bat at the air in the room, and then brought it crashing down upon the glass table, shattering the side and leaving jagged edges to threaten him as he continued to flail about the room. His next swing brought the bat in contact with the glass wall, which spidered and obscured the view.

Cal and his colleagues took the rest of the day off.

The baseball bat used to bludgeon Calumet Forsyth both anterior and posterior was not the legal property of Cahill Architecture and Engineering, Inc. It was, technically, contraband, stolen some fifty years previous. Its rightful owner at the time of the theft was Sunnyside Hardware, sponsor the Sunnyside Lizards, pride of a suburban Kansas City Little League. Walter Cahill, eventual founder of Cahill A&E was, at the time, only ten years old.

Walter was a lousy baseball player and had served on the team against his better judgment. He was not only a lousy baseball player, he was lousy at all sports, games, physical activity, and pretty much anything that required him to pay attention to the world around him. As such, he spent most of his one and only year of Little League on the bench, watching others have what appeared to be a pretty good time.

Having received the appropriate membership fee from Cahill's father, the team was required to play him, and did its duty to the minimal extent required by the Little League regulations of the time. As a result, young Walter generally spent even numbered innings in right field praying to a god he did not have much confidence in to keep the baseball from heading in his direction. He was generally rewarded. On the rare occasion that a ball would come his way during an even numbered inning, he could be expected to miss it, drop it, throw it short, or in some way choke on his rare opportunity, submitting himself to ridicule and shame upon his return to the dugout.

Batting was no better, though his teammates learned to expect nothing from him, and his time at home plate was considered by all to be an easy out.

Even with this unfortunate teammate, however, the Sunnyside Lizards were a pretty good team, and handily won their division the one and only year they could claim Walter Cahill as a member. This did not give much joy to Walter, as it meant that when his summer of hell finally appeared to be coming to a close, he suddenly received an extension to his torture in the form of playoff games. Now, when it mattered more than ever, Walter was sure he would be the cause of their elimination from post season play, and his stomach churned continuously. Fortunately for Walter, the Lizards would be eliminated after only one game, and he would finally be able to put the nightmare behind him.

It was a slaughter. Batter after batter succumbed to the Prairie View Possum's miracle of a pitcher facing them. Out in the field, their confidence shattered, things were even worse. Even a stumble and a short throw on a grounder to right field in the 6th couldn't fairly lay the blame on young Walter Cahill. The whole team was falling apart under the pressure.

When Walter came up to the plate for the second time, he had no fear of striking out. That is to say, so many of his teammates had struck out, he knew his own impending failure would not bring further negative attention. Mildly pleased and decidedly distracted, he entirely missed the first pitch, which came in low. Shocked at his first ever failure to get a strike, he stood frozen in amazement as the second pitch, too, sailed by him, this time outside. His coach was shouting something at him, but the world seemed to be moving in slow motion, and he had seemed to lose control of his arms. As the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth pitches sailed by, he failed to move at all. To the wonder and surprise of his teammates, he managed to receive only two strikes to four balls, and was invited to walk to first base accordingly.

Perhaps some combination of confidence lost by the pitcher and gained by the Lizards was the luck needed to give the Lizards their one and only hit that game. Gary Schmidt sailed a ball to center field, and Walter had no choice but to run. His final thought before taking off at

the best speed he could manage was, "Here we go." He ran as hard as he could. He had no idea where the ball was, whether or not he was in danger, and had no idea how to determine whether or not he should stop. He had never run the bases before. Not even in practice.

He ran to second as the ball landed between two outfielders. He ran to third as the ball sailed back toward him. And he ran all the way to home plate as the ball landed in the catcher's mitt, moments too late to keep him from scoring. He was hailed, however briefly, as a hero.

The Lizards lost that game 8-1, and Walter quietly cheered in his head, grateful that he would never again play a game of sports for the rest of his life. As the team went home dejected, he managed to abscond with the bat that had given him his brief glory by hitting nothing at all, and walked home smiling to himself.

This.

From the time the bat was constructed, it never hit a single baseball. The first purposeful collision it would ever know was with the anterior side of Calumet Forsyth's torso. Sadly, it spent most of its life as decoration, rather than what I suppose is the dream and glory of all baseball bats: to be used playing the game of baseball, and would end its life in a police evidence storage locker. Walter will end his life hanging from a rafter in his attic, hoping against all reason to escape a posse of electrically charged homunculi from tearing out his intestinal organs.

Whether or not Walter Cahill had, at any point in his life, been visited by one of Scherzo's race is unknown. He is, alas, less than a minor character in our story, and we now know the sum total of what we shall ever know about him. Any encouragement he received along the road to becoming an architect and building a business may well have come solely from his friends and family. What we can be assured of, however, is that he did not receive any encouragement from the one muse with whom we have become acquainted. He is not quite Scherzo's style.

Scherzo prefers her science a little more rigorous than one generally finds with an architect. She likes pure mathematics. She likes deep logic. She likes concepts that can be imagined but not seen. And she likes, above all, the pursuit of truth.

As a student, of course, she practiced her skills of inspiration on all sorts. Like the other young muses, she executed her assignments with varying degrees of success, gave bursts of inspiration to hacks in rock and roll bands, art school students, thieves, college professors, software engineers, and yes, even architects. It was a necessary part of the curriculum.

The popular students, predictably, focused on musicians, sculptors, actors, dancers, and so-called artists of all sorts. A few chose instead to create moguls, leaders, entrepreneurs. Some students were a little less focused. They tended to jump from person to person, give bursts of inspiration to all kinds of people, without ever staying very long. Perhaps help someone redesign their apartment, or cook the perfect dinner, or tell a great lie. Just little moments here and there, always with someone new, never really committing to anyone. That is how many of them spend their lives.

Scherzo was somewhere in between. She was a great student. She could have been popular had she so chosen, but felt dismissive of the conformity such a choice would require. She felt art was too predictable a path, and that money and leadership was short sighted. She wanted something more. Something greater. Something rare.

In the end, it was science that gave her what she was looking for. Others before her had inspired scientists. It was far from unheard of, though certainly a non-traditional path. Still, it was science where she felt at home, science where she felt she could make an impact, and science where she focused herself as a young adult, attempting to make her own mark in the world.

So it was that she raised young Hammond Forsyth. So it was that she inspired him throughout his life. So it was that she took a child with a gift and turned him into a man who could change the world. And so it was that in doing so, she learned to care for him.

It is not unusual for a muse to get bored, to leave her subject in mid life, anxious to find someone younger, someone pliable, to leave their former love with whatever remnants, whatever memories of inspiration they can hold onto, sadly watching their gifts fade for reasons they

understand not. Such stories are well documented, whether they fade into obscurity, or implode in a grand final gesture.

Hammond Forsyth was certainly getting on in years, and surely it was time for Scherzo to move on. But she had no desire to. Her work was not done. She had more to give. It was only his ignorance that drove her away. As in he ignored her. As in he chose to be ignorant. And she was not happy about it.

Cal was not exactly his best self on the evening news. A reporter had managed to get to him before the ambulance did, and he was still wrenched with pain from the baseball bat. As he would learn not much later, there was no permanent damage, no broken bones. It seems that his supervisor had been slacking on his regular exercise regimen, and his strength, fortunately, not what it had at one time been. Still, Cal was in pain all over his body, and in shock throughout his mind. He was in no state to talk to anyone.

"Can you tell us what happened in there?" the television reporter had asked.

"Huh?"

"We've had reports of violence, perhaps another madman, inside your building," the reporter prompted.

"Yes...mad...I, um...sure, I...um, probably?"

"Did you see anything? Did you witness the destruction?"

Cal struggled to understand the question. "Well...I...um...he...um, baseball. A bunch of...I guess he...I...I don't think he, um...what he."

An EMT came over and led Cal gently by the arm. She spoke to the reporter in a style that might have been interpreted by the reporter as curt, but might better be described as dispassionate.

"Please excuse us. This man may be injured."

One of Cal's colleagues walked into the camera shot to fill the void.

"It was unbelievable! One of the bosses was going absolutely ballistic, and *that* guy was like, hiding under the chair. He's lucky he didn't get his head smashed in. I was probably the first person to see anything. I was coming by with my cart when I heard this screaming...." etc, etc, etc...

Cal was taken off to a nearby hospital for evaluation, where he was soon cleared and released with no more than a very expensive bottle of ibuprofen. He was escorted out of the emergency room by police investigators, who asked him a few questions, and left him to find his own way out of the hospital, and back home.

Alone, confused, distracted, he picked up his cell phone to call Greta. When she did not pick up, he neglected to leave a message. Too much, he thought, to say. As he passed through the waiting room to wait until later to try again, he was greeted by a friend, a colleague who had followed the ambulance to the hospital.

She comforted him, and offered him a ride back to his car.

It was not until he woke up at home from a very necessary bout of sleep that he realized he had still not told his wife. He found her watching the end of the evening news.

"Where is the North Pole, Cal?"

It was not the greeting he expected. Her face was turned away from him, still facing the news, now onto a post-news commercial for an upcoming series. His first thought was that she, too, was showing signs of madness, but he put the thought away. She was, no doubt, angered at learning about his dreadful experience from such an impersonal source as the local evening news.

"I'm sorry, Greta," he said. "I tried to call but there was no answer and I...I just thought, you know, a message seemed a little, not right, I guess. I meant to tell you when you got home, but I must have fallen asleep." He bent over to kiss her.

"Where is the North Pole, Cal?"

Clearly, he thought, this was going to take more than an apology.

"Where is the what?"

"The North Pole, Cal."

Perhaps she was losing her mind as well. He decided that he should avoid upsetting her at all costs. Keep her calm. Answer her questions as he had the night before.

"At the northernmost point on the Earth."

"How big is an antelope?"

"About the size of a deer."

"Is a lemon drop sweet or sour?"

"Sour."

"Why do birds fly south?"

"To escape the cold."

She went to the sink and filled a glass with water.

"What color is this?"

"Clear."

"How big is heaven?"

"Infinite."

"What is the meaning of life?"

"I don't know."

"Ok."

"Ok?"

"Ok."

She turned off the television and kissed him on the cheek. She held him by his shoulders, then pulled him into a light hug. "When I saw you on the news, I was worried, then I was angry, then worried again."

"It's alright, Greta. I'm a little banged up, but I'm fine. I didn't want to worry you."

"And I was worried about the kids...and...well...if maybe...if maybe you caught it...if you had..."

"I'm fine, Greta, really."

"I know."

She held him at arms length again, smiled, turned away, and walked to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Cal followed.

"Greta, you asked me those questions last night."

Without hesitation, focusing on pulling food from the pantry, she said, "Yes I did."

Cal waited for further explanation, but none appeared to be forthcoming.

"Why did you ask those questions, Greta?"

Still without looking at him, she said, "It's a scientific evaluation of your mental state, designed to determine if you are experiencing any form of mental illness."

He stared at her, unbelieving, as she pulled lettuce from the fridge.

"You think I'm *crazy*?"

"No, honey. You passed."

He felt oddly separate from her at that moment, as if she were on the outside of a cage with Cal inside. As if she had been observing him, had finished, and had now lost interest in his insignificance.

"What answers would have failed?"

"It's not important, Cal."

"It *is* important, Greta."

"If I told you how to respond, it would ruin the test. *Obviously*, I can't give you the answers."

"Obviously."

"Dinner should be about an hour."

It was still a little chilly outside Cal's house, but one could feel the warm side of spring just around the corner, something optimistic about the leaves budding on the trees. There were still some patches of snow here and there, but it was largely gone, leaving behind it the sloppy mud that would soon turn to summer grass. Cal smiled, and took a deep breath, then sighed when the movement of his ribs caused the pain of that morning's beating to come rushing back. As he forced himself to keep his breaths shallow, He felt oppression coming back. Even his own body was trying to bully him.

He soon found himself devolving to old habits, and without realizing it, had turned his eyes to the street, following the lines of sidewalks, of parkways, of curbs and gutters. He had lived in this neighborhood for many years and knew each linear foot intimately. There was the heaving section of sidewalk in front of 502 that had been losing the perennial battle with a fifty year old oak for as long as he could remember. In front of 508, the curb, cracked during a home renovation four years ago, was still unrepaired. At 544, an apron he had come to love, one with old world character, with stones you could still see coming through the pavement, had just been paved over with asphalt, the wooden sticks and ribbon still protecting the driveway from intruders. Looking at it would have been enough to make anyone sick, but the stench carried that disease into Cal's stomach, where he could feel the bile churning, trying to

get out. He closed his eyes, but the smell continued to force its way in. He picked up his pace and turned the corner into the wind at his first opportunity.

Several blocks away, he came upon his church. Well, his wife's church, really. He had no personal affinity for the institution, though he did attend from time to time at his wife's behest. Today his interest was the prize inside.

Two thousand years ago, more or less, a troublemaker was tortured to death for suggesting that love might be more important than power. Ironically, or perhaps with intentional sarcasm, his followers co-opted the instrument of his torture as the symbol of the organization meant to honor him. The church that Calumet Forsyth now entered was a member in good standing of this organization, and as such, had not only a life size reproduction of this torture implement proudly displayed above the door, but also no shortage of smaller versions inside, including some with statues of the rabble rouser himself in the act of being tortured. The gruesome artwork had come to be associated with the phrase, *"Always do unto others, as you would have them do unto you,"* although I personally have difficulty seeing the images without hearing a whisper in my ear of the quiet but clear threat, *"Consider yourself warned."*

Inside this sanctuary, Cal will, in fact, find the object of his search, and his success will lead him to a scene that, in the eyes of some readers might be considered lurid. Whether this scene is gratuitous or a necessary element of the story that sets up our main character for the change our story craves is yet to be seen. Gratuitous or not, however, Calumet Forsyth will and must visit with his lady friend underneath the dark threats of a two thousand year old ghost.

Consider yourself warned.

Inside the church, all was quiet, but as the door had been unlocked, Cal had no doubt that *someone* was there. Instead of calling out, however, Cal walked quietly through the halls, hoping to see some sign of his prize without calling the attention of others. His desire to avoid

contact with others led him to avoid the office altogether, and he, instead, wandered into the sanctuary.

I am not a practicing Christian, and so the meaning so many find in such a place is lost on me. However, it is no surprise to me that the low light, the vibrant colors in the stained glass, the hushed quiet of the room, might bring Cal to a state of peace that was no doubt the intent of the room, regardless of any religious feelings he did or did not harbor. In such a room, the pressures of the day, the angst of guilt, the intangible feelings of responsibility might fall away, and leave one strangely at peace.

Let us imagine Cal, then, in a lonely pew, at peace, quietly letting the atmosphere wash over him. Not in prayer, but undoubtedly in communion with his soul.

When Anne sat down beside him, it was as a gentle breeze floats across a warm room. He was not startled, nor even distracted, but her presence did wake him from his trance. Having almost forgotten why he had come to the church in the first place, he looked at her in wonder, thinking what a pleasant surprise it was to see her after so much time. Her smile was warm and her eyes touched his own. For the first time in weeks, he felt at home.

She took his hand and walked to the courtyard in back. They sat on the stone steps overlooking what would be, later that spring, the tended garden, without speaking a word. In the distance, the low whir of some lawn tool cut through the silence. How long they sat like that it is impossible to say, but the sun was still high when the first words left their lips.

"How's Greta?"

"Fine."

"And you?"

"Fine."

Whir.

"How about you, Anne?"

"Me? Oh, you know. Same old."

Whir.

"And Matt?"

"Well, you know."

"Yes."

Whir.

"It's nice to see you, Cal."

"You, too."

Whir.

The sound of a car in the distance.

Whir.

"So why are you here?"

Why was he there?

"Oh, I don't know. Just...you know."

"Oh."

Whir.

Whir.

"How is work?"

Why was he there?

Whir.

"Anne, I...I've had a rough day. I guess. I thought maybe...I don't know. I thought maybe I needed...I don't know."

Whir.

Anne slipped behind him, one step up, and put her hands on his shoulders. Gently rubbing, caressing almost, she quietly spoke. At first, her words came one at a time, short pauses between each one, then only between each phrase, until soon the words were flowing from her like a deep river, still on the surface but running fast underneath.

"There's a new subdivision on the north side. The developer is in over his head, but it's starting to come together. He's got about 2400 acres, so it will be fairly sizable. We're doing all the civil."

Her hands brushed the back of Cal's neck for a moment before once again finding their comfort zone on his shoulders.

"I can already see it in my mind. Empty houses on muddy lots with fresh grass in the parkways, poking through the straw. Trees barely more than sticks dreaming of the day they can shade their sunny neighborhood. Sidewalks smooth and level, undisturbed by roots or the freeze thaw cycle. Maybe a couple of names carved by adventurous kids in the

wet cement, still supple in the early summer sun, taking its time to harden, knowing that once it does, it will be forever frozen, never to breathe again."

Her arms slid, ever so briefly, over Cal's chest, just below his shoulders, before retreating back up.

"I can see the curb forms, sliding out of the C&G, oozing out, fencing in the homes, a delicate border, barely solid enough to hold its own weight, a promise of what will be, a lifetime protector from torrents and floods. They are crisp on the outside, but still sinuous within, virgin material, not yet tested with the fury of nature."

Cal felt his own hands slip to his sides of their own accord, laying themselves over the cold stone of which the steps were made, feeling for the grooves, the dimples, the imperfections, tasting with his fingers the erosions beneath, and the gentle curves they brought.

"But this is a special project. It sits on the edge of a slough, and the DNR almost shut us down. They were worried about run off. About 2400 acres of soft soil covered with roofs and pavement. About torrents of rainwater carried away from its home, rushing through the sewers to a treatment plant while the frozen pavement is cleansed by the thunderous showers."

Her hands once again slid over the top of Cal's chest. His own continued to seek out the visceral shapes below them, knowing the stone as one could only do by touch.

"So we have compromised, and agreed to lay roads of pervious concrete. The aggregate is large, allowing water to flow through, limiting the runoff into the sewer. The rain lands atop the surface, and drips, drips, drips through, each droplet of water sliding from rock to rock within the road, until it finds again its home in the earth, where it can once again draw toward the slough."

With each *drip*, she pressed into Cal's collar, squeezing into his shoulders with a pulse that made him feel the breath of the earth. Then, running her hands into the nape of his neck, she spoke, almost in a whisper. So quietly he could hardly make out her words, as her gentle breath on his ear competed with her voice for his attention.

"And unlike the ancient stone upon which we sit, each rock buried within will know the gentle caress of rain..."

Here her hands slipped down his arms to his own, and with each of the following words, as if her hands were one with his, caressed the stone beneath with the stirrings of passion.

"...in each..."

Whir.

"...tiny..."

Whir.

"...crevice."

Whirrrrrrr.

Anne was a lost soul.

She had been married for fifteen years, with no children. At first, she had wanted children. Then she hadn't. Then she had. Then she hadn't. On any given day, her mind would shift from one desire to the other, paralyzing her with inaction. As a result, from the earliest days of her marriage, she told herself that only *not* having children was up to her. Motherhood, she decided, she would leave to fate.

She and her husband made love regularly, with no precautions, not for the purpose of creating life, but rather for the pleasure of each other's company. Children would come, no doubt, they told themselves, and they let the fates take destiny out of their hands.

No children came.

Anne didn't really mind. She didn't seek out treatment, didn't ask her doctor to look into it, didn't explore adoption or foster care. The fates had played their hand, and Anne had folded. It would have been nice, she told herself, but at least she still had her work.

Her work.

She had landed a job fresh out of college with a civil engineering firm, and twenty years later was still there. The work was fine. She had challenges. She had the freedom to come and go, take the occasional afternoon off. But like so many women and men of her age, adults who have found their place in life and begin to suspect they have done what

there is to do, began to feel the existential angst that comes with middle age.

Her husband, she knew too well, had fallen into a similar crisis, and had addressed his own demons with a variety of love affairs that he didn't work nearly hard enough to conceal. She knew. He knew she knew. She knew he knew she knew. They never discussed them.

Bored at work. Lonely at home. She sought adventure elsewhere.

First it was the grocery store. Then the gas station. Then the library. Every where she went, she would fall victim to a formerly nascent desire for thievery. Her financial needs were few, her ethics still strong, and yet, still, adventure summoned, and her empty pockets became increasingly filled.

She never took much, seldom anything of value, but always some trophy to prove her accomplishment to herself. She stole key chains, candles and books. Perfume, trading cards and decorative plates. She stole from stores, businesses and friends. She never went out of the house without bringing back some trophy. Some proof of her adventure.

It helped.

A little.

As her collection grew, however, she began to fear for being found out, if only by her no good husband, and she considered a new approach. How many trophies, after all, could she possibly store in one place without calling attention to herself? To further challenge herself, to satisfy her soul and because she never really wanted the stuff to begin with, she began returning things she had stolen. Her addiction to theft showed no signs of abating, but added to that was now the new challenge of returning to the scene of the crime with a former trophy which would then be exchanged for a newer one. In this way, her accumulated crimes leveled off at a sustained level, without growing into an obsession of collecting trophies.

Still, her conscience bothered her, and her sleep was troubled.

To allay her guilt further, she volunteered at her church, an indulgence of sorts, to quietly buy forgiveness for her sins. Indulgence for her sins from the past and those not yet committed. She did some cleaning, helped keep the books for the volunteer organizations within the church,

and in many ways, made herself indispensable. At the time she found Cal sitting alone in the sanctuary, she had been looking for and replacing burned out lights. She had a stolen candle in her purse.

This.

Nine days after her not quite sexual encounter with Calumet Forsyth, their tryst if you will, Annabelle Fruma Cantilever will be murdered by her husband, Matthew Cornelius Cantilever III. He will, upon her request, smother her with an over worn king size pillow. As he does so, he will think to himself that the pillowcase is overdue for changing. He will then fill his house with natural gas and ignite it in an attempt to rid his domicile of the vicious six-legged, fang baring and spike covered creatures half his size and twice his strength, surrounding him and bent on his destruction. Anne's final words to Matt, as he stands over her, pillow in hand, will be, "Free me from this wretched place. Lay me in peace."

The final words spoken by her husband as he holds a barbecue lighter in his hands, finger on the trigger, will be, "Here we go."

Merriam-Webster defines the word *disease* as: "*a condition that prevents the body or mind from working normally,*" which begs the question, if a person is *in*-fected, but not yet *a*-ffected, if that person is yet in a state of ease, can they be said to be *dis*-eased? The question is worth considering, at least that is, until such time as you, too, begin to see the world in a way that cannot possibly be true. Until such time as animal demons claw your throat and the ground rends itself before you, while your friends and family stand by, idle and apathetic before you, concerned only that you see what you should not. Until that time is upon you, but while the virus courses through your veins, are you diseased?

And if such a cancer reveals to you the world as it truly is, allowing you, for the first time, to see what had been hidden from you for a lifetime, if it shows you a world you could not understand, but which is the only world that ever was, if your friends and family, those that stood idly by, are paralyzed not by their fear, but by a blindness that keeps them, as it had previously kept you, from seeing truth, however ghastly, however morbid, will such a cancer be a disease, or a cure?

You will soon find out. As you read this, your body is slowly undergoing a change. Your mind is preparing itself to be unclouded. There is no stopping the process of enlightenment, however terrible. What is seen cannot be unseen.

Look about you. Look carefully. The world is not as it appears.
You have been protected. Sheltered.
And the walls crumble.

Why Do Birds Fly South?

This.

Three years after bamboozling the still unnamed college in Minnesota, Benson Quartermaster was at one of the three low points in his life worthy of remark. The first involved a prostitute in Philadelphia, a morphine prescription, an unborn child, and, not unexpectedly, the criminal justice system. That this particular low point did not bring Benson Quartermaster to the brink of suicide speaks not only to the man's inner strength and perseverance, but also to a sort of disconnectedness he felt from reality, a disconnectedness that protected him throughout his life and will find full flower only after he falls as far as a man can fall.

The third will come much later in life, and find him wallowing in self-pity on a vermin infested couch within an apartment he does not recognize. We shall visit him there before our tale is complete.

At this second of lifetime lows, however, three years after creating the questionnaire that would soon be so misused by Greta Forsyth, the depths of depravity and anguish within which Benson Quartermaster found himself were of such deep amplitudes as to be incomparable with the other nadirs of his life. Sad as it may be to contemplate that this would not be the last time the man would hit bottom, it is, perhaps, somewhat comforting to know he will rise up again before his final fall, an apparent success in pulling himself out of the depths of despair, however briefly.

Benson's methadone clinic in Denver had closed, and he had made his way out of the city, searching for money. Within a week, not a penny to his name, he was fighting withdrawal symptoms in a shadowy corner of a village green, somewhere in western Colorado. He did not know where he was. He did not care. He had no friends, no family, no social worker to care for him. He was completely, utterly alone. It is with irony that we consider his membership to a club of members as alone as he, a club not at all exclusive, but one in which the members are forbidden to commune with each other. Whether or not Benson was dying in the shaded December snow is not of import. It matters only that he thought he was dying, was sure he was dying, and therefore *was* dying.

A poke of skate punks, angered at the packed snow keeping them from rolling in the park, desperate for adventure, kicked him as they shouted invectives. The curses varied, but in each case these punks successfully portrayed the idea that this bum was not welcome in their park. Invariably, these coldhearted delinquents told him to find someplace else to die. Benson Quartermaster thought they were figments of his imagination. He thought the pain they brought yet one more symptom of the withdrawal that would not cease until it had taken his life. He prayed for death.

After a few minutes of mild torture with no reaction from their victim, the skate punks gave up and wandered across the street to warm up in the record store where they were welcomed by an old friend sitting the counter, only to be thrown out shortly thereafter by her manager.

As the sun went down, Benson's extremities froze, his core body temperature dropped, and he fell into a state of hypothermia from which there appeared to be no return. His end had come at last. His final thought before losing the consciousness that had plagued him for a lifetime, the thought he was sure would lead him from this life to the next, the thought that gave him the first hope he had felt in recent memory was, "Here we go."

He did not die, of course. As we have discussed, the man known as Benson Quartermaster must sink to an even lower depth than the one in which we see him now before we can finish our tale. At this time, he was saved, though in what way we will never know.

When he awoke in a warm bed under bright lights with a beautiful man looking over him with caring eyes, all he could manage to ask was, "Where?"

The nurse replied that he was safe, that he was under a doctor's care at Mountaintop Memorial Hospital, and that he was pleased to see him improving.

Benson Quartermaster, still floating in and out of consciousness heard only, "Mountaintop," and congratulated himself on his forethought. "*Heaven, "he told himself, "is on the mountaintop, after all."*

Cal never cheated on his wife. Not really. Even on days like this one, when her shell was strong and the scared and sensitive woman he fell in love with was buried so deep as to be unfathomable, he knew she was and always would be his one true love. His dalliances with Anne were no more than guilty pleasures. Stolen cigarettes when the kids were not watching. Excessive speeding on an unwatched country road. He knew Anne wanted more, knew she would let him take it as far as he wished, but he never dared.

It was a game, that was all.

Still, he never returned home but under a pall of guilt and shame.

Today, she knew. It was unclear *what* she knew, but she knew.

When Cal came home from his evening constitutional, Greta was waiting for him on the porch.

She said only, "Go."

Cal did not respond. He understood everything in an instant. Her fear that she wasn't strong enough to hold him, her fear of being found out for who she really was, her fear of a sane world crumbling around her, her fear that she could not protect her children without him, her fear that he would never truly be hers unless she stood her ground.

"It's not what you..."

"Go."

"We were just..."

"Go."

"Greta, listen to me. You've got to..."

"Go."

Cal sighed. There would be no talking to her, no explaining. Not that day. As with those confounded questions, sometimes the only real choice was simply to give in and follow her directions.

He hung his head, turned his back and walked away, he knew not where.

He turned back to face her. "Greta, please, you just have to..."

"Go."

She turned back to the house where she had set the dinner table for three. And Calumet Forsyth, thrown from his home, nowhere to go,

lonely, friendless, set loose upon the world, wandered aimlessly, no destination in mind.

He walked as if in a dream, not knowing where he was, until he found himself on the south side of his town, near a park built for skateboarders. The gentle curves of the skate park features had always been soothing to Cal. The cement was smooth and bold in the same stroke. The sweeps of concrete were at times symmetrical, and at others, dynamically unbalanced. In each case, however, the shapes spoke to Cal and soothed his turbulent soul.

The voices of boys melted into a background noise with no discernible words. In the audible foreground came the marriage of wheels to stone, the sounds not only speaking in Cal's ears but throbbing in his chest. With each pass, he could feel the rumble of the skateboards permeate his body as he was wrapped with the comforting embrace of the solid world. The ephemeral movement of the wheels, each sound a particular moment, some infinitely small part of the wheel touching the pavement, never to match up quite the same way in quite the same place again, balanced with the stability of the pavement itself, never moving, never giving way.

Then, when he was wrapped in this warm blanket of sound and pressure, movement and embrace, he would be held in an empty silence as one of the skateboarders would approach his zenith and float quietly through the air. In those moments, the blanket was pulled off Cal's shoulders and he was left completely exposed. He could see the infinite, could see himself not in the world, but beyond it. In those moments, he flirted with clarity, perhaps for the first time in his life.

It didn't last, of course. In seconds, the board touch down, rumbling back down the ramp, and Cal would once again be wrapped in his cocoon. For a moment, he closed his eyes, and when he did, in that moment, he was transported back to his youth. He was sitting on his driveway, in what his teachers of that time called Indian style, and what my own children's teachers call crisscross applesauce. In front of him, his own skateboard, not well used, in his hands, rolling back and forth along a two foot stretch of cement. He would roll it slowly to the right. Then to the left. Then to the right. He would listen for each bump, each

connection between the wheels and pavement. Just sit there and roll the board back and forth, back and forth.

The memory was as alive for Cal as if he was truly there, still a child in his parent's driveway, not some ridiculous adult, completely out of place in an after hours hangout for teenagers. As the rumbles flowed through the skate park, he felt them clear as the Saturday sunshine of his childhood home. The intoxication he felt as a child, the high that was always a distant memory, impossible to achieve, came rushing back, and he was once again, if only briefly, disincorporate and at peace.

And then some skater would rise over the top of the ramp.

And the silence would come.

And the joy would end.

And his brother walked by.

And he said, "Hello, I.B."

As far back as Cal could remember, Ham had called him I.B. It was short for Inferior, as in *inferior brother*. It was not meant as an insult. His brother could not mean anything as an insult. He was not capable of such a thing. It was merely his way of describing their relationship. He was the elder brother, Cal the younger. He the higher ranking, Cal the lower. He the superior, and Cal the inferior. He was attempting to be descriptive, nothing more. Nevertheless, the double meaning always hit Cal hard, and he never failed to resent it.

And Cal ignored him.

And Ham said, almost to himself, "I wonder if the driveway gets as much pleasure out of that as you do."

And at that moment, at the very moment he said those words, Cal stopped rolling the skateboard. Any comfort he had found from his quiet rumblings was lost.

Cal gained immense pleasure from his little sits on the driveway and had always felt safe within them. He believed that no one would ever guess the euphoria he felt. He believed that if they did, he had a certain plausible deniability, that he was just daydreaming, just bored, not really paying attention. With his brother's words, Cal knew he was found out and his secret joy was changed forever.

Ham, his superior brother, walked on, as if he had said nothing, and Cal, feeling as if he had once again been discovered in the midst of the world's worst imaginable crime, felt completely exposed in the loss of the world, with not even a chance to deny his guilt.

The memories of childhood, of the guilt he had never let go, of the brother he still resented, carried him away. He must have sat for hours there, catatonic, as the teenagers killed the time between dinner and curfew. Cal was no longer in the park, but a lifetime away, wading through memories long forgotten, and perhaps better left that way.

When he found himself back at the park, when he came back to himself, the teenagers were long gone, and he was shivering in the middle of a cold March night, alone, lost, and with nowhere to go.

And he cried.

The morning sun still hours away, Cal sat alone in the skate park feeling despair close in. His wife didn't want him. His office surely wouldn't miss him. He was alone and cold and uncomfortable.

It is one thing to dream romantically of adventure and cutting the ties of adult responsibility. It is quite another to sit on a park bench on a cold March night with frozen hands, sore back and a rumbling belly, as the realities of exhaustion begin to creep in. He knew not where to go, but go somewhere he must.

It was too late in the night to get a hotel room in his small town, even if he dared risk the gossip. His only hope for warmth, though not for rest, was the gas station. It was open all night, and there were two tables for when they served pizza during normal hours. He slowly stood up, each joint creaking from their frozen state, and slowly pushed himself toward his new destination, a little more than two miles south.

