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Templeton's Peace

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TEMPLETON'S
PEACE

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May 2009

Dedication

To everyone I've ever hurt

TEMPLETON'S
PEACE

by

TRENT D. HUDLEY

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Introduction

This novel is essentially about change. Change isn't a grand theme. In fact it can probably be seen as cliché. But change is inevitable, and the reoccurring investigation of the theme implies its importance. It is the only thing that is completely dependable. The only constant. The only absolute. Yet a strange dichotomy arises when change is taken into consideration within the realm of the human condition. Most people do not like change. The majority of people in the world seek to keep change at bay and create some type of stability in their lives. Most of our endeavors are attempts to secure a particular way of life that is insulated from the assault of change. Yet it is the big changes in life that are most important to us: the continuing process of advancement in our education, the transformation from a single lifestyle into marriage, the addition of life through childbirth, the celebration of change with birthdays, and the biggest ritual for the grandest transition, the funeral's celebration of death. This contradiction, the insistent need for stability in an ever changing universe is what interests me about the topic of change. I like the fact that in our search for a constant, for stability, the only thing that we can truly count on to be stable is change.

Lao Tzu says:

Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;

The difficult and the easy complement each other;

The long and the short off-set each other;

The high and the low incline toward each other;

Note and sound harmonize with each other;

Before and after follow each other.

Lao Tzu is talking about the constant play of the universe, the constant impermanence, the change that constitutes all things. Don Juan Mathos tells Carlos Castaneda that to be a warrior he can't divorce himself from the world, his world of chaos and change, and escape into a place where there are no challenges and only stability. He has to embrace change to grow as a human being and act with complete mindfulness. In the teaching of the Buddha, the first teaching in the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment is to have the Right View. Buddha taught his disciples that the things of the world are impermanent and transitory and to cling to the things of the world, to cling to the illusion of permanence is to bring about suffering. To scramble all of one's life to stave off change is to not live, but to dwell in illusion. There is a quote by John Keats that played through my mind often as I wrote this book. It is his idea of what he called "the impersonality of genius". He states "The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts". To let the power of creative forces penetrate one's being, to embrace existence in all its fullness, one can't cling to ideas or objects that are transitory. One must let the universe wash over one's self to know it. One must be comfortable with the fact of change. That's what Keats is saying, I believe. This same idea is found in Heidegger's idea of "dwelling poetically" in which he claims that technology, his term for ossified and dead language, which he claims stifles one's connection with a true, deep meaningful relationship with life can be equated with clinging to transitory ideas and objects. Robert Creeley's theory of poetic composition is also similar to Keats idea. Creeley says that one can't set out to create a poem rather the poet must let the poem arise out of his/her connection to the environment. The poet shouldn't impose preconceived, hardened, dead ideas on a

composition, like Keats' mind the poet should be receptive to what arises naturally from the particular environment, space that he/she is occupying. In other words let the changes that are taking place around you influence you. Let them unfold as they do and embrace them. That is what Lao Tzu meant by the constant way.

The main character in this novel, Templeton, intellectualizes change. He yearns for something different, for a connection that makes sense of his existence. He craves and loves life, but cannot find the strands that can bring the pieces, the fragments of this yearning into a coherent whole. So he turns away from it in frustration and lives in a world shut off from what he really wants and which manifest in actions of misanthropy, self-destruction and desperation. The main focus of this novel, although of course it is about other things as well, is the investigation of how or if these strings can be brought together to complete some sort of meaningful structure in a world in constant flux.

The story itself changed over a course of five years. In fact, Templeton was not the main character when I first started jotting down notes about plot and characters. He was a secondary character in an overtly, obvious and indulgent political story about a character named Isaiah who, with the help of Templeton and other friends, planned the destruction of the corporate structure in The United States. It was a naïve and idealistic story. A sort of anti-Orwellian idea inspired more than I was willing to admit back then by Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. In this version of the story, Templeton played the foil to Isaiah. He played the voice of reason against Isaiah's irrational and impulsive nature.

"What do you want to do?" he [Templeton] said.

"I don't know" I said, taking the joint from him.

Templeton looked at me and shook his head. He smiled, took a big swig from the Jim Beam bottle and we traded the bottle for the joint.

“What do you know, bro?” he said.

“I don’t know?” I said. “Something.”

I took a drink from the bottle. The weed, although it intensified the warmth of the booze soothed the burn. I stared out over the ocean. The earthy menthol smell from the eucalyptus trees and the sea air mixed with the sounds of the waves against the rocks, and I felt my buzz rise to a new level. I watched the shallow light of the overcast sky (word is not legible in my notebook) in the gentle movement of the water.

I imaged myself plunging into the cold Pacific and sinking like a huge rock to the bottom. From there I could walk or maybe hitch a ride on the back of a couple manta rays or dolphins like Aquaman. I’d reach Hawaii and live on Kauai. I’d live in a hut in the most secluded spot on the island. I’d survive on coconuts, pineapples and Ahi-Ahi. I’d make love to Samoan mermaids. I’d keep the Lord of the Flies at the entrance of my sanctuary to keep away everybody. And if that didn’t work, I’d move to Japan, to Hiroshima and live in the crater the bomb made and then I’d know real sorrow, a feeling at least. Or further to Russia where I could expound on the virtues of capitalist society, incite a riot, and get sent to Siberia where I would write an existential novel. Or further to Africa, the motherland, Nigeria, where I could get back in touch with my roots, my history, my beginning and bring back the word of the spirit to my people in the land of oppression.

“I want to stay fucked up, man,” I said. “I want to stay this fucked up the rest of my life.

Templeton laughed. “Wow, you are fucked up, man. You need to wake up and quit living in your head, man.”

These are shades of the Templeton in this novel seen in Isaiah. The longing for connection as well as an escape is evident in this passage and shows up throughout this novel.

He knew he was going to have to write the book he traveled to New Mexico to write. It wasn't just the need to feel that he had something in common with his uncle, or a simple urge to match his activity out of some egotistic need to compete, or to prove to himself that his lineage did have more than suicides, lunatics and fanatics, that he was more than just a dope fiend and alcoholic who merely floated through life like a Dickensian shade who hadn't yet died, or that he wasn't just an illusionist distracting himself with something just to keep from erupting into hysteria at any given moment. It was all that and more. It was a battery flashlight at the moment of Y2K, it was bread crumbs left on the floor of the Black Forest. It was the feeling of being pricked by needle in the haystack even though he couldn't see it. It was a need that was visceral, a physical point that he felt in the center of his belly, on the surface of his skin, beneath the enamel of his teeth. But it was even more than that, and more than he was even aware of. It extended beyond his body, through the powder-blue light tendrils of his consciousness, to the quantum bonds that mimicked substantiality, into the nexus that was his fabric of existence.

Yet this quality doesn't remain a constant in Templeton's evolution. Templeton changes from a peripheral character who witnesses the beginning of the deterioration of his friend, and who is eventually killed, to a cold, hard rationalist.

In a later version of the story, entitled *Templeton's Feast*, Templeton becomes the protagonist. He is a cold, calculating revolutionist. He is reserved and keeps his political views

mainly to himself unless he is discussing them with his close friends. Even though he thinks his friend's, who he's known since grade school, ideas about politics and revolution are naïve and ineffectual. His friends become involved in radical activist groups and eventually form their own and start to make plans about breaking down the corporate structure. Yet they are unorganized and unfocused. Templeton breaks off ties with them to distance himself from their futile attempts at political change. He pursues a career in the culinary arts. Throughout the story his friends perish, but he flourishes as a renowned chef. He ends up getting into the position to serve a dinner for a big corporate function. The board members of the top 5 corporations in the United States attend the dinner. Templeton poisons them and escapes untraceable into the Amazon jungle.

This sort of cold logic is still apparent in Templeton's character in his ability and willingness to dissociate himself from situations.

Yet, there was a spot outside the line of fire, in the back of his mind, a small dark spot that appeared after a soft pop sounded in the distance of his consciousness that felt he could let it go if he had too, that in the end everything ended like this anyway, that the relationship was probably doomed anyway and he would eventually get over it, just as people go on living after the death of a loved one, that nothing really ever penetrated to the deep core of ones being that would break the noose of self-interest and let them experience some sort of Nirvanic release and immersion into a realm of absolute egolessness and freedom, that it wasn't worth the time to lament, that it was part of the fabric of everything, the law of change, the dance of the Changing Man, that nothing lasted forever and to believe that it did was clinging, struggling, grasping manically at untruth. Nothing was permanent. And everything that happened did happen for a reason.

A reason of choice. Every action that a person took she/he was ultimately responsible for. And the only way to truly live ones life was to be ready at every instant to let go of what one thought was so precious and fulfilling and to be alone to face the beautiful, terrible ambiguity and uncertainty of life. That was power, he thought. That was self-knowledge. He didn't know if this flash of a thought which caused him to feel a strange bodily failure as if everything inside of him had turned to gelatin for an instant, was a back up defense system, or a true flash of insight. He pushed it away and walked, heavy in stride, to his truck parked at the library.

Thankfully the political focus dwindled as the story progressed. The focus waned and the issues began to seem less important than Templeton himself. It was an essay by Jonathan Franzen; his big *Harper's* article entitled "Why Bother" that helped me realize that character is more important than ideas. I had been enamored by Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick and actually Franzen's first two novel and their post-modernist ideas of political intrigue and conspiracy. I wanted to write one of those intricate, brainy social commentaries too. But reading about Franzen's despair over the role of the social novel changed my course and the direction I wanted to take this novel. The essay is basically Franzen's musing about the future of the novel of social commentary. It begins with his doubt that the novel can act as a form of social instruction anymore due the technological advances in the communications field.

Just as the camera drove a stake through the heart of serious portraiture, television has killed the novel of social reportage.¹

¹ Jonathan Franzen, *How to be Alone* (New York, 2002) 67

It doesn't end there of course. He pulls himself out of his despair by the end of the essay with the realization, which I have completely simplified, that people will always read. Yet there was one section the essay that struck a deep cord with me.

The American writer today faces a cultural totalitarianism analogous to the political totalitarianism with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine...²

I didn't want this novel to be put in that category. I am aware that I didn't completely escape the circle, this novel has its share of political commentary, but it is a far cry from the political monstrosity that I had planned to write before.

So I began to focus on Templeton's character. Who was he, what did he want, what motivated him etc. At first I tried to impose ideas and desires upon him and the effect was the same as trying to write a piece about politics without character. I became frustrated and quit writing. Then a fortuitous stroke of bad luck happened right before I moved down to El Paso to start my MFA. My computer crashed and I completely lost what I had been working on. I complained and stressed about it, but the only thing I could do was to start over. So I did, but I approached it differently. I let Templeton come to me. I trusted the character and allowed him to grow naturally, to present himself to me and to become what he is in the novel now.

Several elements have remained a constant throughout the evolution of the novel, but these constants all somehow reflect change. The loss of the father has been continuous throughout the different versions of the story. In one version he dies of an overdose from heroin,

² ibid 69

in the others, as in the current, he commits suicide. In all the versions he is ineffectual as a human being. The absence of a paternal influence is important in that I wanted the character, even as Isaiah, to be partially free of any intuitions, even that of family. At first I modeled him after Camus' Meursault. Both Templeton's parents are gone and he really doesn't have any emotional reaction to that. He merely accepts that and all things as mere facts of life:

Eventually he became secure in the fact that there was ultimately no reason for the things that happened in life. People shot themselves, went insane, did drugs, fell in and out of love, beat and murdered each other, fucked, stole, warred, and died for no other reason than that was the way things worked. Nothing more nothing less. There were no explanations. Things happened as inescapable laws of existence.

I was hoping to bring an underlying existential viewpoint into the novel with this. The point being that attachment to preconceived ideas, institutions, Heidegger's technology and the like is detrimental to the development of a sense of self, of a true, deep, connection with one's existence. Templeton is basically a loner who merely observes life most of the time. He is detached from everything until he meets Jennifer. Through this meeting, this engagement with the world and a person in the world, he sees things differently and realizes the potential to see the world in a different light. He realizes a chance to change.

Another element that has remained throughout the progression of this work is magic. In one scene a continuous line of golden spiders walks across one the character's living room for four days then just disappears leaving a fine silver silk mesh covering everything in the room. In a moment of crisis, while listening to the voice of the big, bad wolf on record, a very young Isaiah, to escape the stress, suddenly begins to float eight feet above the floor. In a different version a character named Fallon, while being arrested by the FBI, with his face smashed into the

gritty carpet of a cheap hotel room manages to free himself and floats out the window above all the cars and chaos and disappears forever. In another version, Isaiah is laying in bed with the lead female character, Fortuna. While she sleeps nestled in his arms he muses about the sound of the rain as it strikes the aluminum awning above the window. As he waxes poetic about how good life is, he looks up and sees the ghost of Fortuna's son, Xavier. Xavier was a childhood friend of his. They grew up together and got involved in criminal activity and Xavier was murdered. He sees Xavier throughout the novel at different times and different versions of him. The first time he sees him Xavier is a child dressed in his church clothes, another time he sees him he is the age he got murdered at. Every time Isaiah sees him though, his face is smashed in as it was the night he was murdered. Xavier is a direct descendant of the Changing Man whose first appearance is in the current version of this work. The Changing man is the manifestation of an elemental force of nature. He can easily be viewed as a Jungian archetype.

"I'm the Changing Man, Templeton. The Changing Man comes when things are changing."

"What's changing?"

"Everything changes. If there is an absolute truth in this universe, change is it."

"Am I changing or someone else? Is Y2K really gone happen? Is it good or bad?"

"I don't know. Change is change, Templeton. I'm not a judge. I'm just an agent of it."

When Templeton was a child, The Changing Man taught him how to do tricks. He taught him to turn lead into gold, how to solidify water into different shapes and how to float. Magic is all about change. Every culture on the planet has some type of ritual that involves magic of some sort. Every religion has a magician of some level that performs at least one miraculous feat that is the catalyst of some type of change. Even the most atheistic scientist who by chance witnesses the strange unpredictable world of the quantum reality has to admit that

there is element of the miraculous pulsing through that reality. The Changing Man is that element in this novel.

The element of “magical realism” in this novel stems from my influence from several different sources. Comic books are definitely one of my influences. I have been reading them since I five or six years old and the fantastic immediately grabbed me. The fascination with the supernatural and alternate realities has remained a constant in my life. In fiction, later influences include Tom Robbins, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Julio Cortazar, Borges, William Burroughs, Kafka, Haruki Murakami, Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon and a host of other postmodernist writers. In other disciplines the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger and Derrida were a big part in the formation of my thought and thus my perspective on art.

Tom Robbins’ *Another Roadside Attraction* is the first book I remember reading that seriously made me decide to try to write. I had never read literary style writing. I was used to reading horror books. Stuff entitled *The Dogs, The Cats, The Snake, The Rats*, or stuff by Stephen King. I also read The Ring trilogy but I was more into the gory stuff. When I read Robbins’ I was blown away by his language. I had never experienced such lyrical sounds and such acrobatic word play. I still believe that he is the best simile and metaphor writer I’ve read. I became enamored by things like this:

*What looks to be a wisp of a cloud is actually the moon, narrow and pale, like a paring snipped from a snowman's toenail.*³

³ Tom Robbins, *Even Cowgirls get the Blues* (New York, 1976)

The beet is the most intense of vegetables...The beet is the murderer returned to the scene of the crime. The beet is what happens when the cherry finishes with the carrot. the beet is the ancient ancestor of the autumn moon, bearded, buried, all but fossilized; the dark green sails of the grounded moon-boat stitched with veins of primordial plasma...⁴

I had never read language used like that before and I was hooked immediately. I wanted to do what he was doing. I read everything he wrote in a matter of weeks. I was voracious for more.

From Robbins I happened upon the beats and discovered William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs' dark, graphic situations and strange extended metaphors drew me in deeper and I finally began to write short stories in his style. From there I found Kafka and his world. Kafka is a center from everything else orbited. I never tried to emulate him because he seemed too large to try to even approach. I approach Kafka like Moses approached the burning bush, his talent is too intense to look at directly, yet he remains the center because I can see his influence in every single one of the writers who I have been drawn to. I am still not brave enough to try to put into words what Kafka is. He is too luminous for me. I revere him with an almost religious fascination. I have a quote I found, I don't remember who made it or from what source, but I keep on my desk with other quotes that I have found inspiration in. It is not philosophical or praise-worthy in a sentimental way. It intellectualizes what Kafka did with his craft and gives me a sort of guideline to my own writing. Here it is:

What Kafka has done a writer is to fuse into a unique literary style all the

⁴ Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume* (New York, 1984) 1

discrete of the modern experience—from the unconscious to the refinements of metaphysical analysis, from the banal to the apocalyptic—elements which in our life are fragmented and incoherent, although never wholly absent.

The last sentence is what I most admire about Kafka's work, "elements which in our life are fragmented and incoherent, although never wholly absent." That is the magic of his work. He manifests the unknown in a way that makes it knowable but still mysterious. He mixes the profound and the sacred into a strange, beautiful, terrifying new reality. He changes, like a good magician does, how we view what is really real.

From Kafka it seems only logical, to me, that I should have discovered the "postmodernist writers". Although what they were doing wasn't really new, it was new and vibrant to me. Their deconstruction of the traditional literary form was exciting and seemed different and innovative to me. In one of the many books of postmodernist theory I read I came across a term "magical realism" and associated with that term was a name I had never heard before then; Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The explanation of the term was intriguing so I looked up this book that this Marquez gentle had written entitled *A Hundred Years of Solitude* and I read it.

From the first sentence, "*Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.*"⁵ I was captivated. While reading this master work I felt as if I had been completely reintroduced to literature again. I felt I had read something so completely new and fresh that I wanted to hide it and make it last forever. *Another Roadside Attraction*

⁵ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York, 1970) 11

moved me because I was new to literature. Marquez moved me because I wasn't. The magic contained in that book slid under my skin and possessed me. I felt I hadn't begun to even come close to what I really wanted to write. Remedio's Ascension haunted me, and made me want to include her in every story I ever even thought of after that. The blood that flowed from Aureliano's house to Úrsula's kitchen flowed off the page and followed me on to the pages I tried to write. I longed to have conversations with Melquíades. This form, the postmodernist, who wrongly claim that it is a form of postmodernism, called "magical realism", entranced me. I knew what vein I wanted to write in then. This was what I had been looking for. From Marquez I discovered Calvino, Buzzati, Cortazar, Murakami and started noticing the technique in other writers not associated primarily with the genre. So after that point all my writing has had some type of magic or supernatural or absurd quality about it.

This novel is an extension of my experimentation in the genre of "magical realism". As I stated above I had a totally different conception of this novel at its beginning. And even before I decided to turn it into a political novel I had ideas about it being an experimental postmodernist piece. Here is one of the first paragraphs I scribbled down.

This is a story. It is a story about several things. It is a story about a writer, a pod of squid, a Native American woman from New Mexico who talks to invisible people, an inter-galactic convict, a bag of money, a walrus, a virus, death and the Almighty himself. In fact this story starts with another story about the Lord Almighty. But mainly this is a story about how Jessup Tarkenton decided, after 13 years of deliberation, not to kill himself.

It was going to be a grand, satirical, self-reflective tome. But as I said, the more the novel progressed the less appealing those clever ideas were. Although I like the writers and theories of postmodernism, the more I thought about it the less organic it felt. I wanted more to be clever, witty and intelligent and the stuff that came out of that mind set was overbearing and not intelligent, witty or clever at all. I had pages of philosophical ranting but no substantial characters, plot or structure. As my ideas became less lofty the form of the novel became more traditional, linear. And I liked it that way. The story took the form it needed to take and the writing became more meaningful, deeper, less concerned with being a novel and more with being a documentation of a process.

As I sit here and entertain the thought that one day this novel may find itself amongst the literature of the world, I hope that it will be included in the tradition of the magical realist. Like Marquez's novel it doesn't fiddle with structure to make itself stand out as an obvious work of the imagination. There is no self-reflective quality about the nature of fiction. It takes a straightforward narrative and weaves in the magical with the mundane. Although Marquez's elements of magic are written so deep into the story that they are part of the norm, they are happening that the reader just takes for granted as being part of that world and it wouldn't be the right world without, my magic elements stand out more as being miraculous. Marquez is writing about a culture where those types of things are part of the everyday life. Those myths and monsters, saints and devils form a nexus for that culture. In the America I grew up in, the society is fractured, incoherent, fragmented. There is no nexus of magic only a nexus of consumerism and status-quo. Most of the time the miraculous goes unnoticed even though it is right under our nose. So I don't think I could have written a novel in which the magical isn't a sort of disruption or intrusion to everyday life. Even the simplest miracles,

noticing the glint of the sun off a piece of glass in the street, acts as a sort of disruption to our everyday mode of perception. The realization, the actualization of that perception of that glint alters our state of consciousness, if even just for a moment, and places our mind in a different state. We are changed by this rare experience at least for a short while.

I think we all want change. We want the world to be a different place. We want to end poverty, hunger, starvation, suffering and all the ills of the world, but we don't want to have to change ourselves to do it. We want the world to change around us, yet stay in our comfortable little shells. I think this is Templeton's dilemma too. That is my dilemma. And it is through this novel that I investigate this cosmic entity change and deliberate about whether it is possible to really embrace change. I somehow believe it is, but then again maybe not.

Trent Hudley May, 2009

TEMPLETON'S PEACE

The city of Truth or Consequences is not allegorical. It is not named after a major Wild West shoot out between leather clad villains and a heroic sheriff and his posse. It is not named after a raging battle between ferocious Indian savages and brave, steadfast settlers. It was not sought out by Spanish Conquistadors in their quest for power. It was not founded by a lone holy man wandering the desert searching for salvation and receiving divine inspiration to build a new city in the name of God. The name of Truth or Consequences has no biblical, historical or literary allusion. But, it is the first city in the history of the United States to be named after a radio game show.

In 1950 Ralph Edwards, the host of the popular radio program *Truth or Consequences*, announced that he would broadcast a coast to coast show for the 10th anniversary of the program from any town that was willing to change its name to Truth or Consequences. Senator Burton Roach, the then manager of the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce, other members of the commission and members of the business community jumped at the chance for free advertisement for their city.

Templeton didn't know any of this when he decided to title his book *Truth or Consequences, (New Mexico)*. His interest in the history of the town was cursory at best. He chose the title because he thought that Cleveland and Meridian had spent their lives in the small town, and the name, though obvious, was just too symbolic to pass up. To him the history of the town was the history of Meridian and Cleveland's relationship. And although only a section of the book would take place in Tor C, the name would supply all the weight the book needed.

The Cabernet was almost gone. Templeton walked over to the window, lifted the shade and peeked out. He watched a few cars pass on the highway then sat down at the desk and set up

the typewriter. He took a ream of paper and a thin paperback book from his backpack, inserted a crumpled piece of paper in the typewriter, arranged some pens, pencils and erasers underneath the desk lamp, and then thumbed through the book. It was a book his Uncle Cleveland had written thirty-six years earlier in 1963, *The Pain of Origins*, and it was why he had traveled almost 600 miles from Denver to Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. It had become an inspiration to him, and he wanted to find out more about the man who had written it. So he drove to New Mexico to find the woman who had shared his uncle's life at one time and talk to her.

He didn't know much about the woman. He knew that she was Native American and that her name was Meridian, but not much else. He had seen a blurry, black and white picture of her in a family photograph that his aunt Rebecca kept in an album, but that was it. It was a picture of all three brothers: his father, his uncle Cleveland and his uncle Philbert with their significant others. Meridian stood in the left corner of the picture. She stood sideways with her head resting on the massive shoulders of his uncle Cleveland. Her features were blurred, but he could see the long, thick, black flow of her hair draped across her shoulders. She wore a kerchief around her neck and a broche shaped like the sun above her left breast. Her right hand rested on Cleveland's other shoulder. Templeton could tell she was an exceptionally beautiful woman, and he stared at the picture for a good hour trying to figure out what type of person this woman might be. An image formed in his head and entertained his thoughts. A lithe, barefooted, pecan-colored sylph dressed in a white, buckskin dress and adorned with turquoise and silver necklaces and bracelets, amply endowed, and dancing sensually, like a Clovian Salome, around a blue and orange blazing fire was the woman he imagined. He felt a deep, subterranean yearning in his chest for the creature dancing in his head. He let the image play in his mind for several days after he first saw

the picture. The figure evolved several times: an ancient old woman wrapped in buffalo skins sitting inside a tee-pee, blind, with the power to presage, casting magic powder onto a perpetually burning fire, visited daily by villagers for advice about luck, loss, love, pain, joy, suffering and death; a shadow, featureless, walking across a dark, dry, gray, cracked desert landscape without a horizon. A whisper of a voice tickling the back of his mind like a fingernail might tickle the back of his neck. But other than the products of his brain, he didn't know much about the woman except what his uncle Philbert thought about her. Philbert had called her a worthless hippy, radical, harpy. But Templeton couldn't picture that version of the woman from the photograph. He was excited to meet the woman who had shared the life with the man who had written the book.

He had found the book rummaging through his Uncle Philbert's library after Thanksgiving dinner. He had finished talking on the phone to his cousins Anita and Kendra, both who lived in Seattle with their husbands and children, and helping his Aunt Rebecca wash dishes. Then he went into the living room to have a drink with Philbert. Philbert sat in his recliner reading the newspaper, smoking a cigar and drinking Maker's Mark whiskey. Templeton picked up the decanter and poured himself a drink over ice. He found the book pushed back and wedged between the missed placed volume 18 of the 15th edition of Encyclopedia Britannica and a biography about Al Capone.