The walking was more difficult than expected. Not impossible by any means, but challenging in a way that required his focus if he didn't want to stumble on every fifth step, which he did anyway. The way to the filling station was by a busy road without a sidewalk, and the shoulder upon which he found himself was not yet devoid of the frozen snow and slush still fighting to remain relevant as spring crept in. Rocks out of place from a season of plowing, ice chunks carved up and refrozen in

unexpected places, and the natural crowning of a road long overdue for a rebuild left Cal fighting for any sort of natural walking pattern. An evening constitutional this was not. He was even splashed full on by a semi that hit a puddle of salty slush at just the wrong moment.

Nevertheless, cold and uncomforted as he was, he still managed to let his mind wander.

The image of his brother continued to force itself into the front of his mind. Cal saw him doing non-specific scientific tasks, like something out of a 1950's science fiction movie. One moment he would be mixing colorful and vapor capped liquids from one oddly shaped glass vial to another, the next staring into a telescope, notebook and pencil in hand. Cal imagined him surrounded by likeminded scientists, brainstorming solutions to ancient problems in the midst of the world's most advanced technology. He imagined interns in lab coats running around fixing massive equipment behind him as Ham wrote complicated formulas on a 16 foot chalkboard.

Cal was not ignorant of science, of the real day to day work of scientists, of the varying conditions under which they worked. He spent his academic youth surrounded by the sciences as he slowly focused on civil engineering. Somehow, though, his brother remained this mythical creature practicing some other science beyond what Cal could comprehend. Whatever it was Ham was working on felt so unattainable to Cal that he could only see it in iconic terms, like a child's vision of what grownups do.

In his mind's wanderings, he allowed himself a brief moment of hope.

He saw himself sitting across the table from Ham. They were in a sunny villa sitting at a wooden table as some vaguely European housekeeper dusted in the background. Cal not only felt the warmth of the coffee cup in his hand, not only saw the steam rising between them, but actually smelled the deep rich roast of a brew all the more extraordinary for the setting in which he found himself. In this vision, Ham was not the coldhearted human-hating computer program Cal knew him to be, but rather a thoughtful and collaborative partner, putting care into

solving the mystery of what could only be a madness disease ravaging Cal's town.

In that moment of weakness, he wondered, and fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.

From thousands of miles away, a woman's voice rang in his ears.

"Dr. Forsyth's office."

"This is Calumet Forsyth. I would like to speak with my brother."

The line is silent for a moment, but only for a moment.

"Cal, what is it? It must be 3:00 in the morning back there."

"I need your help, Ham. The world is going crazy. First Jacob Gruber, then Sara Markuson and the Myendorff kid. And then my boss came after me with a baseball bat and started swinging all over the room..."

"Hey, slow down, I.B. Where are you? What's happening?"

Cal tells him about the madness taking over his town. Tells him it's starting to look like an epidemic. Tells him he's worried about his own sanity. His neighbors. His family.

"You've got to help us, Ham. Together we can figure this thing out."

There is a long pause while silence fills the line.

At last, his brother speaks.

"I understand. But, well, you see I have my hands full here. I have an experiment that I can't walk away from and two more in the queue. I can see value in helping you, but it does not outweigh the value I will receive from my current work. Perhaps if you send me some of your data I can look it over when I have a moment. I have no doubt I can give it some attention in the next week or two."

"But Ham, this is an emergency!"

"I beg to differ, I.B. I have no doubt you feel this is critical to your own well being. That serving your family and friends rises above serving society at large, but surely you must see that this is not true. Of course, I see no reason why you should not put forth your own best effort to serve your community. Perhaps this is your moment. Perhaps it is time you discovered if your own brain holds the necessary intelligence needed to serve your friends. Mine is currently engaged."

And with that, the conversation ended.
And Cal snapped himself out of his daze.
And he fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.
Weakness.

Cal was cold and sad and lonely and vulnerable, and in his moment of weakness, dreamed that his brother, the great Hammond Forsyth, was not the inhuman monster he knew him to be. Cal had turned him from who he knew he was into who he wanted him to be. Into whom he wished him to be. Weakness.

He shook himself off, straightened himself up, and told himself to *man up*. He would give Greta the next day to cool off, and then come home and face the music. He had strayed in his heart, it was true, but he had done nothing unforgivable. She just needed a little time to cool off. With a touch of courage, he lifted his head and moved on toward the gas station in the distance, an oasis of coffee where he could while away the hours until his house would be empty, and he might steal a morning nap.

He put his hands in his pockets and once again fingered the scrap of paper he had taken that evening from his kitchen counter.

Weakness.

Calumet Forsyth had good reason to distrust his brother Hammond.

For example.

Hammond ignored Cal's outstretched hand of reconciliation and forgiveness upon the celebration of his marriage to Greta. Cal had swallowed his pride, and in an effort to show his parents they might put the past behind them, entreated Hammond to serve as his best man. His entreaty was not even rebuffed personally. A letter from one of Hammond's coworkers apologized, and explained only that Hammond was engaged in research that could not be interrupted, but wished Cal the best of fortunes in his new marriage.

There was, of course, no response at all when Hammond became an uncle. Twice.

When Hammond's father died, Cal once again reached out to his brother. This time Hammond did bother to write personally, telling his

mother that death is inevitable to all living things, and that his father had, no doubt, survived longer than most. He wished his mother long life, and gave the briefest of apologies for not attending the funeral.

She did not grant his wish.

By the end of the year, she too had passed, and Calumet tried one last time to reconcile with his brother. He spoke to the reason he knew lay at the heart of all Ham's decisions, and suggested he had best return home to help settle their parents' estate. Ham did not reply.

Cal made no further attempts at reconciliation.

That is.

Cal had reached out to his brother on more than one occasion, had not pushed him, but had waited for life's most important moments, the sort of moments no ordinary man could ignore, to find some way to understand each other. At every opportunity, Hammond rebuffed him. Or ignored him. Or insulted him.

In other words.

Hammond Forsyth was an insufferable something or other not worth his brother's time.

This.

The ex-father-in-law of the truck driver who splashed Calumet Forsyth as he walked though the darkness was a personal acquaintance of Benson Quartermaster. They met in a sports bar in Louisville, Kentucky on a day long distant from the next derby, but far enough from the last one that it marked a period of depression locals would steep in for months. As the two sat in the artificial darkness of winter afternoon, they watched a nine-ball tournament on a television over the bar and made each other's acquaintance. Of course, Quartermaster's acquaintances rarely fared well, and this man was no exception.

"Lotta money in these tournaments," Quartermaster's new acquaintance said.

"That so?" Quartermaster replied.

"Well, for some, anyway. Niche market, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"Well," continued the man, emboldened by Quartermaster's friendliness, "a company like mine, we don't see a lot of opportunity for traditional advertising."

"What kind of company is yours?"

"Leisure, I suppose you could call it. Billiards and bowling, mostly, but we're growing, make no mistake."

"What do you do?"

"Marketing, advertising. Tournaments like this are gold mines, really. Without thinking about it, everyone who watches associates the pros with our products. And everyone wants to be a pro, so..." He shrugged his shoulders.

Benson Quartermaster took no time in recognizing his opportunity. Casually, but without hesitation, he let out the line that would soon present his bait. "Can't imagine many people watch though."

His new friend sighed. "Therein lies the rub my friend." He lifted his scotch and soda to Benson as a toast. "They don't watch if you don't got 'em, and you can't get 'em if they don't watch. Still, if you want to preach to the choir, you gotta go to church."

The man took a drink, let out a short sigh, and started what he thought was a new conversation. "And what do you do?"

With that question, the sucker's fate was sealed. Two months later, he would find himself without a job, without a wife, and with the money running out, all as a result of the bad investment his so-called leisure company had made at Benson Quartermaster's suggestion. The ludicrous suggestion that ruined this man's life was this: With the aid of government grants (practically guaranteed) and a sizable investment from the man's firm (just enough to get things going until the real money flowed in), the world would be blessed with the first annual Olympics of Leisure Sports. World class billiards, bowling and bocci, frisbee, fishing and foosball, sledding, surfing and shuffleboard, all together in one glorious international competition the likes of which advertisers for the sporting goods industry had never dared hope for in their wildest dreams.

The ludicrous suggestion had given this man hope of wealth, power, a promotion, and maybe a little goddamned respect from his wife

for once. In short, a new future. He received only the latter, a future in which he ultimately succumbed to the addictive wiles of fermented sugars, parked in front of a television in his underwear, his wife legally in the arms of another man, his daughter making ends meet at a low end topless bar, and he, filling the inside of the trailer his daughter deigned to rent to him with cigarette smoke and body odor.

His body would not live to see the world destroyed by madness.

At the decisive moment, an otherwise unremarkable moment in the Louisville sports bar, the moment when Quartermaster's mark chose to risk the safe stability of his life for what might have been his only chance at greatness, the man took a deep breath, smiled, shook the hand of Benson Quartermaster, with hope in his heart and a smile on his face. The deed was done. By way of ceremony, he sealed the deal by daring to speak the three words welling up in his thoughts. He clinked glasses with his new friend.

"Here we go."

His daughter's hopeless marriage ended in divorce after her loser husband barely escaped a prison term for injuring a construction worker with his truck and spent her life savings on fines and legal fees. Before our story ends, she will be shot by a customer who believes her to be a wild cougar in human disguise, and who she in turn believes to be an immense pile of rotten, maggot covered meat.

Her ex-husband, the driver of the truck that splashed Calumet Forsyth as he walked through the darkness, nearly made the mistake of his life again, just barely avoiding another accident. Cal was wearing dark clothes on an unlit section of the road, and as a pedestrian walking the shoulder in the darkest hours before the dawn, completely unexpected. The driver only noticed him as he passed, and then only as a ghost. The heart of the driver skipped a beat, or at least felt like it did, as he realized the closeness of the shave he had just experienced.

That he could still make a living driving a weapon that had struck a man once already was a miracle he never failed to recognize, and he knew there would be no third chance. He woke from his half trance, induced by the last four hours of driving on similarly dark roads without a break, and promised himself a reasonable stop at the next opportunity.

He would park his truck and sleep if necessary, although he knew without doubt that such an action would result in his losing yet another job. Even with that thought in mind, however, he considered himself lucky.

When the driver stands outside the nearest filling station, a few moments from now, stretching his legs, counting his blessings, and enjoying a leisurely cigarette, he will watch with curiosity as Cal drags himself inside to dry off and warm up with coffee and a stale hot dog. After deciding three times not to approach him, the driver will finally go inside the all-night shop and introduce himself. He will apologize for *coming so close back there* and ask if he can get him some dry clothes.

By the time their coffees are empty, the two will be sitting side by side in the truck, keeping each other awake, hearing each other's stories, and barreling just over the speed limit toward the hometown of Calumet Forsyth.

How Greta Forsyth discovered what she believed to be her husband's infidelity was this.

In the southeastern quadrant of a middle western state lies a packaging company that, among other things, provides much of the packaging for an off-brand line of foods known as *So Good*. The manufacturing process at this packaging company is largely automated, although, like so much at this moment in time, is not entirely independent from the need for human interaction.

One of the many tasks for which human intervention is needed at this particular plant is the changing over from one type of packaging to the next, and in particular, the changing over from the typical packaging of the plain breadcrumbs to that of breadcrumbs with Italian seasonings. The human responsible for this task some twelve days ago was tired, a bit hungover, and in most ways not herself. She failed at her primary task, and sent to market a couple gross of plain bread crumbs labeled as their more flavorful cousin.

Such a mislabeled package made its way into the Forsyth household, and was discovered by Greta shortly after her husband left for his evening constitutional. She could have flavored the plain breadcrumbs herself, but she was angered by paying for what appeared to be a falsely

advertised product. Not one to be taken advantage of, and certainly not by her local grocery, she donned a light jacket, went to her car, and drove to the supermarket to see that justice was served.

Along the way she saw her husband walk into the church.

Strange.

As she drove to the supermarket, she considered that she had been too cold with him. She was angry he hadn't called, hadn't told her, had let her find out about the horrible events of his day from the evening news. She was justified in her anger. Of that she had no doubt. His actions, or rather *inactions* made her wonder if she meant anything to him anymore, if he was taking her for granted. She had decided that *he* must be the one to apologize, to come clean.

Still, he had been beaten by a colleague, spent what must surely have been most of the day at the hospital, and was probably deserving of more sympathy than she had showed him. She dared not show weakness, that must never happen. Nevertheless, she thought as she drove to the supermarket, perhaps she had been too standoffish.

She thought of Cal walking into the church, looking for meaning. He had never truly embraced the church, had only attended services at her behest. Not lightly would he seek comfort from that place. Not lightly. He must be more troubled than she imagined. He must have lost control of himself.

For Greta, there was no greater tragedy.

She drove into the grocery parking lot and immediately turned around. She could season the breadcrumbs herself. What mattered now was her husband. He was in crisis, and she had let him down. Perhaps it was not too late to show him she cared.

She parked in front of the church and walked in, quietly, so as not to disturb what might be a delicate conversation with their pastor. She made her way to the pastor's office, but the door was closed. She put her ear to the door, but heard not a sound.

Strange.

Perhaps she was being too rash. After all, if her husband was seeking out the clergy, maybe it was better to let him do so. Comfort him at home.

As she turned to leave, however, she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned to look, and saw what looked, through the window, like someone in the courtyard. She walked over to the window and got the shock of her life. Not just her husband in the arms of another woman, but in the arms of *that* woman.

She left quietly, anger boiling in her heart, and drove back to the supermarket, where she demanded justice after all.

Halfway across the world in our still yet to be named small European town, Ham stared at a computer screen, allowing the various letters, numbers, and symbols to morph and breathe, unable to focus on their meaning. He had been there several hours, and the moments of distraction were getting worse. When he first arrived, he dug into a project that had been languishing on the shelf, so to speak, for several weeks. Reminding himself of the details he had known intimately before he left off took him, perhaps, a quarter of an hour. After that, the next three quarters, solid, were spent crunching numbers and reevaluating former assumptions. As the hour mark approached, however, he found himself sitting back in his chair, thinking of..

...wait for it...

...nothing.

So unusual was such an experience for Ham that when he caught himself staring, he abruptly stood up, pushing his chair over in the process, and looked around the room anxiously as if he were under attack. As he came to his senses and realized he had done what he had chastised his research assistants for countless times, he shook his head, sat down, and pushed himself even harder into his work.

The next bout of distraction came less than forty minutes later. The next, a mere twenty after that. He had all the signs of a common man sitting down with a book, unable to concentrate, and settling on television. His own version of television, however, the closest he could come to a mindless activity that would allow a tired brain to rest without sleeping, was the long walk he was prone to take in times of distraction. He knew this. He knew that a long constitutional was exactly what he needed. Yet, he feared it.

On the walk that had preceded his turn in the lab, he had been actively fighting with his mind. There was an idea there, an idea he couldn't find, wasn't sure he *wanted* to find, but which teased him incessantly. He was in the midst of a hide and seek game.

This.

When I was a boy, I used to play Kick the Can on summer evenings.

The way we played the game was this. One unlucky someone is chosen to be *it*. Everyone else hides in a fairly large area, say the yards of three or four houses. The poor child chosen to be *it* must then search the yards to find the other children. Should he find one, he calls out their location, and, on their honor, they must *come quietly*; so to speak, and sit in jail. Should some yet to be unfound child reach the jail and kick the can therein, all prisoners are freed, and no further searching may commence until the poor child known as *it* replaces the can.

Kick the Can is a whole lot of fun.

Unless you're *it*.

The game might as well be called *Mob vs. Loser* for the mentality it brings out of the children who play it. If you are sitting comfortably under the protection of the mob, the loser cannot hurt you. You can, without fear of repercussions, poke your head out and tease the loser, in the hopes he might see you out of the corner of his eye, without really being sure he has seen you. You can see him, but he can't see you. If by some chance, you are captured, you can always rely on another member of the mob to save you. And of course, you can only be captured if you play honestly and admit to your hiding place when it is called out. If you can slip away unseen before you can be physically handled, no one would be the wiser.

Under the protection of the mob, children are not afeared to cheat.

Hammond Forsyth was in his own game of Kick the Can with an array of ideas that refused to be captured. They would poke their heads out for the briefest of moments, just long enough that Ham would be convinced there was, in fact, something to see, an idea to grasp, but not so long as he could be sure of what he had glimpsed. In those rare

moments when he would think he had grabbed one by the tail, he would find himself empty handed and increasingly unsure of his own sanity. Ideas glimpsed but not remembered, he told himself, might as well not have existed at all. And yet, they were there. Surely, they were there.

These elusive epiphanies frightened him, made him fear the only part of himself he had ever counted on, his mind, and he was no longer sure that he wanted to face such fears again.

And so he sat at his desk, attempting to ignore these taunting ideas by bullying his way into the crunching of numbers. It had always worked before. The concentration on the mundane yet important task of systematic analysis had always worked wonders in clearing his head. Had always left him refreshed and ready to find the next leap of logic waiting for him at the back of his mind.

Just because something has always worked before, however, is no guarantee that the same something will work again in the future. As a rigorous scientist, Ham knew this all too well, and as much as he would have preferred it not to be true, there was no denying that his former tactic would be of no avail to him that day.

Absentmindedly, he played at his computer, one with remarkably high access to the priceless machines this facility was built to house. Without direction, he tried to let his ideas spill themselves through his fingers, through randomness, through trial and error. It was not a scientific approach, nor was it one which he would ever allow himself to take were he truly paying attention. He was a man of science. Hypothesis, experimentation, analysis. To begin without a prediction was egregious. But what else could he do?

Afraid of what his mind was doing as he sat at his computer, afraid of what it would do were he to give up and walk the streets of his adopted small town, he searched one more time for the dog eared book he expected to find in his desk drawer. Reaching into the mess that was this open container for junk he thought he might someday need, but which he rarely accessed, he performed the same task he had done several times over the previous days, hoping, against all scientific evidence, to see a different result.

He pulled out notebooks, folders, some cables, but the book was still not hiding beneath. He pulled out everything of size in the drawer until he was left with a handful of small parts from various experiments. Still no book.

Angry at himself for his lack of focus, for his wish to escape it by wasting time with that old book, for putting hope over logic, and most of all for his failure to find the spark hiding in his mind, he stood up and walked back to the control room. Once more he would bully through. He would force himself to focus, whether he wanted to or not.

He would fail.

He needed to be alone. He needed to quiet his mind. Surely, he just needed a rest.

Finally, accepting the obvious, Ham walked from the scientific facility he called home to the apartment he rarely visited. There, upon his unused bed, he would lie and allow his mind to refresh. As he approached the second floor, he could hear the sound of a telephone ringing on the other side of his door.

"Let it ring," he thought. "I'm not here."

Hammond Forsyth's muse was a force to be reckoned with. A ball of fury not only able and willing to take down anything in her path, but likely to do so as well. To say she walked up the street toward her childhood home would be to misread her entirely. She did not walk. To say she walked was to see her as calm and elegant, approaching her destination with patience.

Not she.

More like trencher was she, digging a path for herself, forcing each step through the thickest obstacle she could find and pushing it aside. Behind her, a deep gully tracing the path she had taken, a path which no one in their right mind would attempt to follow.

When she reached her intended goal, her father was on his knees, weeding. She did not wait for him to look up. Her voice was loud enough to be heard by neighbors near and far.

"It doesn't matter that I *overstepped* my bounds. It doesn't matter that I shouldn't have said it. I *did* say it, and he should have listened. It's

not like it's some big secret or something. I mean, finally, *finally* someone who could understand me, and he *chooses* not to. What kind of a something or other *does* that? What kind of a something or other chooses to ignore the one voice that has ever bothered to help him? The one voice that ever dared speak the truth? I mean, I know it's a lot. It's not like I don't know that. I *get* it. It's a *big deal*. More than a little bit scary, ok? But he can take it. At least I thought he could. Clearly, he couldn't. I mean, what kind of something or other *chooses* to be stupid? Because I tell you, Dad, and I say this in view of the full spectrum of knowledge and experience you have deigned to share with me, he is *not* stupid by nature. He has *chosen* this path of stupidity and ignorance and as far as I'm concerned, he can have it."

"Do you mean you..."

"Of *course* I did."

And then silence. Her father on his knees, twisted back to see her face, she, staring down at him in defiance, but for the moment, speechless, the neighborhood silent but for the echoes of her tirade.

Then.

"I mean, I know I shouldn't have. I know it was a mistake. A *huge* mistake, ok? And it's probably for the best that the stubborn something or other wouldn't listen to me. But that's not the point. The point is that he *ignored* me. That he was *ignorant*. He was supposed to follow me blindly, no matter the cost, to the ends of his stupid little earth, but he shut his eyes. It's not as if he *knew* I wasn't supposed to talk about it, *obviously*, so was it too much to ask for him to just *think* about it? *Consider* it? Don't look at me like that. I told you I know I shouldn't have. It was a mistake. A moment of weakness. It's not as if I'm the only one who's ever experienced a moment of weakness. I'm *weak*, ok, *weak*. You're always saying it, and you're obviously right."

There was another short bout of silence in the yard, which Scherzo once again broke, this time by quoting the lesson she had heard so many times from her father.

"But to focus on my weakness is to miss the point."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is. The point is that my sad excuse for a subject is an ignorant, careless, selfish, cocky, insufferable, arrogant something or other, who doesn't deserve my attention, and shall no longer receive it."

She stood, panting, hands on her hips, feeling every bit the beacon of hubris that comes with such a repository of inspiration. Her father, older, humble with the experience that comes from a lifetime of failures, was still in the squat he had risen into from the spot where he had been pulling weeds on his knees. Now he sat back on the dirty grass and leaning on his hands. When he spoke again, it was with a smile that he fought to keep from seeming patronizing. He spoke as if from above the fray, a wise old man with a wide view of the worlds, unconcerned with the petty troubles of the small minded minions.

"So you're walking away?"

She didn't hesitate. "Of course. Wouldn't you? Would you pour your heart and soul into someone who dismissed you without even a wave of his hand? I have done so much for him. *So much*. And he just...I mean this was a gift. A *gift*. And he just...I mean he didn't even throw it in my face. Didn't tell me I was foolish. Or dangerous. He didn't even *reject* me. He just ignored me. Like I wasn't even there. Like my voice was not worth listening to. Not worth his time. His useless, pointless, wasteful, unimportant, overpriced dime store time. That, I cannot, *will* not abide."

"And that he has done you a service? Does that not garner value in your eyes?"

She stood towering over him, suddenly held silent by his words. Angry she was. Of that there could be no doubt. But it was not without a substrate of guilt that she had come home. Now the guilt and anger fought each other silently inside her tumultuous mind, and she lost any ability to respond.

She could pretend she did not understand her father, but she knew he would see right through her. He knew her too well. And the situation was grave, she could not deny that either. With this particular inspiration, the inspiration so fortunately ignored by her so called subject, Scherzo had not only perpetrated a crime punishable by excommunication, but had dared to put an entire world at risk for the sake of a girlish

whim. That her subject had not taken her bait was a miraculous chance for Scherzo to repent and be absolved of her sin without punishment. Maybe. She was lucky that Ham had ignored her, and she knew it. She knew she owed him a debt of gratitude, a thought which only made her angrier.

It was that unspoken understanding with her father that silenced her diatribe.

She sighed, sat on the ground in front of him and put her chin in her hands. With her eyes ostensibly on the ground, furtively looking up at her father for approval, she mumbled, "I guess I really blew it, huh?"

Her father took it in.

Slowly, thoughtfully, with all the care and responsibility expected from a loving father, he answered, "I suppose you did."

For a moment, however brief, Scherzo actually thought her father was considering turning her in. He was, after all, a man who valued honor above all else. Truth, transparency, clarity, these were more than just words to him. They were the ethical shell that surrounded the core of his being. To do the right thing, to be honorable, he might just value truth over family.

Except.

Except there was a core within that shell that held greater sway. The true core of this man's being was love, and love would have its day.

"Still," he said, "nothing broke, and the worlds still turn, at least as far as I can tell."

They sat there, the two of them facing each other on the warm grass, each waiting for the other to speak. Neither did.

An hour later they were in the kitchen playing a quiet and seemingly interminable card game of war. Four hours later she was curled up in her childhood bed, napping away what was left of her angst.

In the morning, at her father's advice, she took some relaxing travel time for herself with the intention of giving Ham another chance when she had sufficiently cooled off.

A million miles away, the idea that the muse Scherzo had attempted to put into the mind of Hammond Forsyth was beginning to

take hold, infecting his world with a disease which could and must be terminal.

By the time Cal finally made it to the gas station, he was cold, wet, tired, and hungry. He looked as bad as he felt, and stumbling up to the all-night convenience store, on foot, at four in the morning tracking in slush, the attendant had his doubts. Quietly, the attendant reached for his weapon, hidden just behind the counter, to *remind himself where it was*. Store policy forbade him from bringing his weapon to work, but like hell he was going to work a night shift without *something*.

There was one other person in the station. Well not exactly *in* the station. Just outside, on the sidewalk, there was a truck driver smoking a cigarette, his rig still parked at the diesel pump. Cal walked right by him without even acknowledging his presence, without even a chin wave, and in fact, did not even notice him until he saw him through the window from inside. The truck driver, however, had noticed him.

Cal was sitting at one of the two lonely tables off to the side, sipping on bad but hot coffee, and staring at the hot dog he had purchased but not yet dared to taste, hungry as he was. The skin on the dog was tough and discolored from hours under the heat lamp, the bun cracked and stale. He tried to imagine the satisfaction of having eaten the dog, but all he could feel when he did was the sickly feeling of a stomach filled with flavored pieces of stiff upholstery foam. With each thought, the first bite became more and more impossible, and he just sat there allowing the bad coffee to fool him into feeling full, not daring to taste the forbidding meal in front of him.

It was in this state that he noticed the man smoking outside. Cal had sensed him out of the corner of his eye, and had attempted a furtive glance to take him in. The truck driver was, it seemed, doing the same. They caught each other full in the face, locked eyes and stared awkwardly at each other longer than they should have, each subsequent moment making it more difficult to look away. At last, after this strange interaction had gone on just long enough to make them both feel weird without going completely over to creepy, the truck driver nodded his head at Cal, put out his cigarette, and walked inside.

"Here we go," Cal thought. "He's coming to con me. Or hit on me. Or murder me." And then, perhaps out of inertia, perhaps out of fear, or most likely out of apathy, Cal told himself, "Well, let him. What do I care? What have I got to lose?"

The truck driver made himself comfortable across the table from Cal, waved with his chin and said, "Tsup, buddy." Not a question, exactly, but Cal treated it as such, anyway.

"Oh, y'know." Cal replied.

They sat there, quietly, for just long enough to prove that neither of them were very good at making conversation. Then the truck driver began with what Cal assumed would lead to some horrible scenario where he lost his money, or was raped, or murdered, or more likely all three. "What does it matter?" He asked himself, feeling for all the world like a man who had already lost everything.

The truck driver began like this.

"Listen, man, I uh...y'know I uh...I'm sorry about, y'know...uh...back there, and everything."

Cal had no idea what he was talking about. He just stared at him, trying to comprehend what he was saying, and somehow connect it to some inevitable dark fate that would surely follow.

"What I mean is...I uh...y'know, I came pretty close to you out there."

The truck driver stared at Cal.

"Y'know...in my truck." He pointed vaguely toward the diesel pump where his truck stood quietly. "Y'know, I was just gettin'...tired I guess. I mean...what I mean is...after I passed you, I thought, *jesus*, what the fuck *was* that, right? Like I didn't even see you until after I didn't hit you with my truck and...shit...I just...I know I didn't hit you or anything, but what I mean is...I mean, I *could* have, 'cause I didn't even see you, and I was just lucky. That's why I'm sorry, I guess. I mean...'cause I *could* have hit you, and that's...fucked up, I guess."

It slowly dawned on Cal who this man was.

"You're the guy that splashed me."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Well, I guess it's nice not to be dead, anyway."

"That's not what I...well I guess that's...yeah this is weird, I guess. Sorry. I just thought maybe I should say sorry and buy you a cup of coffee or something."

Cal was a little lost. He knew he should be grateful for not being hit by the man's truck. Still, if the man had not spoken up, Cal would never have known his life was ever in danger. Of course, the truck driver was really speaking for his own sake, not for Cal's. A sort of truck stop confession. Cal decided it was his role to somehow absolve this man of his sin.

"Don't worry about it. All's well that ends well, right?"

The two of them shook hands.

"So, can I get you something?"

"Really, no," Cal said. "I already paid for this crap, and it hardly cost anything anyway."

The truck driver nodded, and leaned back in his chair, now quite at home at Cal's formerly private table.

"So, what are you doin' out here, anyway?" the man asked. "Don't usually see people walking by the side of the road this time of night."

"Long story."

"Sure, ok," he conceded.

And then.

And then, something got a hold of Cal. Something he couldn't quite name welled up everything in inside him. A force he couldn't understand, but which was ruthless and unrelenting. And he spewed. Cal told him his story, such as it was, though the order was certainly confused. He told him about being thrown out of his house, about the crazy people in town, about the beating at work, about his brother, about Anne, about Greta. And, though he had not intended to, about a half baked plan to seek out his brother, halfway across the world. It was a jumbled mess.

What happened next surprised Cal as much as anything he had experienced that day.

What should have happened was as predictable as Calumet Forsyth himself. He saw himself drinking coffee through the morning rush in this gas station. He saw himself calling into work for a day or two to

recover. He saw himself walking home. He saw himself lying on his bed, sleeping off the worst night he had experienced in recent memory. He saw himself waiting for Greta when she came home, flowers in hand, dinner on the table, contrition in his heart.

That's what should have happened.

It is not, however, what did happen.

The truck driver wished him luck, told him there was nothing more important than family, and spoke, perhaps a little too long, about his own divorce and his regrets about it.

"If only I could go back, I'd change so much," he said.

And Cal said, "Well, sure, yes. Me too, I suppose."

After that the two made small talk for what should have been a few more minutes. The truck driver talked about his route. Lincoln, Beloit and the east side of Chicago, before returning home for a break. When the truck driver told mentioned Calumet City, Illinois, Cal guffawed.

"My namesake."

That led to talk about Cal and his brother, his parents, his childhood in Indiana Harbor.

And Cal said, "I haven't been back there since my mother died."

And the truck driver said, "She buried there?"

"Yes. Indiana Harbor. Not Calumet. But close enough, I suppose."

And the truck driver offered Calumet Forsythe a ride. Calumet City was about three day's drive, with the stops, enough time to let Greta cool off. He could even take him all the way to Indiana Harbor if he wanted. Cal could see his hometown. Visit the graves of his parents. Catch his breath. Just a few days, after which he could fly back home, get down on his knees, flowers in hand, ready to make amends.

And Cal thought about all the reasons why he shouldn't.

You don't just pick up and leave town with a stranger.

You don't head out on a three day journey with no purpose.

You have responsibilities, expectations.

You just don't walk out the door without some sort of plan.

He was on the verge of declining the offer. Just sticking around in town, maybe getting a hotel room for a couple of nights. He was about

to. He would have. Except. Except he saw a car pull up that he recognized. Not a friend, but close enough. Someone he would have to say good morning to. Someone from the real world.

A world he didn't want to talk to.

And Cal surprised himself. He climbed into a proper truck for the first time in his life, side by side with a man who was hardly more than a stranger, thinking, perhaps, a little time away, a dreamy visit back home, would be enough to settle his mind.

He was wrong.

Overlooking a quiet alpine valley, a man devoid of self watches the world.

He has spent a lifetime, perhaps many lifetimes, shedding his conscious self. He has given away his possessions, broken his emotional ties, left the world behind. The family he was born into no longer exists. The childhood memories gone. He knows not where he came from and cares not for the future. He simply sits.

Were a visitor to observe him, though none ever does, she would see a man older than time, withered not with cares but simply with age. The sands of time make demands small but steady, the inertia slow but inexorable. Perhaps someday he will die. He cares not.

And he sits.

This unthinkably old man has not moved in memory, neither in his own nor that of anyone else. Has not eaten. Has not slept. He has become one with his surroundings, is the air, the brush, the lichen, the snow.

He knows nothing. And all.

He is one with the universe.

And he sits.

The changes that have rent themselves through the universe have not surprised him. He is never surprised. He has not, as you and I might have, *noticed* these changes. To notice suggests that one *becomes aware*. This man is already aware. Has always been aware. He does not notice. At best one might say he *experiences*, an activity which has allowed him to know the world as both changing and unchanging.