"Is this Uncle Cleveland?" he asked.

Philbert looked up from the paper and picked up his drink.

"Hand me that," he said reaching for the book. "Where the hell you find this?"

"Right here in the shelf. Is that Uncle Cleveland's?"

“Yeah, that’s his. I thought I got rid of this thing twenty-five years ago. It ain’t no good anyway.”

“I want to read it. What’s it about.”

Rebecca walked into the room poured herself a drink and sat down on the couch across from Philbert. She saw the book in Philbert’s hand and looked at him above the rim of her glasses.

“It’s about a bunch of junk, is what it’s about,” Philbert said, putting the book on the end table next to the bottle. Templeton reached for the book. Philbert picked up the decanter and handed it to him.

“Here, have a drink.”

“I’m not finished with this one, Unc. I want to read Uncle Cleveland’s book,” he said, picking the book up. “I didn’t know we had someone famous in the family, that’s pretty tight. Is it good? What’s it about?”

“Famous? If famous is writing some kinda blasphemous junk and embarrassing your family, then you can take your fame.”

“Oh Philbert, it’s not that bad,” Rebecca said.

“Rebecca, I told you how I felt about that book thirty-years ago. Templeton, you want to read that trash, go ahead, I don’t care. I thought I got rid of that damn thing, anyway. Y’all want to talk about the thing, go ahead. I’m finished with it. I ain’t talking about it no more,” Philbert said, and got up from his recliner. He put out his cigar, picked up his drink, folded his paper under his arm, walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

“What was that about?” Templeton asked.

“Oh, there was a big ‘to do’ about that book when it first came out, baby. It’s not as bad as your uncle likes to make it sound. Your Uncle Cleveland was sort of the ‘bad seed’ on your daddy’s side of the family, at least in Philbert’s eyes. But in fact, he wasn’t like that. He was smart, good-looking man that just did things the way he wanted to do them.”

“Is Unc a little jealous of him?”

“I wouldn’t say jealous. Cleveland was your uncle’s hero before that book came out. It’s the stuff in that book that caused a rift between them. You know your uncle and me are Christians and Cleveland’s book doesn’t have much nice to say about religion. Well, the things in that book just don’t jibe with Philbert’s thinking. And I admit a bit of it is even over the top for me. Your daddy liked it. Go ahead read it and see what you think.”

The book was a rock through the windshield of what Templeton considered his mediocre life. He read it three times in a row. It talked to him. He did not mean that in a metaphorical way. The book talked to him as if he himself had written it, a diary before he was born. It wasn’t as if his uncle had written the piece and he now applied it to his own life because he and his uncle had so much in common, it was more than that. It was that for sure, that’s why Cleveland had become a beacon for him, but it surpassed that. It was an unfolding, an analysis and a commentary of events. His events. It was as if he could open the book to any page and it would address some issue in his life. It was his I-Ching. His Bible. And though he had given up the promise of religious salvation a long, long time ago, there was something evoking about the book.

He not only admired the thaumaturgic and artistic qualities of the book, but the fact that it was a member of his family that had written it. He wanted to know the man who thought and wrote so eloquent, so confident, so brave. He was proud that he had some of this man’s blood

running through his veins. Cleveland's thinking was a middle point between the practicality of the life he had lived with Philbert and Rebecca and the dark sucking hole of insanity that he had been born into. He saw Cleveland's work as shattering the thick, smoked, gray glass that he had been looking through for years.

Templeton had checked into the Buckskin Hotel on North Date Road and New School Road just outside of town. It was nine in the morning, and he was hungry. He went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. A two-day growth shadowed his cheeks. He rubbed his face and thought about shaving, but decided against it. He hadn't slept in two days. He had stayed drunk the whole way from Denver to Truth or Consequences and his eyes burned. He rubbed them hard, hard enough to produce thin lined, multi-colored geometric figures to float in the darkness behind his eyelids. When he opened his eyes he saw a Jacques Cousteau's reflection standing behind him in the mirror. He jumped, ducked and twisted around but no one was there. Holy shit, he thought, I need some sleep. I'm kinda fucked up I guess. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes for a moment. Why the fuck can't I see Pamela Anderson or someone like that, he thought, why would I see Jacques Cousteau in a drunken hallucination? Then the memory hit him like a slushy snowball in the face.

He had quit having visions when he was nine years old. The Changing Man, who introduced him to the invisible people, quit appearing to him after his father, Eli Beaumont, blew the back of his head off with a shotgun. He pushed the thought of his father out of his head. He hadn't thought about the Changing Man in almost thirty-years. He got up from the bed and took a deep swig from the bottle of Cabernet. He chuckled to himself. He guessed it was appropriate that old memories should suddenly pop up when he was in a place to find out things about part of

his past. The Changing Man, he thought, and smiled. The Changing Man had taught him how to float, how to lift himself up and hover above the ground. He showed him how to turn lead into gold, and to solidify air. It had seemed so real when he was a child, and even now the memory seemed that of a vivid dream. He shivered and took a swig from the bottle.

The Changing Man changed. He never had the same appearance. Only a few of the Changing Man's appearances came back to Templeton. He remembered he was Gandhi once, an Eskimo with a walrus tusk necklace, Tonto from the Lone Ranger, Batman, Dr. King and yes, Jacques Cousteau. But, what he remembered most was the sound of the invisible people, the chants, the deep rumbling of drums, bells, singing, the laughter of their children, the calls of wild birds, dogs barking, goats, cows. He never saw them, of course, but felt them. He felt them all around his room, smelled the smoke of things cooking, of perfumes and flowers, of people's breaths; he felt the heat of fires and the people passing by him. He remembered this feeling when he first read a passage from Cleveland's book, but it was vague and distant, like the answer to a question that is just at the tip of one's memory yet can't be recalled. For several days after, it had remained a nagging irritation, and the whole time he felt as if something essential to the meaning of his life would be lost unless he could figure out the feeling the passage had evoked. Eventually it dissipated from his awareness as the events of everyday life loomed larger than the obscure longing for something ethereal. He chuckled to himself as he remembered dancing with the Changing Man once when he looked like Sebastian Cabot. Templeton drank more wine, sat on the bed and laughed out loud.

It was the Changing Man that Templeton called to when he walked in on his mother cleaning up blood and pieces of skull from their bathroom floor. She lifted her head and smiled

at him. Her eyes were wide, watery and glossed over red. She looked manic, and didn't seem to really see him. Her smile was crooked and the right side of her mouth twitched.

“I think the roast is burnt Temp. We'll have to eat out,” she said, and went back to scrubbing the same spot, slowly in a wide circle.

Templeton saw his father. The back of his head was flat and propped against the rear rim of the bathtub; his eyes were wide and bugling like Cookie Monster's, afraid and staring vacantly up at the ceiling. The bottom half of his face was missing. A thick red paste was splashed against the wall behind him. Templeton backed out of the bathroom and shut his eyes. He began chanting the words and throwing his arms over his head like The Changing Man had shown him, but he did not rise into the air as he had done the night before.

“Did you learn that in school, sweetie?” Silvia Beaumont asked her son. “That's nice, but go play outside. Mommy needs to clean up the bathroom.”

But Templeton did not move. He started to jump up and down as he threw his arms over his head and chanted louder as tears rolled down his face. And it was just like that that Amanda Fulbright, the next-door neighbor, found the Beaumont family when she walked through the door to investigate the smoke that was coming out of the kitchen window. She took the roast out of the oven and called for Silvia.

“Upstairs, Amanda,” Silvia said, “Come on up I'm just cleaning the bathroom.”

That night Templeton didn't move as his Aunt Rebecca leaned down, kissed him on the forehead, and told him to try to get some sleep. He stared up and watched the model of the F4

Phantom that hung from his ceiling with fishing line sway back and forth in the breeze that blew through his window. His aunt brushed her hand over his cheek.

“Everything *is* going to be o.k. I promise, angel. Get some sleep,” she said, rubbed the tip of his nose with her finger and stood up. “Do you want me to leave the door open a little bit?” she asked, before she left his room. Templeton shook his head, she nodded and closed the door.

He woke up that night like any other night when the Changing Man came into his room, but he didn’t laugh as the invisible fingers tickled his sides and neck. He turned over and the Changing Man hovered above his bed in the form of a Maori warrior, the drumming and singing started, and the Changing Man started doing the dance Templeton had done in the hall earlier. Templeton screamed.

“Go away, go away. You’re fuckers, you didn’t help, you didn’t help, go away. I hate you.”

His Aunt Rebecca and Uncle Philbert rushed into his room. His uncle’s head passed through the Changing Man’s belly as he sat down on the bed. The two of them sat beside him and comforted him; over his Aunt’s shoulder he watched the Changing Man fade away. He never saw him again.

Templeton got up and took a shower. He hadn’t eaten since Trinidad and his wine-filled belly started to gurgle. He had stopped in one of the hundreds of the featureless little towns common to the American landscape just on the outskirts of Trinidad. He had found a little Mexican restaurant in the last suite of a strip mall that was in the process of turning into another

long, tract of empty economic failure. Most of the empty stores had been broken into by vagrants who slept among the abandoned carts, boxes and mannequins, and shit in the broken toilets and left turds like lung fish to decay in the little pools of yellow stagnant water in the bowls.

Windows had been smashed out by bored, southwestern teenagers high on whatever narcotic was the rage at the time, or graffitied with their sex, blood and frustration.

The Toro del Sol, a Sav-A-Lot having a 50% off sale, a consignment store that had turned into a Good Will and a linen shop were the last four businesses of eighteen that still remained open in the Plaza Mesa shopping center. Templeton sat at the one table out of three in the restaurant that looked out over the potholes and cracks of the parking lot that was becoming overgrown with weeds. He sat and ate a plate of tacos and drank a bottle of Miller High Life beer. A small, thin young Mexican boy about nine or ten with huge brown eyes sunk back in his overly large cantaloupe-shaped head came and topped off the water that Templeton had taken two sips from. The boy worried Templeton. He didn't worry him in a way that he felt pity for the child; he worried him in a threatening way. He couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was. Some feeling, as if rotting fruit could radiate its sweet decaying smell as emotion instead of scent, emanated from the boy. It wasn't that the child wasn't in school at the beginning of October, that could simply be because the family was poor and needed the child's help. It wasn't uncommon in small, poor communities all over the States. The boy was thin, but he looked healthy, yet he had an old, cadaverous looking face and dark sallow rings under wide, glassy black eyes that seemed to stare through a person. They weren't the empty, unfocused eyes of someone who was not present in the world or aware of his surroundings. They were penetrating, a razor blade intense gaze that made Templeton nervous enough to turn his chair to face the parking lot instead of facing the counter where the boy sat staring at him. When the boy came near him to bring his

food, Templeton unconsciously scooted away from him. The boy smiled and touched Templeton's arm. His tiny hand was wrinkled and mottled with dark brown splotches, it was icy cold as if he had just pulled it out of a freezer. Templeton flinched. The boy smiled again and said, "You funny mister."

There was an old man sitting in front of the display case, which held a single piece of flan in a clear plastic carton, they used as a counter. He was an ancient fellow with deep brown wrinkles and coarse gray stubbles of hair sprouting out over his head, cheeks and chin. One eye was clouded over white and jumped erratically like an epileptic jumping bean. Five or six yellowed teeth like blunt stalactites and stalagmites jutted from gray gums in his mouth. He was rolling his own cigarettes and lining them up in a row on the table he sat at. Every once in a while he would gag then spit a plug of phlegm into an old coffee can next to the table. The boy would snicker. The old man would stop, count the cigarettes he had all ready rolled, look over at Templeton, grumble something in Spanish, then start rolling a new cigarette. Behind the counter, in the kitchen a large fleshy woman with great shaking jowls, and a few more yellowed teeth than the old man, watched novellas on an old rabbit-eared, staticy, black and white T.V. She stood in front of a stove laden with large, steaming pots and pans. Every so often she would yell something at the boy in Spanish and he would stop staring at Templeton and walk into the kitchen. She would yell, gesticulate wildly, pace back and forth across the kitchen and shake a wooden spoon in the boy's face, then point out into the dining room. Once she hit him over the head with the spoon and he giggled with a deep mucus rumble in his chest, turned, walked out the kitchen and perched back on the stool and stared at Templeton. After his second beer the little boy didn't bother Templeton much. He ordered another taco, a couple more beers and sat watching a crow bounce across the parking lot pecking at bugs hidden in the weeds.

Templeton bought a twenty-two ounce can of Budweiser and two chicken salad sandwiches at a gas station and drove into town. He drank the beer on the sly as he sat on a bench reading the paper at Ralph Edwards Park. The headline of the paper read: Y2K Bug could be a Plague, Many Warn. The article was about how the Y2K bug was going to cause massive food shortages because modern agriculture had grown too dependent on technology, and the computers and automated systems that run the packing, processing and distribution of the American food sources are not only possibly, but probably going to fail. "Idiot's," Templeton sighed and threw the paper into the nearby trashcan. He needed to find out where this woman that his Uncle Cleveland had known, Meridian Long Shadow, lived. He went to the library and looked in the phone books first, but she was not listed. He looked in old phone books and even went to the City and County building to try to locate her, but he could not find her. He wished that his Aunt Rebecca had given him more information, but the fact that she even mentioned the woman's name had sent his Uncle into a fit.

Two weeks prior Templeton had dropped by their house after work to tell them about his plan to write Cleveland's biography. Rebecca was charmed, but Philbert only said that he better not mention his name in the thing. Rebecca fixed him a plate of food; they were having Halibut and asparagus and Templeton gorged on it. It wasn't often he ate good food. Not that he couldn't afford cuts of fish like Halibut. Templeton was rich. Not unlimitedly rich, but he didn't have to worry about his financial situation for the rest of his life if he spent his money right. After his mother died he got her inheritance that she had gotten from her mother, being the only child. Templeton had also been an only child. His grandparents had owned land in Wyoming and raised cattle. They had invested in numerous prosperous stocks and bonds and had created a well

balanced financial future for the next three generations of their heirs. He also got his father's monthly army pension and the salary from his job as a social worker. He lived alone and didn't have a girlfriend, but the majority of his money had gone to alcohol and cocaine, so fast food and cheap restaurants were his main staple.

Templeton tried to talk to Philbert about Cleveland but he was evasive and vague. Rebecca told him most of the information he had gathered so far.

"Do you know anything about this woman Meridian he dedicated the book to?" Templeton asked.

"Yeah, she's a greedy, murdering, slut," Philbert said, through a mouthful of food.

"Lord have mercy, Philbert. What's wrong with you?" Rebecca said, dropping her fork on her plate and looking at him over the top of her glasses.

"What, am I wrong? She's the reason that crazy peckerwood shot him. Then she wanted to go and steal the rights to that damn book and claim all the money. I tell you I'm so goddamn sick of that book it ain't funny," he said, put his fork down, pushed his plate away and got up from the table.

"I'll tell you what boy, you got a nice, good idea about writing a book about your Uncle. He was a good man that did stupid things. Stupid things I don't care to think about anymore. I'm 57 years old and that part of my life is over, done, so I'm sorry but I can't help you with nothing concerning that. If I never hear the name of that thing again it's fine by me. Good luck to you. If you want to talk about politics, religion, sports, or even this Y2K thing, it's fine. But I am finished talking about Cleveland and that book," he said, and left the room.

Templeton was angry when he went home that night. It's no wonder everything about this family is so absolutely mediocre, when the only surviving male of the pack is an old, superstitious, bigoted, fool, he thought. The thought made him guilty. His Aunt and Uncle had taken great care of him after his mother had been put in the mental hospital. They had taken him into their home and raised him like their own son after Silvia had a nervous breakdown because of Eli's suicide. They fed and clothed him, sent him to school, enrolled him in sports and music lessons, and never once had he heard them complain or sound resentful. They sent him to years of psychotherapy that had actually worked. They had worked along with Dr. Sakimoto to pull him through the phases of fear, guilt, and anger over the loss of his parents. They worked ceaseless hours, days and nights going to family sessions, talking him out of closets or from beneath the bed, calming him from nightmares, going to pick him up from detention and talking to frustrated teachers and principals. More than once they picked him up from jail, and they never gave up, and most of the time made extra effort, to the vexations of his cousins, to make him feel apart of their family. It had been their love and caring that helped him come to realize that the loss of his parents was a decision that they had both made; even his mother's continual slipping away from the world was a decision she had chosen to make. It was their signature on the student loan papers that had allowed him to attend the University of Colorado, and years later that got him put under their care after he got out of rehab.

Yet, the life they had allowed him to live was not the life that he wanted. Philbert had been an electrical systems designer and Rebecca taught 7th grade math, and they had moved from Park Hill to Southeast Denver after Philbert got a promotion. They had been the only black family in the suburban neighborhood. Everyone in the neighborhood had been friendly in the way that people are friendly out of duress or in that scary polite way when they want to assess

and pry. But his uncle and aunt were invited to all the barbeques and dinner parties, and they went smiling and joyful knowing their presence was required to give the host and hostess that liberal-minded status quo and the right to claim that they too had black friends, or that they weren't scared to have the "new family on the block" in their homes. Everyone was sure to have their Dr. King pictures, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison books, and Marvin Gaye records in plain sight when the Beaumonts came over. Philbert always said that a free meal was a free meal and, Rebecca said it was the Christian thing to do to try to get to know the neighbors. Templeton usually disappeared into an adjoining room and watched television while the two girls sucked up the superficiality. If he was lucky one of the families' kids might have some weed and he would go with them into their basement room's smoke and listen to records. It was the only way he imagined how to dislodge himself outside of the shallow confines of the suburban, middle-class. It was what most of the middle-class teen-agers he knew did: take drugs. It was actually at one of these parties that Templeton lost his virginity, by a girl named Ophelia Walken. She told him that she liked him because he didn't seem like a nigger because he talked right, and that his nose and lips weren't all big and fat, he wasn't all dark and mean either, and he listened to regular music instead of that jungle stuff. She put on a Led Zeppelin album, loaded her bong with a Quaalude and weed, took a few hits and passed it to Templeton. After awhile she took off her shirt, took his hands and put them on her tits, and asked him if he had ever been with a white girl. Templeton stammered out a no. Well, I've never been with a black guy, she said. And then proceeded to take off her clothes.

He smoked weed like a Rastafarian holy man when he was in high school. He smoked dope, dropped acid, ate psychedelic mushrooms and popped pills with the focus, seriousness and dedication that professional athletes train for their sports. Getting high was a spiritual thing. He

didn't do it to escape like most of his friends, or rather getting high acquaintances. He did it to find God.

Frustrated, Templeton bought a bottle of Cabernet and went back to Ralph Edwards Park. He sat and watched a small duck bob over waves along the bank of the river that passed through the park and drank his wine. He would look around before taking a sip to make sure no one was looking at him. He had no idea how he was supposed to find Meridian Long Shadow. All he knew about her was information that was almost 30 years old. Rebecca had told him that the last she had heard, after the court hearings about the book, was that she lived in New Mexico outside of Truth or Consequences. He didn't even know if the woman was still alive. He was thinking that the trip had been another hair-brained idea of his, another drunken fantasy that he had decided to act upon instead of just think about for three days, then forget, as was usually the case. He thought that maybe he should just go back to Denver and get his job back to keep from being bored. Placing children in foster homes didn't seem as insane as it had for the last two out of six years. A cold gust of wind blew and he felt the chill penetrate his field jacket. He was getting tired. He had been drinking since 7:30 the night before and the alcohol was being to take its toll. He decided to go back to the motel, sleep for a few hours and drive back to Denver.

Templeton woke up around 9:00 with a hangover. He dragged himself into the bathroom and splashed his face with water. His head pounded, his stomach rumbled and the sandwiches from earlier moved into his throat. He stumbled to the toilet and barely got the lid open before it all came up. He heaved for several minutes over the toilet bowl until the all contents of his belly floated in the toilet and speckled the nearby wall. He slumped to the floor breathing heavy and feeling shaky and queasy. Arms sprawled across the floor, he lay there enjoying the coolness of

the linoleum. He felt hungry again. He stood up. The world dimmed and shifted for a moment and he had to balance himself against the wall to keep from falling backwards into the shower stall. He managed to get to the bed, lay there until the dizziness left, then he put his shoes on, grabbed his keys from the desk and left.

Templeton sat at the bar of the Golden Hornet bar and grill. The restaurant section of the place was full of fat truckers and a loud crying kid his head could not take. So he figured the Merle Haggard and old drunks better company for the state that he was in. He nursed a red beer and hammered down a plate of chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and corn. The bartender, a tall sensuous looking Mexican girl with a long legs and an ample chest joked with him about not having eaten in days. Slow down, she said, there's more if you want it and patted his hand.

"I think she likes you, man," said, a small, impish little Mexican man with a ratty John Deere tractor cap sitting next to him. He had big, shiny brown eyes and fat cheeks. He smiled a wide tooth-filled smile.

Templeton shoved food into his mouth and nodded at the man.

"Goddamn is that shit that good, man?"

Templeton swallowed and chased the lump of food down his throat with a long draw from the beer.

"No, I'm just really hungry," Templeton replied.

"You drive one of them rigs out there, man?"

"No, I'm just visiting."

"Wow. What the fuck's to visit here, man, those hot springs, and shit?"

“No I’m just looking for somebody.”

“Oh you’re a cop, huh? F.B.I. and shit, huh?”

“No man, I’m writing a book, or I was going to write a book about someone but I can’t find the person I was looking for. So, I’ll probably just go back to Denver.”

“Oh shit, you from Denver? I used to live there for a little while. I worked in this restaurant for a while downtown. It was all right. Yeah, I was pretty cool. I got into some shit though and had to leave, you know,” he said, chuckling.

Templeton nodded.

“Eh man, my name is Pavel,” he said, extending his hand.

Templeton shook his hand, and raised his beer in salute.

“Eh man, you want a shot?” Pavel asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, why the hell not,” Templeton said.

The two of them sat at the bar trading war stories. Templeton flirted with Mandy, the bartender, the drunker and more confident he got. Eventually, she sat down at the bar with them and drank. Pavel kept getting up and going into the bathroom. Templeton knew what he was up to, and he wanted to get high too, if only to mellow out the alcohol that was starting to put him over the top. Templeton followed Pavel into the bathroom. He stepped up to a urinal, he could hear Pavel in the stall behind him opening a bindle and sniffing. Saliva formed in the back of Templeton’s throat.

“You got another one of those, man?” Templeton said, zipping up.

There was no answer and Templeton figured Pavel didn't want to share so he started to walk out. Pavel came out of the stall with a big grin.

"There's a couple fatties on the top of the tank for you, man," Pavel said.

"Right on, bro."

The powder floated into his nasal passage and he could taste the ether used to process it. It was good shit and that initial surge of euphoria shot through him with the satisfaction of an orgasm. He left the bathroom calmer and walked behind Mandy and tickled her sides. She turned around and punched him playfully, then leaned into and whispered in his ear.

"I know you guys are sharing, right?"

At closing Mandy stole three bottles of Wild Turkey and jumped into Templeton's truck. They went to his motel room. Pavel followed them in his truck. Templeton went to the office and got plastic cups and ice, Pavel cut lines on the desk and Mandy flipped through channels on the television. Pavel sat on the chair at the desk and Mandy and Templeton sat on the edge of the bed; they sat and continued their war stories until Ricky Martin's video, *Living La Vida Loca* came on the television and Mandy grabbed Templeton and started dancing. Templeton tried to protest and sit down, but Mandy held him tight around his waist and grinded her pelvis into his. How could he stop?

"You dance like a white boy, man," Pavel said, getting out of the chair and doing a little cha cha cha move across the floor to the bathroom and back. "That's how you do it right, man," he said, and started cutting more lines. He saw Cleveland's book and thumbed through it.

"Eh man, is this what you wrote?"

"No that's my Uncle's book. I'm going to write one about him, one of these days."

Mandy turned around and rubbed her hips into his groin.

“What you came down here to look for him? You don’t know where your own Uncle lives, man?”

“No, for an old girlfriend of his. He’s dead. Some asshole shot him. I never really knew him. I meet him a few times and he seemed all right, but I’m trying to find the girlfriend. That lady in the beginning that he dedicates the book to,” Templeton said, swaying awkwardly behind Mandy.

Pavel flipped to the front of the book.

“To Meridian,” he read. “This is her? This Meridian lady is who you’re looking for?”

The song ended and Mandy fell onto the bed laughing loudly. Templeton sat down next to her.

“Yeah, she’s some Indian lady that’s supposed to live around here, but I couldn’t find out anything about her.”

“Did you look in the phonebook, man?”

“Of course, man. There’s no listings of her anywhere. Do they have a different phone book for people on the reservation, or something?”

“I don’t think there’s no res around here, man. I think the closet one is over by Alamogordo, I don’t know.”

“I don’t know where to find her. I’ll probably just go back home and start over, I don’t know.” He leans over Mandy. “You want to go back to Denver with me?”

“You wish,” she said, smiling and pushing him back. “You’re a writer?”

“Trying to be. I haven’t written anything yet, though.”

Pavel handed Templeton the straw and he walked over to the table and did a line. He handed it to Mandy and she rolled over the bed and bounced up to the table.

“What’s her name?” she said, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“Meridian Yellow Shadow, Long Shadow something like that,” Templeton replied.

“I know that bitchy old Indian lady that goes into my dad’s store every once and a while, but her name ain’t Long Shadow it’s Thunder Shadow or something like that. She don’t live around here though. I think she lives closer to Hillsboro, I think,” Mandy said.

“Oh yeah, I think I’ve seen her. I can take you out by where she might live, man, tomorrow, later, after I get off of work, if you want,” Pavel said. “It’s only about 25 miles or so, I think.”

“Yeah, that sounds cool. Why not?” Templeton said.

“Well let’s finish getting fucked up and we’ll did that tomorrow, man” Pavel said. “By the way, man. That crazy lady is supposed to be a bruja, you know.”

“A what?”

“A witch, man.”

The pain emerged slow like an amphibian surfacing from the sticky bed of a muddy hole. Templeton squeezed his eyes and tried to slip back into the soft, dark comfort of the viscous murk. The pain evolved into a spiky reptile that dragged its dry scaly body across the inside of his forehead. Templeton repositioned himself and pulled his shirt over his face. A Neanderthal clubbed his brain and shouted with a high squeaky whine into his ear. Templeton threw his shirt off his face and rolled over on the bed. The television was on. Pauly Shore bounced around the MTV VJ stage in a spandex body suit and leg warmers. The ridiculousness of the scene drew Templeton's awareness into a blank white space of incomprehension. Then Shore "whoopie'd" and the pain erupted in his head with the concussion of exploding bombs. A wave of nausea caught him in its undertow and he barely made it to the toilet with his hands over his mouth to vomit. He knelt in front of the toilet for fifteen minutes until all that came up was yellow bile. He stood. Dizzy, he stumbled to the sink rinsed his mouth out and threw water on his face. He kicked the power button on the TV and it almost fell off the stand as picture faded then flickered off. He fell back onto the bed and shut his eyes. He tried to remember what had happened the night before. The pulse of anxiety caused his head to pound more as nothing came to his mind. He remembered he was in New Mexico but it took a moment for him to remember the name of the motel. He remembered he had met a guy and a girl and they had come back to the motel room to party, but he couldn't remember their names. His stomach growled and he burped. The throbbing and burning in his nose and the dryness of his throat was a clear indication that they had done a hell of a lot of coke. He opened his eyes and rolled his head toward the desk. All he could see was the tops of several bottles of beer and three fifths of whiskey. The sight made his stomach gurgle and a knot formed at the base of his throat. He turned over onto his stomach. The

knot moved to the back of his throat. He remembered kissing the woman. His tongue had slipped into the back of her mouth and he had tasted the sourness of old tobacco. Templeton jumped up from the bed and rushed into the bathroom. The knot dislodged itself in a flow of yellow bile. His stomach and throat burned. Again he washed himself up and lay back on the bed. After that he didn't remember anything else.

He started feeling hungry. He looked on the desk for his wallet and it wasn't there. He panicked and started patting himself down. Then he remembered that he had hid it under the seat of his truck. Then he also remembered the woman worked at the bar he had gone to and the guy's name began with a P. He opened the motel door and a cool breeze blew across his face. He stood in the doorway for a moment and let the air envelope him. He opened the truck door and the stench of stale smoke and alcohol assaulted him and made his stomach turn. He stepped back from the truck, bent over resting his hands on his knees and gagged. There was nothing left in his belly. His hands began to shake. He reached under the seat of the truck and found his wallet. He counted his money and cursed as he realized how much he had spent. Rolling down both windows, he climbed into the truck and went to the White Coyote Cafe down the road.

The shaking subsided with his first cup of coffee. The hollow in his stomach shrank as he slopped up the gooey yellow of his egg with a fork full of pancake and link sausage. The pounding in his head eased off to a dull throbbing after his third cup of coffee. He sat for awhile, his physical discomfort disappearing like the memory of a bad dream, and looked at the people in the restaurant. In the booth behind him a group of old people dressed in golf clothes with the bronzed, leathery appearance from sitting too long under a tanning bed discussed their investment yields, funeral plots and grandchildren. Templeton tried not to listen to their conversation. He watched a hippy couple dressed in cut off jean shorts, sandals, dreadlocks and

with Terry-cloth towels wrapped around their necks walk into the restaurant lobby and use the phone. Hot spring water still dripped from their knotted hair. He stared at the girls butt cheeks that peeked out of the back of her cut-offs. One of the women behind him talked about how her son had just gotten a new job at Enron two weeks after the birth of his first child, a baby boy. The woman and her husband were going to Houston to visit their son and his family for Christmas. What a banal, clichéd ass life, Templeton thought and tried to divert his attention from the table again. He watched a gigantic trucker consume two slabs of chocolate peanut butter pie. A pregnant waitress with her hair tied up in a bun poured him another cup of coffee. The trucker said something to her, then erupted into laughter. She smirked and walked away. A young, pimple-faced, kid with red-hair working as a busboy cleared tables across the room and stole a few of the tips. The old woman behind Templeton went on about the accomplishments her son had made throughout his life since high school: diving and golfing awards in sports, a thespian, honor roll, valedictorian (of course, Templeton thought, why not); then in college he was president of the student counsel, captain of the swim team, and (here we go, Templeton thought), graduated magna cum laude (What? not summa) in physics (from M.I.T.), Cornell. Templeton pictured his father and mother sitting at White Coyote Cafe with his aunt and uncle talking about his accomplishments. He imagined his father sitting there with one eye hanging out of its socket by a thin strip of sinewy tissue, people at the other tables trying their best not to notice him guffawing it up through a fleshy hole that used to be his mouth, the edges of his flesh crisp and black from powder burns, where the top of his mouth and nose used to be, tossing his head back as he joked with his brother Philbert. Then he could see his mother coming out of one of her glassy eyed, trances; stopping her slow, rhythmic sway to the high-pitched sound of her humming, she had gotten into the habit of humming Burt Bacharach songs in a piercing tone that

sounded like the metal halting of a train braking on the rails, to scold his father for getting brain on the back of his seat. He could hear his father gurgling off his accomplishments: he graduated psycho-therapy and quit wetting the bed when he was 12 years old, he quit his degree in English, who needs that pompous shit anyway, right, and moved into sociology, graduated, got a job helping to take children out of their dysfunctional homes and into foster care, got strung out on crack, graduated rehab and went back to his job, and now he only drinks and snorts cocaine. Oh yeah, he's writing a book about his murdered uncle Cleveland now. Pretty impressive, huh?

Templeton turned to look at the hippy girl's ass again, but she had tied her towel around her waist. Another old woman started in about her grandson. Templeton was aware of the anger behind the morbid scenarios he created, but he never quite understood why he was angry with his father. Yes, his father had killed himself when he was nine, but he had never really known the man. He had always been a quiet, distant person. He had been kind, but never close to Templeton. He had never tossed a football with him, never taken him to the zoo, never built a snowman with him or any of the normal daddy stuff. He had tried to ask his uncle Philbert about him, but Philbert avoided the subject and gave vague descriptions or useless anecdotes.

Templeton had two clear memories of his father. The first was after he got back from the war and the nightly routine he had. He remembered that his father wanted a particular dinner every night of the week and he never wanted it varied. He didn't remember what was served on what night, but he remembered eating every week oven-baked chicken with rice and gravy, meatloaf with French bread and peas, milk, always milk to drink and pot roast with potatoes, carrots, and onions on Sunday. The other four nights slipped his mind. After dinner Eli would help him with his homework for an hour or so then take a bottle of Cutty Sark and a tumbler and disappear into the basement for the rest of the night. He never knew what he did down there because no one

was allowed there, and Eli locked it when he wasn't home. For years Templeton imaged sick and perverted scenarios with woman and men, these progressed to more morbid and violent fantasies about victims being kept against their will and cannibalism. It wasn't until later that Templeton found out what his father really did in the basement, and it was the truth that made him weep more than any of his fantasies.

The second memory was of Eli's 38th birthday. At school Templeton had drawn a picture in crayon of Eli dressed as a cowboy riding a horse. Happy Birthday Daddy, I Love You was printed in four different colors across the bottom right corner of the picture. Templeton had been sitting on the picture and right after they finished eating he pulled it out and gave it to Eli. Eli stared at the picture and then he looked at Templeton. His eyes became watery and he leaned over and kissed the boy on his forehead, and with the utmost sincerity he told Templeton it was the most beautiful picture he had ever seen in his life. He held the boy close and hard for a long moment. He looked across the table at Silvia and smiled, kissed Templeton on top of his head, got up from the table, grabbed his bottle and walked downstairs into the basement.

Templeton sighed, got up from the booth by pushing his seat backwards and jostling one of the old men behind him. He stared down at the old man and sneered. The old man smiled, then noticed Templeton's expression and turned away; the old woman did not notice him and didn't stop talking.

Low levels of serotonin in the brain after excessive use of recreational drugs, especially narcotics like cocaine, can cause overwhelming degrees of guilt and depression in the user. Before he learned this in rehab, Templeton had suffered through the periods of bad brain chemistry like a 19th century romantic poet in the throes of an encounter with the abyss. After

rehab, he learned to accept the fact that his brain chemistry was out of whack after nights of partying and waded through the experience, at most being inconvenienced by guilt. So in the truck, when the darkness hit him like a crow smashing into his windshield, he was startled when he burst into tears. He pulled the truck off to the side of the road and wept in deep, heavy sobs. He thought that he was used to the kind of thoughts he had about his parents while in the restaurant. The absurd was how he dealt with the absurdity of what had happened. For years he had wondered in passing how his life would have turned out if his parents had survived. All the years of counseling that his aunt and uncle had paid for had actually worked to a point. He had learned to take the tools Dr. Sakimoto had practiced with him to face his problems and deal with his fears and used them instead, more effectively, to divert attention away from himself. He didn't turn away from the fact that he had seen the contents of his father's head spewed upon the bathroom wall or that he had witnessed the deterioration of his mother behind the walls of a mental institution. He had faced these terrors in a way no one knew, not Dr. Sakimoto, not his Aunt Rebecca or Uncle Philbert, not even his ex-fiancé Patience, and she had known more about him than anybody in his entire life. As a child, a year after the suicide of his father and months after his mother was hospitalized, he had stared down their ghosts, alone in the darkness of his bedroom. Piss soaked, he stared into the wet, slate, gray hollowness of their eyes. Trembling and willing himself not cry, for fear that they may turn their attention from whatever they were looking at in the distance to him, he watched them wander. He searched for reasons for what they did in their eyes, but there was none. There was only the blurred, wet image of himself in the grayness. He never told anyone about these experiences and eventually they stopped. He never analyzed them the way Dr. Sakimoto liked to do to things. He didn't think the reflection he saw of himself in those phantom's eyes were symbolic of himself as the cause of his parent's

failures. In fact he knew it to be just the opposite. It had been his mother who had convinced him, in a rare moment of clarity, when he had been allowed to go and visit her.

He had sat with her as she stared off in a dreamy gaze, and talked about baking cakes with her grandmother in Louisiana. He had tried to tell her about an art project he had made in school, but she did not hear him. He was about to begin to cry as he looked at her and the way she swayed back and forth in her chair, her hands clenched around the neck of her robe, when she stopped and looked at him with her eyes as clear, piercing and lucid as the bright reflection of light on glass and told him, without the thin grin that was usually on her face, that he was to never blame himself for what they had done, and that he had better not ever let anybody blame him for what happened either. Then she assumed her old position and continued her story.

Eventually he became secure in the fact that there was ultimately no reason for the things that happened in life. People shot themselves, went insane, did drugs, fell in and out of love, beat and murdered each other, fucked, stole, warred, and died for no other reason than that was the way things worked. Nothing more nothing less. There were no explanations. Things happened as inescapable laws of existence. So Templeton became adept at adapting. He saw what people were expected to behave like and he assumed the role because it afforded him a freedom away from being probed if he didn't comply. If he played the role then he wouldn't be bothered. He had seen the way the other children in therapy had acted out, throwing tantrums, assaulting themselves, yelling, screaming, crying and pouting, and he watched, with as much intent as he watched the hollow eyes of his parents. He watched how much of their freedom they lost, how controlled they were by Dr. Sakimoto and their parents, and he vowed to himself that he would be a good, well adjusted child, that he would answer all their questions, yet not with too much ease or compliance, but just enough resistance to make himself seem more troubled

than he should have been between the ages of nine and thirteen. He did the meditation and journal exercises, and when he was older, and Dr. Sakimoto wanted to try a new technique in dream analysis he discovered at a conference on Jungian Psychology, he wrote down his dreams, sometimes drew or painted scenes from a dream the Dr thought important and participated in sessions of active imagination in which he would attempt to communicate with some element of his unconscious that had revealed itself in a dream. But all the exercises and techniques didn't erase the hollow distant stare of his parent's eyes. The nightly family get-togethers continued until he was eleven and his father quit showing up. His mother showed up until he started smoking crack, but had recently showed up a brief moment the previous year after a bout of sobriety for five days. Templeton never thought to try to differentiate between whether the phantoms were actual supernatural visitations or manifestations of his own mind. There seemed to be little difference to him, and to speculate on it would only make him seem pensive and suspect in the eyes of others. It didn't matter to him. It was another something that happened, as important as the way a drop of water extends itself before falling into the sink. To act like what was expected of him allowed him the freedom from prying aunts, uncles, cousins and doctors. And he found a modicum of comfort in the vast grayness he lived in within himself and resolved to keep it that way.

Yet on the side of the road in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, the comforting haze of gray erupted black and oppressive as factory smoke. Panic struck him. He felt lost, as if he were in a landscape not on any map, dislocated from normal reality. He hopped out of the truck, breathing hard and wiping the tears out of his wide, shocked eyes. He spun around looking for a familiar landmark. He had no idea where he was. He only saw the bright colors of store fronts and passing cars. He knew what they were but not where. The dust-brown

ancientness of the ragged hills surrounding the town enhanced the alien aspect of the landscape. Then his recognition returned. He knew where he was at and why he was there and despair settled on him like a wet wool blanket. Who he was, he thought, to think that anything was going to change. Who was he to think he should or even could write a book? He got back in the truck and drove back to the motel. He felt exhausted and wanted to sleep.

When he woke up he felt better. He made the bed, showered and brushed his teeth, cleared out all the bottles and wiped up the coke residue that was on the dresser. He straightened his typewriter and paper, looked at them for a moment as if he were trying to determine how the two objects were supposed to work together to produce the object he desired, then grabbed Cleveland's book and reclined on the bed to read. He opened it at the beginning.

The words lulled him into a state. They absorbed him in a way that no other book had ever done. One minute the book filled him with the comfortable, transcendent feeling of contemplation, his imagination pinballing from one lofty idea to another. The next minute, he was grounded heavy in the earth from a scene so beautiful that he let himself sink into it as if he merging with the world from the gravity of it. Yet it surged through him with an anxiousness to act, an urge to do something to prove to himself that he was alive. It left him with a yearning to give back to the force that coursed through his veins and moved him across the land. But, no action seemed big enough, no action seemed grand, or eloquent or majestic enough. So too both quell the feeling and in celebration of it he usually went out drinking, and hoped to encounter a goddess on earth who would share his love of life for a night. Who would help to compose a physical poem with him to celebrate the very fact that they were alive at that moment. A deep, earthy, Dionysian, primal African, pre-language poem that would change their being on a genetic level, on a quantum level and suck them into the Tao then spit them back out as shining

bodhisattvas who would radiate pre-conscious messages, coded to bring joy to those around them.

A knock at the door started Templeton. He looked over at the clock on the night stand, it was 5:20 much too late for house keeping, he thought.

“Who is it?” he said, without getting up from the bed.

“It’s me, güey, Pavel. Open up, bro.”

The guy from last night, Templeton remembered, that’s right we’re supposed to go to the old lady’s. He was about to tell him to come back later. He wanted to read some more, and he knew what was going to happen if he let Pavel in. He still felt a bit tired from the night before and drinking and partying didn’t seem too appealing.

“Ándale güey. I don’t like driving on the highway at night, man. It’s getting dark.”

He opened the door. Pavel stepped in. He smelled of grease and smoke. Templeton remembered him being taller. There was a slight hunch in his back, but he had really square shoulders and his head seemed almost perfectly round. He wore a red shirt that had faded to pink and was stained with grease spots. His baseball hat was turned backwards on his head and he looked like gnome. Pavel slapped him on the shoulder, walked in and looked around the room.

“Looks better than last night, eh?” Pavel said smiling and nodding his head. “Hey man, you ready to go. But, check it out, bro, I need a beer before we go out to that spooky bitch’s place, ok. You can check out your girlfriend too, man. You was slobbering it up last night, homes.”

Templeton tasted the sourness of the girl’s mouth in the back of his throat. He cleared his throat, went to the bathroom and took a drink from the faucet.

“I don’t want to get all blasted though,” Templeton said.

“Naw bro, me neither. I just got off of work though and I need a brew, homes. Come on let’s bounce, man.”

After his fourth beer Templeton forgot about how sour Mandy’s mouth had tasted the night before. His eyes crawled over her and he smiled at her, she twisted her hips and smiled back. Pavel came out of the bathroom and handed Templeton the seal underneath the bar. Mandy saw the exchange leaned over the bar and told Templeton she wanted one, a big fat one. She kissed him on the cheek, smiled, then sashayed down to the other end of the bar and served a motorcycle gang a round of beers.

Templeton laid a line out on the toilet tank. He didn’t crush it so there were little rocks still in it. He liked it that way because it took a while for the rocks to dissolve and it gave a better drip, the buzz lasted longer too. The door opened, and the click of heels told him it was Mandy before her yoo-hoo did. He liked that she had guts to walk into the men’s room to do cocaine, but he also recognized the desperateness of the act. She was either fiending for a bump, or she was used to getting burned when it came time for her to get hers, or she was just comfortable with the men’s restroom and doing drugs or whatever in them. Either way, it made him sad as listened to the echo of her shoes on the dirty linoleum. He laid out an extra big line for her. He opened the stall and she slipped in, took the dollar bill from him and inhaled the dope with a nasally grunt. Templeton had been looking at her ass as she bent over the tank, but the sound she made was too incongruent with the sight and he felt sadder. She turned around hugged and kissed him. He felt the gratitude and desperateness in the act, and he wanted to pull away, but then she put her hand on his crotch and started to massage him through his pants.

“Maybe I can get a fatter one later on,” she said, and kissed him again. “I need to get back out there before they notice I’m gone.”

She left and Templeton watched her sway out of the door, then he made himself another line.

The potholes in the dirt road bounced the two of them toward the middle of the torn fabric seat of the pick-up, and they spend most of the ride scooting back to their sides. Templeton held on to the vinyl armrest that hung in the passenger side door by a single screw. Dirt swirled like a silver mist in the beam of the truck’s one headlight, and slipped in through the top of Pavel’s window because he couldn’t roll it up all the way. The darkness seemed to have consistency. They passed the house and would have kept going until they reached Silver City, but Pavel glanced in his side mirror and saw the dim outline of it through the dark. He slammed on the brakes, the truck fish-tailed and threw Templeton forward hard enough to smack his head against the windshield. Pavel erupted into laughter as he turned the truck around, Templeton frowned at him and rubbed his head. The headlight shown on the house in front of them.

It was a small ochre-colored adobe style house with a fence built of stones that looked to encircle the entire structure. Around the fence big sage, pincushion cacti, aloe, and broom dalea grew. An opening in the fence lead to the front of the house. On both sides of the opening a huge narrow leaf yucca stood like sentinels. In the yard a chokeberry tree, devoid of leaves, was decorated with strips of brightly colored ribbons and figurines made of straw and dressed in clothes made of yarn hung from fraying pieces of twine.

“Fuck bro, this shit is weird”, Pavel said.

Templeton was still rubbing his forehead and just nodded.

“What you gotta do out here, again, man. Let’s go. This shit freaks me out”, Pavel said.

“What? What’s wrong? I don’t understand. What is all that stuff?”

“Witchcraft shit, man. I told you this bitch is a bruja, man. That’s probably people’s spirits and shit, bro.”

The door to the house opened and a small mahogany skin woman, her gray hair tied back in a pony-tail, walked outside and squinted into the glare of the headlight.

“Who’s there?” she said, motioning for Pavel to turn off the headlight.

“Turn off the light,” Templeton said.

Pavel looked at him with a furrowed brow. Templeton nodded. Pavel turned off the headlight and the darkness surrounded them. A few seconds later a dim glow of a porch light split the night, and the woman stood in an orange haze. Templeton got out of the truck.

“Who’s there?” the woman said, irritated.

“Are you Meridian...Meridian...I think you knew my uncle, Cleveland Beaumont.”

The woman walked toward Templeton and he walked toward her, but tripped and fell face first into the hard earth. The woman stopped.

“You’re a drunk dog, get away from here!”

Pavel exploded with laughter.

“Both of you get the hell out of here.”

Templeton stood and stumbled again. He had dirt on his face and a small drop of blood trailed from his right nostril. He smiled at the woman.

“I’m sorry. My name is Templeton...”

The woman began picking up clots of dirt and small rocks and throwing them at Templeton and the car. Templeton stood and stared with a look of total incomprehension. A chunk of dirt hit him in his shoulder. He seemed to wake up out of a trance and stumbled backward a step or two.

“Wait I’m...I’m sorry...I mean do you know my uncle...”

The woman screamed louder. Pavel jumped out of the truck and grabbed Templeton. A rock hit the trucks windshield and Pavel heard the snap of the glass cracking.

“Ah shit, man,” he said, and pulled Templeton back to the truck. “Come on dumb-ass before she grabs your soul or some shit.”

A dirt clot hit Pavel in the back between his shoulder blades.

“Fuck! Esta loca, pinchi vieja.”

“You should have more respect for uncle’s name and your family, boy,” the woman yelled.

Templeton stopped and pulled away from Pavel.

“You knew him?” Templeton said.

Another rock landed just in front of him and Pavel pushed him to the truck. They jumped in and drove away while the old woman still threw stuff at them.

Templeton decided to walk back to his motel from the bar. Mandy offered to go with him, but he told her he wouldn’t be very good company and that he would see her the next day. A cold October wind blew. He did not have a jacket so he pulled his arms through the sleeves of

his t-shirt and wrapped his arms around his chest. He believed he understood why his Uncle Philbert disliked Meridian so much. She was crazy, she was a bitch. Philbert believed that it was because of that “skinny sqaw” that Cleveland had been murdered.

Philbert hadn't liked Meridian from the first time he had met her. They had met in 1967 at The International House of Pancakes in Denver on Colfax and Race, and he didn't appreciate the way she was “all got up in that Indian fashion”. She wore a pair of jeans and a deer skin shirt decorated with beads and feathers, she wore her hair in long braided pony-tail, a head-band with an eagle feather that lay on top of the pony-tail. Philbert didn't think her attire was appropriate for such a family oriented atmosphere. Plus, he knew about all that communist-Black Panther-anti-war stuff that Cleveland talked about, and he knew, “just by looking at her” that she was probably mixed up with “that craziness”. He also held Meridian responsible for inspiring Cleveland to write “that blasphemous, immoral scribbling” and become a “carrot-eating, drug using, communist hippy”. But what caused Philbert to hate Meridian was the fact that he was with her when he was murdered. He was convinced that the man that shot Cleveland had been one of Meridian's “many” jealous lovers. Then after he had gone to court in 1977 to get the rights to Cleveland's books so he could stop any subsequent printings, so as not to degrade the name of his dead brother and family, Meridian fought against him to get the rights to keep the book in publication. Meridian lost. Philbert tried to sue her for personal damages and would probably have been awarded something if Meridian hadn't disappeared, seemingly, from the face of the planet.

“What a fucking waste of time”, Templeton mumbled. “I'm going back home tomorrow, beg for my job back and forget about this stupid book idea and that crazy old woman”.

He was swaying as he walked with his head down and he bumped into someone. He staggered in the opposite direction muttered an apology and walked on. He stopped at the corner for a street light, and turned around. The person who he had run into was standing under a streetlamp watching him. He looked like Mr. French from the old television sitcom Family Affair. Templeton did a double take. The man was wearing a pork-pie hat and he tugged at the brim and smiled when Templeton turned around. Templeton heard a vague, far away sound like chanting. A shiver shot up his spine and goose flesh rose over his entire body. He crossed the street and broke out into a run turning around a block away to see that the man was gone. He ran faster and didn't stop until he reached the motel.

Templeton locked both locks on the door and peered out the window. Then he took off his clothes, threw them on the floor next to bed, showered, brushed his teeth, turned on the TV. He grabbed Cleveland's book and opened randomly. He fell asleep after a paragraph. He dreamt that night. He dreamt of Mandy dancing. She danced in the middle of a circle of people. He could not see, only hear. She danced with wild, convulsive, sensual movements around a fire. Waving her arms like a sand hill crane during a mating dance, twisting her back in slow serpentine curves, raking her nails across the ground drawing strange hieroglyphic signs. Then a man who resembled an East Indian, a striking similarity to Gandhi in appearance, jumped into the circle and began dancing with the woman who was no longer his Mandy but his old girlfriend Patience. They danced for what seemed like hours, they danced until they disappeared and all that was left was a powder blue field of emptiness.