Today it is the change which predominates.

The stars have landed at his feet, the air about him left for greener pastures.

An unchanging rock, one the man has come to know as his brother, equal to him in Gaia, just one more piece of an unknowable whole, a rock which had, long ago, taught the man the only lessons he ever wanted to learn, stillness, patience, acceptance, *that* rock, has melted into a pool permeating the tufts of grass surrounding it, is sinking into the earth.

A swarm of insects heretofore unknown to the man land upon him, cover every exposed spot upon his naked body. They raise him from the ground upon which he has sat for a thousand years that they may cover him underneath as well.

A tree he has known from its own birth, now wider in girth than the man's own arm span, a tree that has challenged the man to watch with patience the growth of ages, the tree that taught him to see the color of a leaf change before him, *that* tree, is becoming younger. At the same pace at which it grew, it is now *ungrowing*. Such a change would be unobservable to anyone else, but to the man floating over the valley, it is as unmistakable as the sudden fall of darkness in the midst of a sun shower.

He has not left the earth, does not believe he has. No fool he.

He is simply aware of the changed world around him.

Aware of the unchanged world around him.

And he sits.

What Color is This?

Soon, Greta Forsyth, like every other character in this story, will quite literally lose her mind. *Literally*, in that the mind she has known, has relied upon for a lifetime, will abscond to somewhere Greta can no longer find it, only to be replaced by another, less familiar mind taking up its former residence. Prior to that, however, she will do so figuratively, in a way meant to express the power of fear in our society and its inevitable fruit. That our story should include such an overused metaphor is itself sadly inevitable, though, fortunately for us, will only constitute a minor background environment in which several plot points can take place.

We've already seen the beginning of this figurative madness in the form of Greta's attachment to the titular seven questions of Benson Quartermaster. Soon, this attachment will evolve into a quest to save her town from itself, the first result of which will be the formation of a society bent on ridding the town of madmen at the first signs of their disease. The questions will serve as the primary tool for this society, a society born not to bring the town together, but to tear it apart. Fortunately for us, the virulence of the actual disease is such that this *society* will never lead to the sort of totalitarian tyranny so typical of fear based organizations, though not for lack of trying.

The society will be an outgrowth of a panicked debate at Greta's church, which will also be witnessed by Cal's not quite lover, Annabelle Fruma Cantilever. At the time of the debate, Anne will already be questioning her own sanity and be tortured by the knowledge that the swarm of flies constantly surrounding her will not be verified by anyone save herself.

Even before the incident that sent her husband packing, so to speak, Greta was not wholly unfamiliar with Anne. Like most members of her church, she was familiar with Anne's unsavory history of petty theft. Like most members of her church, she had professed to forgive Anne her sins, as she asked her god to forgive her own. And like most members of her church, she harbored a secret belief that sinners never really change their ways, and that redemption only ever happens in

novels and television dramas. Suffice to say that although Greta had at no time prior to the incident behind the church known of, nor even suspected, the illicit, although non-traditional relationship Anne enjoyed with her husband, she had nevertheless viewed this recovering sinner with suspicion and disrespect. It was this suspicion that made her husband's so-called infidelity so much more painful. Not only had she found him with another woman, but with *that* woman.

When the debate begins, Greta will notice Anne sitting off to the side, several empty pews between her and the nearest parishioner. She will immediately distrust her, as she distrusts those who speak of mercy and compassion. She will group her together with the other enemies gathering around her, enemies more concerned with fairness and pity than with protecting their families from the growing menace. Each time she looks back at the lonely, afflicted, recovering sinner in the empty pew, she will become increasingly paranoid. She will see the lonely woman not only as the *homewrecker*, but, more disturbingly, as the true power behind her new enemies, the quiet leader allowing others to do the talking, a rallying symbol for the oppressed.

When Greta leaves the church that evening, swelling with pride of her newly formed society, surrounded by her acolytes whispering the gossip in her ear that will soon bring down the enemies of sanity, she will do all she can to keep her eyes on that object of the church's misplaced pity. Her enemy. She will lose sight of her again and again, each time casually moving her head, her body, to regain her view of the lonely civil engineer.

Anne, too distracted by the flies in their oppressive swarm, will not notice this amateur espionage, focusing all her attention instead on wishing the bugs away. Distracted, frightened, and in a hallucinatory haze, she will let her worse instincts get the better of her, and walk off with a candelabrum from the vestibule. If anyone other than Greta sees her, they will, no doubt, assume the action part of her duties as church volunteer. Greta would not be so generous in her assumptions.

How Benson Quartermaster came to be entangled with the life of an unborn child was this.

It began with an ache in his back. No. To call it an ache would be to understate the pain he experienced twenty-fold. He could not move without pain. Could not sit. Could not stand. Had he been asked by a medical professional to rate this excruciating pain on a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst pain he could imagine, he would have rated it a twelve.

He was not. Asked by a medical professional. For he never sought treatment.

Benson Quartermaster self-medicated.

Morphine and her various cousins in the opiate family were an old habit with Benson, one he would wrestle with throughout his life. At the time he was attacked by the back pain from hell, it was a habit he told himself was under control, or as his fellow addicts might say, manageable. Naturally, as the pain took over his psyche, he increased both the frequency and the intensity of the whip until there could no longer be any question of his complete and utter submission to his master. When the medicine worked, the pain was completely gone, and he found himself at peace. With each dosage, however, the effects waned and his sensitivity to the slightest reminder of the pain waxed. He soon found himself in the predictable downward spiral from which few addicts return.

It was in this state that the unthinkable happened. The less than scrupulous doctor who had regularly provided Benson with his medicine disappeared under circumstances that were never entirely clear. Benson verged on panic, though never fully falling in. His supply was strong, but he was going through it quickly and knew he only had so much time before he would need more. He had, at the same time, been successful in avoiding the darker paths of the strung out junkies he knew of and was holding on to what little hope he had left. He had not yet dared to face the life of buying his fix from pushers in back alleys. He was not that far gone. Not yet.

That left only the vague chance that he might find a new doctor who might treat his back pain without focusing on his addiction, a chance he did not feel confident about. To that, he added his fear that his doctor might well be under the watch of the criminal justice system,

and that such scrutiny might also bring that system to his own doorstep before long.

Such musings brought him to leave town with what little money he had left in search of another so-called doctor who had served him in years' past. A man not quite wading in the criminal underbelly of drug deals, but who was willing to offer the service of prescription for a reasonable fee. And so it was that Benson Quartermaster found himself homeless and friendless in Philadelphia, rapidly racing toward the bottom, a prescription for morphine in his hand, and not enough money to fill it.

Still, Benson Quartermaster had not yet lost all of his wits. There was no question that, although he had spent his last dollar on graft for the doctor, the prescription in his hand had real value and could prove lucrative if only it were wielded wisely. A week later, he was shackled up with Corey Shelltower, a sometime prostitute happy to take a break from his day job to share in the profits from selling off the now seemingly limitless supply of morphine generated by Benson's scrip, made possible by his small investment in his new lover's future.

It should have been a second chance for Benson. It should have been an opportunity for him to turn his life around. Find a new con, get up on his feet, a new life in a new city. But I needed Benson to hit bottom. I needed him to hit bottom several times. I needed each nadir to be progressively worse, so that by the time he meets with the muse, later in the story, he will finally be ready for change in the way that only a truly destitute man can be. At that particular time, then, while the light of hope shone briefly in Benson Quartermaster's window, I had no choice but to close the blinds, and thrust him further into darkness.

As Corey Shelltower built himself a small business profiting from Benson's sufferance, Benson found himself in greater and greater pain, his personal supply of relief held back by his new overlord in favor of greater and greater profit. Benson complained, cried, accused and screamed. He demanded what was rightfully his, but which he no longer had the strength to get for himself. His lover, exhausted from the freak show that was Benson Quartermaster when he was awake, wanted

nothing more than to throw him out on the street, although he knew it would complicate his lucrative new profession.

The opportunity came as the result of a surprise visit.

When the husband of a former, and apparently impregnated, client of Corey Shelltower stormed into the apartment with blood in his heart, Corey quietly slipped down the fire escape, leaving Benson to take the rap. The husband, finding only Quartermaster, and assuming him to be the scoundrel for whom he searched, shot him twice in the shoulder as he lay in bed. Though the neighborhood was poor, police were, by chance, nearby, and although Quartermaster's assailant was not apprehended, discovery of the scene did lead to the medical attention Benson needed as a result of the attack. Sadly, the attack also gave the police the opportunity to search the apartment, during which they discovered, among other unsavory items, evidence of Corey's and Benson's trade.

That Benson Quartermaster did not die as he dried out in the city jail was not so much a reflection of the jail's attending physician as of our desire to keep him around for later plot points. Though this abuse of our sometime con man may seem heartless, we must not lose sight of our greater goals: to find some value, however small, from the impending end of the sane world as we know it. That such low points in the life of Benson Quartermaster number only three should give the reader some comfort, at least in comparison to how much more suffering I might have inflicted had I been truly heartless.

Over the next few hundred miles, Stuart Beacon, contract driver for a national trucking company, made small talk with Calumet Forsyth.

He spoke of the large family whom he tried to visit whenever he came through Kansas, where his aging father still ran a farm. About his divorce from the exotic dancer who, in his words, was better off without him, though he still pined for her and hoped one day to win her back.

He told Cal about life on the farm he grew up on.

He told Cal about a succession of girlfriends.

He told Cal the plot to about twelve different horror movies.

He showed Cal the state of the art GPS system his cheapskate employer had installed only when he'd been threatened with fines and a lawsuit.

He told Cal about his rich friend on the Georgia coast.

And they talked about what made a good road.

Cal kept him awake in return for passage and friendship. It was a fair trade, and Cal was grateful for the company.

Until he wasn't.

An hour outside of Lincoln, Nebraska, the truck driver became quiet. Cal thought, perhaps, it was his turn to speak for awhile, his turn to drive the conversation, though up to that point, Beacon had generally preferred to do the talking.

Prior to the silence, the truck driver had been talking about how he met his ex-wife, so Cal took the opportunity to continue the conversation in the same vein.

He started with, "Greta and I met at a party for a friend of mine. He'd just been promoted and..." but he was quickly interrupted.

"Shut up."

Taken aback, Cal looked over at him to see what had caused this sudden change in attitude. The driver was focusing intently on the road, more intently than he had been previously, even in the middle of the night. Although the interstate was wide and uncrowded, although the sun was high and the sky was clear, the truck driver looked as if he were navigating a road under construction with heavy, fast moving traffic, in the middle of snowstorm.

"You alright?" Cal asked him.

Short and curt, completely out of character for the man Cal was still just getting to know, Stuart Beacon replied with only, "Need to concentrate."

Cal had no idea what had brought about this change in him, but he thought it best to let the man focus. Cal sat quietly, occasionally looking over at him and at the road ahead, trying without success to discern what was forcing him to raise his level of concentration.

Over the next ten minutes or so Stuart Beacon became increasingly agitated. Cal saw fear grow in his eyes, in his body language. Cal

saw him grip the steering wheel so tight that his hands turned white. His shoulders hunched up high, and he leaned forward, as if he were driving through a thick fog, trying hopelessly to see more than a few feet in front of him.

Then, with nothing ahead of them but a clear open road warmed by the sun, the truck driver shouted, "Jesus Christ!" and pulled the wheel hard to the right. The truck jackknifed and rolled over the barrier built to protect them from creek and wetland off the side of the road. They landed on their side in a sort of muddy not-quite-swamp, almost out of view of the road.

Cal was unhurt, but his companion was bleeding from his forehead. "Stu?" Cal cried. "Stu, you ok?"

At first, the truck driver didn't move. Cal looked about him to plan his next move. He was on the low side, his door sunk in the mud, held closed by the weight of the truck. Beacon was still strapped in, but Cal would have to climb over him to get out of the truck. "Stu? Wake up, Stu!"

Cal pulled off his seatbelt and awkwardly climbed up to his companion. He shook him and cried, "Wake up, man," but the truck driver wouldn't move. Cal was able to get the driver side door open, and climbed past his new friend, planning to make his way to dry land, where he could call for help. Cal was careful not to step on him, but it was challenging to find his footing. When Cal mistakenly stepped on the truck driver's hand, still gripping the steering wheel, the hand came to life and grabbed Cal's ankle. Stuart Beacon lifted his head and shouted up at Cal.

"Don't go out there."

Cal turned back to him. "Stu, thank god. I'm going to climb out and call for help."

He tightened his grip on Cal's ankle. "Don't go out there!"

Cal tried to shake loose, but with every attempt, Beacon only gripped tighter. Cal shouted at him to let go, but it was no use. The memory of Cal's struggle with Dundee at the office was still fresh in his mind, and, though he was loath to admit it to himself, he was coming round to the inevitable conclusion that the truck driver had begun to lose his mind. In a panic, Cal kicked him in the face. As the truck driver's

hands instinctively went to his face, Cal's leg was freed, and with the force of his push off against Stuart Beacon's face, he tumbled out the door, over the truck, and into the mud below.

When Cal finally made it to dry land, his shoes and pants coated in mud, he pulled out his miraculously still dry cell phone to call for help. As his thumb was poised over the one in nine-one-one, he heard sirens in the distance and sat himself down on the shoulder, waiting to be rescued once again.

What happened to Stuart Beacon was this.

His state of the art GPS, or rather, the one belonging to his employer, and deployed for his use, proceeded, without his permission, to inform him of road conditions. Weather and traffic were clear, there were no construction zones in his path, and traffic was light to non-existent. Stuart listened to the soothing voice of his friendly navigator, and glanced at her display to revel in the clear blue line ahead. Nothing but blue skies.

And then he saw the first one.

What it was, exactly, he could not say. He had never seen one before. It wasn't exactly an animal. Not exactly. More like the idea of an animal. It had a bunch of legs, and a face he couldn't quite make out, but was also not entirely, well, *there*. It sort of faded in and out of the background, to the point where Stuart, at first, assumed he was hallucinating. The way he sometimes saw bridges that were not there, late at night when he had been driving longer than he should have.

And the creature became two. Then three. Then ten.

They picked at the road with their mouth things, clawed at it with their limbs. They became a swarm, devouring the road before him, turning a generously wide passage into an increasingly treacherous patch narrowing beyond the girth of his vehicle.

At first it was just a few bites. New potholes in need of repair, but safely at the edge of the shoulder. Then larger chunks, as if a mudslide had pulled a section of road down into the wetland alongside. His lane appeared to be mostly intact, but dangerous. An unwelcome motion of

his steering wheel would mean disaster, and just staying on the road took all of his concentration.

Then a creature jumped to the middle of his lane, scooping out what must have been a delicious section of untouched road, right between his wheels. Stuart braced for the impact he expected with the creature in his path, but felt nothing as he surely rolled right over him. He knew he could not dare look in his side mirror to see if the creature lay behind him, though he was desperate to know if he had killed it. Still, his instinct kicked him, and he took the briefest of glances to see if the creature was still there.

It was not.

It was on his windshield. With three companions.

And Stuart Beacon, out of instinct, out of fear, with a reaction he would never condone in another man, drew in a breath of shock and turned the wheel just hard enough to send his five ton load of inertia into the drink.

Within the hour, he was dead of hypervolemic shock, having refused to allow the rescue crew to pull him to safety.

His last thoughts were of his ex-wife and regret.

The last thought of his ex-wife, not three days later, as she was shot by a madman mid-performance was, "Here we go."

This.

Once upon a time, there was a muse. He was young and impetuous, not unlike the muse of Hammond Forsyth. His mentor encouraged him to seek out artists, to inspire painting and music. He was told that art transforms, that to inspire an artist is to inspire the world. But the muse rebelled. Instead of seeking out artists, he sought out thinkers and teachers. Preachers and prophets. He wanted to turn his mentor's advice on its head, make words to inspire instead of art. It was his grand plan. Inspire one to speak, to convince, to cajole, and let the speech inspire others. He would be a muse of argument, of debate, of lecture.

This muse hopped from mind to mind, coaxing words out that might change the world. Sometimes the words were wise, sometimes filled with hate, but always, they inspired.

And the muse was proud.

Then, one day, when the muse was feeling that there was no idea he could not bring out, no person he could not turn into a preacher, he came across a man upon whom his inspiration was powerless. Impotent. He cajoled, he tickled, he dangled, he stroked, but nothing he could do would get through to the strange unreachable man. Trusting his old tricks, the muse inspired all the men around him, nudging them to speak with the man, to open his mind, to give him a glimpse of something greater than himself. Still, the man could not be reached.

At last the muse could take no more. He stood before the man, gathered his breath and screamed invectives at a volume unknown by man. This was a safe thing to do because men cannot hear their muse except in whispers. Nevertheless, it made the muse feel better, and he yelled as if the world could hear him.

And something strange happened. Something undreamed of.

The man heard the muse. Word for word. Even stranger, the man spoke back.

He said, "Why do you torment yourself, muse? Why do you strive to collect souls when you can free them?"

The muse, unused to hearing himself addressed by men, did not respond. "Perhaps this voice is only in my mind," he thought. "Perhaps the voice is my conscience. I should practice more control. I should not have screamed. Yes, this is only my conscience speaking."

"I am not your conscience," spoke the man, "though she and I might well speak to the same purpose."

The muse stared at the impossible man. Was he a god?

"Come," said the man. "Sit with me, and know the world."

And, cautiously, the muse sat down next to the man.

The man was a thinker and a teacher. A preacher and a prophet. But unlike the men up on whom the muse had wasted so much time, this man spoke to a congregation of one, as if he had been waiting all his life for one purpose, to share knowledge only with the young muse.

And the muse listened.

"The self will deceive you. Do not trust it," he said.

And the muse listened.

"The gatherer's house is soon too full to sleep in," he said.

And the muse listened.

"One cannot say what one does not already know," he said.

And the muse listened.

And after uncountable years, when the man had at long last allowed death to take his body, after the muse had sat alone for a thousand years deciphering the man's lessons, after giving over his self and forsaking his past, the muse remembered one lesson above all others.

"The world is one."

The telephone in Hammond Forsyth's apartment rang.

Ham lay on the bed, eyes open and pointed at the ceiling, the elusive epiphany just out of his reach. He had grasped it, held it in his hand, known at long last the terrible secret that was the nature of the universe. Something so awful, so ungodly, that even he, Hammond "Evidence-Above-All" Forsyth could not bear to accept it. To even see it.

And the phone rang.

If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one to hear it, there is no question but that a sound is made. Of this, Ham never had any doubt. Sound waves do not cease to travel for lack of an observer, any more than light fails to travel from the sun to the earth because one man is blind. True also, he knew, that an ignored truth fails not to be truth, simply because it is ignored. Throughout his life Ham had seen moralists with their heads in the sand as they denied scientific evidence in favor of protecting a more comfortable world view. No. Not deny, *ignore*. Such ignorance never changed the truth of the evidence. It merely postponed reasonable reaction to it. And yet,

*He that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen,
Let him not know it, and he is not robbed at all.*

Is it ever, Ham dared to wonder, better not to know? Leave the apple on the tree and live happily ever after in the garden? His answer before had always been an unequivocal *no*. One should never ignore

knowledge, never deny truth, an easy platitude before one is faced with true adversity.

And the phone rang.

He had, for the first time, been faced with a truth so terrible, so dangerous, he had not dared to face it. Perhaps. If only he could see the truth again, study it, evaluate it. Can truth be dangerous in itself? It has no agenda, no will of its own. Truth is merely truth. It is what one *does* with it that creates danger.

The truth he had ignored, the knowledge that now refused to show itself a second time, swirled around his unconscious, taunting him with memory of the epiphany, the clues and detail darkly shrouded. He could remember the *feeling* of the discovery, but not the discovery itself. He was not Othello after all. He was Desdemona.

*I understand a fury in your words,
But not the words.*

It was waking from a dream, the emotion still intact, visceral, but all memory of the details gone. It was hearing a language spoken, sure of the timbre, the emphasis, the intent, but unable to *understand*. It was something about the nature of the universe, of that he was certain. Something no one had ever dared to see. Something that would change the world. Something forbidding. Forbidden.

And the phone rang.

Hammond Forsyth was not a man of emotion. He shunned it like most men shun tears. He had no use for it, no need for it. He had reason. He had knowledge. He had logic. Of what use were feelings? They only got in the way.

But he was a spoiled child. He had never had his gifts taken away, had never been forced to live without them. He had bet the house on the pursuit of evidence based scientific reason. He held an undiversified portfolio filled only with logic. It had been a good bet. He had held, in his brain, a lifetime of winnings. But now they were gone. He had lost everything. And like any other spoiled child facing loss for the first time, he threw a tantrum.

He stood up and ripped the sheets off of his bed, throwing them on the floor. He knocked over a standing lamp. He went to a cabinet of curios kept by his landlady, and swept the decorative and perhaps valuable pieces to the floor. He threw a chair across the room, mildly satisfied by the loud bangs it made as it bounced across the floor. He dumped his laptop back on the floor, and ripped up what notes he had bothered to carry with him. Then, his anger not yet abated, unused to managing emotional catharsis, he took his laptop and hurled it through the closed window, shattering the glass and leaving two years of research to destroy themselves on the street below.

His frustration waxing, he stormed out of his room, past his shocked and speechless landlady, and out the front door of his boarding house. Where he headed, he knew not, but an inexplicable force, a force in which Hammond would never believe, drew him away, and pushed him violently toward his childhood home.

And the phone rang.

Not far away, perhaps no more than twelve blocks, a log showed something that couldn't be. It just wasn't possible. And yet, there it was in black and white, so to speak. A wise man, a careful man, a methodical man would ask the kid to run it again. Look at the two logs side by side. Compare them. Such a man would attempt to assure himself that there was no possibility of mechanical error, diagnose step by step to eliminate each possibility as it arose.

And he *was* a wise man, a careful man, a methodical man.

He turned to the kid to speak, to say exactly what the kid expected him to. To say something like, "Run it again, Phillips. This can't be right. I don't want to be creating some kind of panic based on a dumb mistake. God knows you've made them before." The words flowed from his mind toward his mouth. He could feel them working their way out. Words he could be proud of, or at least, words he had no reason to be ashamed of.

Instead of speaking, however, he merely shook his head and walked around the room, staring at the log. It was true that he was a wise man, a careful man, a methodical man, but he was also something else, something which always took precedence over every other trait he

bothered to harbor. He was intelligent. His logic consistently outpaced his better judgment. It led him to skip the proscribed steps of diagnoses he taught his students in favor of great leaps that brought him to his goal more quickly, if not as surely.

This was no mechanical or clerical error. It was not even human error. The machine was not capable of such. No human on earth could fool it. The machine merely showed a record of the tasks it had performed. It had no way of showing anything else. There was no input to allow for false data. No output either. The record, as expressed in the log he stared at, was merely documentation of actual functions carried out by the single most advanced, not to mention expensive, feat of human engineering ever produced.

And what it showed, well, it just wasn't possible.

Still, some son of a bitch was bound to give him hell, and there really was no *harm* in running it again. Besides, he needed a little alone time to think, and it would at least get Phillips out of the room.

It is true that a small part of him died when he said, "Run it again, Phillips. This can't be right. I don't want to be creating some kind of panic based on a dumb mistake. God knows you've made them before." Still, when one found oneself in a position of responsibility, one was not entirely one's own master.

Alone at last, the printout of the log still in his hand, he allowed his leap of logic to take him to the next set of methodical steps. The experiment was unauthorized, but even so, only a handful of people in the world had the capability of using this equipment to run any experiment at all. Like launching a nuclear missile, it wasn't enough to have clearance. One must also have knowledge of and experience with the tools. Forgetting, for the moment, the world changing data that came as a result of this unauthorized use of the world's most advanced machinery, there were only seven humans in the world capable of programming it. Three were technicians, without the scientific wherewithal for such a bold challenge to the established church of particle physics, but who unquestionably had the access and ability, *technically*, to run the experiment. Two were thousands of miles away, teaching at their respective universities, and therefore incapable of affecting anything at this facility

beyond the most basic research. That left only two prime candidates, one of which was himself.

He knew he must speak with Dr. Forsyth immediately.

Phillips came rushing back with the log, which was, of course, identical to the first. Phillips received his next set of instructions forthwith. "Well done, Phillips. Get all three of the T-1's in my office. I'll meet with them one at a time. No delay is acceptable."

"Right away, Dr. Chan."

"Oh, and Phillips," he added.

"Yes, Dr. Chan?"

"Tell Dr. Forsyth I would like to meet with him at his first available convenience."

"Yes Dr. Chan."

And alone once again, Dr. Chan shook his head at the log, wondering if an entire life's work had just been proved worthless within the span of fourteen nanoseconds.

The experience of being surrounded by lights, sirens, and men in uniform hit Cal with a collision far more powerful than the rollover that had preceded it. The memory of the similar scene surrounding his pummeling by Dundee McNair was still fresh in his mind, and he was repulsed by the idea of spending the day with emergency crews, police, and probably the hospital. He felt a natural instinct to slip away.

When Cal was questioned by a stranger in uniform, then, he told him he had only witnessed the crash, not been a part of it.

"Well...if you wouldn't mind sticking around for a few minutes, I think the officer over here will want to ask you a few questions. If you want to wait in your vehicle, that's fine."

All he wanted to do was to get away. If he had been thinking, if he had been calm, he would have nodded, and walked toward one of the many vehicles now gathering along the road, and used the time to plan his next move. Instead, he choked.

"Um...that's not my vehicle."

"Oh, it's not? Well whose vehicle *is* that? Hold on a sec." The uniformed man turned his head away from Cal and shouted to another man in uniform. "Dan! Whose SUV is that, over there?"

The man addressed as Dan looked over to where he was pointing, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Dunno, Tenner. Maybe Berkie's?"

Tenner shook his head in exasperation. Still facing Dan, he shouted, "Well, goddammit, tell him to get it the hell out of here. What is this, a goddamn parking lot?"

"I didn't say it *was* Berkie's. I said it *could be*."

"Well, goddammit, go figure it out. What are we paying you for?"

"You're *paying* me?"

"You know what I mean...what the? Stay right here." And Tenner was off in another direction where there seemed to be a lot of gathering and noise. Cal should have seized his chance and walked off right then, but he was frozen by his orders and not thinking clearly enough to make a reasonable decision. At the time, it was enough for Cal that someone in a position of authority had given him instructions. For his whole life, that had been enough. Someone in authority gives you instructions, you follow them. It was the way the world worked.

So he waited.

And waited.

As he stood, wondering if a uniform should be enough to win his obedience, his attention was drawn to the same place that had drawn Tenner's. There was a crowd of people over where traffic was more or less stopped. There had been someone in uniform up there earlier waving over one car at a time, directing them around the blockage only really caused by all the fire trucks, as the truck itself was well off the roadway, sinking into the muck.

A fight had broken out. A firefighter was going at it, hammer and tongs, with some guy who had pulled his car across the road, blocking the only access. The driver's door was wide open, and the two men were fighting each other as if for dear life. Another firefighter joined the fray, but went after the first firefighter, leaving the civilian to attack yet another man in uniform. The lone police officer on the scene had pulled

his gun and was telling everybody to calm down, though couldn't decide who to threaten.

It was turning into a Hollywood bar brawl in the middle of the highway.

As chaos took rein, Cal woke from his trance. There was no order there. *Uniforms* would not help him. He was on his own.

Trying to look for all the world like he was just bored and killing time, doing all he could to avoid attention, he wandered between the fire trucks and down the highway, hoping to slip away from the bizarre scene for good. Whether from an instinctive form of self-preservation, or simply from fear, Cal couldn't have said. Regardless of why, however, he soon found himself as if in another world from the madness behind him, wandering down what should have been a moderately busy highway, but which was empty, at least on the eastbound side, and increasingly filled with a gapers' block on the other.

The noise of the crowd fell behind him, and the hum of the idles across the way lulled him into a state of unexpected calm. He walked down the empty roadway, seeing grasses push up through the muck, and fought the voices fighting for his attention. He pushed away thoughts of the crash and the madness that precipitated it. He pushed away thoughts of guilt for not staying home to fight for his marriage, for his family. He pushed away thoughts of shame for running to Anne. He pushed away thoughts of his brother, always looming over him like a specter. And with all thoughts of any real value pushed away, he was left with only one thing. The safe thing. The one thing that had always grounded him, had always made him feel whole.

And it needed work. A lot of it.

For a fairly rural road, a road with the limited traffic of long distance travelers, he expected to see it in better condition. Perhaps it had just been left too long. Perhaps the DOT just spent less money here. Everywhere he looked were cracks and patches, hastily filled holes, and crumbling edges. The paint was worn down, and the tar filled holes were overdue for new fill. It was an old man left to die in a nursing home more concerned with its bottom line than with its residents. It was a half dead

rodent, left to perish in the desert sun, dried out, dehydrated, on its way to becoming rodent jerky.

How could anyone leave a road to die in such a state? Where was the care for drivers? For voters? How could anyone see what he saw, and not crumble with shame for their negligence?

And forgetting where he had come from, or where he was going, forgetting the insanity infecting people everywhere he looked, forgetting even his half hidden fear that he might actually be the cause of what was increasingly looking like an epidemic, he wandered down this empty half of a road, thinking of how she had been abandoned by her guardians, shaking his head at the madness of the world.

The road that Cal walked down had been designed by a firm out of Omaha. The company was still, if I dare say, *firmly* in place, but the lead on this particular project, one Henry Montano, was of another age. He had long since retired and gone to live with his son in Lincoln. Although Henry Montano did not share Cal's, shall we call it *unusual* fetish for all things paved, he had certainly made such things the center of his life's work. And like the concrete and asphalt that represented his contribution to the world, he poured much of his so-called soul into the drawings from which they sprung.

Here's the thing. It wasn't a bad road. It wasn't even the result of average and underpaid engineers phoning in the plan for a project that was bid too low to be anything better than *good enough*. At the time, Henry Montano's design was ahead of its time. It was, in fact, so far ahead of its time that it raised serious questions about whether the state had chosen the best firm for the job, and instead maybe just a bunch of yahoos trying to steal their money. With Henry Montano's no less than revolutionary approach, however, he created a roadway that would not only be safer than any that had come before it, but would last longer as well, though to be fair, there was a significant premium on the cost.

Sadly, however, no road lasts forever, and this one, now long overdue for a rebuild, was left to slowly disintegrate as any possibility of a funded response lay mired in state politics. The decay, if it had ever been seen by Henry Montano, would have broken his heart.

As it was, Henry was more or less homebound in Lincoln, save for his morning constitutional and regular games of gin rummy at the American Legion. He left his son's house often, but never the neighborhood. His twilight had come.

Henry Montano's madness is, of course, impending. Before the sun sets twice again, he will find himself in a battle to rival his worst days in the Pacific Theater, protecting his neighborhood from a mob of monsters intent on tearing him apart. The moment he is trampled will be his last sane one, in which he will contemplate the poorly executed pothole repair pushed against his prone face. He will consider the short sightedness of city planners, the laziness of contractors, the ambivalence of citizens. He will consider that, perhaps, the world is going to hell in a handbasket. That nobody bothers anymore. That nothing matters. And sharing the sentiments of my own uncle, as the monsters trampling his body take over what his people never cared much for anyway, he will say, under his dying breath, "Here we go."

Cal fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.

From thousands of miles away, a woman's voice rang in his ears.

"Dr. Forsyth's office."

"This is Calumet Forsyth. May I speak with Dr. Forsyth?"

The line is silent for a moment. A long moment.

"Mr. Forsyth, I...I'm afraid I...I've got some very bad news."

Cal's heart dropped into his stomach as he waited for the woman to continue. She, however, remained silent.

"Yes?" Cal prompted.

"Well...it's just that...you see, I..."

"It's ok," Cal soothed, "Just tell me what's going on."

The woman pushed through held back tears with a shaky voice. "He...I don't know, Mr. Forsyth. It came on all of a sudden. As if...as if a madness had taken hold of him. As if he was suddenly living in some world that was different from the rest of us. Saw things none of us could see. He was running through the corridor screaming about demons and the end of the world and monsters and...and...oh it's all just too horrible."

Cal smiled. "Where is he now?"

"They've taken him to a specialty facility about an hour from here. But I don't...I don't know if they can do anything for him. I've...I've never seen anything like it."

"*Oh you will,*" Cal thought. Then, out loud, "Well it sounds like he's in good hands. Please have his doctor call me if there is anything I can do."

And with that, the conversation ended.

And Cal snapped himself out of his daze, still smiling.