Templeton woke up unusually refreshed. The bristled haze of a cocaine hangover and the nausea of alcohol were absent. He rolled over onto to his back and felt the spine of his uncle's book poke into his ribs. He leafed through the book and reread the passage he had read the night before. He sat up and rested his back against the headboard and flipped to the beginning of the book and reread the first few pages again. He knew he was going to have to write the book he traveled to New Mexico to write. It wasn't just the need to feel that he had something in common with his uncle, or a simple urge to match his activity out of some egotistic need to compete, or to prove to himself that his lineage did have more than suicides, lunatics and fanatics, that he was more than just a dope fiend and alcoholic who merely floated through life like a Dickensian shade who hadn't yet died, or that he wasn't just an illusionist distracting himself with something just to keep from erupting into hysteria at any given moment. It was all that and more. It was a battery flashlight at the moment of Y2K, it was bread crumbs left on the floor of the Black Forest. It was the feeling of being pricked by needle in the haystack even though he couldn't see it. It was a need that was visceral, a physical point that he felt in the center of his belly, on the surface of his skin, beneath the enamel of his teeth. But it was even more than that, and more than he was even aware of. It extended beyond his body, through the powder-blue light tendrils of his consciousness, to the quantum bonds that mimicked substantiality, into the nexus that was his fabric of existence.

Templeton hesitated before he pulled onto the road that lead to Meridian's house. He wasn't quite sure what to say to the woman, and he was more than a little nervous to see her again. He felt the scab on his forehead from the abrasion he had gotten the night before. He

reached over to the passenger's side of his truck and patted the dozen pink and white carnations that he had bought for her as if for comfort. He turned and drove slowly until he reached her house.

A metallic pine green Saturn SC1 Coupe was parked in front of the stone fence. A woman was bent over leaning into the back seat. Templeton couldn't see her face but he noticed she was thin and curvy. She pulled out a bag of groceries. Templeton grabbed the carnations and jumped out of the truck.

Meridian's daughter stopped and looked at Templeton. Over her left shoulder the sun beamed bright and strong. She was indubitably beautiful. Her Native heritage obvious in her high round, cheek bones, yet the thin slope of her nose that tapered to point gave her face a slight, almost Scandinavian appearance when she turned her head. Her hair, in long, thick spiraling curls and tinted nut brown, hung just below the small of her back. She smiled and pushed a piece of hair from across her face behind her ear. Templeton stopped, his mouth slightly agape. After a moment, he managed a crooked, shy smile.

"Excuse", he said to the woman. "Is Meridian here?"

"Yes, she is", the woman said. "Mom" she yelled softly.

Meridian came out the front door. She was dressed in a pair of blue jean overalls and a red flannel shirt. Her hair was still tied back in the pony-tail. She stopped when she saw Templeton. Templeton looked at the ground. The woman looked back and forth between them.

"Is there some kind of problem here?" the woman asked.

“I’m sorry, I ah...these are for you ma’am”, he said, half tripping, half trotting over to Meridian and handing her the flowers. He looked back at the woman and then quickly looked back at Meridian.

“I just...I just want to apologize for last night. I just thought you might know my uncle, Cleveland. Cleveland Beaumont. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble...”

“Mom, what’s going on?”

Templeton moved his head back and forth between the women and finally rested his eyes on a beetle crawling across his tennis shoe.

“Mom?”

“Calm down, Jennifer. You too, mister. You sober today?”

Templeton looked up at Meridian then back at Jennifer, then Meridian again. He nodded his head slowly.

“Don’t you ever come to my house that way again do you understand me?”

“Mother?”

“For goodness sake, Jennifer calm down. Everything is fine. Your names Templeton isn’t it?”

“Yes ma’am. So you knew my uncle?”

“Templeton, this is my daughter Jennifer. Jennifer, Templeton Beaumont. And yes I knew your uncle. Why?”

Templeton was confused whether to answer Meridian or shake Jennifer's hand first. He shook Jennifer's hand and staring at Jennifer said, "I want to write a book about him and I was told you might be able to help me out."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know him," Jennifer said smiling.

Flustered, Templeton turned to Meridian and repeated himself.

"Grab that bag of groceries from her and bring it in the house," Meridian said to Templeton. "Jennifer go get the last bag ok, hun."

The floor of the living room was red, hardwood, covered with rugs of various cultural designs, but with the matching colors of reds, browns, yellows and greens. There were rugs from Cameroon, China, Israel, India, Navajo, Iraq, Chili, Peru and several other countries. Plants in Navajo woven baskets lined the walls and hung from the ceiling; a couple of framed sand painting hung on the wall as well as a poster of Charlie Chaplin. Above the fire place painted in vivid colors were the Yei. Templeton sat on a log framed futon and sipped iced-tea as the women put groceries away in the kitchen. He was still a bit nervous and sat bolt upright on the edge of the futon, cupping the glass between both hands that rested on his knee. Jennifer would peek around the corner and ask him general questions about how long he had been in New Mexico, how long he planned to stay, if he knew anyone else, if he knew his way around town. Templeton gave short, quick answers.

"Relax guy, my mother isn't as evil as she likes to pretend to be. Ornery yes, mean no," Jennifer said peeking her head around the corner. "Mom do you need anything else?"

Meridian told her no and to get on her way so she could talk to Templeton.

“Ok mom, I’m going to dinner party tonight with The Reverend at the Mayor’s house and *church* on Tuesday. Would you like me to pick you this time?”

Meridian snorted and laughed. Jennifer shook her head.

“Well Templeton, it was very nice to meet you. Here’s my card. Call me I’d be more than happy to show you around town, help you with your research, or whatever.”

Templeton stood up, took the card and shook her hand. She smiled at him and left her hand in his for a moment. Templeton looked over her shoulder and saw Meridian looking at them. He pulled his hand away and softly thanked her and told her he would call her. Jennifer looked over her shoulder at Meridian. Meridian smiled. Jennifer shook her head.

“Goodbye, mother I have to go get ready.” she said to Meridian. “Give me a call if you want to go to church this week.”

“Go on your way sellout.”

Templeton watched her leave and smiled as she turned back and looked at him before she closed the door. Meridian peeked around the kitchen door.

“You look like your father, but I think you have passion like your uncle,” Meridian said to Templeton. “At least she should hope so.” she said under her breath.

“You like her?” Meridian asked.

“Ma’am I just came to ask you a few questions.”

“Oh calm down fella, and cut with the ma’am stuff, ok. Call me by my name. It’s good that you like her. She’s a beautiful girl. You should call her. Just don’t let her rope into that Christian stuff she’s caught in. Bad stuff, mister, bad stuff.”

“Yes ma...yes I will thank you.”

Jennifer drove back to Truth or Consequences thinking about what she was going to wear to the dinner party that night. She was the personal assistant to Reverend Tobias Drake Hines, the pastor for the Torch of God Christian Church, and he had invited her to accompany him to a dinner that was being held at the mayor’s house that night. It had been a big fund raising dinner for a large project that the church was undertaking. Reverend Hine’s friends Mr. Samuel Waters, and one of New Mexico’s Republican Congressmen, Allen Franks were set to sit at the table with the reverend. She was nervous because she had never met either of the men before and she didn’t know how to act around such prestigious people. Yet she was also excited. It was a big opportunity for her to get recognized by the reverend’s friends. Samuel Waters’ family had a lot of history in Truth or Consequences.

The Waters’ family had had a lot to do with the city’s name change. Samuel’s father, William, had been a member of the city council and commission from 1935 until he died of a heart attack while hunting moose in Canada at the age of 63 in 1974. He had been one of the key figures in promoting the idea that the city change its name from Hot Springs to Truth or Consequences. The landslide election, 1,294 for and 295 against, was influenced heavily by Waters and a few of his friends who visited the homes of those people who at first were opposed to the change. Bill, as he preferred to be called, because he said it had a friendlier and homier ring to it, like the professional politician he was, arrived at the houses of “those less progressive individuals”, as he liked to call them, in an entourage of four black 1945 Chevy Stylelines. Waters would go to the door of the homeowner and discuss the benefits of the name change for the city’s economy, and how they would never be confused with Hot Springs Arkansas or

Virginia again, and he never failed to mention how it would help his own construction company. While Bill propounded on the financial rewards and the celebrity that the name would bring to the town, the seven gentlemen in the other cars sat on their hoods or leaned against the doors of the automobiles and discussed whether the Philadelphia Phillies would get to the World Series. Only one resident, a Mr. Wade McConnell, found Waters campaign unacceptable. Mr. McConnell pulled a 12 gauge shotgun from behind his door and shot it into the air. The seven men scrambled and jumped for cover behind their vehicles holding baseball bats and iron pipes above their heads. Bill, calm and smiling, explained to Mr. McConnell that wasn't any need for violence, that every citizen of Truth or Consequences had a right to their opinion. Mr. McConnell pointed the gun at Waters' chest and told him the town's name was still Hot Springs and to get off his porch. Bill nodded his head and told Mr. McConnell to have a nice day and left. The next day Waters brought Mrs. McConnell flowers in the hospital while she recovered from asphyxiation caused by the smoke from the fire that started in their home mysteriously. Mr. McConnell, eyes glued to the pale green tile of the hospital floor, shook William Waters' hand and thanked him for his concern. Bill patted him on the back and left.

Samuel Waters stood outside on the porch of the Mayor's house with Franks and the Reverend Hines. Waters and Franks drank gin and Hines drank vanilla Cola. Franks coughed a deep phelgmy cough as he inhaled his cigarette. Waters covered his drink.

"Allen, for the sake of us at least, you need to quit those goddamn things," Waters said.

Franks took a long drink from his glass nodded and coughed again.

"I'd quit the damn things tonight if I thought it'd do me any good," Franks replied. "I've been trying for three years now and nothing seems to work. It's my New Years resolution, though. A new life for a new millennium."

“My ass,” Waters chuckled.

“It’s darn good idea though, Congressman,” Hines said. “A new dawn is arising and the age of the Almighty Father is near at hand. It is a good idea to welcome this age with a clean mind and body. Amen.”

“Amen,” the other two echoed.

“Now Al, the new millennium is exactly what we wanted to discuss with you,” Waters said.

“Here we go,” Franks said.

“Now, come on Al this is a serious matter. We got most the park built and want to break ground for this last section on January 1st and that ain’t too far away...”

“Samuel, if I may,” the reverend intercepted. “Congressman, December 31st 1999 is two months away. On January 1st 2000, with a Saturday morning service we would like to break the ground of Resurrection Falls in honor of the Lord Jesus Christ and his righteous deliverance of his people into a new millennium. The saved, Congressman, will be there to pray. The saved, Congressman, will be blessed on this day in the presence of our Lord, Amen,” Hines almost sang.

“What about this YK2 thing gentlemen?” Franks asked.

“Oh shit on that, Al. You know that’s just a bunch of bullshit you and your friends out in Washington dreamt up to make yourselves a shit load of money. Now that’s what I’m talking about with this resort, Al...”

“Congressman, I’m afraid I don’t share Mr. Waters’ cynical view of the millennium crisis we are discussing, but I know God will see us through this time of doubt and we will all be safe

and sound on Saturday January 1st so that we can break ground for Resurrection Falls in his honor. Allen, may I call you Allen?”

“Of course Reverend.”

“Thank you, Douglas. I’m wondering if you see the importance of this situation. You see to break ground on January 1st of this coming millennium year has great symbolic importance. It symbolizes, not only in name, the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, but the resurrection of the American people’s faith in our Lord. It is symbolic of a new rise in Christian consciousness that is spreading throughout this great American land. To break ground on January 1st, 2000 is like the Lord Jesus Christ’s promise of returning to the earth to bring the saved back into the loving grace of his arms. It is like the rapture, Allen, do you see?”

Franks sipped from his gin and nodded.

“The year 2000 is not the true millennium. Next year, 2001 is the true millennium, not a lot of people realize that, Allen. The grand opening of God’s Land will be on January 1st, 2001. That’s why the breaking of the ground for Resurrection Falls on January 1st, 2000 is so very important. It is the promise of the issuing in of a new world, Allen, do you understand. So this...Native American..., and don’t get me wrong this has nothing whatsoever to do with a persons nationality, in fact my personal assistant is Native, but this...Native situation is most unfortunate. Allen, the name God’s Land is not just a nice catchy phrase; it is what this land is. This is God’s Land. Not Irish land, not Negro land, Chinese land, Mexican land, or Native American land. God’s Land. And that’s the truth, congressman. This is greater than all of us. Amen.”

“Reverend, I understand. Really I do, and I agree, but what would you have me do. The land that Resurrection Falls is planned to be built on is Indian land. It’s theirs, Reverend, there’s not much that can be done about,” Franks stated.

“Damn it, Al we already talked about this. What’s up with your boy on the council? Did he decide if...”

“Allen, the Lord will guide you to a *soul*-lution, but I’m afraid I have to leave you gentlemen for a moment. My assistant seems to be looking for me.” Hines said, shook the two men’s hands and walked away.

Jennifer’s hair was done in a formal up-do style. She wore a black evening gown and a thin, silver sequined belt. A curly wisp of hair tickled her cheek and she kept trying to flip it back in place but it wouldn’t stay. Hines walked toward her. She waved to the Reverend, smiling.

“That little namby-pamby always wants to walk away when we start talking about the real dope. What/? Does he think he’s too holy that he’s gonna keep his hands clean. Some times I could just...” Waters said.

“He’s a man of God, Sam he can’t...” Franks started to say.

“My ass. Oh well fuck it. Look at that little assistant of his. That’s a fine, fine specimen of a woman there, Al. The Rev don’t know what he’s got there, Amen,” Waters said, chuckling. “But, come on, let’s go get a couple more drinks and I’ll explain exactly what I think a good “*soul*-lution” would be to fix this problem.”

“Jennifer, are you enjoying yourself?” Hines asked.

“This is wonderful, Reverend. I even got to meet the Mayor. He asked me if I’d be interested in doing some volunteer work for the children’s summer camp next summer. I told him I’d love to as long as it didn’t interfere with work,” Jennifer said.

“That’s splendid. That’s really exciting. I’m sure we can work our schedule around for you to help out. That would be a great opportunity for you. But, we need to leave now. I have a meeting with a parishioner, are you ready?”

“Always Reverend.”

The two made their way through the guest saying their goodbyes and thanking the Mayor for the invitation. Before they left Hines spotted Waters and Franks at the table. Waters smiled and gave the Reverend the thumbs up. The Reverend nodded.

Meridian pulled up a red canvas lounge chair and unfolded a brightly painted TV dinner stand. Then she went back into the kitchen. Templeton heard her rummaging through dishes. She came back out with a silver serving tray with a set of china cups, a tea kettle and a small glass of milk. She set it down on the stand then sat in her chair. She pulled her chair close to Templeton leaned over to him, her brow furrowed and stared at him with eyes as dark and shiny as obsidian.

“Don’t you ever come to my house in the condition you came in last night. Do you understand me?”

Templeton looked away and nodded.

“It’s disrespectful. Not only to me, but to your uncle and father, and yourself. You looked like a bum and smelled like a demon. Alcohol is for fools not Human Beings. I know this first hand myself. I saw too damn many of my friends get eaten alive by that crap. I don’t want to see

it again. I don't want to even be around the stuff. Do you understand? Not again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," Templeton said, lowering his head.

"So what do you want to know?" she said pouring water into each of the cups on the tray.

They talked for nearly four hours, but Templeton was disappointed to find out that Tor C wasn't a big part of his uncle's story. Cleveland had never once been to Truth or Consequences and Meridian had only moved within the region ten years prior. Meridian had grown up in the Fort Defiance agency in southernmost section of Greasewood Springs just east of the Petrified Forest in Arizona. She lived there until she was six and was then shipped off to school because the United States government made it mandatory for all Indian children to get a proper education. She was moved to the Ship Rock boarding school in New Mexico and stayed there until she was eighteen. She rarely left the confines of the school. Five times in twelve years she was allowed to leave the property. The first time was when her mother died of tuberculosis in 1948 when she was nine. She was allowed to be present in the room where her mother was taken to die, a separate dwelling from the main Hogan. As is the custom of the Navajo people only two elders were allowed to be present for the actual burial, so she was sent back to the boarding school after only three hours. When she got back to the school, she didn't weep, to show too much emotion is not the way of the Diné. They believe that too much emotion is a distraction for the deceased journey to the underworld and may cause the dead to return to the world. Not a good thing in their belief system. But because she didn't show enough emotion the nuns at the boarding school thought there was something wrong her and took her aside and told her that if she didn't show her feelings and pray to God for her mother's soul, her mother could end up in

hell tortured and suffering for eternity. Eventually Meridian cried. She cried so hard and so long that they had to tranquilize her to get her to stop.

Her father's death, six years later, had been the second time she had been allowed to leave. He was given two funerals. One was an honorary funeral given to him by the United States Government because he had been a code-talker in World War II. It was merely for show because his body was buried in the Navajo tradition. He had died of lung cancer caused by radiation poisoning from uranium mining on his reservation. Meridian, being the only surviving member of the family, was given the flag. She burned it twenty years later in San Francisco at a protest against Viet Nam.

The next two times she left the school was with a friend of hers. A white girl named Stephanie Shultz whose father, Jack Shultz, had been an anthropologist who lived on the reservation. The first time, she had gotten permission to go with the Shultz's because Jack had told the school board he wanted to take the Indian child into the city for an anthropological study. He took the girls to a carnival in Albuquerque. He made them pinky swear not to tell any of the other kids or the teachers. The girls never did. Four years later Meridian and Stephanie snuck off the grounds and planned to hitch-hike to Albuquerque again. They got off the grounds only to be picked up by a priest from another nearby reservation and were taken back to the school. The Shultz's were asked to leave the reservation because Stephanie's behavior had become a bad influence on the other girls. Meridian was beaten on her back with a stick until the welts burst with blood. She couldn't sleep on her back for three weeks afterwards, and all the backs of her school uniforms were stained with a grease spots from the salve that had to be applied to her wounds every morning and night.

The next time she left was the last. At eighteen she graduated and left Ship Rock the very next day. She got a job cleaning houses in Albuquerque and attended the University of New Mexico. She never went back to Ship Rock again.

She also told Templeton about how she met his uncle Cleveland, his uncle Philbert, his father and his mother. She told him that she met Cleveland almost two months before City Lights had published his book. They met in Denver on April 16th, 1963 at a bar named the Satire Lounge on Colfax Avenue. She had been there with Stephanie. She had brought Meridian to Denver to attend her father's funeral three days earlier. Meridian had just gotten back from a trip through South America and Mexico. She had traveled for three months after she graduated college. She had studied English and political science. After she had spent a month traveling up the Amazon, she stayed with an old Yaqui Indian named Juan Mathus in Sonora Mexico and studied the medicinal use of several native plants in the region.

They were out having a drink, or rather Stephanie was drinking vodka tonics while Meridian drank 7-Up. Meridian sat on a stool at a partition that separated the bar area from the restaurant, sipping her soda and looking at the people. Stephanie talked with the owner, a young, handsome, Greek fellow who had just bought the bar a year before. Meridian smiled as she told Templeton how all the men stared at her, but none of them approached her. She had even put on a bit of a show and flashed a bit of leg. Then there was a man standing in front of her with a thin, seraphic smile. A black man and she was startled, not by his color, but by his looks. Cleveland was beautiful, she said. He made her nervous he was so handsome. They talked for a while and somehow he convinced her to go to a concert with her. She was raring to go, but Stephanie was scared because he black. She only got her to go with them because she threatened to go by herself.

They went to the black part of town, the Five Points, to a club called the Rossonian. Smoky Robinson and the Miracles were playing that night. Cleveland told her it was where all the big named R&B acts played when they came through Denver. The two women, hand in hand in tow behind Cleveland maneuvered through the crowd of dancing bodies up to the bar. Cleveland ordered Meridian a 7-Up and Stephanie a vodka tonic. Eli and Silvia came in later. Meridian told Templeton she would never forget the way his mother looked that night. She was dressed in a blue and white checkered, cotton dress with a matching bow in her hair. She was so dainty she looked like a doll. But when she started dancing the whole club stopped to look at her. She moved like jazz, and Meridian told him that she had never seen someone move like that before or since. Cleveland had two left feet, but he tried anyway. Stephanie shied away at the corner of the bar until her fourth vodka tonic when a smooth character called Tushy, in a pin stripe suit and a fedora bought her a drink. Then she danced all night with him. She moved to Oakland with him three years later and the last Meridian had heard anything about her was in 1975 when she got a letter from her telling that Tushy had been killed in Viet Nam and she and the kids were moving back to Denver.

They closed the Rossonian down, then went back to the room where Cleveland was staying and had a breakfast of ham, eggs and grits. After breakfast Cleveland borrowed a neighbor's car and drove Stephanie and Meridian home. Meridian stayed in Denver an extra week and she and Cleveland went out every night. Two weeks after she moved to Arizona to teach at a reservation grade school, Cleveland showed up and they stayed together until 1967.

Meridian was about to tell Templeton more but there was a loud knock at the door. She answered it and Templeton saw an older Native American man with shock white hair dressed in

jeans and a denim shirt with a red bandana around his head. Meridian stepped outside and shut the door. Templeton could hear them talking in their own language. Meridian stepped back in.

“We’re going to have to stop right now, ok. I have to go see about a friend. But you’re more than welcome to come back as long as you come sober. But don’t come before dawn, and you have to leave before dusk. Agreed?”

“Yes,” Templeton said, a bit confused by the restrictions, but not dissuaded. “And thank you so much for your help.”

“Good, well come on get up, I have to leave. Come back when you can.”

Meridian climbed into a cherry red, mint-condition, 1957 Dodge pickup. She and the man drove off. Templeton drove out onto the road that lead back to town. After he had driven about two hundred yards two cars started up that had been sitting off the side of the road. One turned down the road to Meridian’s house, the other followed Templeton.

Jennifer sat in section C, the center section, fifth row and eighth seat in the Torch of God Christian Church. It was where she always sat with her friends Natalie Hughes, Shawn Wright and Karen Parks who sat in seats nine, ten and eleven, every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday nights from 6:30pm to 8:30 pm. They sat in the fifth row because they could still be close enough to hear Reverend Hines's sermon without the echo the P.A. system caused way in the back, and without the heat from the stage lights caused in the first four rows. The church had originally been an old wood framed structure with a steeple, a single room two story Protestant church, painted white with six arched windows on each side of the building and with 18 rows of pews when Reverend Hines bought it in 1985. Now it was the largest building in Truth or Consequences. It was a massive Hi-tech architectural structure. Glass and etched steel framed the majority of the building. A porch, extended out from the façade, and three sets of spotless glass double doors allowed entrance into the building. The porch was formed by a colonnade of steel that supported a triangular roof where a massive, polished, brass colored cross hung flanked by two neon green spotlights that illuminated the cross. The porch was lit by the neon green glow of floor lamps built into the cement floor. Inside the church the congregation could sit in Heavenly Bucks coffee shop and sip lattes, or they could browse the Inspirational Family bookstore both in the foyer to the right and left of the entrance to the nave. Down a hall to the left was the Youth "Rock" room where the children eighteen and younger received "The Word" in the form of rock and roll music with lyrics about Jesus and teachings from the Bible. The older members of the congregation sang gospel and traditional style hymns in the nave of the church that was designed like a concert hall. The altar spanned an area about forty feet long and raised above the floor about ten. The pulpit stood center stage and behind it a grand piano and

six risers for the chorus. To the left and right of the pulpit were pits for the musicians. The congregation sat in stadium seats at three different levels and surrounded the altar. In the middle of the second row was a sound booth. It was separated from the congregation by polished chrome bars. Boom microphones hung above the altar and multi-colored lights lit it.

The lights in the church were turned down except for a single light in front of the pulpit. Figures could be seen coming onto the altar and filling the risers and musician's pits. Hushed voices murmured. A voice, as cool and sharp as a wintergreen mint, came over the speakers.

“Tonight your souls will be moved.”

A few whistles, Amens and claps could be heard.

“ Tonight The Holy Spirit will enter into this house of God and fill each and everyone of your beautiful souls with the radiance of the Lord God and Jesus Christ.”

More whistles and some shouts of Amen.

“One man, one holy man has accepted the duty of his Christian heritage and taken upon himself the suffering for us all. Tonight he will help guide The Holy Spirit into your hearts and put you onto the path of righteousness. Help me welcome tonight the holiest of the holy, the disciple of disciples, the shepherd of the shepherdless, the exterminator of evil, Reverend T.D. Hines.”

The musicians and chorus launched into song. The congregation exploded in cheers. The multi-colored lights swam over the altar and congregation. They stood, jumped up and down, heads and bodies shaking, arms reaching to the ceiling. A few even cried. Jennifer and Natalie jumped up and down with the rest and hugged each other. The Reverend T.D. Hines walked onto the altar in a suit of silver silk, arms raised with a smile big enough to show the perfect symmetry

of his alabaster teeth. Not a hair on his head moved as he walked. He went down the stairs to the congregation and shook hands with some of the people in the front rows of section C. A woman with tears in her eyes fell to her knees after she touched his hand. He waved to the people in the third level pews as he went back up to the pulpit. He stood there for a moment waving and smiling. Then the lights above the altar were turned back on, the band stopped playing and the multi-colored lights disappeared. The congregation went quiet as the Reverend motioned them to. He stood silent with his head down and his eyes closed. No one moved. After a moment, a moment long enough for his flock to realize that the Holy Spirit had entered into him, he lifted his head again and smiled. Everyone cheered. Amen's, praise God's, blest be's, shouts and sobs thundered through the church.

“I just had to take this moment to thank God. I had to thank him for all of you. I had to thank him for letting me be alive and be one of those chosen to bring you his word. Praise God, everybody.”

The nave echoed with a united voice.