And he fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket.

The thing you can't lose sight of with Scherzo is just how young she was. Hammond Forsyth was, after all, only her third subject. Ever. And that's only if you count the first two, which were, if we're being honest with ourselves, basically apprenticeships. Sure, she had spent lifetimes alone with her first two subjects, but the reviews, the reports, the unscheduled observances meant that she never truly risked failure. There had always been someone there, some teacher, some *adult*, to catch her should she fall. And she fell often.

The poor souls she cut her teeth on never really had a chance, however, because Scherzo could never really *take* any chances. Her mentors did not like risk, so whenever she dared to risk, they shut her down. In the end, she played it safe. It was the only way to get them off her back. Now, her mentors far behind, and she on her own for the first time, it was becoming painfully clear that there was still much to learn. She discovered, to her disappointment, that she sorely needed the experience of her elders, although she was loath to admit it.

It wasn't uncommon for a muse to give up so easily their first time on their own. Teachers and mentors were skilled at pushing the young ones to give second chances, to salvage bad situations, to fix the things that were broken, rather than abandoning them. Come the first unobserved assignment, however, young muses were often quick to give up, to bounce from subject to subject, choosing to believe that they had chosen poorly, rather than face the possibility it was *themselves* who had lacked the talent they accused their abandoned subjects of.

That was alright. A young muse needs confidence, and finding an easier, a more naturally talented subject helped to instill it. As such a muse gained in experience, she would be able to handle increasingly challenging cases. Of that, the elder muses had no doubt. They had, after all, been through trying times themselves and had not entirely forgotten the challenges of finding their way.

And what was one more abandoned human, more or less? There were, as the saying goes, plenty more fish in the sea.

So, when Scherzo abandoned Hammond Forsyth, it was with a mixture of disappointment, resignation, and fatherly understanding that her father took the news. Though he had hoped for better from his daughter's first time on her own, he was not surprised to see the failure. Add to this his relief that Scherzo's egregious error in sharing the nature of the universes with her subject had not borne fruit, an error that could have separated them forever, and there became little question of why he did not encourage his daughter to give her beloved scientist one more try. He told himself his daughter could learn from her mistake and move on. There was no shame in doing so, and she was lucky to have escaped unscathed. He heaved a sigh of relief, in fact, at her close shave, and was sure she would never make such a mistake again.

Scherzo, however, saw her situation as could only be done through the eyes of the young, anxious and inexperienced. She cared not that she had escaped scrutiny, punishment, banishment, and possibly even death. She did not feel lucky. She felt unlucky. Felt like a failure because Forsyth had completely ignored her. Questioned her own talents. If she were caught now, she would welcome banishment. Would welcome death. What muse deserves to practice that cannot inspire? What muse deserves to live who is ignored by her own subject? Who inspires only ignorance.

Depressed, dejected, the cocky confidence of youth ebbing away, she left her father behind and wandered the earth looking for a new mark. Not an easy A+ she could coast along with, but a sad little D- she might bring up to a D. It was, she told herself, all she deserved.

She sat in a coffee shop, observing the diners, looking for someone who might require her service, someone who had little hope of ever

achieving greatness, someone with whom she could do little harm. Someone whose rejection she could stomach. She sat at a corner table, bottomless cup of coffee before her, and tasted potential subjects, one after the other.

Across the diner, two construction workers dived into their meals. The younger one had knocked off for lunch with a still unsolved problem on his mind. The concrete layout was not symmetrical, and was causing him all kinds of problems. He knew he could do it, inch by inch, measurement by measurement, if he could spend the next day and a half at it. He figured he would just talk to the foreman when he got back, see if he had any ideas to get it done faster. Still, he was sure he could do better, if only he could concentrate.

Scherzo pushed the idea through his mind. Epiphany. Her go-to approach. It had always worked before. Well, almost always. The flash of brilliance rolled through the young man's mind, and she could see him cock his head, as if grasping for the unexpected thought, just barely within reach. Yes, it would work. It was a little unorthodox, but it would definitely work. Except, well, unorthodox gets people fired. Still, he could run it by the foreman. Except, well, the foreman was pretty conservative, and didn't usually like to hear strange new ideas. Still, it could save a full day of work. Except, well, the foreman would probably tell him that working harder and getting it right was better than risking something that might screw everything up, and then condemn him for being lazy and trying to get out of work.

The older construction worker across the table tried to get his attention.

"Bill. You zoning out or something?"

Bill shook his head, and if to throw the epiphany as far as he could with the centrifugal force. "Yeah, I guess so. Sorry. What were you saying? Oh yeah, sorry. Kansas and UConn. I mean, I just think UConn is a little unpredictable this year. Any given game, right? So yeah, I think maybe Kansas. Sure, why not?"

Ignorance.

In anger, Scherzo made him swing his hand wide, knock his full coffee cup off the table, to shatter on the tile floor below. So much for that one.

Several tables away, two women in late middle age gossiped over their coffee, their meal now long finished. One had her hair long and dyed blonde, the other short and black, with gray roots just beginning to poke through. The former was openly admiring a television actress and suggesting roles for which she might be well suited in the future. Roots was nodding in agreement, and occasionally joining in with sympathy for this actress who had, in her opinion, been unfairly maligned in the press for her recent attempt at musical performance.

"And not even a nomination for *Thus Spoke the Snowman*. It's like they don't even *see* her," said Blonde.

"Well, to be fair," replied Roots, "it wasn't really *her* movie."

"Best supporting then. If you ask me, they're punishing her for leaving Storkey."

"Do you *think*?" asked Roots.

"Of course," Blonde continued, and she was off again on a monologue cataloging the actress's talents.

Scherzo gave Roots a vision. Roots stood before a mirror, her hair completely gray, her growing wrinkles natural, and pleased at what she saw. She saw herself writing, a blog perhaps, maybe an advice column. Others looked to her guidance, her wisdom. She was welcomed at a different kind of party, not the Hollywood party she had always vaguely dreamed of, but something filled with a slightly more cosmopolitan group of people than she usually found herself with. It was a simple vision, one of a new life where she could be herself and be praised for it.

Roots smiled.

Scherzo smiled.

And Roots thought about her youth. She thought about growing old. She thought about her beautiful daughter catching the eyes of young men. She saw her face sagging, her hair thinning. She saw herself aided by a walker, rotting in a nursing home. She saw her roots creeping out, her friends pretending that she looked good but talking behind her back. She heard words like *mature* and *distinguished*. Saw herself left behind

as her friends slowly began to show their open resentment for Roots embracing her age. *Their* age.

Never.

Or, at least, not yet.

Ignorance.

And Scherzo made Roots kick Blonde hard, under the table. Blonde reacted violently, knocking her chair halfway back in surprise and jostling the table with her knee as she did so. The salt and pepper shakers fell over and rolled off the table. The coffee cups shook but stayed upright. A full water glass tipped over, soaking the lap of Roots, and making her stand up in shock.

0 for 2.

Scherzo fumed.

Four blocks away, in a dark stairway with black mold creeping up the walls, Benson Quartermaster rolled ass over tea kettle, certain he was dead.

It has happened already. You put the book down for a bit, perhaps to cook dinner, or to sleep, or maybe only for a moment while you considered a thought. Now you are back, interpreting this very sentence, not sure if you have read it already. You have. You skip forward and find yourself in the midst of Cal's exploration of the train yard. You *know* you haven't read that yet. Now you are back, reading what you are just as sure you *have* read, and you wonder if you should dare skip forward in favor of finding the exact place you left off.

It won't help.

Better to take a moment, close the book, rest your mind. Play a game. Surf. Pet the dog. Come back to it later. Hard to relax though. Perhaps you had better find your place for certain. Mark it. Then take a break. If only you could.

The spot is elusive, your memory doubly so. Now, sadly, predictably, your mind is burdened with vague memories of passages not yet read properly, but which will hold pictures in your mind that are difficult to escape. Thoughts of Cal's fight in the shopping district, of the ache in his feet as he searches for respite, of a ringing telephone somewhere

in an unnamed European village, of this book speaking to you directly, urging you to put it down for a bit. To come back to it later.

Then, later, after you have given up and gone further back than you wished, to make sure you have missed nothing, you will come upon those passages again. Your mind will tell you that you have seen them before. And. Your mind will remember knowing that you have *never* seen them before. You will put the book down for a bit, perhaps to cook dinner, or to sleep, or maybe only for a moment while you consider the thought of having seen the passage before. And. Having never seen the passage before.

You will skip ahead, this time to an interaction between Greta and Anne which, while not desperately compelling in itself, will hold your interest long enough to cement it in your mind. Lost, out of time, you will fall back here, carefully attempting to trace your steps, get back on track.

It is too late.

You are distracted.

There is something there, just behind the chair. Under the couch. Crawling up your neck, just behind your ear. Look up and just miss it flying behind the bottle. Madness is impending. She creeps, she sneaks, she sometimes hesitates. But she is relentless. And she comes.

Is a Lemon Drop Sweet or Sour?

Benson Quartermaster was wrong. It may well be true that Heaven is, after all, on the mountaintop. For Benson, however, the Mountaintop Center for Rehabilitation and Convalescence was closer to hell than he could ever have imagined. It was true that he was sheltered from the Colorado winter and sustained with three meals each day, two things that Benson might well have equated with the joy of a peaceful afterlife. It was true that he had been on the edge of death from hypothermia, and had not only his life to be thankful for, but the continued use of his fingers and toes, nearly destroyed by frostbite and saved by the gentle husbandry of his caregivers. It was true that his daily view of the bright blue winter sky behind snow capped peaks was a marvel to behold.

And yet, one does not easily find gratitude and reverence while tortured by withdrawal. The sun was shining in a blue sky? The bright light made him vomit. His fingers and toes were intact? He wished he could cut off his arms and legs, just to stop the pain. He was lucky to be alive? He wished he were dead.

No, the mountaintop was not home to the city of lights. Most decidedly not. If it dared be called the home to anything, it was to the fortress of ultimate darkness.

And in this pit of despair, Benson Quartermaster suffered.

He begged and he pleaded. He screamed and he struggled. He thrashed and he cried. And as the days went by, as his body cleansed itself, as his mind returned, he called upon his charm to find for himself the only thing he ever wanted. He cajoled his doctor, his nurse, begged for relief from the pain in his back, for which the doctor, at least, was entirely unsympathetic. Her belief, grounded in years of experience, was that such claims of physical pain were merely a ruse, a ploy to get the only medicine that could truly relieve the pain of withdrawal, but which would only prolong the process.

He might say anything he pleased, Benson Quartermaster would not be rewarded with opiates. She was not that kind of doctor.

It was true that Benson was playing them. It was true that the pain in his back was now merely a part of a global suffering, that curing him of the back pain without curing the rest would have been cold comfort. And yet, the pain was there. It was true. And cold comfort is better than no comfort at all. That his doctor chose not to believe in the very real pain at all severed any faith at all Benson might have had in her as a healer.

His nurse, however, was not so callous. As he watched Benson recover, he could see that the pain in his back remained constant as other symptoms waned. He could sense the honesty of Benson's reactions when he was moved, when his back pain was exacerbated. The nurse made several attempts to call the doctor's attention to Benson's problem, to no avail. The doctor, after all, was a specialist of sorts, and had no patience for issues that laid outside of her specialty. Besides, the institution could not keep indigent patients forever, and now that Benson had cleaned out a bit, she needed to make room for paying customers.

Cleansed of the poisons that had brought him to death's door, but still suffering from the unnamable torment in his back, Benson Quartermaster was discharged. He would have been a free man had not the incessant pain continued to torture him. As he walked out the front door of the Mountaintop Center for Rehabilitation and Convalescence, not a penny to his name, he had only one thought in his head. How could he get medicine?

His nurse knew this and watched in sadness as Benson walked away. Then, his altruistic self getting the better of him, he took the rest of the day off, picked up Benson in his car, and drove him to a clinic where a friend worked, and where, he hoped, Benson might at least get some treatment for his back.

Within a month, the pain was gone.

Within two, Benson was working as a painter and learning dry-wall.

Within three, he had paid off what he considered to be fair rent for the house he shared with the nurse and his mother.

Within four, he was participating in a mission trip with the nurse's church, to help rebuild Cairo, Illinois, in the wake of the previous summer's tornadoes.

Within a year, he was passed out on a sidewalk in Lincoln, Nebraska, not a penny to his name, heroin in his veins, and a deep sadness in his heart.

This.

As the Society for the Identification and Banishment of Madness birthed itself in the midst of intense argument, as the community room of the public library grew hot and humid with the fervor of her guests, not thirty feet away, tucked quietly away on the shelf of sale books, *The Art of Caring for the Aging Garden* sat quietly unobserved, seething with the very madness this society meant to destroy.

"Greta, *please*. It's not as if we don't all know your own husband is infected."

The room gasped. All that could be heard was the buzz of the fluorescent ballast overhead. The ladies of this newly formed society shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, waiting for this bold speaker, this woman who dared to speak what was on everybody's mind, to finish her thought.

"I suppose you'll expect us to believe you sent *him* away? Please. He's probably got you convinced he's not dangerous, and is sitting in your own house right now. For that matter, how do we know *you* don't have it? How do we know this *test* isn't specially designed so that you can pass it and fool the rest of us?"

This was Melissa Chandler. Mitch to her friends. She never really liked Greta, though she often put her distaste aside for the sake of sitting at the right table, or with the right group. It was not that these women were enemies. Rather, they smiled and tolerated each other, pretended at friendship while their hearts were filled with cynicism and distrust. Their relationship, of course, was not unusual. If one were to view this community room from overhead, connecting each pair of outwardly friendly but inwardly distrustful pairs with a line between each, the resulting web of lines would fill the room to the point that the individual bodies would no longer be distinguishable.

Greta smiled and nodded.

This was her moment.

She avoided eye contact with her accuser as she spoke about her in the third person.

"What Mitch doesn't understand," Greta began, "is that love requires sacrifice. Love *demand*s sacrifice. I'm grateful that Mitch thinks me a good woman. A kind woman. A loving woman. I'm honored to know she thinks so much of me, of the love I bear my husband, that I could never, no matter what the cost, do harm to him. To the man who has taken me for his own, who has given me two beautiful children, who has dedicated his life to protecting our family. Yes. She thinks an awful lot of me, and I am honored. And to Mitch I say, yes, I am that person. I *do* love. I would give anything for Cal.

"Except."

She paused her for dramatic effect.

"Love will have its sacrifice will I or no.

"You see, I love my children, too. I love my friends, my neighbors. I don't think of myself. I would gladly die for my husband, for my children. If I thought my death would serve them, I would end my life this very moment. If that were the choice laid in front of me, I would have no difficulty choosing. Sadly, it is not.

"The choice laid in front of me, the choice that will sooner or later lay before all of us, was not between my husband and myself, but between my husband and my children. Between my husband and *your* children. Ask yourselves, what would *Mitch* do?

"Would Mitch hide Tom in her basement, keep him warm and fed, cozy and loved, while he shared the air with little Erin? Would she make love to him at night and carry his poison with her to the elementary school like a latter day Typhoid Mary, until the playground was covered with the bodies of tiny children who had torn themselves apart with a madness she could have prevented? Would she sacrifice the romantic love, the marital love, the, let's face it, *selfish* love she feels for Tom, for the selfless love any decent mother feels for her children, the selfless love any decent person feels for their friends, their neighbors, as I have? Or

would she hold tight to what is *hers*, her eyes blinded by false hope, and become, herself, the monster we all fear?

"She certainly thinks *I* would."

During this speech, she had avoided looking directly at her accuser, choosing instead to share directly with her wider audience. Now she turned to Mitch for the first time and spoke to her directly.

"Well, Mitch, to be clear for the record, I have, for the safety of my children, for the safety of *everyone's* children, sent Cal away. I don't even know if he *is* infected. He has shown no outward signs. But given where he has been, how close his contact was, the risk was too high, and I care too much."

The thought of her husband's infidelity tripped her, caught her heart in her throat. Knowing her words were not quite true, not quite honest, she fought to push them away and keep the connection to her audience. She now broke eye contact with Mitch and surveyed the room.

"So I say to you all, no sacrifice is too great to save our families, our town, our way of life. I beg you. Take your handouts. Ask the questions of everyone you know. Track every response. Report any answer that is even slightly suspicious. For the sake of our children, be ruthless, be selfless, be brave.

"I know I'll do what it takes. Will you?"

And the room applauded.

On her way out, as she walked through the vestibule between the community room and the library proper, in the midst of the talkative women exiting the meeting, she jostled a woman flipping through books on the sale rack. Without looking at the woman she had bumped into, she muttered the obligatory, "Excuse me," and walked on without waiting for a reply.

Looking up from her book, *The Art of Caring for the Aging Garden*, Annabelle Fruma Cantilever saw only Greta's back, predictably covered with biting flies, and closed her eyes tight, once more using every ounce of strength she had to wish them away.

It is roughly at this point in the story that Cal and I met for the one and only time. I was driving my deceased father's only heirloom, a

blue automobile manufactured by a subdivision of The Chrysler Corporation known at that time as Dodge, in the year one thousand, nine hundred seventy-four. At the time of its manufacture each model of automobile was given its own name, in this case, the Dart. A dart is a small pointed object thrown by tavern patrons in an attempt to prove that their intoxication has not yet proceeded to a state making them incapable of hitting a target at distance of two to three paces. It is more difficult than it sounds.

I was careening east on United States Highway thirty-four, in my inherited 1974 Dodge Dart, when I spotted Cal walking alone by the side of the road, head down, oblivious to his surroundings. I knew it was Cal because I had written him there, walking lonely along the shoulder and reflecting upon where I had taken his life, not only in recent days, but by virtue of the backstory I had given him as well.

Like Cal, I am a lonely person by nature and revel, so to speak, in my quiet time. I knew Cal, too, was enjoying his moment alone with himself, and I was not anxious to disturb him. Nevertheless, I had to get Cal off the highway and into the nearby city where his trajectory would not only lead him toward his estranged brother, but also intersect with the other characters closing in on him. I was impatient and lazy, I admit, but here he was, and there he needed to be, so I invited him into my car and took him, at a pace mildly faster than the limits imposed by law, toward his destiny.

I considered where to begin.

I knew his wife had gone off the deep end, so to speak, and would soon enough succumb to a proper insanity with all the benefits that membership in that exclusive club could provide. I knew how and when it would happen, in every minute detail. I knew of his illicit relationship with Annabelle Fruma Cantilever and the detail of her own inescapable doom. I knew the sad story of his children's future as well as the more uplifting story of his own impending meeting with his estranged brother. There was much I could tell him.

He knew of his dark feelings, his fear of the future. He knew of his past in a way I had not yet bothered to invent. He knew of secrets I had failed to unlock. He knew of his hopes mixed with dread in a way that

could surely help to serve the telling of his story, if only I could decipher them. There was much he could tell me.

I considered where to begin.

"Long day?" I asked.

With a half smile and without turning, he said, "Yeah. Long day."
And the road swept below us.

Twenty miles of near silence as I clung to the last few miles of a jazz station I had little hope of recapturing once the static took over in earnest. Then, before searching for the next musical background, I poked my passenger, this man I had invented, and for whom I felt some small amount of responsibility. The poke was intended to be advice. Words of wisdom. As usual, I succeeded not in inspiration but only in adding to the poor man's confusion, pushing him further down the dark road of self awareness from which there is no return.

The poke went like this.

"Madness is everywhere, Cal. The world is not as it seems, and yet we cannot, not one of us, truly accept it as it is. The evidence of a lifetime, the laws we have come to know, the rules we have come to trust, the inevitability of predictable patterns are the true rulers of our minds. What then, when the world proves to be different? What then, when everything we have ever proved, turns to nothing but a broken hull, carrying us to the depths of the ocean from which it had once protected us? Do we walk on the watery surface? Do we fly through the depths, uncaring of breath now unnecessary in the new world we find ourselves in? Do we accept the evidence bombarding us, even as it contradicts everything we have ever known, everything we have ever learned, everything in which we have ever wrapped our faith?

"We do not.

"We look to define the new world in the old ways. We ask our brothers, 'Did you see that?', and when they decline to support us, we shrink back, lose faith in ourselves. How can there be a world, after all, that is only ever seen by one person? Such a thing cannot be. The evidence you seek does not appear, and yet the new world is there. You can see it. Touch it. Hear it. Smell it. It is madness, no doubt, but it is not a madness you can escape. You tell your brothers to look harder, to see

what you see, and they know. They know as much as you know. You are mad.

"Yet, is it mad to accept the world as it truly is, even if you are the only man who can see it? Or is it madness to deny it?"

I felt smug. I had given my hero the sort of advice I was sure would help guide him through the difficult times ahead. I had seeded him with an idea that would surely bear fruit. The seed would grow inside him, drive him to see the world in new ways, see his fellow man in new ways, face his brother, perhaps save the world.

I was disappointed.

Cal, much to his credit, would have none of it. He shrunk into himself, certain that he had fallen in with yet another madman, after so narrowly escaping the last one. He was afraid to engage me in conversation, and held his tongue for a long moment. When he did reply, it was with a scant six words.

"How did you know my name?" he dared to ask.

So that was it. He was not yet ready to open his eyes. He would be someday. I would make him. To get there, however, he would have to suffer further. I had my work cut out for me.

Disappointed, I heaved a sigh, and turning my attention from the road to look Cal in the eyes, I said only, "I don't know, Cal. Lucky guess?"

I found an old school country station, turned it up, and drove on toward the next required destination in my hero's travels, a necessary stop on the way to his dreaded family reunion.

Or maybe this happened.

Cal had always imagined that hitchhiking would involve a long succession of short trips, interspersed by interminable periods of loneliness as one stood by the side of the road waiting for the rare generosity of strangers. His only foray into this activity turned out to be much different. He couldn't have been walking along the road for thirty minutes before he was picked up by a second driver, hadn't even bothered to stick his thumb out. In all honesty, he wasn't sure he even *wanted* a ride. His adventure within the truck hadn't exactly left him optimistic about his travels, and he was just beginning to come back to himself when his next

adventure pulled up beside him. She, adventure, woke Cal from his convalescent trance like the dog that pounces before you are ready to wake.

"C'mon, man, I've been up for *hours*. Just get up. Please? Please? We'll go for a walk. It'll be fun. C'mon, man. Please?"

He had a choice. And he had no choice.

The driver, predictably, was mad. How could it have been otherwise? At this point there could be little question to Cal but that he was carrying a disease. *The* disease. He had passed Greta's test, that was true. But just because Cal wasn't mad, just because he wasn't *infected*, did not mean he wasn't a *carrier*.

At first, he thought, *don't engage him in conversation. Just look straight ahead, pretend you're not here. Breathe as little as possible. Maybe this doesn't have to end in tragedy.* Cal's intentions, however, were of little use. His rescuer, his driver, almost immediately engaged him in conversation. Cal knew he should respond, knew it was his responsibility as the man's guest to be good company, perhaps keep him awake on the long drive. And yet, he feared as much for the driver's safety as for his own. He adopted the attitude of a recluse, a hermit, a dullard, whatever it took to avoid engagement. He knew it was impolite at best, and offensive most likely, but he had made his decision and held to it.

Sadly, the driver's madness manifested itself almost immediately. He rambled about how the world wasn't the world, or that everyone but him was insane, or god knows what madness. Cal tuned most of it out as if trying to stave off his own madness. *Please make him stop, please make him stop*, he thought, like a sick drunk praying to the porcelain god as the room spins about him.

And he called Cal by name.

And he knew where Cal was going.

And Cal realized that he must have spoken to him after all, forgetting his words almost as soon as he had surely uttered them.

And then the man turned up the radio, Cal held his breath, and the two of them watched the road to the soundtrack of country oldies as they made their way into the city.

This.

As surely as the north wind tears at your face in the dark depths of winter, Benson Quartermaster will be kicked nearly to death by angry demons before our tale is through. The poor guy has been through a lot, and I hate to do it to him, but there it is. Madness envelopes the earth, and the aged Benson Quartermaster, whether or not he deserves it, shall, like everyone else, be her victim, will he or no.

If it is of any comfort, you can be assured that his battle with madness will be, in comparison with his lifetime of struggles with poverty, addiction and pain, only mildly debilitating. At this very moment, in fact, Benson Quartermaster wallows in the lowest depth to which he has yet sunk throughout his miserable life.

Before now, each time he fell, he had landed on some rocky bottom from which he could no longer see light creeping into what seemed an inescapable pit. Before now, after lying broken on the rocks, he would reach out for a slippery outcrop and, with infinite pain, dare to pull himself up, if only a few inches, to feel some minuscule amount of hope, barely perceptible in the darkness, but there nonetheless. Today, there is no hope. Today, he is truly at the bottom of the pit. Today, his body is swallowed by the mud pool hardening around him, with nothing to hold on to, nothing to pull against, nothing but smothering mud, nothing at all.

If one can dream without properly sleeping, then so it is with Benson. Lost, frightened, under attack, he knows not where he is, can hardly see, has little control over his own movements. Pain sees him, and she stalks. Benson is half in the real world, half in his nightmare. He knows the real world is worse and forces himself to stay in the dream, no matter how frightening. The couch on which he curls is damp with sweat, though comfortable enough for the bed bugs whose home he has invaded. These *cimex lectularius* that feed on Benson's flesh have, perhaps, even less shame their victim, who prefers to suffer the indignity of being eaten, rather than escaping the torture of their proverbial frying pan only to be driven into a raging fire.

He is dragged from his dreaming state by a noise.

A loud noise.

A loud noise directed at him.

"Get the *fuck* out!" says the noise.

"Just five more minutes," Benson imagines himself saying.

"Wake the fuck up and *get out!*" the noise insists.

"Go away," Benson imagines himself saying.

"Fine then," the noise says, and Benson is, for a brief moment, relieved.

Rough hands grab his filthy garments and move Benson from his fetal position to a vaguely vertical state. Benson, entirely against his will, shakes. He feels himself borne along, moving he knows not where, trying desperately to hold on to the nightmare in which pain may well be chasing him, but at least has not caught him yet.

As he tumbles down the stairs, the dream steals away in earnest. He thinks, "*This must be it, this must, at long last be the end. Praise God.*" He lands in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, in the open doorway of the apartment building's vestibule. He would not be surprised to know he was lying in a pool of stale beer and piss not three hours old. He curls up to fight the pain that never truly leaves him, now exacerbated by the trauma from the fall. He shakes. He cries. He prays for death.

No one hears him.

A boot to the head. Another noise.

"For chrissake." The door, which has hit him in the head, now pushes it to the side as it opens its full width. The rough hands lift his nearly weightless body, and he is airborne. Moments later, he lies on the sidewalk, door locked behind him, new pains shooting through his body, each vying harder for attention than the last.

Benson Quartermaster tries to wish it away. Wish it *all* away. He curls up in the midst of a major pedestrian path and fights to make his way out of this nightmare and into the last, where pain is closing in, but with some effort, he might have some last remnant of hope to hold it back for a few more seconds.

This.

The as yet unnamed European town in which resides the scientific outpost place with the machine that sounds suspiciously like a super

collider, has not yet been struck by an outbreak of madness. For most of the natives of that community, this is very good news indeed. They continue to go about their lives, tend their fields, drink their coffee, and talk about what they call football as the madness spreading itself across the earth remains just another interesting story those internet people talk about.

Some, however, are closer to the epidemic than they realize. The world of people is, of course, smaller than we prefer to admit, and the connections between us far more numerous.

For example.

The waitress that served Hammond Forsyth earlier in our story.

She had long told herself that she was greater than she seemed. It was not that she thought she would *do* great things, although she did have vague dreams in that respect. For her, it was more that she felt she had some *relationship* to greatness. That she might be associated with some great person or great event. That she was, in some way, secretly famous, and that her fame would someday become apparent to all.

Had she known that she had served, had in fact snubbed, the man who was singlehandedly responsible for the epidemic of madness now ravaging the earth, she might have felt justified at last in her suspicions. As it was, however, she had no idea of Hammond Forsyth's importance, did not even know his name, and was, instead, consumed with jealousy of someone far less worthy of her envy. It seems her best friend had apparently once slept with a soldier who had been killed fighting mob of madmen in Japan two days ago. For this near connection to ephemeral fame, the waitress's friend was now locally famous, and the waitress herself filled with desperate envy.

What the waitress also did not know, as it happened, was that her own biological father, a man she thought to be a deceased transient laborer, was in fact an American office manager by the name of Jacob Gruber, who had been alive and well until becoming one of the epidemic's earliest victims.

That is.

The unnamed, and therefore unimportant waitress, broken hearted over her lack of importance in a world increasingly focused on

victims of the epidemic, had not only received the world's first lecture on the cause of the epidemic from the man responsible, but had lost her biological father as, perhaps, its first victim. It may even be true that it was *because* of her interaction with the father of the epidemic, that it chose her biological father as its genesis.

In other words.

The waitress who wanted, more than anything, to have an unearned fame thrust upon her, was harboring not one, but two secret connections that neither she nor anyone who mattered to her knew anything about, and which would have served to fulfill her desires beyond her wildest dreams, had she only been aware of them.

It was to this creature that two technicians from the scientific outpost place spoke, ordering light breakfasts, before continuing to discuss a problem, the implications of which they assumed no one in hearing range would understand. Once she was out of hearing, they lowered their voices and became more animate.

"Chaos, man, chaos," said the first.

"Do you really think..."

"The end of the world as we know it. It must be," the first man continued. "How could man possibly survive?"

"But surely," the second man dared, "insight and knowledge, *awareness*, these things must have combative value."

"You think you'll *combat* this? You think your *awareness* will save you? When the ground beneath your feet splits apart revealing a canyon of infinite depth, do you think the knowledge that it is your personal view into unthinkable dimensions will keep you from splitting in two? It will not. The knowledge that the parts of your mind you no longer feel still exist somewhere in the unreachable depths of time, space, and dimension will be cold comfort when you are half, a tenth, a billionth of the man you always believed yourself to be."

"So what, then?" the first man asked. "Do I just lay down and die? Cease to exist?"

"Worse."

"Worse?"

The first man looked about the cafe, a seemingly normal place filled with seemingly normal people. It could not last. He looked back up at his colleague. Speaking softly, but with purpose, he said four words. "Madness, chaos and death."

"And Dr. Chan told you all this?"

"He didn't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he was trying to figure out if any of the T-1's had performed an unauthorized experiment. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but it wasn't like he could avoid saying *anything*. He had the log in his hand but wasn't showing it to me. I asked him if I could see it, see if I could help in some way, and for a minute, I thought he was going to show it to me. But then he just shuffled me out of his office in a sort of panic. I'm not surprised, really, considering what he was looking at."

"So you never *saw* the log?" the second man asked.

"Oh I saw it. The first thing I did after I left Dr. Chan's office was to look it up. He'd dropped my security clearance, but it's not as if you need a whole lot of clearance to find a log, if you know where to look." The T-1 smiled, and his colleague smiled, too. It was not without a certain amount of pride that these men held the keys to secret locks on rarely used doors.

"And you're saying the concurrent capacitative flow inside the Buxton Sinks fell short of..."

"Not fell short of. Was so unbelievably fucking low as to be non-existent."

"So you're saying..."

What he was saying, was...well, what he was saying was a bunch of garbled technobabble not even *he* fully understood. This man had looked at the so-called log and seen nothing to draw his attention. He was completely baffled. As a man who had a reputation for arrogance, however, he was not about to let a T-4 think he was not as knowledgeable as he wished to be. So, he lied.

He had no first hand knowledge of the catastrophic dissolution of the barriers between infinite dimensions now destroying the home of Man. He knew only that his superior, the inimitable Dr. Chan, had

unjustly accused him of reckless behavior that put the entire universe at risk. That this same great scientist had blundered in his panic, and said out loud that no man could survive a world unisolated from the dimensional chaos that constituted the *All*. They were words the T-1 should never have heard, but they were words he now believed, without doubt, to be true.

The man made up whatever technobabble he needed to convince the young pup across the table from him that he knew what he was talking about. Made up the proofs that led to a conclusion he knew to be true, though he knew not why. He let the ends, so to speak, justify the means.

And the T-4, too, believed what he heard. He looked about him in imitation of the scan his own superior had made not minutes ago, observing, he now thought, his last sane moment on earth.

The waitress, coming back to check upon them, heard only the technobabble, and dismissed the weird scientist guys as usual.

A short walk away, Dr. Hammond Forsyth's phone continued to ring.

Calumet Forsyth's mad chauffeur, that is, myself, never asked Cal where he was going, and I'm not sure that he would have told me had I done so. Nevertheless, from the necessity that drove me, so to speak, to pick up Cal in the first place, I took him to the place I most needed him to be, the place his truck driver had been steering him toward. Exhausted, spent, he allowed me to do so, never questioning my prescient sight. Fate was like one of the uniformed men back at the truck crash. She had an authority Cal found hard to ignore, and he gave himself over to her.

From the moment I concluded what Cal surely believed to be my mad monologue, we had travelled in silence, save for the soothing nostalgia of the country oldies, which grew in strength as we headed east. The open road turned to busy expressway, then the tighter roads of an industrial cityscape. Soon we reached my destination. I brought the fine old Dart to a stop, and said only, "Good luck, Cal." The hint was obvious.

He thanked me for the ride, opened the door, and sat himself down on a bridge overlooking a train yard.

There are moments, mid-adventure, when you stop to study the view, and gaze in wonder at where you are, and how you came to be there. For Cal, this was such a time.

He looked about himself, at the trainyard, steeped in memory, seeing only the industrial edge of town from his youth, wondering how he had come to be home-not-home.

The fates were laughing.

It wasn't incredibly different from the one near which Cal had grown up. Like Indiana Harbor, it was a vaguely industrialized area where trucks and trains came together to commune and transfer goods. Workers abounded. Some used cranes to move containers from one unit of transportation to another, others forklifts and dollies. The least fortunate moved things by hand.

Cal's mind went back to his childhood. He saw himself sitting on a short wall with a view of the water, watching the grownups work, not sure of what he was really seeing. He remembered the flash of sun on the water, smoke rising from the steel plant, and more from the refinery. He remembered being bored and wishing he wasn't. He remembered watching with melancholy the concrete boat landing that dove under the water, drowned surely, breaking apart under the merciless force of the great lake that relentlessly broke down even the hardest rocks into sand.

He wondered when he had stopped going by the harbor, when he had lost interest. Clambering up onto a short wall not dissimilar from the one on which he had wasted time as a child, he breathed deep, and watched the scene unfold before him. As it mixed and morphed into the yard and port of his youth, he felt just a little sick.

Feeling as if he hadn't eaten in days, he wandered away from the industrial mess, toward what he hoped would be a more commercial area. Somewhere he might get some coffee, some food perhaps, figure out where to go next. He was hopeful.

He shouldn't have been.

As he approached a busier area, one bustling with college students, government workers, and those who made their living off of them,

a mass of movement caught his attention. Noises rose out of the mass, and a tingling sensation began to grow in his stomach. "*Not madness,*" he prayed, "*not here.*" The noise formed itself into cries, and the cries into screams. The movement became a struggle, the struggle a melee. People ran, trampled, kicked, shoved, and punched. Makeshift weapons appeared and violence abounded. Somewhere in the mass, an old man, a visionary of civil engineering from a bygone era, was crushed to death by monsters.

The sounds of sirens carried themselves to Cal's ears from far in the distance, growing in volume as they approached. He shuddered to think that the madness no longer appeared to be limited to a few individuals. It was now attacking large groups, perhaps with society as a whole its next target. The riot looked like the beginnings of a mad revolution, an insane fervor spreading its tentacles ever further into the sea of former sanity.

And Calumet Forsyth forgot his reverie, his memory, his curiosity. Instinct took over, and he ran.

In the opposite direction.

He ran down unknown streets, turned right, then left. He looked to escape the madness falling further behind him, without ever daring to believe he might leave it behind forever.

Winded, far enough from the melee that it seemed, if only for the moment, safe, he came upon a coffee shop where any knowledge of the riot happening some six blocks away had not yet reached. Hardly noticing anyone or anything, he ducked inside and stumbled blindly to the counter. He sat down on a stool and tried to wake up from his nightmare.

"Coffee?" A waitress asked.

"Um, sure."

"Menu?"

"Um."

"You look terrible, darlin'. Why don't I get you a cup of soup. Chicken and Dumpling alright?"

"Um, sure."

Cal put his head in his hands and nearly dozed off.

The uniform knew what he needed, and once again, he allowed himself to be told what to do. This time, his trust paid off. The coffee woke him up, and the soup invigorated him. Before he knew it, he was working on a meat loaf special, the first meal he'd had since leaving Greta on his doorstep, and started to feel like himself again. He hadn't forgotten about the madness just down the street, but apparently word had not spread yet. He felt, if only for the present, safe.

Food can be a miracle.

As Calumet Forsyth sat, sated, warm, sunshine coming through the window, he thought again about his brother, and fingered the scrap of paper in his pocket. From the moment Greta had thrown him out, he had thought about his brother. About the anger he was unwilling to let go. About some fantasy of reconciliation and forgiveness.

He pulled out the paper and looked at the telephone number with far too many digits. Maybe he should call after all. Maybe he should dare to touch base. Call the secretary. Find out where he is. Seek him out.

Tentatively, Cal pulled out his cell phone. Nearly dead, but maybe enough battery for one call. Maybe one call was all he needed.

He wasn't even sure if he could *make* an international call from his phone, but he punched in the numbers anyway and waited.

And waited.

And when his call was answered, it was with a recorded message. What time even *was* it wherever he was calling?

"This is Dr. Forsyth's office," the message began. It was a woman's voice, shaky with trepidation. "If you are calling to respond to our search for Dr. Forsyth, please press star now, or wait for the tone to leave any information you have. We'll get back to you as soon as possible. We are currently unaware of Dr. Forsyth's whereabouts, but teams from our facility are actively coordinating with local authorities to conduct a thorough search of the area, and we hope to be reunited with him soon. Please send your good thoughts and prayers for his safe recovery. Thank you."

And with that, the message changed to an automated answering system giving the caller a variety of options in a language Cal did not understand. Cal's phone died before he could leave a message.

His brother missing.

His brother had been missing for lifetime. Why would anyone bother to look for him now? And that voice. She sounded genuinely concerned. As if Ham's absence really meant something. As if someone actually cared about him. Was it possible? Could anyone care about that insufferable something or other?

And what about himself? Did anyone care about Cal? Was anyone searching for *him*? Unlikely that.

Cal heaved a heavy sigh, looked about him, and sipped his cooling coffee. He was still a long from his goal, his boyhood home, Indiana Harbor, and what felt like equally far from Greta. His stomach churned thinking of how to face her. Of what to tell her. Of what she would say. Somehow travelling away from his problem seemed simpler than returning home. Returning to face the music, so to speak.

He thought, perhaps, a simple text to his wife was in order. Something simple like, *I love you*. Then, he would look up the nearest bus terminal and find a bus back home. He wasn't quite ready to face the music, so to speak, but it was a long trip, and he would have plenty more time to think along the way.

Sadly, his phone was now dead.

Not that it mattered. It was too soon. Greta would surely need more time. He would only find himself exactly where he started, back home with no place to sleep but the local motel where he wouldn't be able to face the clerk who used to babysit for him. Where he could hardly stick around the gas station for fear of seeing someone he didn't want to talk to.

Maybe a hotel here in Lincoln was what he needed. Another night to gather his thoughts. Charge his phone.

And he was struck with a vision.

With a wallop. It blindsided him and found him, metaphorically speaking, laying on the ground, staring up at the sky, wondering what the hell had just happened. The vision took over every part of his mind, and any previous thoughts, any residual feelings, were buried so deep beneath it as to be unfathomable.

The vision was this.

Calumet Forsyth once again saw a vision of Indiana Harbor, but this time his boyhood home was transformed. It was home-not-home. Like no place he had ever seen, and at the same time one he had known all his life. Pervious roadways with gentle curves flowing seamlessly into curbs and driveways. A living, breathing river of aggregate flowing through the town, licking up to homes, carrying cars and bikes and pedestrians alike through channels and tributaries moving gracefully to increasingly bigger roadways until they spilled back into the predictable old world of tar and concrete highways outside of town. It was the hand of God, impressed upon his hometown, an integrated path, not clumsily laid on top of the natural landscape, but one with it. A vision of the future. A vision that would change the world.

Epiphany.

His first.

His only.

Not something to be taken lightly.

Epiphany.

Stunned, Cal stood up, as if struck by an electrical short in his barstool. *"To hell with Hammond Forsyth,"* he thought. *"To hell with Greta. I'm going to change the world."*

He stumbled with the dizziness that accompanied his epiphany. Such a feeling had never come over him before, and he was unprepared to handle it. His eyes were opening, and he knew he dare not stop to think. He had always wondered about this moment, about how it would feel. If he did not take it, he knew would always regret it. Hastily, he pulled some cash from his pocket, too much, and left it on the counter. "Keep the change," he nearly shouted, and sped from the restaurant.

When Scherzo heard Hammond's name in the mind of Calumet Forsyth, she was furious. Halfway around this miserable world, seven billion people to choose from, and she had to land on the one person this side of the ocean that knew him personally. Knew the one person she was trying to forget. The person who had, with one inaction, destroyed any and all faith she might ever had held for humanity.

And she had helped him. Soiled herself by sharing her gift with a blood relation of that ignorant, careless, selfish, cocky, arrogant, insufferable something or other who had betrayed her without hesitation. The brother of the man who had, without so much as a hint of regret, dismissed her lifetime of work as if she were no more than an over worn blanket, a little long in the tooth, left behind carelessly and destined for the rubbish bin.

She felt dirty. Violated. She considered going after the brother, sharing some evil thought, turning him into a sociopath, driving him to mass murder. She got so far as the exit, watched him walk away with newfound purpose. Yes, he was susceptible. She could easily turn him into a perpetrator of mass carnage. Fill him with insanity. She could do it in her sleep. At least *this* one would listen.

She turned back to the useless collection of customers in the restaurant once more. She sneered. Willfully deaf and blind. They had only themselves to blame. Suddenly, without warning, everyone in the restaurant felt the need to stand up clumsily, and knock their tables, chairs, dishes and drinks about. The coffee shop became a mass of confusion as patrons wet with coffee and water, soiled with ketchup and grease, apologized to each other for their own actions and condemned each other for the actions brought to bear upon themselves.

Scherzo watched with joy and laughed. She'd needed that.

Then, turning back toward her prey, the lost brother of her jilted subject seething with newfound epiphany, she walked out onto the street, and charged full speed into a mad riot that had continued to stretch across the city. Pipes swung, fists flew, teeth bared. Men and women fought each other, screamed at each other and ran from each other. Some police attempted to keep order. Others only brought more violence into the scene. Everywhere was pandemonium, with sanity in short supply.

This was not a dangerous place for Scherzo. She was easily able to work her way through the crowd, gently nudging the minds of these mad revelers as she passed by. She could not fully control everyone in the crowd, but she could create a sort of shield of apathy around her, so that as she moved, attention was always drawn away from her, violent actions

focused in new directions. She had no fear for her own life or limbs, such as they were, but she was devastated about losing her quarry. He was now so far away with such a mass of humans between his location and hers that she had little hope of finding him again easily.

As she realized her loss, her anger grew.

She began to twist the feelings of apathy into feelings of violence, driving those around her not just to avoid her, but to actively hurt the others. Where madmen were swinging, she enhanced their desire so that the swings multiplied in strength. Where people cowered, she encouraged them to stand up and fight back. Where women ran, they suddenly found themselves pushing anyone in their way forcefully, knocking innocents to the ground where they would soon be trampled.

By the time she had made her way to the outer fringes of the riot, it had intensified by a factor of five, with no end in sight. She stood, looking to the empty street beyond, her fists clenched, panting hard, looking in vain for the man she had lost, seething with rage at her failure. Her continued failure. Her lifetime of failure.

When she tripped over the homeless guy laying on the sidewalk, she cursed herself for not seeing him, for once again paying more attention to her own thoughts than being mindful of the present. It was her mentor's greatest criticism, and one which, while she knew it to be true, she had ever denied. That such an obvious breach should leave her face down on the sidewalk, the perennial *I told you so* that should have been a teachable moment, was indicative of the crisis of faith she was facing. As ever, she denied the obvious in front of her, refused to admit her own faults and reacted in the most contrary way possible.

She stood herself up, turned to face the cause of her stumble, and kicked him hard in the stomach. That would teach him to lie in her way.

This.

Greta Forsyth and Benson Quartermaster shared a dream.

They walked hand in hand along a vaguely romantic boardwalk in the warm glow of a late summer afternoon. They felt like old lovers, a lifetime of trust behind them, no secrets between them, each filled with the lifetime of faith they had put in each other. Contentment infused

them. They were happy, and they walked, comfortable in each other's embrace, basking in the straw colored light of late afternoon.

As they talked, they seldom looked at each other. They did not need to. The sound of each other's voice was enough to satisfy them that they had been heard. They shared an intimacy that can only come with time, with age, with patience.

Greta began her catechism.

"Where is the North Pole?"

Benson did not answer. There was no answer. They had been through this so many times before that he knew the futility of playing along. The pain would come, would he or no. There was no response, no answer that would prevent it. He simply awaited his punishment with the patience that comes from a lifetime of habit.

Greta, for her part, did not expect an answer. She knew what was coming as well, and was just as helpless to stop it. She was not in control of herself. She gave her actions no thought. It was simply her way. What she did. What she always did.

Still holding Benson's hand, she swiftly, and with the force of a professional soccer player, twisted her body and kicked him in the stomach. He doubled over in pain from the impact, never letting go of Greta's hand. When he felt himself near collapse, her strength kept him from falling all the way to the ground. With a gentle pull, she helped him back to his former upright position, and they once again embarked upon their stroll down the boardwalk under the warmth of the summer sun.

Benson smiled weakly, balancing the knowledge of what was coming with that of the faith that it would soon come to an end.

"How big is an antelope?"

No answer.

Another kick.

This time Benson fell to his knees, still holding Greta's hand. She let him take a previously determined allotment of time to recover. She always did. When he was ready, she felt the short tug on her hand, and she once again gave him light assistance to his feet.

On they walked as the sun slowly inched toward the horizon. There was, alas, more pain ahead than behind.

"Is a lemon drop sweet or sour?"

Benson took a deep breath. No answer could prevent the inevitable. He need only wait.

The kick that came did not vary in force nor accuracy from the first two. It was identical in every way. Identical in the way that only years of repetition can bring.

Benson fell to the ground, his left hand splintered by the boardwalk, his body prevented from full collapse only by the love and strength of his assailant.

Although each period of recovery increasingly demanded more time, Greta did not allow herself to show the mercy demanded by her victim. Each period of recovery perfectly matched the time allowed for the last, so that each time a new question came, Benson was weaker and less prepared than for the previous one.

"Why do birds fly south?"

Wait for it.

Kick.

Pain.

Collapse.

This time he nearly let go her hand, and it was only her unwillingness to let go that kept his right hand from joining his left on the boardwalk. When they resumed their journey, Benson was limping.

She held her own right hand in front of her, palm up. He did not turn to look.

"What color is this?"

Followed by the expected.

As he cried, his head on the boardwalk, she came around to face him, grabbed his left hand with her right, and forcibly lifted him up. Benson offered as much assistance as he could, which was almost none.

"How big is heaven?"

Silence. Kick. Wrenching pain. Collapse. More pain. More tears.

He was lifted up solely by Greta's strength of will. He had none of his own left with which to assist her.

Now Greta allowed the recovery to stretch. Benson began to hope. The time had doubled. Tripled. Benson wondered if he has miscounted.

If the final question had come and he had forgotten. He was limping, but starting to become lucid. He felt pain, not only in his gut but throughout his body. In his heart. In his soul.

He felt the warmth of Greta's loving grasp on his hand and allowed the love to flow through him. Invigorate him. Restore him. She stopped, turned to him, forcibly turned him to face her. She let go of his hand, and gently grabbed his face between her own.

"What is the meaning of life, Benson? What is it? Tell me. Tell me."

He looked helplessly at her. Afraid, tentative, sure that no answer could avoid what was coming.

She beat him to within an inch of his life.

He was almost dead.

Greta awoke in a cold sweat, full of purpose.

Benson opened his eyes to see a strange woman looming over him, her foot in transit toward his kidney.

A recipe for madness. (serves one world)

Ingredients:

1 Soul of Wisdom, grated.

1 Disciple, aged.

2 Fields of Physics, seeded.

1 Field of Biology, minced.

1 Field of Geology, sliced.

1 Field of Chemistry, crushed.

4 Fields of Engineering, pureed.

1 Dash of Mathematics

1 Plan for the Future

1/2 Lifetime of Work

4 Feelings of Vanity

1 Vision of Self

Allow wisdom to ripen one thousand years or until golden and speckled with brown. Grate evenly over disciple. Marinate until flavor is fully infused. Lay wisdom upon parchment and release. Set aside.

Fold knowledge into a large baking dish. Chill.

In a separate bowl, add plans, work, vanity and self. Stir well.

Lay parchment across chilled baking dish and allow to come to room temperature. Once parchment is fully infused with the off gasses, coat with contents from bowl and chill.

Once coated parchment is firm, break into pieces and serve family style.

Where is the North Pole?

There is a state, sometimes hallucinogenic, sometimes merely metaphysical, in which you find yourself in the most ordinary of places, the most known of situations, sure that you have never been there before. *Jamais vu*. Never seen.

You stand at your own front door, know in your mind that it is a front door you have passed through a thousand times. Know that it is white. Has always been white. Know that the knob is at the same approximate height as your belt. Has been since you can remember. Know what you will see when you walk through it. Unchanged. Predictable. And yet, here you are, standing before it, sure in your heart, in your soul, that you have never been here before.

Jamais vu.

Like its better known cousin, *deja vu*, it is no more than a trick of the mind. A missed electrical connection. A poor mixture of chemicals. A mistake.

Yet, here you are, standing before it, sure in your heart, in your soul, that you have never been here before.

So it was with Hammond Forsyth upon his return to his boyhood home.

Indiana Harbor had changed. It wasn't that the buildings were different. They were not. Some businesses had closed, others had taken their places. Their relationships to each other, the parks, the streets, were more or less as they had been in Ham's childhood. Lincoln Elementary needed some work, but looked essentially the same. St. Catherine's had clearly been renovated, but stood in the same place that hospital always had. The entirety of Hammond Forsyth's well cultivated mind told him, by view of the evidence around him, that his boyhood home remained essentially intact. In the back of his mind, however, or in a cellar perhaps, he fought with the surety that comes with indefinable feeling. Indiana Harbor had changed.

Coming here was a mistake.

He thought, perhaps, coming home, revisiting the physical location of his earliest inspirations, might kindle the fire dying in his mind.

That what sparked him as a child, might do so once again. Hopeless. As he walked the industrial village of his youth, as he looked about himself, he knew whatever inspiration he had experienced in childhood was gone the way of himself, a world traveller so far from home he could no longer truly return.

In the distance, still several blocks away and obscured by homes and trees, stood Lincoln Elementary, the school that hadn't quite known what to do with him. Careless, Hammond Forsyth put one foot in front of the other, repeatedly, carrying himself at a speed patient at best, toward the institutional block of cold bricks.

Then it hit him. Full on in the face. He never saw it, only felt it. A force strong enough to make him stumble, though not quite enough to push him to the ground. Two images vying for his attention, each so massive that when taken together took up more room than his mind was prepared to offer. The images, completely different from each other, unwilling to synthesize, overwhelmed him, stopped every other process of his brain as it attempted to decipher them. Instinctively knowing that such an attempt would require every bit of power his brain had to offer, knowing that all non-critical functions must be shut down in order to route power to where it was most needed, willfully ignorant, as always, of social conventions and how his actions would appear to others, Hammond Forsyth took an action that would be considered suspicious, if not mad, by passers by, but which for him was only logical. He sat down. On the sidewalk. Where he was. Where walkers in their own neighborhood, perhaps in front of their own home, would have to walk through the grass if they wanted to pass, like an automobile skirting fresh roadkill, unwilling to dirty itself with someone else's problem.

The first of the two images that inundated the mind of Hammond Forsyth was a dreamlike view of the problem that had been plaguing him since before he left Europe. It formed itself into epiphany, only to morph back into a mass of images Ham was unable to interpret. This time he was no longer afraid, and this time, the understanding left him of its own accord. It was there. He could see it. And yet it was obscured. As if he were studying a distant star, unseen behind a night cloud which had, on at least one occasion, thinned itself enough to allow a view of the star,

but which once again completely hid it with no promise of moving out of the way again. If he continued to look in the same place, if he continued to adjust the telescope to point where the star *should* be, he might get another brief sighting, should the cloud choose to move out of his way. Or he might spend the night staring at blackness.

Looking harder wouldn't help. He knew that. His only chance was to look continuously, to wait for the grace of the obscuring cloud.

The other image, not at all obscured, and perhaps the obscuring object itself, was a memory. An old memory. His first memory. From the institutional house of brick not three blocks west, where the halls had not quite forgotten him.

At that moment, Greta Forsyth and Annabelle Cantilever were locked in mortal embrace, attempting to kill one another. Neither one knew the first thing about fighting, or even self-defense, making the battle, at least the physical aspects of it, mildly comical. The violence with which they attacked one another, however, the hate they allowed to show itself, provided for an undercurrent of danger which made the comedy uncomfortable at best, and more often worthy of bringing a cringe to even the most sophisticated of gawkers.

How it began was this.

Anne had begun the inevitable descent to madness. It came in waves, but had been, in a way, manageable. When the swarms came, she would shut her eyes, wish them away, and do everything in her power to bring herself back to reality. It was a battle she was losing.

To find some semblance of peace, some way to calm her turbulent soul, she turned to her home away from home, the church that had saved her from herself and which often helped her to regain some sort of center. It was Saturday, and her work for the week already concluded. The church was well prepared for services, and she had naught to do before the following day. Nevertheless, not knowing what she was looking for, not knowing why she was doing so, she let herself be drawn to the church, where she might breathe a little easier and perhaps get ahead on some of the next week's work.

When she had almost arrived, was yet standing across the back lawn, the madness at war for dominance of her mind took the last proverbial hill. This time, however, there were no flies. This time, the madness took hold. Turning to see what creature had cracked a twig behind her, she was awed to see her lord and savior standing before her, glowing with divinity.

Overwhelmed, she fell to her knees, put her face down into the grass, in the deepest, most obsequious pose she could think to take. As she cowered, half in fear, half in awe, she, for the briefest of moments, doubted. For just the tiniest fraction of a second, her brain told her she was bowing before an hallucination, that it had mistakenly decoded the input before it, had mistakenly interpreted that input as the earthly manifestation of her god. In that fraction of a second, she knew what she had seen could not be true, must be some sort of mistake. That she might yet close her eyes and wish it away. The greater part of her, however, spent the rest of her time chastising herself for lack of faith. For allowing even the smallest of doubts to instill itself in her mind. She was not worthy.

And she attempted to bow yet deeper.

The holy being before her did not speak, but considered Anne, studied her, as if struggling to evaluate what steps to take next. Standing there, silent, the being shook its head in disappointment.

At last, it spoke. "Annabelle?"

It was a woman's voice. The voice of Greta Forsyth. The voice of Greta Forsyth coming from the mouth of Anne's lord and savior.

"Annabelle, what are you doing?"

Anne's confusion at hearing a recognizable voice come from the vision in front of her pricked her. She considered, ever so briefly, perhaps even more briefly than during her previous moment of doubt, peeking. No. She must have faith. If this was the voice her god chose to use, then so be it. She would trust. She would give herself over. She would shed all doubt.

Greta, for her part, knew exactly what she was seeing. It was madness, plain and simple. She knew the messy job in front of her. Never mind that this was the harlot who stole her husband. What mattered to Greta in that moment was to get this woman to the hospital where, while

she could not be cured, could at least be separated from the healthy ones. Keep her town, her neighbors, her loved ones safe. That the madness was obvious, however, did not satisfy her need for proof. What she required from others, she required from herself.

And so, without further delay, she began the catechism adopted by the Society for the Identification and Banishment of Madness, now directed at the subject bowing obsequiously before her.

"Where is the North Pole?" she asked.

There was no answer.

The doubts, formerly tiny specks dancing around Anne's mind, now began to grow. They became louder, and focused themselves in the forefront of her mind. They told her the voice was no divinity. That the voice came from a human being, someone she knew, someone she despised. That the vision had been merely a fantasy. That there was no god before her.

When Anne remained silent following the first question, Greta repeated the question, louder, more forcefully. Still, there was no reply. Greta, disappointed, unsure of herself, moved on to the second question. Then the third, each with no reply. Greta had no guidance for what to do with a silent subject, but knew in her heart that one way or the other, she must at least *ask* the questions. Only then could she be justified in diagnosis.

"Why do birds fly south?" she continued.

Anne fought the fight of her life with herself. Faith versus reason. The eternal battle. Two thoughts, two sureties presented themselves in her mind. One, that her god stood before her. The other, that he did not. In her heart, she knew only the first could be true. Must be true. Regardless of what her brain said.

And if that were true, some rogue part of her rational self told her, then that voice, that woman who had insinuated herself into The Lord God, was something evil, a demon, a challenge, a test. It was the only truth. The only place where her faith and reason harmonized together. Her god was testing her, daring her to fight the demon that had tried to break her faith.

Her resolve certain, it took only the smallest of catalysts to bring her to action. It came in the form of a question. Question number six.

Greta said, "How big is heaven?"

I can't really fault Anne for what happened next. She had no control over herself. Not really. Her madness was waxing and insidious. It cast her as the defender of all that was good and holy against the woman she saw as the embodiment of everything she despised. The woman who had always chosen herself above her husband, who had cared more for things than for people, who had made it her life's goal to change her husband, rather than accept him for who he was. It was not what she did that mattered to Greta, only how she was perceived. At least, that was how Cal had described her. It wasn't only that Greta didn't understand Cal, it was that she didn't even try. She didn't love him. She didn't love anybody. She didn't know how.

Of course, Greta didn't actually hate Cal. Not even Cal would have gone so far as to say that. At worst, she was contemptuous of him, at best, dismissive. The battle that was about to begin was not good versus evil. It was not love versus hate.

It was love versus pride.

Anne really had no choice.

Annabelle Fruma Cantilever, silent and fearful of her god, her knees on the grass and her head implanted even deeper, rose up at the blaspheme, and attacked Greta Forsyth with the following words.

"How dare you poison this holy vessel!"

And her hands were around Greta's neck.

And Greta's knee was in Anne's stomach.

And Anne's nails cut Greta's ear.

And Greta's arms pushed Anne to the ground.

And Anne rose, taking Greta back down with her.

And there was pulling and pushing and scratching and punching.

Sadly, this will not be a battle to the death. Anne will be left to suffer until she is smothered by her husband, grateful for the death that finally releases her from the torture her life had become. Greta will live long enough to save her children from the pains of madness with the

peace of eternal rest. At this time, these women merely hurt each other, eventually running in terror when discovered by an authority figure.

For now, the battle raged on.

After Scherzo had kicked the nearly dead Benson Quartermaster seven or eight times, she began to regret it. What was she? What had she become? An angry ball of hate looking for something to hit. Something to kick. And kicking the poor soul before her hadn't even made her feel better. If anything, it made her feel worse.

Like the body of Hammond Forsyth, closer to her than she could dare imagine, Scherzo lowered herself to the ground, sat on her heels, rested her hands on her knees, and bowed her head in shame. Quietly, she asked for forgiveness. She asked it of the man in front of her, of her mentor, of her father, of the men and women she had indiscriminately slapped, so to speak. And in, perhaps, her greatest moment of weakness, when she felt that nearly all of her strength had left her, when she knew, for the first time in her life, that she must need humble herself, somehow, to someone, she came to the edge of a precipice, below which was forgiveness of Ham. She teetered, forgiveness waiting below, and watched herself, disincorporate, the irresistible pull of that long overdue trip to humility tugging at her, encouraging her fall.

Before she could allow herself to make the final plunge, however, before she could give herself over to the only forgiveness that could offer meaningful redemption, she was dragged back to her body, to the present, into the moment, by the low dying groan of Benson Quartermaster. The anger was gone, the tension was gone, and a rare moment of peace hung about her. It was in this state of calm that she reached forward and brushed her hand against Benson's forehead. She felt the immense pain, the infinite sadness of the poor wretch, and tears seeped from her eyes.

She had no joy to push into this nearly dead soul, no inspiration, could share only empathy, a touch of love, perhaps. She shared some small feeling of warmth, of hope, not a spark so much as a tiny glowing ash that might, if left undisturbed, slowly rekindle his dying soul. She was no god. Not really. She could not bring a dead man to life. All she

could do was to make the dying a little less painful, a little more purposeful.

And Benson, his eyes still closed, brought his hands to his face, felt the warm feminine hands of the impossible muse leaning over him, and shared in her tears.

How long they stayed like that, even I cannot say. How many passersby pretended not to see them, how many sneered in disdain, it is impossible to tell. For we have been keeping our full attention on Benson and Scherzo, have allowed the world to go by as we breathe, timeless, in this infinite cocoon of love, forgiveness, and hope.

Although yet another hospital was certainly called for, might well have put him on one more long road to a temporary recovery, Scherzo thought she could do better. It was her usual pride getting the better of her. Even a muse does not change overnight. Still, there was something generous in her impulse to save this man. It was more than her usual contempt for the failure she saw all around her. More than the usual hubris. This time, it was more a condemnation of herself, an attempt, not to prove she was better than everyone else, but to prove she was good enough to remain in their presence.

She was a long way from enlightenment, but it was the biggest step she had taken in recent memory.

Exuding hope, fanning the glowing coal into a heart flame, she helped Benson to his feet and, more than half supporting him, walked him back to the coffee shop where she had wreaked such havoc not an hour before. Empath that she was, his pain struck deep. Not the physical pain. That was meaningless to her. But the emotional pain, the depth of his despair, the utter disdain for care, the hopelessness that now defined him, reduced her to near hopelessness herself.

As she fed him soup, the death in his eyes turned slowly to emptiness.

The soup turned to coffee, the minutes to hours. Scherzo did not speak, nor did Benson. He thought words, of course, and Scherzo heard them. Until he spoke, however, she did not respond, not even with feelings. The inspiration would come, she would share when he was ready. For now, she just sat, waited.

When he did speak, it was with the words he had been thinking for close to an hour. The words that betrayed a feeling he hoped was not true, that he prayed could not be true. A feeling that both gave promise, and at the same time stole any small hope that had still bothered to linger with him. Each time he thought to speak of it he closed his mouth for fear of the speech making it true. When at last he gave up, it was with the surety that only comes with complete loss.

He said, "I'm empty."

And she knew it to be true.

Two boys approach Hammond Forsyth as he sits on the sidewalk, eyes pointed toward his childhood school, mind deep in memory. The two boys, still a short distance away, think not of what the hell this stranger is doing sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, but instead of themselves. They hide the...well, are they cigarettes? Vapes? Perhaps one of them holds a marijuana pipe. It doesn't really matter. The point is that these boys are doing something they shouldn't, and that on this day, in this town, they still have just enough respect for their elders, even an unknown crazy man blocking their way, that they make an honest attempt to hide their transgression. Perhaps the vape goes in a pocket, or the pipe gets curled into a hand. Some attempt to allow plausible deniability. It is unlikely, I know. There was, long ago, in the land of fairy tales, an unwritten rule in which a delinquent would make a minimal effort to hide his crime, and a generous adult who could see through the ruse would pretend not to see it, grateful for the respect. No longer. The phrase, *kids today...* comes to mind, which I immediately swallow in shame.

These boys, a relic of my own past, undoubtedly a little stoned, pass Hammond by, laughing to themselves, and work out the story they will soon tell about him. One dares to say, "Hey man, what's up?" but Hammond does not reply. The second says to the first, "Don't touch him, idiot. What if he's got the thing?"

The first replies, "Like that's even real. My uncle said that's just a giant prank."

"Your uncle's an asshole."

"Well, yeah. Still..."

They stand there for a moment, looking at him. Catatonic. Then, more to the air in front of him than to his friend, the second one says, "Whatever. This is boring. Let's go."

And they boys walk on. They like the idea of ignoring the doomsday advice given in that morning's high school assembly. Like the idea of proving that it is all just so much paranoia. At the same time, however, there is doubt. Not much, perhaps only a seed, but still enough to scare them off.

Later that night, the first boy's mother will strangle an off-duty bank teller in a failed attempt to save mankind from evil. She will be the town's first hands on experience with what was, by now, a worldwide epidemic, though far from the last.

Ham is close to forty years away, but the boys do not go completely unnoticed. In his mind, they mix with some older boys of his own youth, passing him by as he sat on the very same sidewalk, the very same spot, a giant piece of colored chalk in his left hand, poised above the cement surface.