“Tonight's a beautiful night for you all to be here,” he said, taking the microphone off the pulpit and walking across the altar. “For tonight I want to share a joyous secret with you. The fruition of God's will is about to be fulfilled here in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, people. The saved, and you are all saved because you are here tonight, are about to be rectified, justified, and immortalized in the presence of the Lord. Now I know some of you are thinking, Reverend, what could be so joyous with the end of our civilization glowering just over our horizon? What can be so wonderful with this Y2K lurking around the corner like Satan looking for souls at an abortion clinic? What can you tell me, Reverend to dissipate my anguish and fear? I can tell you that you are backsliding, my friend. I can tell you that if you have fear as a

Christian in God's army then your faith is weak and you must reassert your strength into your faith. Fear is the work of the devil. Fear is the devil whispering in your ear telling you that God may not be all you think he's cracked up to be. Fear is Satan's temptation to draw you away from God in this time of approaching apocalypse. If you fear you doubt, if you doubt you have lost your faith. Fear not children. The sanctuary of the Lord is about to be erected on earth at the very time the earth is to be lost. The breaking of the ground for Resurrection Falls, which you know is the final phase of God's Land, will happen the day after the Lord has taken his retribution upon the faithless. But Reverend, you may ask, how can this happen after Y2K? Won't all the electrical power and gas and heat be gone, won't hordes of the damned be assaulting and pillaging the land and each other's homes. Yes, yes this is all true, but friends the ground that Resurrection Falls is to be build on is holy land. Holy land that I consecrated myself while in communion with the Holy Spirit. Y2K is not the rapture my friends. It is a preemptive strike of sorts. A strategy of God to gather the saved together in places like God's Land over the entire world. And the Holy Spirit revealed to me that this land would be protected, a sort of way station, if you will, for the saved. A place for you, all of you who donated funds for the construction of HCR to come and revel in the grace of God. We will be taken care of. There is still time for those of you who have not donated to become a closer and more intimate member of this Christian community. Come into the bounty of God's love and celebrate your salvation at God's Land."

The church rumbled with cheers, amen's, whistles, stomps, shouts. Jennifer and Natalie joined in the celebration wide eyed and smiling through the rest of the service.

Meridian jumped out the station wagon first and walked straight over to Hines and Waters. Waters removed his Stetson and nodded at Meridian.

“This is Indian land Mr. Waters, Reverend Hines,” she said, standing with her legs spread and her hands on her hips. “This land is not yours to build your church or whatever it is you’re planning on building here.”

“Well, ma’am I...”

“My name is Meridian Yellow Thunder, and this is the Navajo tribal lawyer, Delbert Graham, who will be representing the people who do own this land, Mr. Waters.”

Graham limped over to Waters and Hines and shook their hands.

The Salamander lowered his shades and peered out the window of the car. Douglas Fuhrman was known as the Salamander because Reverend Hines had told him he traveled through both worlds, the spiritual world of the Lord and the profane world with as much ease and efficiency as his amphibious moniker. The only truth to that was that he moved in a slow, cautious and lumbering way when he walked, and his eyes were small and beady; but the reality was that Hines’s first secretary back in 1986, when Douglas and Hines had met up again at Hine’s office, had been terrified by the size of Douglas’s mouth when she first saw him. He had walked into the office and asked for Hines. The woman looked up from some paper work and gasped. Fuhrman’s mouth extended back almost to his ears. She backed her chair up as the cavernous maw seemed to unhinge itself and open like a feeding python. His mouth seemed alive and separate from the rest of his body. She was afraid that if he opened it more that the top of his head would fall off and roll across the floor. After Fuhrman left Hines overheard the woman taking on the phone. He overheard her snickering and saying that Fuhrman looked like a

salamander. Hines tried to reprimand her, but he broke up into laughter as well. A few days later Fuhrman returned and heard the woman whisper to Hines that The Salamander had arrived. Fuhrman asked why she called him a salamander, Hines, without hesitation, told him, and he had believed the good Reverend. After that Fuhrman preferred to be called The Salamander. Only his wife and the Reverend called him Douglas.

“You see Mr. Waters, Reverend Hines,” Graham said, taking a document from the inside pocket of his jacket. “As stated in Article 2 of the 1868 Navajo Treaty the land: ‘The United States agrees that the following district of country, to wit: bounded on the north by the 37th degree of north latitude, south by an east and west line passing through the site of old Fort Defiance, in Canon Bonito, east by the parallel of longitude which, if prolonged south, would pass through Old Fort Lyon or the Ojo-de-oso, Bear Spring, and west by a parallel of longitude about 109 degree 30' west of Greenwich, provided it embraces the outlet of the Canon-de-Chilly, which canon is to be all included in this reservation, shall be, and the same is hereby, set apart for the use and occupation of the Navajo tribe of Indians, and for such other friendly tribes or individual Indians as from time to time they may be willing, with the consent of the United States, to admit among them; and the United States agrees that no persons except those herein so authorized to do, and except such officers, soldiers, agents, and employees of the Government, or of the Indians, as may be authorized to enter upon Indian reservations in discharge of duties imposed by law, or the orders of the President, shall ever be permitted to pass over, settle upon, or reside in, the territory described in the article.’”

Graham folded the paper and put it back in his pocket.

“You see sirs, a large portion of land, approximately 275 acres, on which you plan to begin construction on phase four, Resurrection Falls, of your God’s Land Resort project is on

Indian land. And seeing as official representatives of said persons have not yet been contacted about the purchase of this portion of land, the construction of property on this private lot is illegal. And I, as a representative of said persons, am asking that you desist any further construction on this land,” Graham said.

“Mr. Graham,” Waters said, adjusting his Stetson further down on his forehead. “We surveyed this land several, several times and several years ago before we even moved an inch of dirt. We consulted with our people in the U.S. government and they made the same claim. We consulted with your people and the fine leaders of your great nation, and they also conferred with us that this land is not your land, this land is my land. So I say to you, Mr. Graham, if you have issue with this arrangement, I suggest you contact the proper authorities in both parties that I mentioned before. And please, if you require further contact with me contact my lawyer, thank you,” Waters said and turned to walk back to the car.

“Mr. Waters I have the government issued geological map of this area and how it is divided into...”

“My lawyer Mr. Graham, my lawyer.”

“We know what you two are doing, Waters. People like you have been doing it for years, but you’re not stealing land from us, not this time,” Meridian said.

“Madame, I don’t appreciate what you are implying here. And as a matter of fact this is not your land, this is not Mr. Waters’ land, this is not my land, this is the Lord God’s land. And a temple for the righteous Christian brethren will be raised here in honor of the Lord, and you or any other heathen, no matter who they are, will not stop this glorious occasion from manifesting,” Hines said, stepping forward and shaking his finger at Meridian.

“You self-righteous, little arrogant sack of lard, do actually have the audacity to stand here and tell me that. Your fat forked tongued gospels haven’t done anything but cause strife and suffering across this entire globe, and you have the nerve to talk to me, a woman of people of the earth about whose land this is. You had best be...”

“Is there a problem Reverend?” the Salamander said, walking up behind the Reverend. He protected the reverend ferociously. He had known Hines since he was a kid in high-school in Roxbury, Kansas, and the reverend had taken him under his wing. He had been a big, clumsily, hulk of a child who basically kept to himself. He had pale skin and platinum blonde hair. He was teased a lot, and his peers, from a time before he could remember, called him baby Huey. The reverend brought the boy into the church that he was pastor at and introduced him to Lord and the word of God. The Salamander became a devote member of Hines’s church. He would go to service every night and stay late to help Hines with whatever organizing or cleaning duties that needed to be taken care of. He drove Hines’s car and ran Hines’s errands. He helped paint the church, weed the flowerbed, and whatever other chores the reverend had him do. Behind closed doors, some of the less God fearing people in town began to call the boy “Hines’ nigger”. Others understood and thought it was down right nice of the pastor to take the boy under his wing. It probably kept his mind off the fact that he would probably never find a young lady being as how strange he looked with his mouth so big and all. The Salamander was not oblivious to it all. He realized that Hines was the only person who took any interest in him. So, even though he existed with a deep sense of loneliness, he did not let it get in the way of his job. Not only did he feel it was his Christian duty, he it did with complete abandon and dedication.

“No, son. It’s o.k.” Hines said patting the giant on his shoulder.

“No, there is a problem. Can you solve it?” Meridian said staring at the Salamander.

“Meridian, lets just go. We’ll handle this don’t worry about it,” Graham said, putting his hand on Meridian’s shoulder.

Meridian shrugged off Graham’s hand and stood staring at the three white men.

“Meridian. Meridian Yellow Thunder?” the Salamander asked.

“That’s my name, yes it is.”

“The same Meridian Yellow Thunder who was indicted for conspiracy in the incident on the Pine Ridge Reservation in Wounded Knee, South Dakota?”

“The very same. Are you trying to intimidate me, Mr...?”

“And you’re Delbert Graham? The same Delbert Graham who was kicked down the stairs in 1974 at a Tijuana brothel by a Mr. Sergio Gallegos for not having money to pay his prostitute for the carnal business you transacted?”

“Whatever your name is, Mr. Dark Sunglasses, Mr. wannabe CIA or FBI, or Reverend’s pet. Your threats about our past don’t hold any water. All that was the past and everyone knows what I’ve done and will do. And if you think we’re impressed that you know so much about us you’re wrong again. We know just as much about these two. So save your theatrics for someone who hasn’t seen a lot better, son.”

The Salamander walked toward the two, but stopped as the ’57 Dodge rolled up in a cloud of dust. The old Native man was driving and two other Native men around the same age sat in the bed of the truck with rifles.

“Ah, brother and sister. It’s a good day to go hunting on Indian Land don’t you think?” the driver said hanging out the window.

“Who are you men?” The Salamander asked stepping forward.

The men in the back picked up and cocked rifles.

“Come on boy, lets go,” Waters said, pulling the Salamander by the arm and patting the Reverend on the shoulder.

The three white men climbed into the car and speed off. Graham smiled at the bumper sticker that read: Remember Lot Didn't Look Back. The others watched until they disappeared over the horizon.

“That wasn't smart, guys. Now they'll get the feds involved,” Graham said.

“They probably already got the feds involved. The feds are probably part of this lie already,” the driver said.

“Yeah, but they'll know we're serious, too,” Meridian said, getting back into the station wagon.

Graham shook the hands of the men in the truck.

“Pete, Charly, Albert, how you all doing?” Delbert said.

Good, the men said in turn.

“You old outlaws keep out of trouble, please,” Delbert said. “We need to handle this delicately, ok.”

The three men chuckled and nodded. The driver winked at Meridian and they drove off. Graham got in the station wagon and started it up.

“You told me you hurt your knee playing football in high school,” Meridian said, looking at Graham with her eyebrow cocked.

“Well it was sort of the same. I hurt it running.”

He smiled at her and they drove off.

“What are you reading?”

Templeton looked up from the book and fell in love. Jennifer stood above him smiling. He stared, captivated. He felt as if he were suddenly suspended in deep water, drifting in a warm, spiraling current. He consumed her, letting her image burn itself in his memory. She wore a fluffy, wool ivory colored sweater with a wide collar that hung down enough to show her long, thin, muscular neck. On her neck rested a thin, silver braided chain with a silver sun charm. Her hair was down and the restaurant lighting shone with a dim orange glow around her head and played hopscotch with the highlights in her curls, her eyes were light, penetrating, scintillating, and the slight crook in her smile made her full lips look even more sensuous and gave her the appearance that she was letting him in on some sly secret that only she knew. This was the woman he still saw sometimes when he was alone, this face floating in the brackish water of his memory, a phantom stab of pain, and a weight like a lead coat on his body.

“Oh wow,” he said, looking up, pushing the book aside and standing up. “You’re...you look incredible.” He pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the table for her to sit down.

“You like?” she said, sweeping her arms around to show him the restaurant. “I didn’t know if you liked Greek food or not, but I thought I’d take my chances. Do you like it?”

Templeton nodded, smiling, still staring.

“You’re making me nervous looking at me like that.”

He jerked, straightened the collar of his shirt, and picked up his water glass and drank.

“I’m...I’m sorry I didn’t...”

Jennifer laughed.

“It’s cool. I just have a tendency to be vain sometimes and you’re giving me a really big head right now.”

“You just look absolutely fantastic, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I like it. Did you have any trouble finding this place? Sorry I’m a bit late. I got caught up at work. I’m kind of a work-a-holic, just so you know.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I work for the Torch of God Christian Church. I’m the reverend’s personal assistant. I handle all the office work basically. So, how do you know mom, anyway?”

“I didn’t before the other day. My uncle knew her. I guess they ah...dated a long, long time ago, before we were born, you know”, he said, trying to gauge her reaction.

“Cleveland, right? Your uncle’s name was Cleveland?”

A waitress came to the table and asked if they wanted anything to drink. Jennifer ordered the house Chardonnay and Templeton a beer.

“Do you mind if I order for the both of us? You’ve got to try the Arni Mavrodaphne, its exquisite. But we should get some saganaki first. I think you’ll like it. Is that ok?”

Templeton smiled and shrugged. “Whatever you suggest is completely all right with me.”

“Yeah, I remember when I was real young my mom used to talk to the Coyote about a man named Cleveland, but that was a long time ago.”

“Who’s the Coyote?”

“Oh just an old guy, about my mother’s age that lives up the road from her by Blue Canyon lake. He’s a friend of hers from their radical days. Her drives a real nice truck, but still lives in the past. He and my mom are into all that old Indian stuff.”

“Does he drive a ’57 Dodge?”

“I’m not sure what it is but it’s in great condition.”

“I think he picked your mother up the other day when I was at her house.”

“Yeah that was probably him. They were probably going to do their ritual stuff up in the mountains by the Gila monuments.”

“You don’t do the rituals or anything with them?”

“Just because I’m Indian doesn’t mean I dance around fires and run through the woods talking to great spirits or whatever. The Lord Jesus Christ is my savior, Templeton. There is nothing, or no one else that is going to give you salvation. It is the saving grace of Jesus and God that guides people. People who believe, and are saved anyway. Do you believe in the saving grace of Christ?”

The waitress set the drinks in front of them and asked if they needed anything else before their food came. Templeton asked for more water.

“Umm, I’m not real religious, I guess,” he said, looking down and rubbing his finger along the rim of his water glass and shifting in his seat.

Jennifer took a sip of her wine.

“My mother’s all into that traditional tribal stuff. I think it’s all a bunch of superstition, and blasphemous too. But I can’t make her save her own soul. All I can do is tell her the truth.

She's always harping on me that I don't know my roots and heritage. I think it's the opposite. Those...guys, the Coyote, and his friends that live up by the lake, they like to think they're poking fun at me and call me their little apple, you know red on the outside, white on the inside. I laugh it off, but I feel bad knowing what's going to happen to them on Judgment. None of them know their heritage is straight from the line of Jesus Christ. But, they'll never believe it. Sometimes I feel sorry for her. I know she's not saved and I feel bad, but she's a grown woman and she makes her own choices. I go to church three times a week and, I'm the personal assistant to Reverend T. D. Hines of the Torch of God Christian Church, and that is how I know I am saved. You should come and check us out tomorrow. It's a great time."

"Yeah, yeah, maybe if I have time I will."

"Good you should. It's real a fun and exhilarating experience. It's different every time."

The waitress came back and Jennifer ordered the saganaki for an appetizer and the Arni Mavrodaphne for both entrees Templeton finished the rest of his beer in two gulps and ordered another one.

"Wow you can put those back, huh?" Jennifer said.

Templeton looked at her glass. It looked as if she had taken two sips from the wine.

"Just a bit nervous really."

"Nervous? I make you nervous?"

"Definitely."

"Me too actually," she said and took a sip of wine.

They were silent and looked around the restaurant. They made short comments about the décor or a customer. Their eyes met several times and they smiled at one another.

“I feel like I’m twelve and this is the first time I’m alone with a girl,” Templeton said.

Jennifer smiled at him then looked down at the table. She took another sip of wine and scooted her chair closer to the table.

“You’re so beautiful I can’t even think of words to describe it. I’ve never seen anyone more beautiful in my entire life. I’m sorry I hope I’m not embarrassing you, but I mean it.”

“God, you’re killing me here. I’ve never felt so awkward. You’re making me blush,” she said running her hands through her hair. “Thank you. Thank you so much. That’s why I’m so nervous too. You’re very handsome. Extremely handsome.”

The waitress returned with Templeton’s beer and informed them that their saganaki would be right out.

“So you’re writing a book about your uncle or something like that,” Jennifer asked.

Templeton smiled at her and nodded. He handed her Cleveland’s book. She looked it over and saw the quote on the cover.

“Is it a Christian book?” she asked.

“Templeton chuckled. “No, no not at all. It’s not religious in anyway I don’t think you would like it very much. My other uncle, his brother, is very religious and he didn’t like it at all.”

“Well just because I’m Christian doesn’t mean that I don’t enjoy good books and movies and stuff. I’m not a condemning, boring, old bible toting freak who judges other people because

they don't believe what I believe. I know how to have a good time too, buddy. Mmm here comes our food."

Templeton turned around and saw the waitress coming up the aisle with a plate of hummus, pitas and flaming cheese. She put the plate on the table and asked if they needed anything else. Templeton ordered another beer. He looked at Jennifer, she glanced at him, smiled a thin smile and looked at the waitress. The waitress asked her if wanted another glass of wine.

"No, no," she said shaking her. "Not right now maybe with dinner."

They ate the saganaki and talked about movies they had seen, books they had read, places they wanted to go to.

"I want to go to Paraguay," Jennifer said grabbing a long string of cheese that was dripping from her pita and twirling it around her finger.

"Paraguay? What's in Paraguay?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about the place. Basically I like the way it sounds. Silly, huh?"

"No, not really. I've known people, and I have too, done things that don't have half as much logic as your reason. Things not thought about in any capacity. Meaningless things. Things done just to do them because otherwise you might forget you're alive."

"Wow. Well that's pretty dark, Templeton."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't mean.."

"I'm kidding. I understand what you're saying. It is a bit sad, but I understand. Come on say it. Paraguay. See? I like the way it sort of parachutes in your mouth on that last syllable. Pa-

ra-guay. It's like the bud of a flower opening up to the sun on warm spring morning. Maybe a country with a name that sounds and feels like that can't be too bad, right? What do you think?"

"I think you're awesome. I think if you went to Pa-ra-guay, it would be that type of country. You'd make it that way with your mere presence."

So where would you want to go?" Jennifer asked.

"Cambodia. Without a doubt. Cambodia."

"And why?"

"Angkor Wat."

"What's that?"

"It is the ruins of a complex of temples in Angkor, Cambodia. They were built first for Hindu worship of Vishnu then later Buddhist adopted them."

"You like that kind of stuff. Those eastern ideas."

"Oh I could really care less who they were built for and what they did there. It's the beauty of the place. It stands outside of ideas. It's like a living piece of art. There are ruins of these exquisite ancient stone temples that look like they are raising out of the earth, and the jungle, massive trees as old as or older than the stones whose roots entwine throughout the windows and doors of the building and sometimes completely covering up a structure. Vines, broad plants and shrubs grow up the facades of the temple buildings, animals, monkeys, lizards, snakes, insects, birds are all crawling and running and creeping around. It's the ultimate place of communion. Man and nature. I'd definitely go to Angkor Wat."

The waitress brought their meal. Templeton ordered another beer.

“Well I guess if you’re going to drink that much beer you won’t think bad of me if I get another glass of wine,” Jennifer said.

After the meal that sat a bit longer and ate a couple small pieces of baklava and sipped Turkish coffee.

“Can I ask you a question?” Templeton said.

Jennifer took one last bite, put her fork down, slid her plate away from her and looked at him from beneath her brow.

“Depends on what it is.”

“No, it’s nothing bad. It’s just...I mean. Well, your last name isn’t exactly Native American. Johnston? Is that your father’s name?”

Jennifer smile at him then turned and looked for the waitress. She waved her over and asked for the bill.

“I didn’t know my father. And the name thing. Well it’s kind of a long story that I don’t really feel like getting into right now.”

Templeton nodded and drank the last of his coffee and followed it with a last drink of beer.

“I’m sorry I didn’t...”

“Do you like bowling?” she asked him. “Let’s go bowling tonight, ok.”

The fantastic when entertained in a state of detached observation is a source of enjoyment and pleasure for the human brain. For instance, it is gratifying to indulge in mental exercises speculating our quantum connectedness, or entanglement. The idea that uncertainty plays more of a part in non atomic reality than it actually does, or the solipsistic idea of the will's influence over interpersonal relationships and the gross material of everyday reality. The mind knows these ideas are foundations for the things it encounters in everyday reality, but there is still an element in the contemplation of these ideas that verges on the fantastic. The possibility of confronting the stories of Greek Mythology, or the kind of childish, excited fascination of reading about the exploits of Hindu deities. There is no actualization. What would the mind do if it encountered a Pegasus? Or say the idea of the vast amount of space between atomic particles were to somehow intrude, interrupt our normal state of consciousness or manifest itself somehow viscerally, if somehow one were to experience the vast emptiness of space on the macro-physical plane of existence. Confronted with the incomprehensible emptiness of space and the fact that reality had indeed changed and nothing is as we think it is, the mind would recoil into itself and shut down or recreate something out of necessity to fill that thriving nothingness. And so it was that when Templeton woke up the morning after his first date with Jennifer Theresa Johnston, he found himself floating eight inches above his bed. The first conclusion that his mind raced to was that he was only a dream, and he was willing to accept that until he turned his head and saw that his jeans were draped over the back of the chair where he put them before he went to sleep. Flashback! A bit of LSD that was released after being trapped in a fat cell that was burned up as energy due to the stress he put himself under the last couple of days, or a really late and strong drip from all the coke he had been doing was causing his neurons to fire erratically and distort

his perception. Oh God, he thought, I might be having an aneurysm or maybe I'm even dying. But the flashbacks he had had in the past had always only been fleeting; there was no pain in his head and he figured if he were dying the landscape might become a little more ethereal and bright. It wasn't until he had to rake and clutch at the dingy gray sheets of the bed to keep from floating higher that his mind ceased trying to grasp explanations and shut down. He fell back onto the bed unconscious, and woke an hour later with the nervous comfort that he had had a really intense dream.

Reverend Hines stood at the window in his office scrutinizing the crystal lattices of frost embroidered on the glass. He moved his finger along the spiky contour of a pattern and felt the cold outside air pressing against the window like a voyeur's gaze. Who could doubt the intention of God when it is revealed in every little detail of life, he thought. The intersection of these fragile shards of frozen water vapor combine to form such eloquent sculptures, a manifestation of beauty and symmetry that a man could never create and only awkwardly copy. And from all these interacting shards, wholly unimpressive singularly, a grand, beautiful pattern is formed. All the events in life are like these shards of frost. They combine, entwine and intersect with one another to reveal the Lords glorious and immaculate plan. I am part of that plan, and I am helping to bring about God's design. And now another shard is being formed at this moment.

He waved to Jennifer as she got out her car, her briefcase under her arm and a cup of coffee in each hand. She smiled at him, and held out one of the cups toward him and nodded at it. He smiled and nodded back with a thumbs up gesture.

“It’s starting to feel like Christmas is going to come early this year,” Jennifer said, the chill still staggering her breath. She handed the Reverend a coffee, took off her coat, hat and scarf and put them on the coat rack.

“I was starting to go over the plans for the Christmas celebration last night,” she said sorting through papers in her briefcase. “And I think we’re going to need more room than the church banquet hall allows. I was thinking..”

“Don’t worry yourself about all that stuff right now. Let’s talk. We haven’t talked in awhile.” the Reverend said, his voice a harvest, gold wheat field, expansive, hearty, comforting. It was the tone he took when he wanted an intimate and heart-felt dialogue. It always put Jennifer at ease with its fatherly inference. She set her briefcase aside and sat down in the chair in front of the Reverend’s desk. The Reverend, legs crossed at the ankles, leaned on the top of his desk and sipped his coffee.

“I’ve just been wondering about all the wonderful people in this church and how I haven’t just sat down and talked with them about the things in their life,” he said. “It’s not good for a shepherd to be out of touch with his flock like that. So I’m just wondering how things are going with you?”

“Everything is fantastic, Reverend. Thank you for asking.”

“Good, good. How’s your family?”

“Good.”

“Excellent. I think I saw your mother.”

“My mother?”

“I believe so. Her name is Meridian Yellow Thunder, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes, I ran into her yesterday.”

“Where?”

“Yes, yes. I was out yesterday with Mr. Waters surveying the land for Resurrection Falls when she and her lawyer came up to us rather upset about the fact that we are going to be building the place. They believe we are trying to steal land from...well, as she put it, her people.”

He watched with not a little bit of confidence and pleasure as the color evaporated out of her face and her jaw line became a razor edge.

“It got a bit heated, I’m sorry to say, and I don’t think she was very happy with the outcome. So I was just wondering if she was ok. I was worried about her. She is ok, right? Some rather shady gentlemen in a truck rolled up with hunting rifles, we left and she and her lawyer friend remained there. I’ve been thinking all night and morning about her safety.”

“I’m so sorry Reverend. I don’t know what to say.”

“Sorry? Sorry about what child? I just worried about your mother’s condition. I just hope she’s doing ok. She was quite upset and I was worried is all.”

“I haven’t talked or...I’m sure she’s fine. Reverend I’m so sorry. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Now, Jennifer don’t you worry about a thing, child. Everyone is entitled to their opinion about things. Maybe you could invite her to the church and let her see what we are about, or you could talk to her and tell her the real meaning of God’s Land. Tell her about the importance of this new structure to the community of Truth or Consequences, tell her about the lives that will

be changed, the souls that will be saved, let her know about the power of this project, child. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Yes, reverend I most definitely will. Can we start discussing the Christmas celebration now?"

Hines sipped his coffee and watched her as she turned on her computer and sifted through papers in her briefcase.

"Ok, child. Let's do."