He was seven years old. And he was inventing algebra.

She had come to him without warning as he walked back to school after coming home for lunch. He knew the walk intimately, even at seven, and knew he would arrive exactly two minutes before the bell. There was no need to rush. He walked past familiar sights and pictured his near future, himself sitting at his desk in social studies, his pretty but boring teacher droning on about something he cared nothing about. The thought intermingled itself with the Underdog cartoon he had just finished watching, and his teacher became Sweet Polly Purebred. He allowed the thoughts to mingle freely in his mind, not caring where they took him. And then *she* came.

She blasted into his mind and froze him. He felt a wave of inspiration. An enormous wave. What at that time would have been called a tidal wave, at least in the midwestern United States. He was walloped. The numbers swept through his mind, dancing around each other, partnering off and then intermingling in a way that left no doubt as to their interconnectivity. He saw a Gaia of numbers, and it brought him to his knees.

When his mother found him, twenty-five minutes later, he was surrounded by numbers, letters and symbols drawn with the green sidewalk chalk that had been conveniently left in the grass beside him by a careless child. He had lost all notion of time, of school, of the world. He was in his own world. The real world. The world where everything was defined, where everything was interconnected, and where everything made sense. Hammond Forsyth had been a happy child before, but this was different. He felt purpose. He felt one with the world.

He felt epiphany.

His mother was furious. Worried sick. She had left work when the principal called and now she might lose her job. What in the hell was he doing?

She was close to the end of her rant, the car still running next to the curb, when he finally heard her. He looked up to see her talking and struggled to understand her words, inspiration still monopolizing his mind. Slowly, his mother brought him back to earth, to dull, staid, pedantic earth. Ten minutes later he was sitting in math class, sure that the day's lesson was a gross simplification of concepts now far beneath him.

Seven years old.

Somewhere far above him, he saw the numbers swirling, felt the joy of first love, and smiled at his secret.

Close to forty years later, in the same spot, his first love now gone forever, he sits like a jilted lover, caring for nothing, nostalgic for the lost romance, feeling more alone than he has ever felt in his life.

Half a world away, an old man sits perched above a valley.

Like Ham, he is lost in thought.

Like Ham, he finds his situation distasteful, but upon him nevertheless.

That the world is one, he has no doubt. He has long since accepted this, and accepted his own role as no more than an infinitesimal and insignificant piece of a whole so much greater than himself as to be not only inconceivable, but undimensionable. Undefined. Something that can be accepted, but never truly understood.

The best one could do, the old man had known for centuries, was to shed one's conscious self. To forget. To unlearn. To give over the self to the universe. To *be* the universe.

That was the journey.

And he had done well.

Yet, here, today, he was lost in thought.

A word had woken him from his reverie and turned his mind inward. He considered the value of words, of language. He wondered that language could both help one on his spiritual journey, and keep him distracted from it. That without words, perhaps man would still be living off berries in the savannah. That maybe such a fate was better than the one with which man was burdened. That words can help us to see the world as it is, and also help us to disguise it. That words were neither good nor evil, but of such immense power that they could not be ignored.

Could not be ignored.

He tried to relax back into the reverie in which he had sat for millennia. Tried to hear the word, notice it, let it float by, disappear, and fall back into his peace with the world. It was as if he had been staring at the moon, seeing each crater, each peak, understanding inherently as he stared the nature of the moon, its shape, its structure, its movement, and then, without warning, had seen the proverbial man in the moon, and could no longer shake the new image and go back to his deeper view.

Or to use a more vulgar example, he was a boy immersed in an optical illusion, suddenly no longer able to see the special shape, but only the lines on the page.

Such was the power of words.

Of a word.

He considered the meaning of the word itself. Of the implications behind it. That perhaps his journey was over, at long last. Perhaps he must now give up, unsated. Perhaps he would never reach the end, if there even was one. That perhaps it was his destiny to seek, but not to find. That this particular search was now over.

He considered a rock below him.

And a cricket.

A pocket of moist air lower in the valley, beautiful in its density.
Perhaps he could let the word disappear after all.
And the word came again.
And again.
And he knew that to fight it was no better than to accept it.
The voice from beyond.
The word.
"Come."

This.

That Indiana Harbor's first victim had never read *The Art of Caring for the Aging Garden* did not keep that corner of the world from falling victim to the spreading epidemic. She had merely given her attention to an advertisement for a tree removal service. The advertisement had also been read by a madman in Cicero. Prior to succumbing to the madness that would lead to his downfall, that man had read a billboard proclaiming the light of a common god and its importance to saving humanity from evil. That billboard had, in previous turn, been read by a young girl riding shotgun in her mother's car on her way home from the hospital, where the doctors had just told her mother there was nothing they could do, that they did not take *psychiatric* patients, that she would be better served by another facility. The girl had just finished reading a young adult bestseller she had been reading for the last week.

The bestseller had, of course, been devastating.

So had a particular blog post that had, in the sadly poetic parlance of the day, gone viral.

So had a new soft drink marketing campaign.

In corners all over the world, men, women and children read phrases, sentences, chapters and tomes, each time sharing some small part of the madness held by those who had read those words before them. From the page to the eye to the mind and back again, the world shared the most dangerous idea known to man, and the idea drove them mad.

It has been said that reading opens your eyes to new worlds. Perhaps some worlds are better left unseen.

Here we go.

As Calumet Forsyth, epiphany roiling his brain, is drawn inexorably toward his childhood home in a manner not unlike that which affected his brother Hammond, let us throw a few distractions his way. Accents of madness to flavor the dish of adventure he finds himself cooking.

The bus terminal.

A presumably homeless man. What my father would have called a bum, and my grandfather a hobo. A white man with dreadlocked hair fat around the back of his head and dropping below his shoulders. He sits outside the terminal, what few belongings he has gathered around him, possibly asking passersby for money. I say *possibly* because neither Cal nor anyone else can understand his words. That he has an old shirt on the ground in front of him with a few coins on it is the only indication that he is panhandling, although it is not clear that he actually desires the money so much as others feel he needs it. We'll have Cal drop a few coins as he passes.

The man talks to himself, loudly if unintelligibly, but is not, we cannot fail to note, a victim of the current epidemic of acute madness. He is, rather, one of her chronic victims from the previous era. He has clearly suffered from the effects of mental illness far longer than could be attributed to the epidemic, and as such, is largely ignored.

Just because the old madness has not disappeared from the earth, however, does not mean the new one is in hiding. It looms, and it attacks. Here comes one now.

A man in a suit and tie, hair well combed, screams at the vagrant. Unlike the vagrant, the gentleman's words are absolutely distinguishable. They are well enunciated, and there can be no mistaking each word. Their meaning, however, is completely undecipherable. "Boat drink burying pain can always know impunity. Ephemeral heat drains excrement sharp but instinctive." Or something like that. The truth is even I can't remember which words he spoke, they were so unrelated to one another. It is absurdist theater. Dada. Meaningless except in its intensity, which is in the extreme.

As the assault turns to battery, and the fists of the well dressed man begin to pummel our vagrant, I would love to see Cal step in and act the part of a hero. I would like him to step up, so to speak, and defend the honor of the chronic madman from the unfair advances of the upstart. I think it would help to solidify the new confidence Cal should feel accompanying his epiphany. His new purpose.

Alas, it is not to be. It's just not who Cal is, and anyway we've got to get him to Indiana Harbor so we can wrap this thing up. We'll give Cal a moment, though. Let him stop in the doorway, the noise of the ruckus behind him, and turn back, determined to help.

And save him the trouble by the appearance of a Uniform.

The airport.

A man holds his wife close, pulling her toward an exit, protecting her from the watchful eyes of airport security, now hauling anyone remotely suspected of the mildest insanity away in the interest of public safety.

A college kid cowers next to a water fountain, refusing to let anyone touch her

Security screening is shut down for nearly ten minutes while an elderly woman hides herself in the baggage x-ray compartment, unsympathetic to the pleas of hundreds of frustrated passengers about to miss their planes.

The sane ones are dominated by fear. What should be an airport noisy with the chatter of lively travelers is instead an airport in the midst of a battle between the deathly silence of fear and the deafening screams of madness. That anyone dares to board a plane, to lock himself into an enclosed capsule with hundreds of potentially contaminated people, a temporary prison from which there is no escape but death is, perhaps, the greatest mystery of all.

The airplane.

The pilot becomes concerned about the growing number of obstacles in the path of the airplane and attempts to dodge them. Watchful eyes on the ground assure her that her path is clear, but the pilot refuses to take the chance of ramming what she believes are airplane destroying, house sized boulders, threatening the safety of his passengers.

Air traffic control has been expecting something like this, and immediately contacts the onboard air marshal and co-pilot. What ensues is a battle for the plane, with each party certain they have the interests of the passengers at heart. By the time the co-pilot gains control of the plane, the plane has been sabotaged by the pilot to the point where only an emergency landing is possible.

We'll let Cal exit the airplane on one of those cool slides, just because.

On the tarmac, a fellow passenger becomes violent, and runs off toward the distant fences, ripping his clothes off and screaming words we cannot understand.

The frequency of such events only increases inside Midway International Airport.

Enough.

Let's put Cal in a rental rather than suffer another capsule of madness inside a bus. It's high time we got him to his destination.

That Scherzo had experienced some level of her own epiphany after kicking a nearly unconscious Benson Quartermaster in the street was yet to be seen. She had certainly allowed her better half to eclipse the darker side that had just shown itself. She had certainly embraced her empathic tendencies, a perfunctory act of contrition for the vile deed she had just done. But epiphany? Had she really seen the world in an entirely new way? Was she changed? To that we must, if we are being honest, answer with an emphatic *no*.

Even as she put forth her energy to help the poor man in front of her, it was her own feelings, her own needs that continually drew her attention.

Sitting in silence at the coffee shop where she had so recently caused a ruckus, Scherzo first occupied herself with the roiling battlefield that was Benson's mind. She watched as he struggled with physical pain, with fear, with abandonment, with loneliness. She watched as he tried to pull some small memory of confidence up from the depths of his memory, as he grasped hopelessly at a life preserver too far away to be of

any use. She dug down to see the buried hope, brought it up a bit, pulled it inch by inch, until Benson might finally reach it on his own.

As she did this, her own mind brought itself back to Hammond Forsyth, to his betrayal, and her anger once again welled up. She took the hope, the metaphorical life preserver, and thrust it down further than it was before, took her anger out on the helpless man before her. She was a spoiled child in the midst of a tantrum. At those times it was, perhaps, worse for Benson Quartermaster than if she had never saved him at all.

And then she would feel him again, be overcome with empathy, and try to save him once more. The tantrums would come in waves, she would spike with anger, and then rest in exhaustion, only to come back stronger with the next one. This was the background to the silence Benson and Scherzo endured that afternoon in a coffee shop in Lincoln, Nebraska.

When the tantrums had finally run their course, as she was falling off from a peak of anger too high to reach again into an exhaustion deep enough to keep her in check for at least the day, she gave up hurting him and gave up helping him. She took away every feeling he had. She took away every fear and every hope. She cleaned him out completely and collapsed her head into her arms, tears wetting the fake wood table beneath her.

It was at that time that Benson Quartermaster said he was empty.

To say he felt good, or rejuvenated, or even relieved, would be to miss the point. He did not feel better, did not feel worse. He simply did not *feel*. The person who had spent a lifetime focused only on survival, who had lied, cheated, stolen, only to make it to the next day, the next week, was no longer. Benson Quartermaster, empty Benson Quartermaster was not some new version of himself, someone with a chance to turn over a new leaf, to make a new start. Empty Benson Quartermaster was an entirely new person altogether, looking back at the story of his former self as if he were watching television. Bad television at that.

Benson Quartermaster was gone, and Benson Quartermaster, empty Benson Quartermaster did not mourn his loss. He merely observed it, dispassionately, as he observed all that he saw, including the strange woman across from him, crying into her arms.

And Scherzo cared not.

Benson spoke.

He said, "I'm empty."

And she knew it to be true.

She looked up, her face wet with tears, and saw the shell before her, the creature no longer worthy of being called human but for the dying ember of life she left inside of him. She might as well have faced a robot.

"You're blessed," she said.

"I don't feel that way."

"You don't feel anything," she replied. "You're better off."

"I suppose."

"You *know*." She was sitting up now, burning her own intensity into his eyes. "You don't want to be that man again. You don't want to feel his pain. You don't want to suffer like that."

"I suppose."

"You think because you had a few moments in your life, a couple of good highs where you felt you were winning, you should endure the pain with which you paid for them? Because you won twice at the slots you should give away your fortune to the casino? That you'll ever feel that first high again?"

"It was never about the high," Benson said quietly.

"I don't mean the opiates, Robot. I mean the joy. The joy of succeeding, the joy of doing something right, the joy of killing the pain, the joy of," and here, she let out a brief sigh, "of inspiration. I mean that you paid a dear price for a few moments of joy, and that you can't possibly want to try again. You can't possibly want to endure the torture that your life became for the infinitesimal chance that you might feel good for the briefest of moments. You don't want that, Robot. Better not to feel at all than to feel nothing but pain."

"I suppose."

"You suppose. You suppose." She leaned forward, drilling into his eyes. "How about *thank you*? How about a little gratitude? I could have destroyed you, and I gave you the blessing of blessings instead. Saved you from the torture of man's existence forever. You should be kneeling

at my feet, praising me for killing the creature that only wanted to devour you, and instead you only think about the one minuscule thing you might possibly have lost. You're just like all the rest of them. You never see what you have, only what you don't.

"Well you can have it back if you want. I'll put you right back where I found you, leave the world on your back, fill you up with pain and fear, bury the faintest spark of hope so deep you can only wonder if it is there. But hear my words. You will never find it again. Just say the word, Robot."

Benson Quartermaster stared at Scherzo blankly. She returned his stare with a biting one of her own.

"You did this," he said. It was not a question.

"I did this," she replied, half a challenge.

The two sat in silence for several minutes, Scherzo's mind bouncing back and forth between the man in front of her and the traitor she had left behind. Benson's mind was calmer, but still busy. He wondered if he was truly the ungrateful person she made him for. He wondered if the world was the same. He wondered if he was part of the world, or if he was to be forever separate from it. And he looked back upon the life of Benson Quartermaster to determine if it was a life worth living.

He saw moments of love, of joy, of pride. He saw the pride turn to hubris, the hubris to overreaching. He saw Benson Quartermaster falling off cliffs when he reached too far over the edge, watched him fall, knocking his head along the rocks as he tumbled to new lows. He saw moments of hope as Benson pulled himself up from what he thought was the bottom, the belief that he could once again attain great heights strong within him. More joy. More pride. More falls. Each peak lower than the last, each fall deeper.

He saw Benson Quartermaster beg for death.

And empty Benson Quartermaster broke the silence. He spoke without care, without feeling. No smile crept across his face, no anger, no disappointment. He simply said, "I accept your gift. Thank you."

Scherzo, still thinking of her own pain, cared not, beginning another long silence. She was in her head, fighting thoughts of Hammond Forsyth, knowing that the harder she tried to forget him, the more

pervasive would be his memory. She thought of the moment she met him, of the inspirations he had embraced. She cursed him for rejecting her. She held imaginary fights with him, loud screaming matches that overpowered any thoughts of the man sitting across the booth from her. The outward silence between the two of them was broken only when Benson asked, still thinking of their last interaction, "Are your gifts often rejected?"

Scherzo, who needed little excuse to speak of her troubles, to share what was really dominating her mind, dove in, starting at the beginning. "There was this boy I watched, walking to his school after going home for lunch..."

Two refills of coffee later, Benson knew how to repay her gift.

Calumet Forsyth found himself in his boyhood town.

Summer was starting to creep out from under the spring. The sun was out, the sky was clear, the air was warm. There was nothing about the day to foreshadow disaster, nothing foreboding. It was the sort of day on which everything should have gone right.

Except.

Except his boyhood home felt dreadful. As in full of dread. Instead of being washed with nostalgia for his youth, Cal felt nothing but anxiety for he knew not what. At first he assumed he was feeling the same ongoing fear of some new random madman, bound to attack him from around the next corner. Cal had become so used to that idea, however, so *comfortable* with it, that he knew the churning in his stomach must presage something greater. He considered his own, what he suspected must be *impending* madness, but that, too, was an idea he had long lain with. The fear for his own sanity gave him pause, put him on his guard, it could not be denied, but he no longer *dreaded* madness with the intensity that he now felt for...for what?

He turned to his childhood memories. Maybe this feeling of impending doom was tied to some long forgotten trauma he had suppressed, some hidden memory threatening to bubble up to the surface, a pain he had long avoided, now crashing down upon him. It was *possible*, he knew, but it seemed so unlikely. Cal's childhood had been fine.

Uneventful. It had been filled with good days and bad days, triumphs and failures, but there was nothing that should have scarred him for life, no stomach churning moments beyond the occasional refusal of a dance invitation, getting caught once at cheating, and the rest of the usual childhood guilt. It seemed unlikely that there was another, deeper memory trying to free itself.

Cal tried to let the blue sky and sunshine enter his soul, put away the dread by sheer force of will, but it would not cease. And then he knew.

Cal looked about, saw the streets that had hardly changed since his high school days, the dilapidated downtown, the dated aluminum siding, houses that looked about as nice as they could without being torn down and rebuilt. Everywhere he looked, he saw the desperate hope of a town wishing it were more than it was, and making due with what it could get. Everywhere he looked, he saw *good enough*. The boyhood home of Calumet Forsyth saw itself as a B-, which it supposed wasn't really too bad, considering how much worse it could be. And Cal knew that he, Calumet Forsyth was the hope. That any chance there was of it ever being better than *good enough* lay squarely on his shoulders. That was the thought bubbling to the surface. That was the thought that filled him with dread.

He parked by the harbor and walked awhile on foot. The epiphany from the coffee shop still simmering in his soul, he suspected it was time to start bringing his vision to bear, to plant the first seeds. Only by walking those streets could he assess his thoughts, confirm his memories, start to turn this new dream into reality.

At which point it all fell apart.

From the time that his vision of a new world, of a new integration between street and home, between travel and life, took hold of him, he had been dreaming of what his childhood streets looked like, and imagining them transformed into a world in which one could not tell where the yard ended and street began. Not only had he seen a utopia where people no longer distinguished between what they needed and what they wanted, but he had seen the transformation between what was and what could be. Now that the reality of those childhood streets hit him, now

that they were no longer memories but cold hard fact, the dream became elusive.

Cal shuddered as he walked past his old house, feeling an emptiness where mere hours ago had been inspiration, purpose, joy. There was a vacuum in his soul, and he felt as if he would implode. Felt himself caving in, crumbling, and he collapsed to the sidewalk by the overwhelming sensation of loss.

And he was attacked by the greatest villain of all.

Realism. The Devil's son-in-law.

Cal now had a new vision, one not encouraged by his brother's muse. It was a darker vision, and in every way, uninspiring. Or perhaps de-inspiring.

He saw the cost of tearing apart an entire town and rebuilding it. Saw the anger of neighbors who like things the way they are, *thank you very much*. Saw a town council with more important things to talk about than some carpetbagger's idea of what their town *should* be. Saw anger and passion and disdain all directed at him, uninspiring little Cally Forsyth, inferior brother, with no strength to fight back. He saw himself as just another poor sap who had no business trying to change the world, and no hope of ever doing so, too weak to even face his own wife when the going got tough. A loser who would never amount to anything meaningful.

He reeled at the shame.

Cal had hardly arrived, and longed to go home.

He had been running away. Running away not because he had done anything wrong. He didn't believe he had. In fact, that was the real problem. He knew he could explain to Greta. That she would understand. That, ultimately, she would pretend it never happened. That in order to save herself, Greta *must* pretend nothing had happened. That was what really tore him up. That they could *pretend* to end this fight.

He needed to finish it. To be punished. And be forgiven.

It was time for him to face that. Time to go home.

With little strength, his muscles barely strong enough to raise him from his position of collapse on the sidewalk of his youth, Cal forced

himself to rise, change course, and take on yet one more new mission, the only true one. One slow step at a time, he began the journey home.

Upon arriving in Indiana Harbor, Cal had circled around on a lazy walk that had left him in front of the house where he'd lived as a boy, but now he was determined to make a beeline to his adult one. That meant getting to the car, and a long drive through the night. The map of the town was still indelibly scratched into his brain, having haunted his adult dreams in a way that never truly left him. The shortest way back to his car was to continue forward, past the elementary school, and through the vacant lots he had often cut through as a child. That is, if they were still vacant.

It was with purpose, then, mixed with heavy heart, that Calumet Forsyth walked toward his destiny, and fell directly over his brother, Dr. Hammond Forsyth, who was impossibly not only half a world from his own adult home, but sitting on an Indiana Harbor sidewalk, bathed in the afternoon sun, staring catatonically toward the cinder block school they had once attended as children.

Half a world away, Dr. Nugulu Chan, PhD., sat at his desk, pouring over logs.

I feel a little sorry for Dr. Chan. He was a leader in his field, the envy of his colleagues, and, by every standard set by Man to measure these things, a genius. And yet this genius, this pinnacle of intelligence at the height of his career was forever in the shadow of a man he could never hope to compete with. In any other place, at any other time, Dr. Chan would have been lauded the world over for being the greatest scientist of his age. In the shadow of Hammond Forsyth, however, he was merely part of a generation of greatness led by another.

All told, such a reputation is not so bad, if you are not stuck with the burden of leadership. As it was, however, Dr. Chan had all the responsibility of a leader in his field, without the fame that by all rights ought to have accompanied it.

So, yes, I feel a little sorry for him.

This.

Nugulu Chan discovered some sort of quantum thingy that physicists the world over had been arguing over for decades. It was the sort of discovery that should have earned him a Nobel prize. Honorary degrees. Accolades, at least. The prediction and confirmation of the thingy that no one had previously been able to properly envision, let alone observe, should have been the making of him.

It was not.

Hammond Forsyth used Chan's observation to reinvent the known view of the universe, and in the process, not only changed the scientific community's understanding of physics, but as a result, predicted and observed another five or six ridiculously small thingies that no one, not a single physicist had previously even imagined.

And although Chan was, through the disinterest of Dr. Forsyth, listed as a co-contributor to the great discovery, such inclusion did not begin to recognize Chan's contribution to the world. In fact, it was largely because Chan had bothered to take on much of the paperwork and writing that he was included at all.

From the time he had come to work with Dr. Hammond Forsyth, such had been his life.

Today would be no different.

Dr. Nugulu Chan, Phd., sat at his desk, pouring over the logs, desperate to find something he had not yet seen. The impossible had happened, of that much he was sure. Natural limits had been exceeded, impassible barriers had been crossed, and worlds of physical laws previously only known in the wild imaginings of ten year old boys and hallucinogenic dreams of college kids blowing their minds on psychedelics were insinuating themselves into reality. Everything he had ever known, everything he had ever striven to understand was falling apart, and his own mind with it.

It was the discovery of a lifetime.

It was the end of the world.

It was born in his lab, on his watch, under his authority.

And, as usual, it was certainly Hammond Forsyth's doing.

A T-2 burst in Dr. Chan's office. "Still no answer."

"Well keep trying, dammit."

The T-2 was at a loss. "I don't think he's there."

"What are you, twelve years old? You've got *one* job to do, and I don't want to hear from you until you've done it. Or died, or...I don't know...suffered some sort of horrific accident or something. You're a *scientist* for god's sake. You have a problem, so *solve* it. What, do I have to think of *everything* around here? Send somebody to knock on his door. Search the town. He's got to be around here somewhere. The man hasn't left in over twenty years. He may be a needle, but this town isn't exactly a *haystack*. For god's sake just do your job and *find* him."

The T-2, a little smaller than when he had burst in, a little more hunched over, a little less inflated, took his dejected self away, clear of mission if a bit less sure of purpose.

Nugulu Chan's imaginary friend, his constant companion since his youth, spoke gently. "*It doesn't matter that what he has done is evil. It surely is, be that what comfort it may. What matters is that he has done it and you have not. What matters is that the game is over, and you have lost.*"

Chan knew better than to speak out loud to his imaginary friend. As he had learned long ago, it was best to keep such conversations quiet. You never knew who was listening. Besides, his friend had no trouble hearing the words emanating from his mind.

"But if I can stop it, I can be the man who saved the universe."

"If you stop it, you will be a supporting character in a story about him. A story where he makes some world changing discovery. If the world doesn't end, no one will care that it almost did. No one will believe it. They will only care about the new thing. The thing he did. The thing he gets the credit for."

"Still, I can't just let the universe tear itself apart."

"Oh," his invisible friend replied with no lack of sarcasm. "*You can stop it?*"

Chan did not respond, silently or otherwise. The existence of infinite universes was real. He had never imagined them in this way, no one ever had. And yet, there they were. There they had always been. It was simply that the only universe he had ever known could now see the

rest. The world had eaten from the tree of knowledge and there was no going back.

The best he could do, the best anyone could do would be to put back up the barrier. The shield. The protective layer that had kept the truth at bay since the beginning of time and was now cracked and shattering. If only he could better understand the barrier he had never believed in before, find a way to repair it, perhaps he could salvage some semblance of sanity in the world.

And his room grew dark.

And clouds of poisonous lightning rolled in, tearing at his flesh.

They could not hurt him. He knew this. He was merely seeing what had always been. They were carnivorous gnats flying about his face. It did not matter that he was at no risk of being bitten. He needed only to focus. Seek patience. Acceptance. That was the key. How easy it was when you knew the secret.

Sadly, however, he did not have the patience. Reality is what we see, what we feel, and like every other human on his planet, he forgot about everything else, and started swatting.

In Hammond Forsyth's empty apartment, the telephone continued to ring.

You have not read this book. Cannot have. For as surely as you exist, this book does not. It is not in your hand but in your mind. An illusion. You are asleep. You dream of sanity, of lucidity, of sound mind. A respite from the madness that has infested your mind from the time that you began to absorb this book.

This non-existent book.

This poisoned book.

The story itself is meaningless. A jumble of stories and images from your life. Metaphors to bring some semblance of peace to your warring mind. To find method in the madness that has taken you over so fully you can no longer separate your fancy from reality.

When you wake, and wake you will, the vague feeling of epiphany will scrub at the back of your head. An epiphany not unlike Cal's, short lived, real, but faded before he could understand it. You remember Cal,

of course. He was the scientist guy who...the guy with the phone who...wait...there was a muse, or...no, that doesn't make sense. Wait...he was your brother. That's it, he was, wait...you don't have a...where did it...what were you thinking about again?

And before you can find it, you will fully wake into the madhouse that your life has become. Unreality that is the *only* reality. Throughout the day, you attempt to stave it off, but there is no hope. Your world has broken apart, and you must soon fall victim to it.

Your mind goes back to your home. Not the home you have now, but the one you used to have. The one where things stayed where they should. The one without demons and voices and monsters and bottomless pits that open before you like mouths of hell. The one where there was always hope of a snack in the fridge, a comfortable chair, and a book on the table beside it. A book that surely existed.

A book that could save you, if only you could find it. A book that has already sentenced you to death by madness. A book you are dreaming.

Wake up.

Madness awaits.

How Big Is Heaven?

At what, to Greta, looked like fifteen feet, Annabelle Fruma Cantilever towered over her adversary, a monstrous giant preparing to take Greta in her claws and hurl her across the church courtyard. She was not, of course. Fifteen feet tall, that is. How could she be? People don't just suddenly become giants the likes of which the world has never seen. Demons do not appear where they have never been seen before, terrorizing the human race. Infinitely deep crevasses do not tear apart the earth beneath our feet, where the earth has always been more or less stable before. The world, the universe, is a fairly predictable place governed by laws, some of which we understand and some which we do not, but laws which without doubt govern the universe nonetheless. This tale does not seek to change that.

In this tale, however, the world we have always known is but one dimension that has been forever separate from all others in existence. In this tale, many dimensions have been forever separate from each other, never cognizant of, never even *suspicious* of the existence of the others. In this tale, there has been safety in ignorance, protection in privacy. In this tale, the universe in which we lived had been a stable, introverted place, sitting alone in its apartment as a wild party raged on in the apartment upstairs. Headphones on, eyes on the television, we refused to even acknowledge there *was* a party.

But the party raged on nonetheless.

And it was getting increasingly difficult to ignore.

Greta now saw the party. She looked through the lens of a dimension she had no reason to believe existed. She saw what she could not. What could not be. And yet, her eyes had never deceived her before. Like all of us, she knew that reality was what we personally experience, that personal observation must always be the first and foremost evidence we rely upon to hold madness at bay. Her observation fought her reason, and she was left with only one possible conclusion.

Madness was no longer at bay.

Which did not stop a fifteen foot Anne Cantilever from threatening to take Greta's life for impersonating her god. Now it was Greta who

cowered in fear, begging for her life. She knew that what she saw before her could not be, and yet, there it was, threatening her life as surely as the sun had risen that morning. And what then? What would become of her children, as mad men and women terrorized her town, rising to the size of giants and tearing apart mortals as if they were no more than discarded candy wrappers.

She looked up, preparing to challenge this monstrous creature for the sake of her children, to be the hero of her own story, when she was drawn away by something unexpected.

In the very moment that she had determined to face certain death, she was bombarded by a swarm of stinging insects the size of pinballs. In an instant, every thought, every fear, every desire changed. What came before was gone, and there remained only the visceral too human fear of bugs. Giant bugs. They bounced off of her, got stuck in her hair, and stung her with deep pain when she tried to swat them away. She shook her head, waved her arms about and spun her body as she rose from her former pose of obsequious humility. She had one thing on her mind now, and one thing only. Escape.

Whether or not the giantess still towered above her, whether her town was being overrun by madness, even the question of whether her children were in danger no longer interested her. Her mind was now completely consumed with the urgent problem immediately before her. Escape from the bugs.

She flailed about, ran away, then back, jogged left, then right, ran full bore in one direction, then the next. She believed she could escape them but was continuously thwarted at every attempt. The harder she fought, it seemed, the closer they clung. It was only in a moment of indecision that the idea first crossed her mind that by *not* moving, she might best achieve her aim. She experimented with holding still, fear and disgust at the awful creatures turning her stomach, and found that if she could stand it long enough to calm herself, the bugs would begin to lose interest. It was true that they would not leave her alone entirely, but the largest part of the swarm certainly moved away as she minimized her movements and pushed away her fear.

Her greatest skill, her only skill, had saved her once again. Pretend to who you are not. *Fake it till you make it.* Be who you want to show the world and ignore your instincts. It was the theme of her life, her most practiced skill, and it served her well.

By the time that there were only three of the giant stinging insects crawling on her arms, Anne was staring at her in disbelief. She had been watching the god-impersonating demon perform its satanic dance, and was losing confidence that she maintained the strength to destroy it. As Greta slowed herself and forced a calm upon her body, Anne's confusion grew. She slowly backed away, not sure of what to do next. Greta stood with a meditative stillness, Anne frozen in fear.

It was to this tableau that the priest entered, completely unaware of what had come before.

"Anne, you *are* here. I'm so glad. I thought you'd gone...oh, hello, Greta. I almost didn't see you there. How's your volunteer group going? Lucy told me she was at your first meeting and thought you were doing some really important work."

Greta did not hear him. She was focusing on the twelve-legged creature slowly crawling up her left arm.

"And...well...and I think so, too. After all, we don't seem to be getting much help from the outside, do we?"

Anne looked at Greta, then the priest, and then back at Greta. Greta looked at her arm, a small patch of soft white skin, bare for the warmth of a spring day, to all the world but Greta a completely mundane sight to see. For in all the world, it was only Greta who saw the terrible creature creeping toward her shoulder, only Greta who could feel a second creature crawl along her neck. To Anne and the priest, she was unadorned and curiously silent.

"Well..." the priest said awkwardly, and turned his attention to Anne. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

Anne shook her head like a schoolboy denying his shenanigans to an unsuspecting teacher, as the evidence of his crime stood, for the moment, blocked by his shadow. In her mind she was saying, "*No, not interrupting anything here. Just us girls having a little talk in the courtyard. No fight to the death was occurring here a few moments ago. No earthly*

visitations of a demon god intent on destroying mankind. Nothing to see here. Just normal, everyday, run of the mill..."

"Oh, good. I'm having trouble with that printer again, and I was at about the end of my rope. I didn't want to call you at home. I...well, you know I would never bother you at home about something like this, but since you're here, if you could..."

Anne turned carefully, without speaking, and slowly walked from the scene of madness. Greta remained still. The priest turned from one to the other.