During lunch Jennifer sat alone in a booth at Mc Donald's. She had hardly touched her salad and stared out the window at nothing in particular. She was thinking about what to say to her mother about what she had done. Several times she thought about just letting the matter go, ignoring and hoping it would go away. But she knew her mother and she knew that this was just the beginning and that she was going to escalate things no matter what she said to her. Nothing was going to stop her. I should know this by now, Jennifer thought. For the last twenty-eight years she had lived in what she thought had been the chaos of her mother's will. Her first distinct memory was of being taken out of her bed when she was five years old at four o'clock in the morning by an FBI agent. They had broken down the door to their house, she remembered that Mr Alvarez, The Black Coyote, had been sleeping at the house that night too, and the FBI had taken him and her mother out of the house in handcuffs. She remembered the cold air as it filled the house and seemed to freeze the tears streaming from her eyes onto her cheeks. She remembered the glow of the red and blue lights from the squad cars flashing bright against the thick darkness of the night sky. The agent held her with one hand as she screamed for her mother

and fought to get away from the man whose cold leather coat had smelled like cigarettes. Another agent held her arms while he put a coat on her. Then they put her in the back of a car. She was too short to see anything but the glow of the lights, but she could hear her mother screaming her name and she started to cry louder. As the car drove away her mother's voice was drowned out by the hum of the car engine.

For four days she stayed in a place with six other little Indian kids under the care of a several different women. During the day the children were fed, bathed and clothed by a fat lady who styled her hair in a bun and wore big flower print blouses and brown polyester pants that were too tight for her and accentuated the rolls of flesh on her hips and ass. She was usually helped by a slightly smaller woman who looked like Carol Burnett. At night a thin curly haired woman who wore dresses that looked like nurse's uniforms fed the children and put them to bed. She was helped by an older black lady with big bi-focal glasses who always gave the kids an extra cookie. Before they were put to bed, one of the women would read to them from a brightly illustrated book entitled *Children's Favorite Bible Stories*. Jennifer had never heard the stories before and she sat in the tiny, lumpy cot she slept on and listened. She liked the way the black lady read. The sound of her voice was soft and warm like the feeling she had right before she drifted off to sleep. Yet, she also liked the way the curly haired lady would hold the book open so the children could see the pictures. She particularly liked the story of Noah because the pictures of the animals were so detailed. For years after the episode she would remember the wrinkles in the elephant's trunks as they walked up the plank into the arc. The stories had a comforting quality to them. They were filled with strange words and magical deeds, not unlike the stories Meridian told her sometimes. But they all revolved around one person named God, and Jennifer had never heard of this person before. There wasn't the playfulness of the coyote

and rabbit that her mother told her about. This god person had a sternness about him like white people she had known. Yet, the stories made him sound friendly and kind too, and she liked that. After the second day in the place she wasn't afraid anymore and looked forward to hearing the night time stories.

On the fourth day Meridian slammed through the gray aluminum double doors yelling for Jennifer. Jennifer had been sitting at a small table shaped like a turtle when she heard her mother's voice. She jumped up yelling mommy, mommy, but the fat lady grabbed her and held her. Meridian flew into the room and snatched Jennifer away from the woman. The woman stood up and Meridian pushed Jennifer behind her and faced the woman. Delbert Graham rushed into the room behind Meridian and explained that they were there, by the order of the Arizona court system, to pick up Jennifer. Meridian glared at the fat lady and the woman turned around. The Carol Burnett woman handed Delbert the child's coat. The three of them left, Jennifer clinging to Meridian with her arms wrapped tight around her neck and her head nestled against her shoulder.

Jennifer never found out why Meridian and Albert Alvarez had been arrested that night. Meridian never discussed her run-ins with the law with Jennifer. It was just unspoken but common knowledge between them that it happened. And it continued to happen. And it was about to happen again, Jennifer thought, and she didn't know if she was capable of dealing with it anymore.

Streams of frigid air crept under the collar of Templeton's field jacket. Hands jammed under his arms, he bounced up and down while gas pumped into the truck's tank. When the pump shut off, he covered his hands with the sleeve of his jacket to grab the nozzle and put it back on the pump. He trotted into the store with his hands searching deep in his pockets for a bit of warmth. He stood at the back of the line blowing into his hands and bouncing to warm himself. In front of him a man and a woman were discussing their survival plans after January 1st 2000. The woman, a small older lady with dull, thin red hair and the panic barely veiled in her voice, told the man that she and her husband had gone to buy twenty gallons of kerosene at Home Depot in Las Cruces, but they had been sold out. There was almost a pleading in her voice as if she were asking the man to help her out. For a moment Templeton felt like hugging her. He wanted to hold her and tell her everything was going to be ok. She seemed so frail and needy. But his quick compassion was broken by the man's comment. The man, a fat trucker with a five day shadow and a blue, ratty Mac truck hat pulled over his bald head shrugged and told the lady she shouldn't worry cause it was God's way of clearing the earth of sinners. Templeton shook his head, sighed loudly and quit listening. He picked up a *Mad* magazine and flipped through it until it was his turn at the register.

The fat, young cashier with two tiny pig-tails sticking off the sides of her head like antennas squinted up at Templeton through the lens of glasses thick enough to use as coasters for a gallon jug of German beer. Ten-fifty, she whistled through the gap between her bucked teeth. Templeton handed her the money and tried not to stare at the monstrous zit above her right eye. She'll be able to ice a cake after she pops that thing, he thought. She thanked him as she dipped

beneath counter to pick up the quarters that rolled off the counter. When she pulled herself back up to tell him come again, he was already gone.

As Templeton walked back to his truck a brand new jet, black Ford LTD pulled in front of him and stopped. In the car a pale white man with a shock of platinum blonde hair sat staring at him. Templeton stopped and looked at the man. He bent down, held his hand over his eyes to block the glare of the sun bouncing off the aluminum of a gas pump, and looked into the car. The Salamander just continued to stare. Templeton walked over to the car and stood waiting for the man to open the window and say something, but he never did. He just stared, unblinking, his eyes black, almost all pupil like a snake's. He stared at him as if he were studying him.

Templeton shivered. What the hell do you want you weird mother fucker, is what Templeton was thinking. But he said "Can I help you, sir?" He didn't want any trouble. The man looked big and Templeton was a bit afraid of him. They remained that way for a long moment. The Salamander scrutinizing Templeton as Templeton nervously bounced back from one foot to the other trying to discern what the man wanted. Then the Salamander drove off. Templeton stood and watched the car pull out into traffic. He didn't move until the car disappeared out of sight a block away. He suddenly felt silly, embarrassed by his awkwardness and anxiousness. He turned and looked around the parking lot to see if anyone had noticed, there was no one else there. He turned and looked into the store. The cashier was sitting with her elbow on the counter and her head resting on her hand flipping through a magazine. Templeton noticed the cold again. He put his hands in his pants pockets and walked to his truck looking in the direction the white man had driven off in.

“Mother are you crazy or what?” Jennifer yelled, slamming through Meridian’s door. The older woman raced out of her bedroom dropping a basket of laundry, with a look of bewilderment on her face.

“What is it, what is it,” she stammered. Jennifer threw her purse and coat on the futon and stood in the middle of the living room arms crossed and leaning to one side.

“Why do you always have to pull crap like this,” Jennifer yelled.

“Child, have you lost the little sense you had? You don’t come into this house with an attitude and talk to me like that about who knows what the hell you are talking about.”

Jennifer switched her weight to the other side and threw up her hands.

“Let’s play this game now shall we. God’s Land, mother. I’m talking about you and your hoodlum friends trying to intimidate Reverend Hines. I can’t believe you would do something so, so, stupid.”

Meridian stood silent and stared at her daughter. Then she erupted into laughter. Jennifer’s mouth dropped open and her face flushed red.

“You’re crazy. You really are. I know it. You’re crazy and probably just as dangerous as those outlaws who live by the side of the lake you hang out with.”

“You have lost your mind, child,” Meridian said, trying to catch her breath. “We intimidated them, huh? I suppose that’s what old Holy Roller told you. I don’t suppose he told you about Mr. Dark sunglasses his big mouthed blonde pet that tried to intimidate us with junk from the past, did he?”

“Mother what were you doing there in the first place? That’s private property. It’s the church’s land. You had no right to be there. You were trespassing and harassing the reverend. You are lucky he’s such a kind man or you could have been arrested.”

Meridian chortled.

“This isn’t a joke, mother. You could get into some big trouble if you keep this silliness up. What is wrong with you? Why don’t you come to the church and find out about what we do? It’s a wonderful place, mother. The people are beautiful, friendly, happy and in God’s grace.”

Meridian sat down in her chair and looked up at her daughter with a look that was almost pleading, but more perplexed. She sighed and drew her hand over her face.

“Sweetheart, you’re being silly if you believe that. What you believe spiritually is your own thing. But if you believe the lies that man is feeding you, then you are in danger of being pulled along into the same pit he lives in. A man of “God” who tells you outright blatant lies is not a holy man, baby. He’s trying to give you glass beads for your soul, baby. The land he plans to build his new church, or whatever it is, is Indian land. We have reason to believe he and that congressman and some *traitor* in the Diné council are making shady deals to falsify surveying information so that they can have the land.”

Jennifer dropped her head and shook it slowly.

“Mother, it’s not Indian land, it’s not white people’s land, it’s God’ land. That’s what the reverend wants everyone to understand. And by you making all this commotion it only makes you look like the bad, crazy Indian who wants to be selfish and reject the new kingdom that the Lord wants to erect upon the earth. You can be part of that, mother. Don’t you understand?”

Meridian sunk back in her chair. She seemed small and gray and suddenly old. She criss-crossed her fingers and laid her hands in her lap and stared down at them.

“Have they gotten into you that far,” she muttered. “Don’t you know who you are, baby?”

“Mother don’t.”

“Do you know where you come from?”

“Don’t start, mom.”

“You are Indian, Jennifer. Your bloodline spouts from this land.”

“Mom, stop.”

“You are not separate from this land. You are inextricably connected to his place. This place live inside of you and you in it. It does not belong to you or anyone else. It does not belong to “God”, it is God. Your reverend and congressman look at it as an acquisition for the benefit of furthering their insatiable lust for power and control. They don’t want to take the true gift of God, the bounty and power that resides in the earth, and learn from it, become aware of it. They want to manipulate and erect a structure that in the end is a monument to the assertion of their will. Their God’s house or land or whatever they call it is nothing but a manifestation of their egos.”

Jennifer picked up her purse and coat and put them on.

“When are you going to stop with all that hocus-pocus, pagan superstition? The Lord Jesus Christ and his father in heaven are the only answers. They are the only way to salvation. I hope you learn that before it’s too late. I’m just telling you to leave Reverend Hines alone. It’s not just about you, mom. I work with the man. My job and reputation are at stake here too. I’m a

respected member in my church, not that that means anything to you, but it means a lot to me, so just lay off. Ok.”

Meridian stood and followed Jennifer to the door. She grabbed the girl by the arm. The color was back in her face and her eyes blazed.

“You don’t talk to me like that, do you understand. I’m the woman who brought into this world, I’m the woman who raised you and no matter how much they have brain washed you, you will remember that and respect me. You hide your head in their lies if you want, Jennifer, but don’t tell me to back down from what I know is right and what I know is the truth. You can run back to your high and holy priest and tell him he will not get this land. I’ll die before I stop fighting him on this.”

“Well you deal with the consequences on your own. Maybe you should go to jail; maybe it’ll wise you up. And by the way, I respect the God my father over everything else in this world,” Jennifer said and left.

On their second date Jennifer and Templeton went to Las Cruces to see a production of *Romeo and Juliet* put on by the students of the theatre department at New Mexico State University. Jennifer, because she thought Shakespeare would be good for Templeton because he was writing a book, and anything literary she associated with Shakespeare, had suggested it. Templeton, who hated Shakespeare, but had seen and read *Romeo and Juliet* a hundred times over throughout his college career, and hated it just as much as he disliked the author, thought it was a great idea strictly for the fact that he would have gone on a safari to collect elephant dung to spend time with Jennifer. Jennifer couldn't understand the words in the play and Templeton thought the acting was horrendous, but they sat close to one another with smiles on their faces. During Act 3, Scene 3 Templeton placed his arm on the armrest. A minute later Jennifer did the same thing. She was surprised to feel his hand there, but she didn't remove hers. They looked at each other and smiled then turned back to look at the stage. Templeton spread his fingers and Jennifer entwined hers with his.

After the show they went to a Lorenzo's in Mesilla by the Luna Rossa Winery and ate green chile pizza and drank New Mexican Cabernet. In the dim orange flicker of the table candle they rested their hands upon each others, and looked and smiled at each other. An older couple walked by their table on the way out; the woman stopped and told them that she and her husband had noticed them from across the restaurant, and she just wanted them to know what a beautiful and perfect couple they made. The old man smiled and nodded in agreement. Jennifer smiled, said thank you and felt a flush of warmth rush through her face. She wondered if they could notice her blush. Templeton stood up and shook the old couple's hands and thanked

them. After the couple left they ordered another glass of wine, drank it slowly and sat in the warm aura of a comfortable silence.

Although it was a cold night and all the stores were closed, they walked down the Old Mesilla Plaza hand in hand. Templeton, who usually avoided the cold with urgency, didn't notice the chill in the air. He felt the warmth of Jennifer's hand seep through the rest of his body. Jennifer, her head slightly cocked to one side, and swinging her other hand, enjoyed the cool air on her face. She stopped and looked in the window of the Thunderbird de la Mesilla store at a pair of shoes. She bent down to get a closer look and Templeton noticed their reflection in the window. They did look great together, he thought. He bent down with her and stared at their reflection. He noticed that her eyes in the reflection catch the gleam of a street lamp and seemed to glow silver. He wanted to take her face into his hands and kiss her, but he settled for leaning in close to her and inhaling the scent of her hair. He closed his eyes, leaned in closer to her and inhaled deeply. She felt his face pressing softly against her hair. A soft sigh escaped from her. She smiled and asked if he was sniffing her. Templeton didn't move but told her yes as their met eyes in the reflection of the store window. Jennifer stood up and turned to face him. He put his hands on her hips and drew her slowly to him. She looked at him, her lips parted slightly, put her arms around his waist and pressed herself against him. He lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. She moved a hand from his waist, placed it behind his head and brought his mouth against hers. They stood, enveloped in the blanket-warmth of their energy, kissing.

For a long moment they stood holding each other, rubbing one another's backs, and reveling in silent excitement. Jennifer asked if he wanted to go to The Double Eagle for some Mexican coffee. He said yes and they walked with their arms around each other's waists.

The Double Eagle restaurant was originally the home of a family named Maes who ran an import-export business. The mother, or so the story goes, was a snooty, high society, elitist woman who tried to raise her teenage son Armando the same way. But Armando fell in love with one of the servant girls, Inez, and mamma didn't much care for that. So when she found them together in her son's bedroom, after she had kicked the poor girl out of the house weeks before, she fell into a trance of rage, grabbed a pair of scissors from her knitting basket and stabbed Inez. As she raised the scissors to plunge into the girl's chest a second time, love struck Armando flung himself in front to protect his love and his mother ended up stabbing him instead. Of course the two lovers died and mamma fell into a catatonic state for the rest of her life. But the lover's fate was to roam the 150 year old building for time immemorial .

Jennifer sipped her coffee while she told Templeton the story.

"I love the history behind these old buildings," he said, and sipped a beer.

"I can't believe you're going to miss out on the best coffee ever created by man to drink a lousy Budweiser. Don't you get sick of that stuff?" she said.

"Coffee messes with my stomach," he said, looking around the restaurant.

The backlights of the bar were French Coronas with Lalique shades from the 1890's. A bright, metallic haze seemed to emanate from the behind the two bartenders who stopped and chatted with each of the customers at the bar. The main dining room, lit by seven foot long and three foot wide classic French baccarat chandeliers with thousands of hand-cut crystals, glowed with a hazy yellow light caused by the 18 and 24 karat solid gold ceiling. Twenty gold-leafed French mirrors with hand craved Greek revival style frames hung throughout the dining room. A

mariachi band wandered through the dining room and bar playing music for the customers willing to pay ten-dollars a song.

“I’d like to compile a book one day with stories like that one from all over the world,” Templeton said.

“I don’t like stories like that, really,” Jennifer said. “Why do the lovers always have to die or not be together? Why aren’t there any happy stories about love, you know?”

“There is. Hollywood,” Templeton said.

Jennifer playfully rolled her eyes and sighed. They sat and drank more drinks until the bar closed an hour later.

On the way back to T or C they listened to a CD of Neil Diamond Jennifer had in her car. When they got back to town Jennifer pulled into the parking lot at Templeton’s motel. They sat several minutes in the car kissing. Templeton asked her if she wanted to go in, but she said she couldn’t because she had to get up early the next morning. He wasn’t upset, he was actually glad because, he thought, if she came it would ruin everything that had happened tonight. They kissed a few minutes more and then Templeton got out. He watched her drive out of the parking lot and waited until she drove out of view until he opened the door to the room and went inside. He turned on the light, took his coat off and tossed it across the back of the chair at the desk, clapped his hands together, fell on the bed on his back, smiled and said. Hell, Yeah. Hell, Yeah.

They began to see each other every night and all day on the weekends. During the day while Jennifer worked, Templeton would go talk to Meridian or to the library to work on research and write. At night they got together and went to restaurants or movies in town, or they just took drives around Elephant Butte. On the weekends they traveled. They went to

Albuquerque, Las Cruces, El Paso, Santa Fe, White Sands, Ruidoso, Silver City, Carlsbad, Roswell and wherever else they felt. Some times they planned a trip to go to a festival or art show or a restaurant one of them had heard about. Other times it was a spur of the moment thing and one of them would just get an idea and they would act on it. They had energy together. Once, for example, on a Saturday morning Jennifer suggested green chili omelets for breakfast. Templeton suggested they roast their own chilies, Jennifer suggested they drive down to Hatch to get the chilies, and then from there they somehow ended up spending two days in a hotel in Juárez. And Jennifer, in a completely uncharacteristic act, called in sick on Monday and they stayed the day in El Paso where they had a picnic at Hueco Tanks National Park.

Neither one of them had ever felt more comfortable or enlivened by another person. They yearned to be with each other when they were apart and everything else in the world, except the two of them, seemed not to exist when they were together. So the first time they made love it threw them into a place neither one had ever imaged existed.

The shadows from the candles that stretched across the floor and wavered on the wall of the living room seemed to dance to the rhythm of the steel drum sound from lids rattling atop pots on the stove. Jennifer lifted one of the lids and a cloud of steam rose and dissipated around her head. She sniffed the air above the pot and stirred its contents with a wooden spoon. She placed the lid back and lifted another one. She poked a fork into this one then took it off the burner. She stepped back and to the side as she opened the oven. Heat waves emanated from the open door. She took out a large casserole dish covered in aluminum foil and set it on a metal rack next to the stove. She looked at a clock on the wall. It was 7:51. The doorbell rang. "Early," she thought, "that's good".

Templeton walked in sniffing the air. Jennifer handed him a glass of wine and sat him at the table. As she prepared the plates they talked about what they had done during the day. She asked if her mother had told him about the argument they had had over God's Land. Templeton told her no. She brought the plates to the table and Templeton felt his mouth start to water. He lifted his glass and took a sip. She told him not to drink it all because they were only going to have one glass with dinner and then she had a surprise for him. Templeton stared at his plate. Sea scallops two inches in diameter, baked until they had a slight, perfect caramel, brown edging drizzled with a tomato-ginger sauce with garlic and onions and garnished with chiffonaded Italian parsley, sat in the middle of the plate. Surrounding the scallops was basmati saffron rice and brussel sprout halves coated in lemon butter. He just continued stared at the plate and she asked him if something was wrong. He told her he felt guilty eating it because it looked to great. She thanked him, told him *bon apétit* and proceeded to tell him almost verbatim about the argument she had with her mother.

After dinner she brought out a couple glasses of beer and a bottle of Clamato tomato juice and put *The Seventh Seal* into the VCR. She had remembered that he told that it was one of his past-times. To drink red beers and watch his favorite movie. Bathed in the gray light of the TV screen, they settled onto the couch and watched Max Von Sydow duel with death. Jennifer scooted close to Templeton and rested her head on his shoulder. He turned and kissed the top of her head. She turned and kissed his neck. He held her face in between his hands and their lips melted into one another. Still embracing, Jennifer lowered herself onto the soft cushions of the couch. Templeton followed her motion. They didn't see the end of the movie.

As she rolled from underneath him and positioned herself on top, Templeton held her hips as she pushed slowly and softly back and forth. She had her head lowered and her hair

flowed into his face. Her eyes were closed and she bit her lip. Templeton moved her hair aside and told her to open her eyes. He stared into them and felt his body start to expand. It started from his belly and moved outward. She moved slow and rhythmic. The feeling moved into his limbs and they started to disappear. He held her face in his hands. She smiled at him and ran her tongue across her lips. Templeton's torso disappeared. Jennifer moved faster. Templeton raked his fingers into her hair and held tight. She leaned down close to his face and licked him from his lips, across his cheek, to his ear. "You're inside of me," she whispered, and increased the speed of her hips. Templeton's head disappeared. There was nothing else in the world but her moving on top of him in a space filled with a warm light. Jennifer's breath escaped in little bursts of high pitched gasps. She pushed her face into the crook of his neck and bit his ear. "I'm going to come," she stammered. Then she pulled herself up, pressed her nails into his chest and swung her hips in a frenzy, she stopped, lifted her head, dug her nails into his side and pierced the air with a wild peacock cry. Templeton squeezed her hips and ground into her. His body was one tense knotted muscle and the release a flash of light that consumed everything. He became aware that her body lay across his, both warm and slick with sweat. They breathed together heavy in unison. She moved her face against his neck and nibbled on his ear. He moved his face against hers and they lay silent until he whispered in her ear, "You're inside of me."

Templeton's stomach growled when he saw the food. Meridian placed a huge bowl of stew, topped with sour cream, tomatoes and green onions, in front of him. It took an act of will to restrain from plunging his spoon into the bowl and shoving the food in his mouth. He sat and sipped at a glass of iced tea that had been brewed from herbs in her garden. Meridian sat down, she placed a plate of bread in the middle of the table and said a prayer in a language Templeton didn't understand, but the music of it intrigued him. When she finished she looked at him and smiled. "Go ahead, try it," she said. Templeton ate the meal in gratified silence, then helped Meridian clear the table and wash the dishes.

After the dishes and a cup of herbal tea, Meridian told Templeton that she and Cleveland had lived together in Arizona. A happy couple under close scrutiny by the more conservative residents of Window Rock Arizona, the seat of the Navajo Nation. She taught school and he worked whatever odd jobs he could get when they needed extra money. He spent a lot of time in the Petrified Forest and areas around there. He would sometimes leave and she wouldn't see him for three or four days. Then he'd show up with a far-away stare in his eyes and lock himself in the room and write for hours. Then he'd come out and talk incessantly about ideas he had for his new book. It was those times that she enjoyed the most. They would curl up in front of the fire if it were winter or on the roof of the house in summer and between periods of love-making talk throughout the night into dawn. Then one day in June of 1967 he just didn't show back up. She received a letter a week later explaining why he left.

Templeton asked her if she still had the letter. She got up from the table walked into the kitchen and started making more tea. When she came back she stopped and looked at him for a

short moment. Templeton, feeling uncomfortable smiled and shrugged his shoulders. She set the tea on the table and told him she didn't have the letter.

She told him that she didn't see him again until September of 1973 four months after she had participated in the retaking of Pine Ridge at Wounded Knee. She had moved to Nogales with Jennifer, who was three at the time, to escape the media attention the remaining soldiers of the siege was getting. They had lived in a small one room apartment and she worked as a waitress during the day at a truck stop. One morning when she was getting ready she heard Jennifer outside talking to someone. She stuck her head out of the bathroom window and saw Cleveland bend down on one knee with a full beard and a wild tangle head of hair watching Jennifer draw in the dirt with a stick and listening to her tell a story about the picture she was drawing. At first she didn't recognize him and was about to yell for Jennifer to go into the house, when he lifted his head she saw his eyes and knew who it was. The next two weeks they seemed like a family. Cleveland adored Jennifer. He attended to her like a Saint Bernard. At night they talked and he told her about the new book he was writing. He wanted to write a parody of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. He was going to call it *On the Other Side of the Road*, and it was going to be about a black man who traveled across the United States but received a lot different reception from the people that he encountered as opposed to the reception Kerouac received. He told her he had traveled extensively through the south to try to understand where he had come from. He told her he had meet Olen Montgomery, one of the Scottsboro boys who had been arrested, tried and incarcerated on false charges of raping a white woman. Nothing original about that in those days. He said he had sat down and ate lunch and gotten drunk with the man. He described him as a shell. A husk that had had its insides corroded away by hate. Not hate of white people and what had been done to him, not completely anyway, but the hate of being

black. The disgust at his very being, his total existence because of the color of his skin. He said he had met Mr. Montgomery a hundred thousand times in the south. But, he also said that he had met new black man. A black man that was proud to be black, a force that surged through a thousand black communities in the entire United States. The power of the ideas of revolutionary leaders the likes of Dr. King, Malcolm X, Che Guerra, Bobby Kennedy, Nehru, Franz Fanon, Huey Newton and others was penetrating the being of young and old blacks alike. It traveled just like him, like a band of spiritual gypsies spreading strength and pride, like a bomb exploded in everyone's head and woke them up with new eyes' new minds, new ideas. He had said that he could just feel this immense force of energy dancing between people. They were happy, they were confident, proud, and black was the thing to be. He had even seen Dr. King's *I've Been to the Mountain Top* speech at the Mason Temple and he had let the power take control of him too. But the next day they shot Dr. King and the power turned from a deep blue swath of confidence and pride to maroon anger and he let that take control of him too. He wrote a lot about what he did after that in his journal. But I could see it inside of him. He had lost something. I could never put my finger on it, but something was different about him. He was still a loving, compassionate, caring man. Still brilliant, still curious, but something disappeared inside of him.