Once Anne had disappeared inside the church, the priest turned to Greta and invited her in. She smiled at him, as if to say thank you, but remained still. The priest, still not quite sure what to make of Greta, thought it best to leave her be, and followed Anne into the church, where he intended to ask her if Greta was alright, and whether there was anything he could do to help her.

At the moment the priest disappeared from Greta's view, she saw that she was at last free of the invaders, and, her heart filled with relief, she walked apace to her home, where she now feared in earnest for the life of her children.

Madness had not yet come to Indiana Harbor. Her first local victim had not yet shown expression of the disease. Nevertheless, there was no hiding from the fear a worldwide epidemic in the time of instant communication inevitably brought, especially so close to a city the size of Chicago. Most residents had wisely locked themselves into their homes, praying they had not just sealed their doom by caging themselves up with an already mad, though not yet symptomatic, family member.

Such ones were the inhabitants of an unremarkable house on a small street leading to Lincoln Elementary. Cautiously, they peered through a crack in their curtains and watched what surely must be the town's first madman sitting on the sidewalk before them in some sort of catatonic state. That he was a stranger gave them some confidence, as did the approach of a second stranger, perhaps a government man come to protect them and their neighbors from infection. Of the fact that he was mad, they could have no doubt, for what but madness could bring a

grown man to sit himself down on a strange sidewalk, alone, in the middle of the day?

Outside, the weather was awkward. The sun shone and gave promise of a warm summer to come. For that, it was what many people would call a *nice day*. Had the day been still, men would have gone down to their shirt sleeves, pleasantly warmed by the sun, perhaps even seeking shade. It was, however, not a still day. The wind blew at a moderate pace, bringing with it the remnants of a winter not quite dead. Not quite.

For myself, I've always struggled with days like that. I feel summer coming on, am anxious to get outside, to shed my winter coat, my hat and gloves. I dress too lightly for the day and am always disappointed that the day is a little colder than the blue sky and budding flowers suggest. I stretch my legs for a stroll in the sunshine, look toward shedding whatever stress has built up and enjoying the peace of a morning walk. Once I am outside, however, I find my ears colder than they should be, my fingers wandering toward my pockets for warmth. Rather than a peaceful meditative walk, I find myself putting all of my energy toward fighting the cold breeze. My body tenses up, I think about my path, rather than my life, and by the time I arrive back home, I am, if anything, less peaceful than when I embarked on my morning journey.

This was such a day.

The residents who looked through a crack in their curtains at Hammond Forsyth sitting before them considered that it seemed like a nice day to be outside, and felt some small regret that it was the madman on their sidewalk that was enjoying the day, while they were locked in a stuffy house, safe but caged. Had they changed places, physically at least, they would have felt otherwise, and wished they had been better prepared for the surprisingly cold wind that numbed their ears and gave them the beginnings of a small headache.

Well. The grass is always greener.

Ham did not feel the cold wind. Not really. He was still years away, reliving his childhood, lost in memory. Calumet Forsyth, however, felt it very much. The hope that had buffeted him, the inspiration that had given him purpose, had left him. He had been walking the streets of his childhood home, trying to fend off the feeling of impending doom that

always attacks us when we come down off a high. Life comes in waves, and Cal was on a downward slope. He had summited a peak, and as he gained speed on the way down, he could not yet even see the nadir before him. To him, the downward journey looked endless.

In such a state, the cold wind was a visceral reminder that life was the enemy, and that the enemy would never concede. He felt the wind push through his jacket as if it weren't there, felt his fingers stiffen in his pockets. The sun, the blue sky, the promise of spring were but carnival barkers to Cal, vying for what might be left of his hope, the prize in view but unattainable.

That the person he least desired to see in all the world sat on the sidewalk before him only served to confirm the sense that any good feelings he had previously felt were now left far behind as he spiraled toward the unfathomable depths before him. What his brother was doing here was no more mysterious, he supposed, than his own presence, but that didn't stop Cal from being sideswiped by the coincidence. The gods had brought them together. There could be no other explanation. But to what end?

With resignation, with a loss of care, Calumet Forsyth stood on the sidewalk, facing his brother. He looked down into Ham's eyes, attempting to decipher the vacant stare. Not sure where to start, he opened innocuously.

"Didn't expect to see you here, Ham."

Hammond Forsyth heard the words. He heard the voice. The sound of his brother, even in middle age, was unmistakable. But he was far away, and the voice came as if from Cal's younger self, just a boy who did not yet know how to ride a bike, a pest flying around his ears, disturbing the music of his new friend, the glorious mathematics singing through his mind. There was a symphony filling his soul as it had that first time, the moment his life journey had begun. He was lost in the music of memory. The voice that interrupted, the cruel coughing patron that threatened to ruin the musical joy, the poke of the alarm clock tearing him from his dream, was not yet persistent. Perhaps it might fade away and leave him to his music.

He pretended that he hadn't heard.

The thing you have to understand about Benson is that nothing he could say, nothing he could do, nothing he could *think*, could, in any way, surprise Scherzo. His newfound emptiness did not endow him with some remarkable shield to protect him from her invasive prying. She was, by nature, a voyeur, and looked where she pleased. As the man sitting directly across from her, the man with whom she was engaged in conversation, he was the natural focus of her not so subtle surveillance.

When he was inspired, then, with no help from her it must be noted, she was instantly aware, not only of his plan, but that somewhere, somehow, one of her own kind must be interfering. She looked into his mind for some evidence, some clue as to who could have put such an egregious, such a dangerous, such a destructive idea there. She looked for evidence of her mentor, of her father, of her third grade coach, anyone who would have an excuse to meddle with her personal affairs. There was none. Just a very dangerous idea floating along in what was otherwise pure emptiness. The vacuum of space that was now Benson Quartermaster.

In a rare moment of silence, she looked at him, attempting to find meaning in his intent. She found nothing. Not love. Not care. Not even altruism. All she could see was the intent itself, swathed in a sort of blanket of logic. As if Benson was saying, "*Surely we must do this thing*," with a sort of shoulder shrug that made it sound so obvious as to be unarguable. Not arrogant. Not cocky. More like a passenger looking at the driver as the traffic signal turns green. For Benson this was not complicated. When the light turns green, you commence travel.

Scherzo, however, was having none of it.

"I will not."

Benson still had not spoken. The two of them stared across the table at each other in a silence all the more powerful for the muffled din of the other patrons, reaching across the room. Silverware clanked. A cacophony of voices not intended to be overheard wafted through the air, creating a noise floor that served to punctuate the silences between them. Sounds only noticeable in the midst of their own silence.

She imagined him saying, "*Of course you will. You can't help yourself. Everything you say, everything you do leads you to that place. The inevitability is staggering. It is dwarfed only by your inability to see it,*" which, of course, he did not.

"It's not *my* fault."

The clank of used dishes collected from a nearby table.

"Never."

The scooting of chairs and gathering of light jackets and purses.

"He ignored me. *Insulted* me. I gave him a lifetime, and he spat me out like I was some two bit tramp who had done no more for him then give him a few minute's comfort in some back alley. And I should go *back*? I should lower myself to my knees, crawl upon the ground, grovel before him? *Supplicate* myself? *He* should come crawling to *me*. He should beg *my* forgiveness, swear his undying loyalty, dedicate himself to my visions, and even *then* I would not forgive him. He was nothing before I found him and he's nothing now. And *you*. You would dare suggest that somehow I...that somehow I..." She made a sort of punctuating sound as she slumped back in her chair, arms crossed, brows furrowed, eyes sharp and focused on her challenger.

Benson Quartermaster remained silent.

Even his mind, with the notable exception of the dangerous idea floating alone in the sea of emptiness, was quiet.

In the distance, a conversation about a television show was interrupted by the delivery of an anticipated lunch. Elsewhere, a ketchup bottle farted inelegantly upon soggy fries.

"Never," repeated Scherzo, as if she were taking part in an actual two-way conversation.

We will not know how it was that Benson Quartermaster, empty Benson Quartermaster became a vehicle for the dangerous idea now harassing his savior. The idea that some adult figure in Scherzo's life was trying to guide her toward reconciliation with her former subject was false on its face. The idea she had infused Hammond Forsyth with, the idea he had so rudely rejected out of hand, was so dangerous, so embedded with risk, that no reasonable member of her kind would dare come near it. No adult in her life would even think of suggesting she reconcile

herself with the man she had nearly endowed with the power to destroy the universe as it was known. To a muse, they would, in Scherzo's own words, say, *good riddance*, and be grateful for the near miss.

No, the idea that Scherzo must seek out her man, must seek reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, was not an idea a sane muse would dare inspire.

"Never," she said again, this time believing herself a little less.

And Benson Quartermaster, inspired by we know not whom, but whom we suspect may have been influenced by the very woman refusing to listen to him, finally spoke.

"It is not a question of whether, sweet goddess, but when. You have already sought him out. You have already forgiven him. It is too late to refuse. You are a dune moved by wind. You can no more stop yourself than can an ocean wave. You know where he is. You know what he needs. You know you will seek him. There is no choice to be made."

And although she once again said, "Never," it was with less resolve, less fortitude, and less faith than she had yet repeated that word.

For Scherzo knew that Benson Quartermaster had spoken the truth.

Hammond Forsyth looked up. A voice. There was a voice somewhere. Somewhere over his head. A familiar voice. What did it say? Something about...about...

"Ham, what are you doing here?"

There it was again. So familiar. What was he supposed to do next? Look up? Respond? Ask the gentleman for his name? Why would his brain not work?

"Ham? Are you alright?"

Ham looked up and saw his brother, Calumet Forsyth standing over him. He was not surprised. It wasn't that he had expected to see Cal standing there, or had even made the connection between the familiar voice and the one he had known almost as long as any other. It was only that, at this moment, Cal's presence there seemed wholly natural. Appropriate. As if they had come to that place together, and Ham had only sat down for a rest.

Ham put out his hand toward Cal, a request for a hand up, a little assistance in standing. The gesture was prescient of Ham's greater need, a cry for help out of his life's first spiritual crisis, though for the moment, Cal and Ham focused on the immediate physical problem. In moments, still holding hands, Hammond and Calumet Forsyth stood facing each other, far from the places they now called home, in the neighborhood of their first, a place they had both nearly forgotten.

They did not embrace.

Slowly, they each let go of the other's hand as they studied the world worn faces before them. Each saw their own face in the other, their own cares permanently etched in skin.

Ham said, "I was walking *this way*."

"Ok," Cal replied.

And they walked toward the elementary school, neither sure where to begin.

Cal had many things to say to his older brother. Deep feelings of resentment for Ham's disinterest in his life. A sense of abandonment. Anger for Ham's deliberate alienation of himself. The brother that never was. The brother, Cal supposed, he failed to deserve. Ancient feelings of unworthiness permeated him, and he could feel himself grow shy, small. His stature shrunk, his body bent, and he withdrew into himself. Every feeling of insecurity he had left behind as an adult came rushing back and wrapped him in the paranoia he knew had been hiding, just under the surface, waiting its chance to take over.

It was in this cloud of paranoia, this straight jacket of insecurity, that Calumet Forsyth thought his words, but in which he was unable to speak them to the only person that mattered.

Ham's state was not at all the same. He was laid bare by private confession. He had, at long last, admitted to his dependence, faced a picture of himself that was nothing without his inspiration. His loss freed him. He didn't feel good, it would be unfair to go that far, but he did feel some relief in finally confessing his need, if only to himself. He was crossing the line, the other side of which was acceptance that his inspiration was no longer within reach, that she was not coming back, that

she would never come back. He was sad. He was broken. He was humbled. And he could envision, for the first time, contentment.

When he spoke, it was with the air of resignation that can only follow a loss, a sort of concession speech. His voice was scratchy, above a whisper, but small and quiet.

"I suppose there is a time when we can become anything. Little stem cells, careless of what lies ahead, happy just to dream along the sidewalks. That must have been me once. It cannot have been any other way. And yet, I have been trying, trying to remember the moment, the moment before I became what I am, what I was. I cannot find it."

Cal was only half listening, bombarded as he was by his own selfish thoughts. Ham, oblivious to whether Cal listened or not, continued to speak, almost to himself.

"I see sparks, flashes of some being, some predecessor to myself, related but distant, and I think, what would he have been, what would he have done without *her*? All I ever was, all I have ever been came from without. None of it was me. None of it. I wanted it, of course. Of *course* I wanted it. I was a child, and some stranger gave me all the candy I could conceive of. Balloons and pop and lemon drops and, I don't know, whatever the heck kids want. What would I know about it? I cannot even remember my own childhood. I must have had one, must have been a child like all the rest before she, before some stranger offered me something better. Something I *thought* was better. Some stranger."

Ham shook his head quietly to himself. Cal, for his part, was picking up increasing amounts of Ham's words. Cal was in the midst of some awkward dream, not quite a nightmare, but an inundation of mildly nauseating images that blanketed him, images through which Ham's words attempted to penetrate.

This.

Like most humans, I am occasionally struck by a virus from which my body attempts to save me with torture. I mean that awful sickness wherein I lay in bed for something like thirty to forty minutes, praying for the churning in my stomach to end, after which I reluctantly carry myself to a convenient receptacle into which I vomit with great relief.

For a few moments, too few, I feel well again, only to be crept up upon by the same unrelenting nausea from which I once again attempt to hide.

In the midst of my hiding, which takes the form of an attempt to sleep, perhaps with the covers pulled well over my head, I often dream. The dreams are rarely more than some simple image, harmless in itself, and tortuous in repetition. A phrase of a song. A scent of overripe fruit. A picture from a newscast thought long forgotten. The image gets so intertwined with the nausea that it becomes indistinguishable from sickness. It *is* sickness.

So it was with Calumet Forsyth.

And Hammond's words were little streaks of sunlight, waves of fresh air that tried to pull Cal out of his infernal loop. Mostly, Cal was still stuck in his nightmare of incessant images, but bit by bit, the voice of Ham began to pull him out, gave him something new to focus on.

Ham continued.

"I suppose I gave myself over to her completely, but I never, I thought, how could I, how could who I was come from anyone but *myself*? The only person I have ever been knew better. The only person I have ever been knew that every answer was within my reach. Knew that every problem had a solution. Knew that everything in the universe had an explanation, a definition, a logic behind it that could be found. What logic allowed for my thoughts to come from anywhere but the collection of nerves in my brain?

"And yet it was *her*. It was her all along."

They had reached the school, now abandoned for the day. Ham walked up to the building, turned, and sat on the ground, his back against the bricks.

"And she is gone and, well, just, gone and, what in the name of, what am I supposed to, what am I supposed to do *now*?"

Cal was now standing before him, towering over him, really, nauseous with the coming argument he knew he could not stave off. He was filled with pity for the broken man before him, wanted only to comfort him, care for him, and yet he knew in moments he would add the proverbial insult to injury. Put his pride before love. Kick the man while he's down.

To continue the previous analogy, the vomit was now welling up inside of him. He would soon feel better, but he would have to go through the worst of it first.

And the vomit came.

"It's nice to hear you talk like a human being for once, Ham, but it's too little too late. You want me to feel sorry for you because you've been abandoned? Cry me a river you *worthless bag of water*. Where were you when I needed you? When anyone needed you? When in your life did you ever care about anybody but yourself? My whole life, all I wanted was a big brother who gave a shit about me. I got *you* instead. Do you even know who I am? Do you even remember what Mom and Dad looked like?

"I'm sorry you lost your childhood, you piece of crap. You'll never know how sorry. But it was here. I was here. *We* were here. You spit on us like we were day old garbage and kicked your own childhood into the gutter. We were here for you, desperate for you, and you acted like we didn't even exist. We offered you love, and you turned up your nose at us. Now love has kicked you in the gut and you expect us to comfort you?

"You're like some spoiled brat who breaks all his toys and then comes crying to his mother because he wants more. Well, I say *teachable moment* Ham. I'm sorry your girlfriend left you, but I can't say I'm surprised. I'm only surprised you ever managed to have one in the first place."

Cal had already said far more than he wanted to, but was giddy with the relief it was giving him. All his life he had dreamed of taking Ham on, and all his life he knew it would be a losing proposition. Ham had the smarts, the dispassionate logic, the cool reasoning that was too great for Cal to beat. Anything thing Cal could say, any argument he could muster would, he had always known, be torn apart by a logic even stronger, if not ignored completely out of disdain for Cal's apparent stupidity.

Today's victory was empty, he knew that. With Ham emotionally vulnerable for the first time in his life, Cal knew he was in no risk of a beating. Nevertheless, it felt wonderful to finally lay him out.

He laid one more kick as a parting blow.

"So you can take your brain, your logic, your insufferably perfect reasoning and shove it up your ass. I'm tired of giving a shit about what you think."

And with that, Calumet Forsyth turned to leave his brother behind forever.

Ham, not quite the empty shell that was Benson Quartermaster, though for the depth of his loss, feeling very much the same, spoke two words. The words were both arrogant and humble at the same time. They proved that the insufferable something or other was still in there, beaten and humbled though he was. They showed that, even in the midst of utter defeat, while suffering the loss of his greatest gift, Ham could never quite let go of the consummate scientist inside. And they were likely the only words that could have held his brother from leaving.

The words he spoke were, "I accept."

Cal stopped. He knew there would be more. Knew the speech that must surely follow could well be the concession he had waited for most of his life. Knew that such a concession could only be meaningful if it came from the smug, arrogant, careless scientist rather than the broken and thoughtful man that had confessed before him. His first two words proved to Cal, beyond doubt, that the words which would follow would come from the man who had wronged him, not some broken shell from whom the words would be meaningless.

Cal could only repeat. "You accept?"

And Ham conceded.

"I accept the premise of your argument. I accept that I have spent my life focusing on my work, and in doing so have neglected my family. I accept that I have allowed my pursuit of knowledge to eclipse the needs of those around me. I accept that I have put knowledge before wisdom. I accept that, contrary to my deep commitment to logic and reason, I have harbored an almost superstitious belief that even the slightest waver from that commitment would turn my life into one not worth living. I accept I had no qualms of sacrificing the world before my ambitions to understand it.

"I do not say that I have changed. Or that I will change. Although I suspect that both are now sadly inevitable. I do accept that the person

I have been was and is a choice. I accept that the choice has not been altogether successful, if not entirely harmful. It would be wrong to say I am sorry. I cannot be. To be sorry is to desire change. I do not desire change. Were my gifts restored to me, I have no doubt I would soon become, once again, the monster of reason that you accuse me of being.

"But a monster, perhaps, with some small amount of wisdom, some speck of self-awareness not previously afforded him. A monster who accepts that he has wronged you. Has wronged others. A monster who will, at least, no longer do such wrong with his eyes averted."

Hammond Forsyth raised himself up and put out his hand. His brother took it warmly. It was not the embrace that he so deeply desired, but it was honest, and was all the more meaningful for being so.

And together, they began the natural next leg of their day's journey, the long walk to their parents' final resting place.

I have been a demon. A demon from the woods. A demon intent on destroying the only woman who could recognize me for the manifestation of evil intent that I was. The experience was, without doubt, unsettling. I had come to the woman with good intentions, a samaritan interested in her well being. The woman had been plagued by demons and wished only for them to leave her alone. She was lost, confused, standing by the side of the road. I had come to help, but was recognized for what I truly was, a demon from the woods.

Until that time, I did not know I was a demon. Perhaps none of us ever know. Perhaps we demons walk the earth, completely unaware of our true nature, fully embracing the masks we have built for ourselves, the shell we have created to keep the monsters inside at bay. Usually, we are fairly good at hiding our true selves. There will always be those, however, who recognize us on sight, and fail not to name us for what we are. They do not wish us to be demons, do not choose to name us. Such things are out of their control. They merely suffer from true sight, from the vision the rest of us lack, or at least, dare not embrace.

It is not without sympathy, then, that I relate the madness that inevitably took hold of Greta Forsyth.

When we last left Greta, she was heading toward home, fearful for the safety of her children. As she walked the short blocks from the church to her house, her children were indeed safe in all respects but one: that their mother was approaching.

Jessi is in her room, door closed, headphones deep, death metal swallowing her body. Had she the opportunity to live a long life, she would eventually have understood the feelings now sucking her into a pit of depression. She would have seen the unwarranted but nevertheless pervasive guilt over her father's absence as the cause for her dark mood. Would have recognized that the spiral of depression she was now falling into was no more than any child of divorce suffers, that the tension between her parents was not her fault, could not be. That things would get better.

Sadly, she will not live a long life. She will hardly live a short life. She will not, in fact, live to see the moonrise.

Clyde, Jessi's younger brother, is in his own room playing a video game. He is, more or less, oblivious of his father's absence, of anything amiss in his family relations, of anything at all. The world had gone mad, that was true. But school was on hiatus, his friends were still online, and his dad, on a business trip or whatever, wasn't going to be bothering him about cleaning his room tonight. It was not so much that life was good as that life just continued on.

Whatever adventure awaits him, however, is destined to remain in dreams. His potential in life must remain just that. Potential. All that he *could* be is now moot. His future is *now*, shrinking to a tiny dot, soon to be obliterated altogether.

Greta opens the front door, ready to protect her children at all costs.

At all costs.

Jessi first. Greta knocks upon her daughter's bedroom door but does not wait for permission to enter. Jessi, supine, her head elevated by the few inches of cushion provided by her pillow, stares at the ceiling. Greta scans the room carefully. There are cracks in the floor where none have been before, saturated with tiny bugs making their way in. Greta knows that demons are attempting to work their way in, but the

goodness of her daughter has provided a resilient shield that slows their progress.

Greta takes her daughter by the wrist and drags her from the room.

"We're going," she says.

Her daughter resists. "Let go of me."

Greta does not. "Get in the car," she says, panic riding up into her voice in spite of all her attempts to subdue it. Jessi has seen this panic before and does not resist. This is not a battle she can win. Not today.

As they pass Clyde's room, Greta hears herself say, "Clyde. We're leaving. Get in the car."

His door is locked, but after a series of screams and poundings of her fist upon his door, the thirteen year old boy emerges, hand held game held in his hand, cord rising to his ears. Within moments all three are in the car, and Greta has started the engine.

"Where are we *going*?" Jessi asks again, but Greta is too preoccupied to answer. The garage has disappeared, and hellish green flames rise up from what was formerly the cement floor. She attempts to close the car windows, but they do not work. Ahead of her, she sees a beacon of light, a gate of sorts that appears to be her only hope.

"Stay here," she tells the children, and walks off on a narrow precipice in search of her family's salvation. Her children, sitting in the car, eyes focused on tiny screens, heads filled with the everyday sounds that have always created a shield of safety, have no idea what their mother has said. She's always forgetting something and running back into house. What else is new?

Oblivious of their own danger, they sit and wait.

Searching for the door, Greta crawls underneath a stair she believes to be a cave, and hunches down, waiting for the flame-spouting demon not four feet from her to disappear of its own volition. It does not.

As carbon monoxide fills the garage, Greta and her family become sleepy. By the time the fuel tank is exhausted, they will have left this world for the next, only their bodies remaining in the hive of madness their world had become.

Scherzo found herself once again in her father's house, this time with Benson Quartermaster in tow. Her younger brother, a monster at the age of, well, let's call it seventeen to have the best understanding of his attitude. To put it another way, he is of an age when men know all there is to know, and are certain that the rest of the world has forgotten. It is, we hope, the last moment in life when we are sure enough of ourselves to comfortably look at the world with disdain, as we *tell it like it is*. This lad of whom we speak was dominating the dinner conversation with his thoughts on what was wrong with the world, a world he had as yet hardly come to know.

"I'm sorry, what? Busy? What do *we* care if they're busy? We walk into some guy's life..."

"Or girl."

"Whatever, Mom. You know what I mean."

"Well *say* it, then," Scherzo's mother insisted.

"Fine. We walk into some guy or girl's life, ok, and offer them the gift of a lifetime. We don't *have* to do this. We are not *required* to do this. And yet we do. We offer them this incredible gift, a gift with which they can finally *do* something with those bizarre brains, those otherwise *useless* brains. I mean, here's this guy, ok, or girl, and he's, or she's, or, ok, Mom, let's just assume it's a guy I'm talking about, ok? So here's this guy, using like *none* of his brain. I walk in and I'm like, dude, here's the thing you've been waiting for all of your life. Here's the key to unlock the treasure in your head. Use it. It'll make you feel good. It'll make your friends feel good. It might even make the *world* feel good.

"And he does, right? He uses it. He *accepts* my gift. And then what? Then he says he's busy or whatever and locks the brain back up and shovels coal or counts people's money or bosses people around or sits around watching tv all day or whatever crap he was doing before I blessed him, like none of it even happened. And then he gets bored or whatever and suddenly he expects me to come back. To be there waiting for him when he finally bothers to play again.

"Except, see, I say, to hell with him. Why should I stick around and wait for him to bother to be interested? Why shouldn't I just go find

someone else? That's all I'm saying. If he won't bother to trust me, if he's going to lock himself up *voluntarily*, then he doesn't *deserve* me. I mean, it's *obvious*, right?"

For a moment, there was no answer. His mother and father knew better than to bait him. On another day, his sister might have responded, might have taken up an opposing viewpoint that she did not share, just for the joy of putting her brother down. Today, however, his words only served to salt an already festering wound, so she sat in pain, not daring to make it worse.

The opening was left, then, for Benson to comment. The former Benson, the huckster con man who had relied on the art of bullshit to carry him through life, would have sized up the scene, the strange new land, the strange new people, would have found what they were really looking for but dared not expect, and given them hope of getting it. That Benson would have easily gained the confidence of the room, even as a stranger, and worked it for his own ends. That Benson, however, was dead. The man that remained had neither desire to win nor fear of losing. He merely existed. With no desire and no agenda, he merely listened to the young man speak and took his questions seriously. It was with such an attitude that Benson Quartermaster filled the silence.

"Why give us anything at all?"

It was, of course, the beginning and end of their philosophy. The first question a curious muse asked in school, and the question the grown ones struggled with all of their lives. He might as well have asked the boy to tell him the meaning of life.

It was the boy's mother who spoke next, a smile growing on her face. "A fine question Mr. Quartermaster. Perhaps Leap can answer that."

"Cause we're a generous people, BQ. That's why," replied the boy. "We give because we *can*. Because what is the point of having a gift and not sharing it? I guess this might be hard for a human to understand..."

"Leap! This man is our guest."

"Sorry, Mom. Sorry, BQ. Didn't mean to offend, ok? I was just trying to put in terms that...ok, I guess it's like feeding your dog or whatever.

You don't do it because you *have* to. You do it because you *want* to. And because the dog is a little nicer to be around when it's been fed."

Benson answered. Another man might have spoken with sarcasm, or with the dark tones of self-assured argument. Benson, however, truly wanted to understand, and so continued the analogy.

"I see. You feed the dog from your generosity. Then the dog chases a squirrel, gets lost, and tries to live as a wild dog again, but it has been spoiled by your taming, and can never quite forget how nice it was to live in the house and be fed. Finally, it finds its way back to your doorstep, and asks again for your nice food. Is it at this point that the dog no longer deserves your generosity?"

Scherzo's parents smiled. Leap furrowed his brow, not sure how to respond. Scherzo herself leaned her head on Benson's shoulder. She had much to say, and no words to say it. She felt that her own generosity had escaped her, that she had come to see her gifts as hers to bestow, rather than the world's to receive. She saw the worst part of herself in her little brother, felt sure he would someday grow up and laugh at the hypocrisy of youth. She felt, for the first time, that it was time to grow up, to finish what she started, to give for love and not for need.

When she finally spoke, when she broke into the dinner table conversation it was to say that she had been wrong. To say that she was ready to make up for her selfish choice. That she was ready to forgive. That she and her friend were leaving now. That she had work to do. She spoke but one word, and that to the air.

"Ok."

And with empty Benson Quartermaster by her side, she went out to seek her man.

See Calumet and Hammond Forsyth sitting on a stone bench, a long stone's throw from the graves of their parents. Here and there throughout the death park are ghostly apparitions, human forms of inconstant shape, struggling to hold their form. Cal is not frightened of those spirits, though an odd foreboding shudders through him. Perhaps the shudder is more the fear of madness than of the visions it brings. Not fear of the symptoms that oppress his mind, but of the disease.

See his mother, or the spirit of his mother, or some fog like apparition of his mother, strolling a lackadaisical winding path, avoiding headstones and other spirits, coming toward her two sons not by the shortest route, but by the least obstructed one. See her stand before them, kneel, take their hands, Cal's right and Ham's left. Her hands are warm and not quite solid. Their own hands sink into hers, as if holding and being held in the same instant. Their hands slide through the top layers of hers, but never fully through. The warmth that envelops their hands flows through their entire bodies.

Cal does not resent sharing this moment with his brother.

He had resented Ham for so long. Resented him for being dismissive. For ignoring him. For not even noticing him. He knew that now. Cal had told himself he resented his brother for abandoning their parents. For treating them as if they were just two more insignificant ants. He had told himself that the anger he felt toward Ham was in defense of his mother and father. That they needed someone to stand up for them. That if not Calumet Forsyth, inferior brother, then whom?

And yet her hand, his mother's hand, holds Ham's as well as his own, not in forgiveness but in love. She speaks no words, but both men know that she holds no resentment, no anger. She does only as a mother must. Share love for her children. This Cal knows. This he accepts. He has given over his own anger, and is not surprised to find that his mother has never held any. The indignation has been Cal's alone. His burden.

Forgiveness, however, there is. Through his own hand Cal feels his mother's grace. Absolution of his sin. The sin of hating his brother when he should have loved him. The sin of thinking more of himself than of his family. The sin of not caring *why* his brother hurt him, only *that* he hurt him. The sin of imagining his father and mother could feel the same. The sin of pride.

Feel Calumet Forsyth's sincere contrition.

See his father standing behind his mother, hands on her shoulders as she kneels. See a different pride, one of watching his children accomplish at long last what he had always wished for them. That his sons might become men by daring to do whatever they feared most. They had dared, and he could rest in peace.

See the two brothers, side by side, on a bench before the final resting place of their mother and father, of their former neighbors and their families. Watch them see the world as they had never before. Know that, though madness has surely taken hold of their minds, it is no longer the torture they have feared, that seemed so frightening in others.

Darkness falls, and Cal is reminded of the night Greta sent him away, sitting in the cold night before the skate park, reliving the sadness of his youth. This time, however, he is free of that burden, is warmed by love, is ready to go home.

How late it is when the strange voice behind him breaks the night's silence he cannot say.

This.

The bench on which Hammond and Calumet Forsyth sit was made from stone quarried not twenty miles distant from the cemetery in which it stood. The stone had been intended for the church itself, just beyond, but was deemed to be of an inferior quality and hence too great a risk to use as the foundation for a church meant to stand beyond the years of the men who built it. The stone was left where it had been hauled, forgotten in the woods abutting the church, its unsightly mass hidden from the divine beauty of the church.

The stone in the woods became a favorite play spot for young boys, eager to explore the woods and have imaginary adventures. After dark, it became the haunt of their elder brothers looking for a place to share their fathers' bottles of whiskey unmolested. After the cemetery began to encroach, however, the stone lost its luster, so to speak, being now, as it were, in the midst of hallowed ground. The woods became marked as haunted and were left to the ghosts. The stone fell out of use, and became grown over with weeds and ivy. Mushrooms bloomed in the dark shadows where portions of the stone did not quite meet the ground beneath.

On a summer night between the wars, two young lovers looking for a romantic spot where they might not be observed, dared to wander into the haunted woods, and rested themselves upon the long abandoned stone. The ivy made the stone to a soft bed, and under the drips

of moonlight through the trees, the young lovers lay upon the flowered stone. Spotted with pale moonlight, they bared themselves and embraced, taking the final leap from childhood together.

By the time the next war had concluded, the fruit of this coupling had lost his father to patriotic heroism in the Pacific theater, and travelled with his mother to Chicago, where she had found work as a seamstress. The boy studied hard, built upon his successes, and proved a sturdy member of the Army Corps of Engineers, to which he dedicated his career. He married and fathered three children, the youngest of which he named, not for himself, but for his thrice decorated father, Mathew Cornelius Cantilever.

Within months of the birth of this only son, the church cemetery in Indiana Harbor was expanded. Space in the churchyard had run out, but the congregants desiring to lie within it did not. With the church now hemmed in on three sides, there was nothing for it but to invade the area on the fourth, known locally as the haunted woods. Upon discovering the stone, a local artisan volunteered to turn it into a bench, on the very spot upon which it was found. The same spot in which Mathew Cornelius Cantilever II had been conceived.