She told Templeton that Cleveland had asked her to marry him. She said yes. They had planned to get married after all the insanity from her trial had settled down. Two days later he was shot in front of the diner where she worked. A man named Lloyd Patterson Henry, a switchman for the Magma Arizona railroad company, incensed with the audacity of a "tribe of bow bending nits" taking over "American" land wanted to start his nation wide crusade of revenge, by taking out as many redskins as possible, and she was to be the first. Henry leaned out of the window of his El Camino with a .357 magnum in his hand took aim at Meridian, pulled

the trigger twice, missed, one shot blew out the window of the diner and the second one hit Cleveland in the back. It happened so fast she didn't realize what was going on. She had heard the shot, she whirled around and ducked, then heard screeching and saw the blue smoke of the tires as the car fish tailed out of the parking lot then saw Cleveland lying on the ground with a blood stain growing in size on his jacket.

She didn't cry or scream. It wasn't until two weeks after the funeral, watching her daughter sleep that she cried. Several people from the diner and the laundromat next door rushed outside. She knelt down beside him and put her hand in front of his mouth to feel for his breath. She had seen people shot at Wounded Knee, so the dead did not frighten her. Then she took his pulse. A friend, tears streaming down her face wrapped her arms around her. She asked the woman to go to the car and make sure Jennifer was ok. The baby had slept through it all. She sat beside the body caressing his face until the ambulance arrived. She asked the woman to watch Jennifer and rode in the ambulance to the hospital.

“My Uncle Philbert always told me it was a jealous lover of yours that shot him. Doesn't he know the truth?”

“That is the truth to your uncle. He can never believe anything different. It was incomprehensible to him that he should lose the two people he cared for the most in this world in only four short years. He was angry, confused, afraid, in despair, and the unnamable alien thing that had entered into his life, the shadow that was consuming him had to take a form for him and that form was the another unknown, me. Your uncle doesn't hate me personally, although he'd never admit it, not even to himself, he hates the thing that ripped his life apart. My goodness, imagine the weight of pain that man felt. The guilt he may have felt for still being alive and his brothers dead, the anger he felt towards them for leaving him alone with that grief. He's a strong

man to carry that without being completely pressed into the ground. I've seen people destroyed by that kind of weight. I admire Philbert for that."

"He says you were trying to steal the rights to Uncle Cleveland's book to get the money from it."

Meridian chuckled and poured them both another cup of tea.

"Believe me Cleveland's book wasn't making any money. I was fighting to keep it in print. Philbert wanted it to disappear. As much as I admire him for his strength in one aspect, I think he is a religious fool in another. He hated the book for what it said. Cleveland was a devout atheist, and Philbert always hated that. He saw the book as an embarrassment to him and your family name. And because he was family he won. The book was put out of print and disappeared. Until now. I only saw you once before when you were about 3. I thought you were adorable, but you didn't look too bright. I'd have never thought you had the push to do what you're doing."

"I guess that's a compliment, huh?"

"Stay focused *honey* and you'll be fine."

The two got up from the table. Templeton again helped to clear the table and wash the dishes.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" he asked.

"Depends what it is."

"Jennifer's father. Where was he when Uncle Cleveland came back?"

"Gone."

There was a long silence and Templeton left it at that. He asked if he could return the next day and ask some more questions about his uncle's writing and Meridian agreed. He gathered his coat and went to the door.

"It was a brief thing," Meridian said.

Templeton looked at her puzzled.

"Jennifer's father. He was what you kids call a rebound,"

"A rebound?" Templeton asked with a smile.

"Whatever. She knows him but doesn't know him. That you keep between us. I don't know if it's right to keep it that way, but I do know it's safe. I know you like my daughter. That's good. That's very good. Seems things are coming full circle. She's a strange one though, but she's mine and I love her. You be damn good to her. Now go home. I want a nap. I'll see you tomorrow."

As he was pulling out the drive, Templeton decided to see where the road let to in the opposite direction. Three miles up the road the old man in the Dodge pick-up passed him in a cloud of dust. Templeton looked in his rear view mirror to admire the truck and noticed that it had stopped. The old man leaned out his window and waved for Templeton to come over to him. Templeton went. They got out their trucks and shook hands. The old man told him his name was Albert Alvarez. Templeton told him his name. They talked about the truck, and Meridian and what Templeton was doing. He asked Albert if he had known Cleveland. Albert furrowed his brow and answered a quick, definite no. They talked a bit longer. Albert told him where he lived and invited him to go to his house anytime. They could go fishing on the lake he lived next to. Templeton agreed. They shook hands again and turned to go back to their vehicles. Before he got

into his truck Templeton asked what was up the road. Albert told him, and Templeton decided he would like to see it for himself. So hopped in his truck and followed Albert until the old man turned off on another road and Templeton kept going.

The road had lead to Silver city eventually. It passed through Gila National Monument, though nowhere near the cliff dwellings, and the Gila Navajo Reservation. He ate dinner in Silver City and headed back. It was dark when he reached the road in front of Meridian's house. An orange glow flickered behind her house. It looked like fire. Templeton brought his truck to a jerking halt and jumped out. He ran toward the house and heard voices. He picked up a big rock in case Meridian was in some kind of danger. He thought about the man at the gas station earlier and became afraid. But there was something familiar about the voices. They sounded as if they were chanting and he could hear Meridian's voice among them. When he got to the edge of the house he slipped onto his stomach and inched himself into a position where he could see. There was Meridian dressed in a deer-skin suit adorned in patterns of intricately weaved beads. Her long gray hair, decorated in eagle feathers billowed around her shoulders. And with the night itself danced around a fire in a pit in the middle of her yard. An amorphous silhouette two shades darker than the night undulated around and behind Meridian and around the fire. The chanting became louder and drums began to beat, the voice of children laughing seemed to float up and rush behind him. Templeton stood up and whirled around. The shadow began to split into separate figures shaped like men and women who danced with each other and Meridian. The drumming got louder. Dogs, goats, cows and horses formed out of other shadows. The chanting grew louder. Sometimes it sounded as if the voices were African, then East Indian, then Native, Spanish, a multitude of unknown dialects once separate then mixed together in a euphonious wall of sound that vibrated the ground and flowed into the middle of Templeton's belly. He

stood wide-eyed, motionless not knowing whether to be terrified or elated, as he stared at what he had thought to be for the last 20 years merely childhood dreams and fantasies but were undeniably not. The invisible people danced with Meridian around a fire just as they had done in his room when he was a child. He stumbled back and bumped into something. When he turned around Sebastian Cabot took off his hat and nodded at him. Templeton stifled a scream and backed away stumbling to the ground and crawling back to his car. He got up and ran a distance before turning around but all he saw was the post to Meridian's fence and the bright orange glow flickering behind the house. He jumped into his truck and sped off.

The Jim Beam disconnected the synaptic networks in his brain that fired and told his muscles to shrink and expand in spastic contractions. His body was calm. The shaking subsided, but the rip in the fabric of his reality felt lodged in his mind like a needle. What did it mean if all these phantoms were real things, what did it mean if he had really woke up floating that morning, that his imaginary friend The Changing Man was actually real? He hoped it meant he was suffering from some kind of mental disorder from stress and over indulgence with toxins. Anything else was incomprehensible. Templeton took another big gulp from the bottle of bourbon and went into his room. He turned on the TV and didn't sleep that night.

Templeton caught Meridian before she descended down the other side of the hill. When he caught up to her he was panting and out of breath. She was carrying a woven basket full of food, and singing a song in a language he didn't know.

"That was a cool sounding song," he said. "What's it called?"

"It doesn't really have a name. Black Elk taught it to me when I was a little girl."

“Black Elk? Not *the* Black Elk, right?”

“Yes, the Black Elk. My Father knew him. Met him at a Pow Wow for the Indian Nations several years before he died. I went to South Dakota with my father to visit him before I was put in that boarding school and after Black Elk had broken his hip. When I met him he was sick with T.B. and confined to a wheel chair. But he was still a powerful presence. I can’t explain it and I don’t like trying, but I could feel it coming off him. It was just very warm, comfortable, and serene in his presence. But there was an undercurrent of sadness too, like the feeling you have as a kid when you know summer vacation is almost over.”

“What’s it about?”

“About a little girl picking flowers and how she wanders too far into the forest and gets lost. It’s about her fear of never being found again and her hope of being found again and all the things she wants to do. She is about give in until a white stag finds her and shows her the way back to her people.”

“I like it,” he said.

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s good to see you. You can help me pick up around Ms. Hudson’s house. I go there every Wednesday and make sure she’s ok. She’s a spry old lady too, but she’s 89 years old and all of her family is gone. She’s got a gas generator one of the guys up by the lake, Charly Running Cloud, keeps up. The four of us take turns looking in on her. She still pumps her own water from a well. She’s lived out here for about 30, 40 years.”

When they reached the rim of the hill, Templeton saw the little gray adobe style house. It was a sparse domicile with a small, well tended fenced in yard where four chickens scratched around in the dirt eating black ants. To the right of the house was an even smaller garden green

with the leaves of winter squash and melons and in the middle a cast iron water hand pump with a plastic yellow bucket hung from its nozzle. Behind the house was the rusted out shell of a truck of indeterminate vintage beginning to decompose into the earth and overgrown with spiny vines and cacti and the home to lizards and beetles. Off a road that stretched dusty and brown into the far distance a weather worn mailbox sat atop a short column made of river stones.

“Hello, Ms. Hudson,” Meridian said, smiling as she and Templeton walked up.

An old black woman lifted her head from a pillow. She had been sleeping. She was sitting in an old recliner just to the right side of the door of the house. She straighten the scarf around her shoulder and opened her eyes. They were a pair of shining golden, brown eyes as sharp as light reflecting off of water, and they did not look like they belonged to the deep brown wizened face enfolded in wrinkles. They were captivating and Templeton felt almost mesmerized looking into them. She stared back and forth from Meridian and Templeton as if she were staring at two phantoms. Then she recognized Meridian, threw her arms up and began to laugh.

“Ah Suzy, honey. My eyes are too old I didn’t recognize you.”

Templeton looked at Meridian.

“She calls me Suzy for some reason. Always has. So I answer to Suzy,” she learned toward him and whispered.

“Ms. Hudson, this is my friend Templeton,” Meridian said, gesturing toward him. “I think he’s come to steal my daughter, Ms. Hudson,” she said leaning to the old woman in a mock conspiring tone.

“Templeton, this is Irma Hudson.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Templeton said holding out his hand.

Irma squinted at him then looked at Meridian.

“She could do better,” she said. There was a moment of awkward silence. Templeton stood silent and still with his hand limp at his side. Then the two women erupted into laughter. Irma spread out her arms and Meridian nudged him into them. Irma hugged him and patted his back.

“I’m glad to meet you. Very glad to meet you.”

The old woman led the two into the house.

“Ms. Hudson, you go around and sit back down. I just came by to straighten up a bit. You don’t worry yourself with anything, ok.” Meridian said.

“Now I just cut open a melon. I want y’all to try it. Have a seat and I’ll bring it right out.”

Templeton watched her walk into the kitchen. She didn’t shuffle like most older people he had known. She had a strong almost determined stride if only a bit slow. She wore a pair of khaki jeans and a green denim shirt with short sleeves and pockets on both breast and a pair of blue, canvas deck shoes. She looked 10 years younger than her 89 years. Even the way she wore her hair wasn’t typical of a person her age. It was combed out in a short, tight, afro that surrounded her head like a silver corona.

There were several crosses around the small living room. A particularly detailed one hung above the front door, and a small silver one hung above the entry way into the kitchen. On the mantle was a small composition like an alter setting. A statue of the Crucifixion was in the middle with a rosary hung around it so that the cross lay at the feet of the statue. On each side of the statue on a tiny tier was two candles in red glass candle holders. The flame hidden behind the

glass flickered like will-o-wisp in a deep, red haze of some swamp. Four laminated prayer cards occupied the lower middle part of the altar. Two, St Benedict and St Francis, were stood up to lean against the statue, and two others The Blessed Mother Theresa and Saint Joan of Arc formed a V at the foot of the statue encasing the cross of the rosary. Beneath this a purple velvet cloth edged with white lace hung a bit below the edge of the mantle. To the left of the altar was a black and white photo of a young Mexican woman in an ornate wooden frame. It looked as if it were taken some time in the thirties. The woman's hair was done up in a loose bun and a ringlet curl hung on either side of her face. Next to that was a close-up picture of a younger Irma and the same Mexican lady but much older than in the bigger portrait. They both wore sun glasses and huge toothy smiles. They hugged one another and their faces were pressed close together. Behind them hundreds of people shuffled through the arches of Sleeping Beauty's Castle which beamed in the rays of spotlights in all its gaudy glory.

Irma came back with two bowls filled with quarter slices of honey dew melon. She handed them to Templeton and Meridian, sat down and proceeded to tell them the history of that particular melon from seed to plate. They listened, only intermittently drifting off into their own thoughts. When they finished Meridian collected the bowls and took them into the kitchen.

"Ms. Hudson, I'm going clean up a little bit for you now, ok," Meridian said.

"What do you need me to do?" Templeton asked.

"Keep Ms. Hudson company if you don't mind. I'll call you if I need your help with anything."

Templeton and Irma sat on the porch. Templeton sat on the stairs and Irma in her chair. They were silent for a bit. Templeton looked out over the expanse of desert beyond the house. A

dirt road appeared and disappeared behind hills like the smooth skin of a sea serpent's back. Brown, olive drape, black, a few reds and yellows of foliage dotted the sparse landscape. A few yuccas here and there stuck up from the ground like spiky buoys.

“So what'd you say your name was, son?”

“Templeton, ma'am.”

“Templeton. That's a strange name for a black man don't you think?”

It was a question that Templeton had been asked all his life. Years ago, after he had gotten over the kids in grade school calling him Templeton the rat from E.B. White's book *Charlotte's Web*, he learned to sublimate the comments from both white and black people concerning his name. At first he flew off the handle and ripped into a diatribe about race and names and how they had nothing to do with one another in a homogenous American culture. When that response just fueled more ridicule and had gotten him into a few fights at bars and parties, he started telling people it was originally a Sanskrit term for a pre Hindu god who was very, very fat and demanded places of worship be built for him and supplied with an unending supply of food. Then it was adopted into the Arabic where it came to mean a very large palace. It was then assimilated by the Ibo people to designate the round ruddy cheeks of their Dutch assailants. Dutch picked it up and changed it to mean a gentleman who appreciated a woman with an ample chest. From there the English distorted it to mean king or ruler until it filtered down to a session drummer at Motown who used it during a Marvin Gaye song to mean to be put into a heavy groove, as in: Marvin music tempintin'' the Lawd to get down and boogie. Most people just looked at him, get it, and walk away feeling foolish or roll their eyes. Some asked him what album the drummer played on.

“Yes ma’am it is I suppose.”

“Well that’s alright child. It sound noble. Are you noble?”

Templeton shrugged. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

“So why you here?”

Templeton told her his story.

“You gonna do good,’ she said. “You gonna do fine.”

“What’s that over there?” Templeton asked, pointing to a small grassy mound just off to the right of the house.

“That’s Bethany’s grave.”

“Who’s that?”

“Did you see the woman in the picture on the mantle?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“That’s Bethany. Bethany Ramirez. She was my partner for thirty years until she died of cancer of the pancreas seven years ago. That’s where she wanted to be buried. She wanted to come home and die and be buried here. She loved it here. We moved out here after my husband, if that’s what you call the man I choose to live with for twenty miserable years of my life, died. Me and Bethany had met in Guam in the Red Cross and we kept in touch after that, and when Rodger died I wrote her to move out here with me from San Bernardino. She left her man and moved right out here. And we lived pretty good together, if I do say so myself.”

“That’s incredibly wonderful. It’s beautiful. I’m sure you really miss her.”

“Oh yeah. I miss her physically. That’s just human, but she’s here more than anyone could ever know. The good Lord don’t take something without giving something back. She’s here every night when I pray. I can feel her nudging me when I start to doubt my faith and myself. She was Catholic too, and she was more strict about that stuff than my mama ever was. She out there when I water those plants, when I pump that stubborn damn well and feel like about to cuss she remind me to calm down with the sound of a bird or a glint of the sun off the window or some such a thing.

“Child, how you think an old woman like me gonna be out here alone without no body. She here alright. The good Lord wouldn’t leave an old fart like me out here to rot. She his angel now. She helps me to recognize the beauty of his world. You see it right now. That’s why you was so quiet at first. I saw you just a drinking it in with your whole self. You can’t help it sometimes. Sometimes I wake up and come sit out on this porch just a crying. Sometimes I’m crying cause I’m missing Beth, of course. But most the time I look out around here and I cry because I can’t believe God has let me see this. Look at this. Look around you. Ain’t no way you gonna ever see anything more beautiful and holy as the earth. He made this for us, child. And maybe he took her from me so I could remember that. When’s the last time you was woke from the sound of a desert moth crawling across your window screen? Or sat in the evening listening to grouse clucking their goodnights to one another in the distance? There is depth to those sounds, depth so thick you can float on it.”

Templeton scooted up on the porch and leaned against the wall of the house. He closed his eyes and tried to listen to the sounds Irma was talking about. He heard the soft breeze blowing against his ears and Irma’s breathing and adjusting herself in her chair, but then he fell

asleep. He woke up to the smell of food. Irma was asleep in her chair. The sun was behind the house. Meridian came out and woke up Irma.

“I made you squash and chicken stew. Are you hungry?”

Templeton stretched. He felt well rested. Irma looked down at him and smiled. He smiled back. He got up and helped her out of the chair. Meridian told her again that she had cooked and Irma insisted that they stay and eat some too. The three of them ate together. They listened to how Irma had eventually moved out to New Mexico from Arkansas when her father got a job on the railroad in 1918, how she went to college, joined the Red Cross, got married, lived with Bethany and Bethany’s funeral. After they ate Templeton washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. They had another slice of melon on the porch. They ate in silence and looked out over the landscape. Meridian told Irma it was time for them to go. They hugged their goodbyes and Irma watched them until they disappeared over the hill.

The sun was beginning to set when they got close to Meridian’s house. A swath of orange, blue and red emanated in the expanse of sky behind a range of hills. The house stood in an impressionistic relief against the back drop. Meridian stopped and absorbed the scene. She smiled and nodded her head as they started to walk again. In the distance the call of a bird echoed. Meridian chuckled.

“I have to tell you something,” Templeton said. “I have to be honest with you.”

Meridian looked at him and arched her eyebrows.

“I’m sorry. I was coming back from Silver City and I saw the light of the fire so I got out and well...I’m very sorry. I know you told me not to come by after dark, I was just worried and I...”

“If you saw, you were meant to see. The spirits, energy, the universe, whatever you choose to call it works that way. You’re supposed to learn something from it. It’s the balance between the thing you call yourself and the larger environment that you are part of working in synchronicity.”

“Those people, those shadows and stuff, I used to see them when I was a kid. Before my dad...died. Then there’s this guy I keep seeing. He looks like Uncle French from this show I used to watch as a kid. I used to see him with those people. I called him the Changing man, cause he changed. When I was a kid he changed appearances to whoever I was most happy with at the time. I’ve been seeing him too.

She looked at him intently and nodded her head.

“You’re more like your uncle than I thought. I have something I think you should probably have now.”

Meridian went into the other room and came back with a leather bound book clasped with a small buckle. She handed it to Templeton.

“This is Cleveland’s journal. There’s a lot of stuff in there that’ll help you with your book. There’s a lot of stuff in there that will help you with this other thing too.”

“This is his journal? This is amazing, thank you. I’m sure it’ll help a lot. Thank you for being so kind and helpful.”

Templeton looked at his watch.

“I should probably head out now, I have plans tonight.”

“Tell my daughter hello.”

“I ...it’s not what you think. I...ok.”

“Tell her to give her mother more respect.”

Templeton looked at her in question.

“Never mind. Go on. Don’t be late. She hates when people are late and she’s hell to deal with when she’s mad.”

Templeton nodded and held up the journal. Meridian nodded back and let him out the door.

Hines and Franks sat at a booth in a dimly lit alcove in the back of the restaurant. Behind a blood red container, the flame of a candle flickered like an epileptic cricket. Franks sipped on a gin while the Reverend ate mouthfuls of spinach and artichoke dip on chunks of French bread. Franks watched him from the corner of his eye. It was at that moment that Franks thought he saw the true character of Hines. Not the charismatic preacher of his church, but the balding aging, Neanderthal-profiled man shoving wads of food into his mouth. Franks let his disgust simmer. He had never really liked Hines. He had never trusted him, even at first when he started going to the Torch of God and he was really looking for some type of salvation. He was taken in by Hines style, but the flamboyancy of it kept him from trusting him. He wasn't like the solemn, quiet and dreadful priest he had grown up with in the Catholic Church. It was that type of preacher who instilled a deep sense of fear and guilt that made him feel like he was in contact with a higher power when he was younger. Those preachers pointed out to him what was wrong with him, cataloged the sins that he had committed and prescribed ways for him to redeem himself. Hines, from the start seemed like a con man, a barker at a carnival selling salvation as a side show behind a dark curtain for three-bits. It had been his wife's idea to stay in the church so he went along with her in the silent agreement that he went along with all of the things she wanted to do. He knew he was right about Hines all along when he came along with Waters to discuss getting the land rights for God's Land that day in his office in Albuquerque. At least Waters was an honest, straight forward crook, but Hines hid behind his wall of righteousness like a snake hides in the brush waiting for something to strike at. He hated Hines most because of that, because he was the same way. He hid behind his official status with the feigned interest in bringing a better economy to the Sierra county region with God's Land, but he also had no problem with the kick-

back that would be falling into his pocket. He downed his drink, held the glass up and rattled the ice. A waiter came to the table and took the glass.

“You have to try this stuff,” Hines said, through a mouthful.

“I think I’ll just wait for dinner,” Franks said.

Hines nodded and went back to eating.

The waiter brought Franks another drink. He leaned back in the booth. Water’s guffaw traveled over the din of the restaurant like the bellow of a fog horn. “Good now we can get this over with and I can go home and sleep,” Franks thought. He stood up and waved Waters over to the booth. Waters walked up with his arms around the shoulders of an Indian man with short hair immaculately groomed. He wore a three piece suit and glasses.

“Gentlemen this is Wilbur Jefferson from the Navajo Nation’s Eastern Agency,” Waters said, patting the man on the back. “Dave this is Reverend T.D. Hines and Congressman Douglas Franks. Gentlemen I think we all have something in common and I think we can work around our problem facing the God’s Land project. Mr. Jefferson is here to help. And reverend am I correct to say that your boy, the lizard, or whatever you call him is taking care of our agitator problem?”

Hines looked up from the bowl of dip, a piece of bread in his hand and a chuck of artichoke on his chin and nodded. He swallowed hard and washed it down with a drink of water.

“He likes to be called The Salamander, Samuel. Not the lizard. He’s looking it things right now,” Hines said looking at the contractor from the corner of his eyes.

Hines didn’t like people disrespecting or making fun of The Salamander. He took it personal. The boy had had a rough enough life, he thought. He thought about the night he had

found the boy in the locker room. Hines had also been the Inman High School football coach. The Salamander had been a terrible football player. In the fifth game of the fourth season, his senior year, the Salamander started as middle linebacker because the starter had pulled a hamstring the week before. He was humiliated as the opposing team ran their star full back, a huge black kid, up the middle and straight at The Salamander all night for 4 touchdowns and 156 yards rushing. The whole team made fun of him for getting bested by a nigger boy. The following Thursday evening after practice a few of the other players trapped, held him down, stripped him down to his underwear and painted him black with oil paints. They locked him in the equipment shed. It took him an hour to jimmy a window to climb out of. Hines found him sitting on the bench in front of his locker looking like he'd been tarred and feathered, crying.

He sat down next to the boy and put his arm around his shoulders.

“The Lord Jesus went through many trials and tribulations, son. The Christians of old were persecuted for their belief in the way of Jesus too. I know you suffer right now, but you must be stronger than you ever been right now and allow the Lord to enter your heart,” Hines said, rubbing the boy’s back.

“Remember the 23rd Psalms, son. Pray with me.”

He held the Salamander’s and put his head on the boy’s shoulder. Together they recited scripture.

When they finished Hines leaned over and kissed the boy on his ear. The Salamander turned and looked at him. Hines smiled and wiped a tear from the boy’s eye.

“Come let me help you, son,” he said, helping the boy stand. “You get undressed and I’ll start you a shower.”

Hines went into the shower and started it. The Salamander went in. Hines stood off to the side of the stream of water with a bar of soap sudsing in his hands. The Salamander stopped and looked at him. Hines waved him over.

“Come on, son,” he said smiling. “I’m going to do the Christian thing to do and help you get cleaned. Just like Jesus washed the feet of Mary Magdalene, I’m going to wash you and left you know you are truly a child of God.”