The third of that name would, as we know, go on to murder his wife in an act of mercy before ending his own life, quite literally with a bang.

Here we go, indeed.

The voice heard by Calumet Forsyth was not the same as that heard by his brother Hammond. Of what Cal experienced we shall hear soon enough. For now, let us leave him behind, and spend our time wandering the wilderness of the mind with Ham.

He finds himself he knows not where, lying on his back in the darkness, surely still somewhere within the confines of the cemetery. There are those, of course, who would shrink from such a situation, who might scream or run or do what they could to be anywhere but a dark graveyard filled with semi-corporeal spirits. Ham hardly noticed. Like his moments of peace on the sidewalk, he had given himself over to loss and was floating on a sea of acceptance. He needed to be floating *within*

it, neutrally buoyant, but had not yet completely surrendered. Not just yet.

Whether he saw the woman from whom the voice emanated is unknown. Must be unknown. Perhaps he had always seen her, perhaps he had never seen her. It matters not. It matters only that he had always *known* her, and that the voice he heard was that of an old friend. Perhaps his oldest.

She said, "You failed me."

He said, "I know."

She said, "I risked everything. I gave you everything you ever wanted. The key to the universes. I showed you the light you had been begging for all of your life. I broke the only rule that mattered to my people. For you."

He said, "I know."

She said, "You refused my gift. Turned away from me. Betrayed me. Locked me out of your mind. Refused to acknowledge me. Everything you are, you are because of me. Everything you have ever dreamed, you have dreamed because of me. Every thought, every inspiration, every leap of faith has been because of me."

He said, "I know."

She was far angrier, more aggressive than she meant to be. She had meant to be forgiving, to inspire contrition, to find a gentle reconciliation. She had meant to put it all behind her. She failed. Her worser self came out. She found herself wanting him to beg forgiveness, rather than to beg forgiveness of him. Against her will, she was rubbing salt in his wounds when she should have been healing them.

Before her, this broken man that only she could fix lay in wait for another kick.

She wanted to be better than that. She wanted to say sometimes people make mistakes. To say the gift was too great for any man. That she overreacted. That it was all her fault. She wanted to say *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*. She wanted to say *please take me back*.

She said, "Why?"

Like a child afraid of his own feelings, he wanted to say, "*I don't know*." He knew her well enough, however, to know this would never

do. He had been searching the heart he never knew he had since she had left him, had been searching for just the answer she was looking for, and knew it well. He wasn't proud of the answer, but that changed nothing. Still staring at the dark sky above the cemetery, he confessed.

He said, "I saw it in an instant. I cannot tell you what it was, that is gone, but I can tell you I was afraid. I saw myself gone mad with the knowledge I had so long desired and dared not look. I was sure it would destroy me, destroy everything I had worked for. It was too much. I was not ready."

She said, "Craven."

He said, "Yes."

She did not speak.

He said, "What man can say what courage he will find when he needs it most? We are not offered the choice of courage against cowardice. That would be too easy. We are asked to balance courage against wisdom. Perhaps this choice I make is courageous, man thinks, but it will end my life or leave me wounded. Perhaps the better choice is to give way in the battle to later win the war. Perhaps the courageous choice leaves many dead, and the wise choice leads to peace. Is the wise choice cowardly, man asks, just because it saves my skin? It is not always easy to know. Or maybe we just tell ourselves that so we can live with ourselves."

He said, "I was craven. Doubt not. But when I ran from you, I did not see it as cowardice. I saw it as the only rational choice. The wise choice. I did not think my mind could survive the knowledge you showed me. What good could such awareness be without a sane mind to decipher it."

He said, "At least that is what I told myself. I know now I was just afraid."

She said, "I know."

She said, "I know because I was afraid, too. I was afraid I had gone too far. That I had used you for my own selfish reasons. That your moment of weakness was a judgment on my life. That you never needed me. That I was meaningless."

He said, "Forgive me."

She said, "I already have."

And the vision tore through Hammond Forsyth's mind. He saw the unending swirl of worlds wrapping around each other, fighting for space, looking for the small breaks in the others' shells through which to break through and feel the freedom of endless space. He saw the structure of those shells in minute detail, what held them together, what kept them apart. He saw the nature of all that is at the most basic level, and knew how to manipulate it. He saw that he could, with little effort, tear apart the shells that divided the universes, the worlds, the dimensions, and bring all that is into chaos.

This time he did not fear. This time he knew that such knowledge must not necessarily lead him to madness. This time, he knew he could know without acting. He felt sated at last, and smiled in satisfaction.

Let us enjoy this moment. Let us see the satisfied Dr. Forsyth, his inspiration by his side, the joy of achievement in his soul, pride in his heart. Let us be happy and quiet and at peace. Let us walk in the sunshine of a cool summer day, rest in the shade of a tree under blue sky, nothing to do. Dawdle. The moment will not last long. A storm is coming.

Hammond Forsyth closed his eyes. Fear crept upon him.

He said, "I did not know what I was doing. I was...I was fumbling...trial and error....I knew there was something...something great, and I could not...but I did. I found the...I've...I've ruined everything. My god, I have...what have I done?"

She said, "I know."

By the time Cal realized his brother was gone, his spot had already been filled by a man Cal had never met. It was not so much that the man had crept up behind Cal as sidled up, as if he had been wandering and just *happened* upon him. The man's voice, behind what Cal thought was both Ham and himself, was, for being in the midst of the classical horror show that was a witching hour cemetery filled with visible specters, unusually relaxed. It betrayed no signs of the fear Cal would have expected from a visitor to that strange place.

"Mind if I sit down?" It asked.

He was already sitting when Cal realized the space he took up had been absented by his brother.

"It's alright. He'll be back," he said, not a worry to be found. Or at least, the confidence he exuded was great, and Cal could sense not the slightest shred of worry or suspicion about him. He had, Cal knew, no doubt of his brother's return. Because of that, neither did Cal.

"Where has he gone?"

The stranger was silent for awhile, as if considering the possibilities. "Hard to say."

"But he'll come back," Cal suggested, more a question than a statement of fact.

"Yes. He'll be back." Once again his surety filled Cal with confidence. Of course he would be back. The stranger had said so. Who was Cal to doubt him?

They sat together in silence, watching the images of death float about them and through the cemetery. Cal's mother and father had gone their way. Now Cal was a guest at a convention of his neighbors, of the ancestors of his neighbors, of long forgotten travelers who had tired of their journey and made this city east of the city their home.

By the time Cal realized he had not asked the man his name, he had become embarrassed for not already having done so. It seemed too late. Cal had already accepted him, and to question him now seemed intrusive. He felt he would have to simply accept him as a friend and sit quietly in his presence. Cal had no doubt the stranger sensed these thoughts, for as they rose to a fervor in his mind, as Cal sunk into what his wife often called the vortex of *do/not do*, the stranger answered Cal's question for him.

"My name is Benson Quartermaster. Or at least it used to be. I suppose it still is. Hmmm. Well, it is the only name I have ever known, anyway, so we will leave it at that. Benson Quartermaster. I have come here in the company of an unusual woman to whom I, perhaps, owe my life, and who has been, as I understand it, a long time companion of the man formerly occupying this space. She has taken him off for a private conference during which I have respectfully remained apart."

"His girlfriend? The one who left him?"

"Well," the stranger said thoughtfully, "Girlfriend does not sound quite right. Let us call her his love."

They sat quietly for a while.

Cal thought of his own love, his dear Greta. A montage of beautiful memories wafted across his mind. Hiking along side her in the Adirondacks, the sunlight falling through the trees, both of them young and in love. Sitting on the floor of their too small apartment, playing some long forgotten game with Jessi, pieces strewn about the rug, Greta trying to keep Clyde from eating them, laughter all around. A quiet night of lovemaking after the kids were asleep, holding each other through the night.

And he knew he was nothing without her.

Thoughts of Anne crept in. Anne whom he had never kissed, but about whom he nevertheless felt strong pangs of guilt each time her picture invaded his mind. There were times, he knew, when thoughts of her would arouse in him mixed sensations of love and desire, but he felt no such emotions now. Now she was merely an invader of purer thoughts, thoughts of true love, of regret, of hope.

And he wondered if he could go back. If Greta would let him return. If life could be as it was before.

He knew in his heart, however, that he could not. Not now.

However unfounded Greta's suspicions of his infidelity had been, he was now kept from home for a far more persuasive reason. He was a danger to everyone he might come in contact with, including his family. He sat in a graveyard of ghosts. He had been in the presence of his long dead parents. He was speaking with a mind-reading stranger in the darkness, the hour of witches past. He had spent the day impossibly with his brother, no doubt a creation of his far gone mind. There could no longer be any doubt. Calumet Forsyth had gone stark, though admittedly not raving, mad. He could never return.

Cal's mind went to his last days with Greta. The fear. The strange questions repeated again and again. In his waking dream Greta transformed from the love of his life to an enemy interrogator, a light shining in his eye as she landed the questions before him over and over again.

He heard them as if she were standing before him in the darkness, the proverbial bad cop determined to get her man.

"Where is the North Pole, you scum?" Her face just behind the interrogation lamp.

"How big is an antelope? Don't tell me you don't know." Now she's leaning on the desk, her face in his.

"Is a lemon drop sweet or sour?" Then at the top of her voice, "Answer me, scumbag!"

Cal shakes his head. She doesn't stop. "Why do birds fly south? Why? Why!"

He crumbles under the pressure, his head down on the interrogation desk.

She takes a bottle of water and smashes it on the desk, leaving it half broken in her hand, shards threatening. "What color is this? I said what color is this?!"

Cal is crying.

"How big is heaven?" Her voice calms, becomes almost soothing. "Well? Do I stutter?"

"Alright," she says. "Last chance or you're going down for good."

Cal lifts his head in hope, but he knows what is coming. A question he has no hope of answering.

"What is the meaning of life?"

And he is silent.

He is buried underneath the desk she has just overturned in anger. She has walked out, and he cannot escape from under his burden.

Cal was woken from his vision by the laughter of Benson Quartermaster. Cal looked at him, and Benson turned to him, laying a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"I am sorry, my friend," he said. "I have done you a great disservice."

And he laughed again.

"What is it?" Cal asked.

Benson Quartermaster just shook his head. "Something from another life," he said.

And then, almost in a dream, he said, "When I was a boy, I did not see my mother much. She worked three jobs to pay the rent on a room not fit for the rats we shared it with, and my father was gone before I was born. The boys in the neighborhood used to give me hell for my...well...I never really fit in, I guess, even as a kid. By the time I was five, I was making my own dinner, such as it was, and putting myself to sleep.

"My mother used to come home late, thinking I was already asleep, tuck me in, pet my forehead, and read me a poem. It was always the same poem. Maybe something her own mother used to read to her. It did not matter. What mattered was the sound of her voice, this moment we shared, our one private space together each day. All my life it kept me going. All my life, it was the only thing that gave me hope. Until the miracle, that is."

He laughed again. Then he closed his eyes, smile still on his face, and began to recite from memory.

*There is a place atop the world
As north as you can go
Where antelopes as big as trees
Play gaily in the snow.
The lemon drops grow wild about,
Are neither sweet nor sour,
But fill your mouth with joy as like
The gentle daisy flower.
The summer sun glows all the year
And birds do never dread
The winter wind to waken them
From on their summer bed.
The water is as clear as if
It isn't even there.
The sky above so big you could
Almost fit heaven there.
This place was built for you, my child
Atop this hidden peak.
It is your journey's end, someday,*

If only you will seek.

"And then one day," the stranger continued, "I threw it away. It was the great tragedy of my life. My life was full of tragedy, full of pain, full of disappointment. It seems hardly fair to choose one moment above the rest as the linchpin of my downfall. And yet, I cannot think of one other moment, one other action that was a greater betrayal to myself, to whatever goodness I had inside."

Cal felt as if this man spoke inside a dream. Cal's dream. He sat upon a bench in the darkest corner of the night, madness invading his mind, the spirits mostly gone but still floating in and out of his vision as if to remind him that they were still present. The world was underwater, the man's voice muffled. He spoke and Cal knew the words, not because he could hear them, but only because he *understood* them. As if he knew the words before the man spoke them, but that it was only upon speaking them that Cal allowed himself to accept them.

"The poem was all I had of my mother. All I had of my true life. Somehow, I knew that I could do anything, be as terrible as I could imagine. Lie, cheat, steal, gain the trust of strangers only to betray them. Live my life by a code that could only destroy friendships. Kill trust, turn everyone I encountered to a cynic. All of these things I could do, all of these things I could be, and still, still there would be hope. The poem assured me that. My mother's love protected me."

He was silent for a moment. A ghost sat down before them, studying them before sliding beneath their bench and back into the shadows of shadows.

"I gave it up, though. In a moment of, I know not what to call it. Weakness? Arrogance? Hubris? I suppose it is all the same. I told myself that this sacred text was just...just words. That it had no true meaning. That if it were to serve me for some selfish purpose, what could it matter? I had lost *faith*."

He turned to Cal and put his hand back on his shoulder.

"I created a study that proved you could determine if a man was insane. Created. Invented. Pretended. It was just a con. A scheme. I ran off with the grant money and never showed my face near that university

again. Just one con among many that took me through life. Except. Except this one was made with the only piece of integrity I ever had. I sold out my mother to make a few bucks, and the sale thrust me into the abyss.

"I spent the rest of my life trying to crawl out, but it took *her* to save me."

He stood up and faced away from Cal.

"But she did not pull me out. She merely took away the abyss."

He turned toward Cal, shrugged his shoulders and sat down again. Another laugh.

"It is hard to believe that thing is still around. Where did you hear those questions, anyway?"

Cal was so deep into the dream, he did not know how to answer. Even as the words filled his mind, he could not make his mouth work. He was, quite literally, speechless. He thought of Greta, of his children, of the madness he had seen before leaving home, the madness he had seen since. He relived the catechisms Greta had pummeled him with and the fear that had accompanied them. His mouth never opened, but Benson Quartermaster heard every word.

When Benson spoke, it was with the words Cal knew must come, but which he feared more than any. He said, "It is time you went home."

Cal's mouth still struggling, he said something like, "But my brother..." Perhaps the thought never left his mind. Who can say? Of Benson's reply, however, we have no doubt.

"He is in good hands. Worry not."

And through the fog that life had become, with Benson Quartermaster in tow, Cal made his way home.

At this point, the world as we know it has more or less lost its proverbial mind. Police, military, secret government security organizations the world over, all are helpless in the midst of madness creeping through their ranks. Men see what cannot be, are attacked by creatures they cannot touch, disappear into chasms so deep they cannot fathom. Insanity abounds.

Where madness is the cause, death is the symptom. Men kill men to save them from themselves, to protect them from demons that cannot be fought, to spare them from visions worse than death.

Some are catatonic, frozen with fear and indecision, left to perish of neglect.

Some throw themselves determinably into dimensions that cannot possibly support them.

Some give themselves over to demons intent on their destruction, their bodies lifeless with no apparent cause, save the evidence seen by those with the new vision.

If chaos does not yet reign over the earth, it is only that she has not completed her conquest just yet. She spreads her black tentacles around the globe, leaving only the small patches between in light, soon to be obscured by her unstoppable growth.

The home to mankind is devastated, and a new world order emerges.

What Is the Meaning of Life?

How he found himself once again walking the streets of our still unnamed and vaguely European town, Hammond Forsyth did not know. In a moment of thought that would previously have been unthinkable for him, he did not desire to know. He thought only of the curiously deserted streets, unusual for this time of day, now late morning. The mystery of the empty town nudged his brain as he made his way, sure of purpose, to his place of work. The mystery of his sudden appearance in that place did not.

As he came into the third floor below ground, a level notorious for its high security clearance, he passed a technician cowering in a corner behind a large piece of equipment. The man shouted a whisper to Ham, his wispy voice never rising into the sure tones of speech for as loud as his words were.

"For godssake, man, *hide* yourself! Can't you see it's coming!"

Ham turned around and searched the corridor, unable to see anything worth his observation. Yes, there was a large, hairy, and undoubtedly alien primate hurtling itself down the hall at a breakneck pace, but the creature surely had no interest in a couple of scientists minding their own business. He shrugged at the cowering technician and continued on his way, unsurprised when the creature brushed past him in search of, well, whatever it is such a creature might roam an alien dimension in search of.

Ham walked with an assured pace down to the terminal where he could do the most good. He entered his security clearance and began diving deep into the program. He was clear of mind and had no doubt but to the road ahead. He would clear the error he had made in the nightmarish confusion that had been the loss of his muse, and repair the rip he had unwittingly created between universes, between the existences he had formerly believed were permanently separated by unchangeable law.

Easy.

He found the area of the program that had been affected, changed a few numbers, and drove the experimental machinery that took up the

vast majority of the complex to undo the error of a lifetime. Everything lined up. Everything acted as it should. Everything appeared to be in working order.

Easy.

Relieved, proud, and perhaps just a little sheepish, he walked toward the exit, grateful that he had averted disaster.

He was, alas, too late.

Some sort of green plasma lightning tore across his path, ripping the floor apart and allowing the creature's mates to crawl up from the blackness below. To his left, he could see the interior of what could only be massive atomic particles, seen as if from within. Around his legs he was hugged by hand sized insects craving the warmth of human flesh.

Ham knew immediately that his heroic effort had failed, and falling from mild euphoria to deep depression, walked dejectedly out of the facility to commune with his thoughts in the empty streets.

He was too late. His inspiration had come back, but not soon enough. The laws of physics wait for no man, for no muse. He was clear of mind, but even a mind such as his was not enough to save the world. The worlds.

It was over.

Overwhelmed, exhausted, he mindlessly took himself to his apartment, to the bed he used hardly two hours a night, for a rest he thought might last a lifetime. Along the way he saw sights another man might attribute to madness, but which Hammond Forsyth knew without doubt to be simply a reality he had not known before. He was honored to witness such a sight, and he did not fear it. For Hammond, the unprecedented events happening all around him were no more than puzzles to be studied, analyzed and cataloged. There was much to learn, and he had no doubt the study could take him the rest of his life.

But he was tired.

He would begin tomorrow.

He walked into the empty foyer, up his empty stairs, and into his empty room where the telephone was ringing. A telephone that to his knowledge had never rung before.

He picked up the receiver with an incautious, "Hello?"

"Hello," a stranger spoke. "There is a woman standing behind you. Please put her on the phone."

Ham turned around to see a woman he had never seen before. A woman he had known all of his life. And when she smiled at him, he knew how grateful he was that she had deigned to stay with him after all.

"It's for you," Ham said, and handed the phone to Scherzo.

Out of the receiver came a voice she knew well, but louder, angrier and less forgiving than she had ever known it to be. "Home. Now."

And with two words, she finished the conversation and left to go where she would surely face the punishment of her life.

"Yes, Daddy."

This.

The head of the council that banished Scherzo was not in favor of doing so. He offered the lone dissenting voice tempered with the wisdom that can only come from lifetimes spent communing with the universe. That he was called from his perch above a valley, where he had sat at peace for a thousand years for what could only be considered political reasons, did not escape him. The result of the so called trial merely served to reinforce his distaste for the whole affair. He was above such petty grievances now and hardly saw them as worth the effort. Nevertheless, he had sworn an oath for life, and when he was called upon to serve, serve he must.

The poor girl had made an error, of course. An egregious one. She had violated more than one of her own oaths and must be disciplined accordingly. Of that there could be no question. But to say her crime was greater than all others, to say that she was the greatest criminal in all of history was going a bit far, thank you very much. To imagine that the nature of the universes could remain hidden forever showed a magnitude of hubris unfathomable for any other peoples in the whole of existence. All knowledge is inevitable. All change. All things.

This he had come to learn on his perch above the valley.

He had been outvoted, of course. And saddened. He knew the girl was just another drip in the unthinkable whole that is all there is, and he was prepared to forget her as one forgets a bird that has flown beyond

the horizon. At the same time, however, he felt that he had something to say. Something of his wisdom was called forth by this travesty of justice. He did not expect his words to change the council's decision. That was lunacy. He did, however, hold hope that his words might inspire.

Such is the nature of a muse.

His dissenting opinion, read before the full council for the record, began thus.

"How do we assess the value of our people? Is it by the accomplishments we ourselves make, or by those we inspire? By the music that we make, or the music made for us? By the art we make, or the art that is made because of us? By the changes we make in the worlds, or the changes made in our names?

"The answers are, of course, obvious, though worth remembering. You will forgive my asking them rhetorically, but I come of a different age, and I'm afraid my techniques of inspiration are nostalgic tools to which I cling, relics of a time in which I made mistakes I now know to be as great as those of this poor girl whom you condemn.

"This catechism that was once a required lesson for every school-girl has now, apparently, fallen into disuse. Apparently, we no longer care to train our children that it does not matter *what* we do, only *how* we do. Not achievement that matters but inspiration. Not the end but the *means*. Not measurable metrics, but unbounded joy. Oh when did we lose our faith!

"Today a girl stands condemned for sharing her legacy. *Our* legacy. With a joy that can only come from tickling a mind and stirring a soul, she danced in the heart of a man and brought him to epiphany. She sparked, kindled, and fueled. She dripped, flowed, and flooded. She blew, stormed, and galed. She acted not with maturity but with frivolity. Not with policy but with pleasure. Embraced not sensibility but serendipity. Can there be greater joy? Can there be greater purpose?

"She has reminded all of us of why we are here. Of our destiny.

"And yet she is condemned. Why?

"Because she dared to take us at our word. Because she dared to inspire without concerning herself with the consequences. Because she let herself be carried away with her work. *Our* work.

"She was sloppy, yes. She became attached to her subject, yes. She walked away when things got hard, yes. All true. For these offenses she is guilty. For the offense of immaturity. For the offense of folly. For the offense of youth.

"But criminal? Never. Never will I condemn one of our kind for reminding us what it is to act with love. Never will I condemn a muse for following her heart. And never will I condemn this girl for succumbing to the sin of pride. Our child has stumbled. We should help her up, not kick her to the curb.

"This girl is banished for one reason. We have become afraid. We have censored ourselves. Held ourselves back. We have told ourselves that we are mature, that we have responsibility, that the fate of the worlds is on our shoulders. We have become more fond of rules than of play. We fear death.

"Banishing this girl will not appease gods. It will simply call death forth.

"I did not sit on a mountain for millennia only to fear death now.

"Banish her if you must. She will always be welcome with me."

And with those words, he stood, bowed, and went back to his studies.

Because societies fear. Because change is hard. Because doom is easier to see than a bright new day. Because mobs protect what they have and doubt what they will get. For all the reasons that change in every world is slow, stilted, and saddled with setbacks, Scherzo was banished from her people.

There were many who were persuaded by the old judge, and who stood up for forgiveness. Many was not all, however, and in the end, they were just not enough. The worlds were in chaos, there was nothing to be done, and someone needed to take the blame. Scherzo was obvious. Scherzo was convenient. Scherzo was banished.

Her father was gentle, ultimately. That there were so many who had stood with Scherzo, or at least with the idea of what she had done, held great sway with him. He knew that fear can be generational, and that his instinct to condemn her might only be from the natural

conservatism that comes with age. He gave her some benefit of the doubt, though not without holding some doubt in reserve.

He spoke gentle words, gave sound advice, and with sadness, sent her on her way.

Of the advice he gave her, these are the words she remembered best: "Seek the old man. He is wise, he believes in you, he may help you."

And so she did.

He was waiting for her in his spot above the valley. She sat beside him, humbled and shamed, her pride fled, her passion dampened, and her soul exhausted. She was as after a long cry, when energy is gone and sleep is near, but you are still awake, no tears left to shed. She did not speak. She did not have to. She knew there was nothing she could tell him he did not already know. They sat together in silence for some time.

For days.

For weeks.

For some time.

One day he said, quietly, "Peace is elusive."

The words did not invade the silence of the valley. They flowed with the natural sounds around them, as if coming at the crest of a wave, just when they were expected. Not a surprise but a natural breeze landing in just the right way, at just the right time.

The breeze continued.

"It comes. It goes. One moment you cannot get comfortable, your legs fall asleep, you scratch at the bugs, squint your eyes against the sun. The next moment you have been sitting for a thousand years. Who can say when one will come, and when the other?"

"The world is one. I know this. I have seen this. Long before the barriers came down, I knew the world to be one. But I did not always see it. I *do* not always see it. Still, I have known it to be true. It is the nature of the world to be one. How can it be otherwise?"

He sat, facing his valley with the girl by his side.

They sat in silence for some time.

For weeks.

For months.

For some time.

One day he said, quietly, "Our people have a gift. It is in our nature to share that gift. The gift grows within us and will out. If we hold it back, it pushes against us, fills us with pain. We must give. We must share. We must inspire. Else who are we?"

They sat in silence for some time.

For months.

For years.

For some time.

One day he said, quietly, "It is time. Seek out mankind first, then all peoples. Share the truth, inspire them to believe. To *know*. The world is one. It is not to be feared. It is to be loved. It is not to be fought. It is to be accepted. One does not battle the waves, one flows about them. The river does not run straight, but follows the natural path. Men, too, must not fight the natural order. Inspire them to trust the world, to float downstream, to revel in the joy of what *is*, not fight for the memory of what *should be*.

"Inspire your own people, *our* people, to join you. It is our destiny. It has always been our destiny. The greatest inspiration there has ever been. To see the world not as it was, but as it *is*. And maybe, perhaps, for the right ones, at the right times, to see the world as it *could be*.

"This is your journey. Your punishment. Your path to redemption."

They sat in silence for some time.

For some time.

One day, she said, quietly, "Thank you," kissed the old man on the cheek, and left to seek her destiny.

Scherzo had her work cut out for her, of course. While Ham, with the help of his brother, worked tirelessly to undo, or at least control, the barriers that had formerly protected all of the worlds from each other, Scherzo travelled the increasingly depopulated earth teaching men to accept the impossible they now saw before them as a part of daily life.

She did not preach, did not give lessons. She merely gave what was in her nature to give. She opened men's eyes. Gave them vision.

Inspiration. Epiphany. And the world over, men resigned themselves to their fate. To a new normal. To the real world.

Over time, her brothers and sisters joined her. First it was those who had supported her in her time of trial, but soon enough even her greatest detractors realized that Scherzo's punishment, her mission, was the only way they could save themselves.

How can man be inspired when he cowers in fear?

What is a muse that cannot inspire?

This world of muses came together to save their world, to save the others, and bring forth the dawn of a new era.

Scherzo saw little of Ham, though she visited him from time to time. He was working hard, had embraced the epiphany, and was hard at work on undoing the havoc he had wrought. With brother Cal helping out as best a smart but inexperienced assistant could, he solved the mystery of the barriers between the worlds.

He found that with help from the other sides he could control the barriers. He found that where another world had similar control, together they could bring back the barrier and the former wall that had separated his world and another. In other cases, he could not.

He also found that he could infuse his own world with flavor, a scent of sorts that seemed to keep some of the less desirable creatures at bay. It was not that they were repulsed so much as that they lost interest in exploring the world of man. Like coming upon a musty swamp. It is not that you cannot conquer it if you choose, but why choose?

And together, with Ham working on the science, and Scherzo on the madness, they brought the worlds some semblance of order.

And life went on.

Like many towns, neighborhoods and cities, the village in which Calumet Forsyth had settled down, had raised his children, had called home, held many memorials. All over the world such rituals continued to take place, a way to mourn the dead as people, as individuals, beyond the mass observances for the devastating loss across the world.

When Cal first came home and learned that his wife and children were no more, he wailed at the gods and shook his fists. He fell to his

knees and asked why such misery had been reserved for him. He sought out comfort and found his beloved friend, his not quite lover, was also no more, and his wail broke the heavens.

When he had no more left to wail, he wandered the streets and saw, perhaps for the first time, just how much tragedy the so called plague had wrought. He saw that the gods had not put death on his shoulders alone. Every man, woman and child who had survived, who had managed somehow to embrace the madness, felt as he. Calumet Forsyth was not unique for his grief. He was tragically average. To feel what he felt and know that his pain was the least on earth was a final kick to the gut he could not bear. To commiserate, to mourn with his neighbors was not yet something he had the strength for. He must do something, anything, to avoid facing the loss that now filled the world.

In such a state did he once again search out his brother, committing himself to saving whom he could of those still standing. He found him and served him well.

In time, however, he came back, at last ready to mourn with his neighbors.

And like many towns, neighborhoods and cities, the village in which Calumet Forsyth had settled down, had raised his children, had called home, held many memorials with depressing regularity, to help console each other as they found the strength to face their loss.

Weekly, Cal's former neighbors, what was left of them, gathered to share their stories, to share memories of their loved ones, to mourn, to celebrate, to remember. Like a meeting of recovering alcoholics, the room was filled with people who had found friends in tragedy, who were glad to see each other, but who never forgot the sober importance of why they had come. Such was the meeting that Calumet Forsyth attended at last, welcomed heartily by the regulars who knew how hard it was for him to bear confession for the first time.

He was invited to address the congregation, to speak of his family, to help them live through story. Not without tears he told of meeting his wife, of tickling his children, of *this one time*, not very important but which had always stayed with him, when a spilled drink had wetted the

family altogether, and brought them together with laughter never to be forgotten.

And when he was done remembering the joys, he spoke of harder times. Of fights. Of regrets. He fought back tears until they flowed of their own accord, standing there before neighbors he had never come to know too well, but who were now all that was left of his time there.

Of his final days, he said this.

"Greta thought she held the key to saving our children, our village. She came across a test written by a conman I had the pleasure of meeting not long ago. She believed the test would catch the madness before the madness caught us. The test was a sham. A joke. A bold faced ploy for stealing money from charities and scientists more worthy of the generosity of donors. A con.

"But the questions turned out to be more prescient than she thought. I answered them several times, each time not really understanding what she was asking. Each time fearing that it was she who had succumbed to madness."

Cal took a deep breath. Fought back tears. She was gone now. Jessi and Clyde were gone. His life was gone. And still he stood, daring to start again.

"You all heard them. Her society made sure you did. And yet, what Greta brought to you in fear, I think I can bring back in love. I have thought much of these questions as I travelled, running from the place I belonged, leaving my family to..."

Cal trailed off in the silent room. People shuffled in their seats, waiting to see if he could find the strength to go on. Someone in the back yelled, "Say it brother."

Cal said, "to...to...die. To murder. To tear themselves apart."

He let out a long sigh.

"So here it is.

"The North Pole is where hope lies.

"An antelope is a wise old creature, as big as the mind and as small as a child.

"Lemon drops taste of the sweet joys of life, meaningless without sour trials.

"Birds fly south with hope, to chase their dream.

"There is nothing to see without man's eyes. Nothing to hear. Nothing to feel, but by man.

"Heaven is the size of your love.

"And life. The meaning of life..."

The room was now completely hushed. No one dared to lay down a coffee cup, not even to lift one to the lips. An overhead fan whirred as Cal's neighbors, his self-professed brothers and sisters leaned forward in their chairs to hear him finish.

Cal looked about the room, not sure if he should dare.

Weeks later, when he was once again working with his brother, he wondered if he had said the right thing.

Cal had worked hard to put his grief behind him. Worked hard with Ham to undo the kind of damage that can only be made by genius. He was beginning to hide away the realities no one could accept. At the same time, the world was beginning to accept the realities and resign themselves to them. The world was settling down, and madness, such as it was, waning.

On a particularly lazy day, Benson and Cal went for a longer than usual constitutional. The sky was blue, the barometer high, and the world felt like it was reborn. At nightfall, they found themselves an empty farmhouse, intending to make their way back the following day. The next day something drew them further, and they continued their journey on foot, each hour wondering what might be over the next ridge. Days they walked, sometimes talking, sometimes in silence, carrying themselves slowly into the mountains, always telling themselves that the next day they would begin their journey home.

They came over a crest and saw a lone figure sitting in a clearing overlooking the valley below. An old hermit.

As they neared him however, they discovered this was no hermit. No guru. He was, Cal knew instantly, the last of the madmen. An old man made catatonic by a reality he could not accept. They introduced themselves. They nudged him. They spoke of the nature of the new

reality. Of acceptance. They offered to take him to safety. But he did not respond. Did not move. Did not so much as blink.

That there were madmen that could not be helped still in the world, Cal knew. He had faced them before. Still, the situation left him feeling helpless.

Cal attempted one last thought to save him. He said, "Fear not the world, old man. It is your friend."

The madman, the catatonic old hermit turned to Calumet Forsyth and smiled. A blessing from a lunatic.

Benson and Cal turned back toward home, no longer fearing for his safety.

And madness was washed from the earth.