He took The Salamander by the hand and guided him under the water. He rubbed the soap over his head and chest, under his arms and down his side. He washed the boy’s face and gently rubbed the paint off of his lips. He bent down in the stream of water and washed the boy’s feet and legs. He lost his balance and his face brushed against The Salamander’s thigh. He washed his genitals and between his legs and then rinsed the boy off. He led him back into the locker room and dried him.

“You get dressed now, ok.”

The Salamander nodded.

Hines took him by the back of the neck, brought his head forward then rested his forehead against the boy’s.

“God bless you,” he said, then turned and left.

Waters looked at the Reverend, smiled and nodded.

“Well good. Why don’t you have a seat Dave and we can get down to business over this border problem,” Waters said, guiding Jefferson into the booth.

Templeton closed the book and put it in his back pocket when he saw Chris Young walk into the restaurant. He wondered how much Young's nest of matted, brillo- textured dread-locks, which hung down past the middle of his back, weighed. He always got a kick out of seeing white people with dread-locks. It never seemed to look as elegant or noble as on a brother. It never quite accomplished the lion's mane look that it was supposed to. It usually just looked ratty and messed up. He was pretty sure that his uncle Cleveland, had he still been alive to see it, would have seen it as another theft the *white-man* perpetuated against the African descent culture and tried to turn into their own. Templeton didn't think like that. He thought that dread-locks on anybody who was not a practicing member of the Rastafarian religion and culture, whether they were white, black, brown, yellow or green was just another pathetic fad used to distance the people who thought they were being original, counter-cultural and or rebellious, hip and cool as another common-place act of the unimaginative who needed to feel their lives were somehow more adventurous and creative than other people. But Young was a good guy, Templeton thought. A bit naïve and overly optimistic, but definitely honest and sincere in his beliefs and life-style. He had met Young at a meeting that Meridian had held in the Truth or Consequences library. She and Delbert talked about the infringements on Indian land that the developers of God's Land were taking. Young had heard about the situation from a friend who ran a website that kept track of corporate wrong-doings and greed. Graham had found the site while surfing the web doing research about real estate fraud and posted a letter on the website telling about the situation in Truth or Consequences. Young jumped in his Subaru Legacy three days later and drove down from Oregon where he had been hammering metal spikes into old growth trees to

give back the lumber employees their just deserts for destroying the trees. Two days later he was knocking on the office door of Delbert Graham's office asking how he could be of service.

Young's list of green defense activities read off like a mercenary's resume. In March of 1981, at the age of eighteen, he joined a local cell of The Animal Liberation Front, and helped burn the administrative office of the INGO Pharmaceutical Company in New Jersey down to the ground for testing their products on animals. The success of the operation and especially the fact that no grave consequences came from the act gave him a taste for the dramatic. Throughout the rest of 1981 the group successfully raided and rescued a total of 1175 cats, 115 dogs, 250,000,000 fruit flies, 13,000 mice, 11,000 rats, 800 rabbits, 16 squirrel monkeys, unbeknownst to the group at the time to be infected with HIV, and a blind chimpanzee who died of cirrhosis of the liver in an animal shelter, from 17 different operations in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Nine of the 17 places he helped burn to the ground. But not in one incident was a human or animal life lost. It was a badge of pride for his cell because many cells throughout the world couldn't say the same. He felt alive, more so than any other previous time in his life. He was connected to something so much larger than himself. And it was this feeling of losing himself to something bigger that energized and kept him going, motivated and excited him about his work. He saw himself as a warrior for life. To Chris, what he did was more than a mere political statement, more than fulfilling some adolescent dysfunction to be anti-social and participate in giving it to the man, more than simply being rebellious. It was a spiritual act. He felt himself to be a soldier, a crusader in a holy war. To Young, deforestation, pollution, animal abuse, privatization of land, oil drilling, mining, fossil fuel, consumerism, population growth, nuclear waste, pesticides, and the myriad other threats that assaulted the planet daily was an affront to life, a blasphemy to being itself, and he, like an

eco-bodhisattva, was manifested in this existence to set things straight by any means necessary. That was why it didn't enter into his mind to think to follow up on his actions, and find out about the logger who lost his eye as he drilled into a tree and his chain blade ran against a spike he had hammered into an old Hemlock tree in southeast Alaska, broke a tooth from the blade that shot into his eye, or about the firefighter in Vail in 1998 who received third degree burns on over 2/3 of his body while fighting the fire that he had help set with The Earth Liberation Army. And though he didn't know about these incidents, it is more than likely that if he had heard about them he would have stated: Karma's a motherfucker.

It was something Templeton didn't understand, either. What was the point, he thought, of destroying billions of dollars of property, putting people out of work, and putting others at risk cleaning up the mess he had helped make. He understood the freeing of the animals as long as they got better homes or were released back into the wild. (Except the chimp that was at least getting medication to alleviate the pain of the cirrhosis, and the monkeys who were incinerated because they were infected with an incurable disease). But he didn't understand the destruction. It didn't help anything. The culprits paid a few fines, got their hand slapped by the media and the caring public for a month or two then they were forgotten, they rebuild, designed tighter security, better PR people and started all over again. Templeton thought it was just like anything else, the people who bought the products were given what they wanted by corporation. The people buying cosmetics, fur coats, prescription drugs, and whatever else was put out on the market wanted these things and they wanted them more than they didn't want a monkey having electrodes being jabbed into her skull. The majority of people are going to buy them regardless if the ALF, ARM ELA or the IRS destroyed a billion dollars in property every three days.

It had to be a completely different type of destruction that was going to bring about any type of true animal or human liberation. The problem is philosophical in nature and not political. A change in the way that people view life as a whole has to change. An understanding about ourselves and our relationship, or connection to our environment is the only thing that is going to bring about any serious and permanent change. And Templeton didn't see that happening anytime soon. People are too addicted to convenience, he thought. Sacrifice and cutting back are cool ideas to ponder and spout to friends and other people to be politically correct. But in the United States, one of the greatest consuming nation on the planet, where the material and acquisition is synonymous with success and power, where ones being is an extrapolation of the brand of clothing, car, and real estate one possesses, Templeton couldn't imagine anything changing anytime soon.

Also, he was not quite sure what Young and the people like him really wanted either. Were they vying for some type of pre-industrial, agrarian society? Some type of idealized, communistic utopia? He didn't understand what they truly wanted. He was inclined to agree with Pierre Bourdieu, that no matter what, society was not going to evolve into anything other than what it was now. That at the heart of all the grand social ideas and hopes there was nothing but hope and ideas and that it is our lot to remain exactly what and where we are. Evolution of the social has reached a dead end, and only a few brave individuals, possibly like Meridian Yellow Thunder could make even a semblance of an escape from the creation.

But it was just that wild idealism that Templeton liked about Young. They had hung out together almost as much as Templeton hung out with Jennifer over a three week period since Young had arrived on Halloween. Young was actually one of the nicest, most generous and easy

going people Templeton had ever met. And even though Templeton got irritated with all his political talk and philosophy, he still had a good time with him.

It was Templeton who had introduced him to Albert Alvarez and his two friends Charly Running Cloud and Pete Sanchez, who were both Navajo. Albert Alvarez, or the Black Coyote as he was called, was Apache and had been known in certain “activist circles”. Alvarez, Charly and Pete had taken an immediate liking to Young with the exact intensity that Meridian had taken a disliking to him. At the meeting Young had insinuated that more drastic measures than protesting and petition signing were needed to stop the completion of God’s Land. The old men, who had all met at the siege of Wounded Knee in 1973, chimed in their 3 cents worth in agreement with Young. Meridian squashed the idea immediately and told the four that their help was more than appreciated, but the actions that they were implying were not in the least bit welcome in her campaign. With a release from the tension like the steam from a pressure cooker that Young’s comments had created in the room among the amateur and newly recruited protesters, composed mainly of older Native peoples and a few liberal retired white folks and 5 political science majors up from New Mexico State University, the crowd of 18 clapped. Young and the old men sat the rest of the meeting in contemptuous silence. After the meeting Alvarez nodded at Young hopped into his truck with the other two in the back and drive off. Young waved and Charly Running Cloud waved back. After the second meeting Templeton introduced them to Young, and Sanchez invited him to stay with them up at their house by the side of the lake.

Meridian made it clear to Templeton that she didn’t want him bringing Young to her house with him when she found out that they had been hanging out together. “His way of doing things only brings trouble,” she said. And she didn’t trust him. But the only thing that Templeton

had even remotely seen as a bad quality about Young was his incessant political interpretation of every conceivable situation that there was. Other than that he had a good time hanging out with the old men and Young, fishing in the lake, hiking around the country and just relaxing on the porch drinking a beer while Young and Sanchez smoked pot. He had even taken Jennifer with him a few times to go hiking and canoeing on the lake.

Young sat down at the stool next to Templeton. A waitress, a miniature placard with the name Fern pinned above her chest, dressed in a powder blue uniform made to resemble a vintage 1950's ensemble complete with the frilly white apron and half cap she wore lopsided in her pinned up graying hair, came up asked, in a voice that reminded Templeton of Bela Lugosi for some reason, if she could help him. Young ordered a stack of buckwheat pancakes and a cup of black coffee. Fern reached behind her and grabbed a glass coffee pot from the coffee maker. She pulled a mug from beneath the counter and poured Chris his coffee. Templeton watched the loose flesh of her arms shake as pushed the mug to Young.

“Missed you up at the lake the last few days. You doing alright?” Young asked.

Templeton slid his plate away from him. A quarter length of uneaten link sausage rolled into some scraps of hash browns. He finished the rest of his orange juice and pulled out his wallet.

“Just been hanging low. Actually did a little bit of writing yesterday. That journal is really helping out a lot. But mainly just been spending time with the lady, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I do you lucky bastard.”

“What've you been up to?”

“Looking for you. I thought you came in here and ate everyday, but the last three days I’ve dropped by you haven’t been here. Must be nice getting breakfast in bed.”

“Yeah, I’ve been getting spoiled, man. I could really get use to this. So what’s up? What’d you need?”

Fern slid a plate full of pancakes in front of Young, topped off a quarter inch of coffee in his cup, put a canister of syrup next to plate and asked him if he needed anything else. Young smiled a big mid-western howdy do, thank you very much smile, shook his head, drenched his pancakes in syrup and plunged his fork into them.

“You know that kid, Markowski, or something like that,” Young said, swallowing hard and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “That kid from the college that was at the first meeting. Strange little thing. Sort of looks like Penny Marshall in a way. Remember her?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. Homely girl. Hot body, but a face to protect it. What about her?”

“I was going to ask you that. Seems she’s been asking for me around town about an interview or something. Is she legit?”

“I don’t know anything about her. I only saw her that one time. She’s just some kid who wants to interview an eco-activist for her school paper probably. Who knows, she might have a thing for you. She might like the tall, light and scraggily type.”

“Shit, I wish I was that lucky. Even some homely loving could do me good right now. It’s been a while, man. A long while. Anyway, do me a favor; if you see her or she finds you sniff her out for me, ok?”

“I’ve got a lady, man.”

“That’s for sure. But, serious. Do that for me alright? I know I’m being paranoid, but…”

“Yeah, sure thing, Youngy. Listen, I need to take off. I got to go to the library for awhile and try to work then met Jennifer for lunch. I’ll try to get up to the lake this weekend, though. Take it easy.”

Templeton shook hands with him and patted him on the back just before Young shoved another fork full of pancakes into his mouth. He walked over to the cash register and Fern followed him behind the counter. He paid for his meal and told Fern to ring up Young’s breakfast on his tab as well.

“Later,” he said to Young, as he walked out the door. Young raised his chin in acknowledgement then assaulted his plate of pancakes again.

Wilbur Jefferson stood behind Samuel Waters, leaned over his right shoulder and used his index finger to follow the new boundary line he had created on the map showing Indian territory and God’s Land perimeters. The difference had been a mere 175 feet. A distance that may have made a difference to Jefferson if the amount in monetary gain hadn’t equaled the distance. Franks and Waters had spilt the tab and gave the money to Jefferson in cash. Reverend Hines had not been present at the transaction, and thus by his account had not partaken in the trade. He liked to think that whatever transpired between the other three was the will of God and anything that was considered illegal in the laws of man was exempt in the law of the Lord. Waters shook Jefferson’s hand and told him to never contact him again. He told him that they had never met before and he didn’t and had never even heard of a man by the name of Wilbur Jefferson, and that Jefferson had never heard of him. He advised Jefferson to be wise with the money and keep it under wraps, spend it or invest how he wanted, he didn’t give a damn, but to do a little at a time to keep attention away from himself. Jefferson agreed with everything. Pulled

his hand out of Waters grasp, lowered the brim of his cowboy hat over his brow and walked out Waters' office.

“Ellen get my lawyer on the phone,” Waters said into the speaker of his telephone.”

“Yes, sir,” a female voice answered back.

“Well congressman, that was a deal gone good wouldn't you say?” Waters said leaning forward on his desk.

“Let's just get those Indians and Eco-people off our backs and build that damn thing. I just want this whole affair over ASAP,” Franks said.

“It's over Dougie. It's over.”

When the Salamander and Waters' attorney, Richard Douglas Hurd arrived at his office, Delbert Graham was leaning back in his chair with his feet propped up on the desktop reading an article about Y2K in *Time* magazine. When the two men entered, he stood up, rolled the magazine up in a cylinder and slapped the open palm of his other hand with the magazine. The Salamander closed the door and stood, arms crossed and legs slightly spread, in front of the door. Hurd approached the table and threw a manila folder on Graham's desk. Graham put the magazine in his back pocket, picked up the folder and took out the documents that were inside. He looked at them held them out to Hurd and shrugged.

“What's this?” Graham said.

“That Mr. Graham,” Hurd said, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, then folding his arms behind him, “is the evidence of the boundaries of Navajo land and the land in

which my client Mr. Samuel Waters has purchased for the construction of the God's Land Christian resort."

"You're joking, right? This is ah...crap to say the least, Mr.?"

"Hurd. My name is Richard Douglas Hurd and the gentleman behind me is..."

"I've met your thug, Mr. Hurd. And I don't know who you think you are playing for a fool but these documents are a complete fabrication. I have been to the State office and I have seen the original maps and treaties and everything else that goes along with land boundaries."

"Mr. Graham the evidence is in your hand. These are the official, registered documents issued by the government of the United States of America concerning Navajo land and private and or government owned land. The 175 square yards of land in question, as the maps show, is clearly not in Indian Territory and any further inquiry into this matter can be handled in court, Mr. Graham."

"I don't believe you people. You really think you can pull this kind of crap and get away with it.? You're nuts, you're bunch of criminals."

"Anyone who is not associated with my client or my client's company who sets foot on that tract of land will be persecuted to the full extent of the law, sir. Also we have filed for an injunction to keep you and your protestors least 100 yards from any property associated with my client. Which means your people will need to demonstrate 100 yards from the premise of Mr. Waters' offices and other property. Is this clear Mr. Graham?"

Graham shook his head and chuckled. "You people. You people are unbelievable."

"Thank you for your time, sir, and have a good afternoon," Hurd said, turned around and walked out the office.

The Salamander followed Hurd then stopped turned around and looked at Graham. Graham looked back even though the other man's hazel gaze boiled with a threatening animosity. The Salamander shut the door. Graham threw the documents across the room and watched them flutter to the ground like dry, dead moths falling out of an old lamp shade.

Jennifer began leaving an hour and a half earlier to work to avoid her mother's invasion into her world. She lived seven blocks from her job, and in a 2 mile radius, Meridian had set up a sort of blitzkrieg. By eight o'clock in the morning Meridian had protesters stationed in front of The Torch of God's administrative building, where Jennifer worked, in front of the main post office, the city and county building and the W NM University. The number of protesters varied from day to day. The most that had been present at any one place had been 25 at the courthouse. The first day she saw the protestors in front of the post office on her way to work she had dismissed it as something completely distanced from herself. So, it wasn't until she pulled into the parking lot at her job and saw the Black Coyote and eight other people with signs painted with various condemning slogans, about the Torch of God Christian Church stealing Indian land, and handing out fliers, did she realize that the perfectly architected city of the pristine world that she had so laboriously created to show her praise for the Lord had been besieged, laid to waste and vaporized by the denotation of what was surely her mother's complete and final voluntary separation from reality. She stopped at the entrance of the parking lot and stared out the driver side window at the spectacle in a state of mute incomprehensibility. Her mind had been sweep clean of any clear associative activity as to what was really taking place. It swam in a whirlpool of confusion verging on hysterical delirium. She slowly pulled forward watching the protesters walk in a circle, wave their signs and move their lips in unison but not hearing what

they were saying. The car crept further into the parking lot until a man in a white t-shirt turned gray, boot cut jeans covering a pair of scuffed, scratched and faded pair of brown cowboy boots steeped away from the circle and sauntered over to her. She looked at the man with a dumb startled look like a kid getting caught doing something she knew she wasn't supposed to do. He lifted the tattered straw cowboy hat off his brow, moved the Pall Mall with his tongue to the side of his mouth, smiled and held out a flier to Jennifer. She stepped on the gas and nearly side-swiped a mailbox as she sped across the parking lot and flew out the exit on the other side of the lot. The cowboy stopped, readjusted his hat, spit out the Pall Mall and watched her butt into traffic.

In the parking lot of Mc Donald's she had a melt down. She slumped forward in her seat, rested her head on the steering wheel and began to weep uncontrollably. She wept in all earnestness, deeply, sincerely, devoutly. She wept that her job may be threatened, she wept because her mother was selfish and didn't care about her feelings, she wept because her mother probably didn't love her. She wept because she was angry, scared, confused. She wept because she had never known her father and her mother always avoided the subject with empty platitudes about mother and daughter relationships, she wept because she hated her mother. She wept because her world was slowly unraveling and what she had worked so hard to construct was being to disappear and mean nothing. She wept for her lack of control and because of the weakness she felt from weeping and that display of weakness. She wept because she had fallen in love with Templeton. She wept because that love couldn't be controlled and it was wild and making her yearn and desire and passionate. She wept because he wasn't there with her right now to hold her in those arms of his and let her rest her face against his chest and weep even harder. She wept because he wasn't a Christian. She wept over what she thought was the

wreckage of her being, over her inability to have foreseen these obstacles creeping into her life and preventing them from happening. She wept over the impermanence of things, the instability of everything, the deterioration of a comfortable stasis, of a permanent place to call her own, of a place like the heart of God that never changed and was always dependable, inflexible, eternal. Her body was wracked with great convulsions of sobbing and epileptic fits of high-pitched squeaky panting. The muscles in her shoulders and neck burned and ached from the force of her sorrow. There was still more inside of her to get out, but her body had run out of the necessary chemical elements used to create tears, so she sat back in her seat with her eyes closed and her head on the headrest and guffawed deep breath out of her mouth while her body shook like Jell-O in the hands of a hungry toddler.

Then a yearning wave of desire surged through her with an intensity that made her swoon. She needed to have Templeton inside of her. She squashed the feeling immediately with a reprimand that verged on self-loathing, but the urge was stronger and over powered her guilt by slipping into her thoughts as the need for human affection and contact with the man she loved. She told herself she needed comforting, but her body knew otherwise. It was an old response that she thought she had mastered years ago. She remembered in high school when she was as empty as she felt now the 15 to 20 minutes of self-exploration had always calmed her and brought her back to a place in which she could objectively view her situation. It was no different from anybody else's response to stress. Some people ate, some people drank or did drugs, like Templeton, some people stole, gambled, shopped, fought or cut themselves. It wasn't that she was a whore, which in her guilt afterwards she always thought she was. It was simply the need of the body to be brought out of that nebulous realm of the mind in which despair grew like mushrooms in an old growth forest. The body needed to be re-recognized, replenished,

reinvigorated. So she drove to the library, found Templeton hunched over a book about Voodoo, took him back to her house and fucked him like she was receiving the Holy Spirit.

She couldn't hide from the guilt in the crook of Templeton's arm. She nuzzled closer to him and tried to hide her whole head under his arm. He pulled her up, put her head on his chest and ran his fingers over her arms and back. She lay there trying to enjoy his caresses, but the tumult of thoughts fueled by her usual guilt, and the image of the stupid-looking cowboy with the nasty cigarette in his stupid-ass mouth who had the nerve to be smiling while he invaded her job at the bequest of her mother, whipped the guilt into a fury. She kept sighing, twitching and turning in Templeton's arms until finally she had to get up. She was her old self again. She was ready for combat. She would not capitulate. If her mother wanted war she would get it. She jumped off the bed and slid into her underwear. Templeton tried to pull her back in bed but she jerked away. She jerked a little too forcefully and an ice sliver of anxiety shot through the back of Templeton's mind.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to grab you. Are you ok?" Templeton asked.

Jennifer pulled her skirt up, buttoned her blouse and tucked it into the skirt. She marched over to her chest of drawers and studied herself in the mirror. She reapplied her lipstick and eye shadow while Templeton slide out of bed and started dressing.

"Are you Ok?" he asked stumbling as he lost footing try to put his pants on. "Are mad?"

"It's not you, Templeton. It's my mother. You may not want to go and see her for awhile after I'm done with her. I need to get my head out my you-know-what and get into work and take care of something. You can stay if you want or I can give you a ride back to the library. What do you want to do?"

“I’ll stay.”

“Ok, I’ll see you later. Have a good day,” she said and left.

Templeton stood in the doorway between the bedroom and the living room and listened to the vibration of the slammed door die down into a silence that was heavy and brooding. He put the rest of his clothes on and made the bed. He rummaged through the sparse food items in the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator and tried to figure out something to eat for lunch and fix for dinner. There was nothing but a few cans of pickled beets and creamed corn in the pantry and dying vegetables wrapped in plastic bags and decaying in viscous pools of tar colored liquid in the refrigerator. He decided he would walk to a fast-food joint for lunch and if she wanted to go out for dinner they could try to find a nice Italian place. He knew she was mad and wanted to do something nice for her to take her mind off of it. And although she had said she wasn’t mad at him there was the creeping suspicion that he was somehow involved in the constellation of her anger. That was something that he did not want to be a part of. He knew that from the intricate construction of her anger that if his star stood out in anyway more so than all the other points of light that it would be his light that she focused on with an overwhelming amount of scrutiny. And whether that attention was of a positive or negative quality, it was a dangerous thing. Too much positive attention could turn into a needy, clingy, nagging sort of attention. The constant need for reassurance and ego boosting. The negative was a boot out the door, and that he could not handle that.

He thought he had been in love once in college with a woman named Patience. They had lived together from their sophomore year until two years after they had graduated, but when she left his pain had been more of an obligation than involuntary. With Jennifer, the thought of her leaving felt as if someone made of iron were kneeling on his chest and strangling him. That

hadn't been the feeling he had when she walked out the door, but the watch dog sentinel that alerted him to the unstated particulars of situations, lifted its head off his paws, shot his pointy ears straight up, sniffed the air and looked around cautiously before laying his head back down. The dog had always been a trust-worthy friend, but Templeton thought he may be overreacting. He remembered the ecstasy he when she had snuck up behind him in the library and nibbled on his neck. It had been the signs of her arousal, the color in her face, the full, softness of her lips and the lusty glaze in her eyes; it had been the spontaneity of the act. It was out of character for her to do something like that, and it made him proud that it was him that she had come looking for. He liked to think that it was just plain lust for him, but he knew it was something else. People don't break their habits and roles just because they get horny, not most seemingly adjusted people. So he knew something must have shaken her up and she needed him for comfort, which made him feel good about himself. He had never thought of himself as the type of person who someone would come to feel calm and safe. He had never really felt calm and safe himself, and that's what scared him, because if she thought that he was someone who could make someone else calm and safe, she may be more fucked up then him. All he did was adore her, and he thought that was a selfish thing to do. He didn't understand that being adored was exactly what Jennifer wanted and that she loved him. He thought in all cases of love, familial and otherwise, that he was supplying what others needed and that they just took it from him because he was a good guy. He never realized that he was loved in return. So when Jennifer had shown up with desire radiating from her body for him, it toppled him into a whole new dimension.

He would wake up in the middle of the night and follow the outline of her body with his eyes then slowly traced them with his finger. Then lift himself up on his elbow and stare into her sleeping face. He would lower his face so that his mouth glided across the rise of her top lip then

move his mouth down to the crook of her neck and her scent for the rest of the day. He'd move to her ear barely touching her skin as if it were crystal. A thin smile would appear on her face and he kissed her before he nestled his head in her hair and fell asleep to her smell. When he was alone at her apartment he would take her pajama top or a blouse she had worn, or the blanket she covered with at night and sat on the couch watching TV, and hold it to his nose.

The attraction they felt was gravitational. They could feel one another's aching. Their embrace was almost savage, as if they were trying to pull each other inside of one another. He walked down the street with her holding hands, or with his arms around her shoulders laughing and smiling and not having another thought except the feel of her against his body. They stared into one another's eyes over the table at restaurants, hugged at movies, took walks in the hills on weekends and in the park at night. They had promised each other children and the rest of the time they were going to be on this planet to spend it with each other.

Templeton had seduced Jennifer. She had known that she liked him and would give him the time of day when she first saw him, the idea of sex had even crossed her mind, but she didn't think she would give it up so absolutely voluntarily. She thought, if he was worthy, that she might make him work for it for a long while, but she gave in on the third date. So while she cooked scallops and brussel sprouts she felt the weakness in her stomach and the moisture precipitating between her legs and knew she was going give herself to him that night. She couldn't quite comprehend what exactly it was about him that swayed all of her "better judgment". He was nice, cordial, friendly and funny, but so were a hundred thousand other guys. It wasn't jungle fever, she had had a black boyfriend before; it wasn't his looks although he was a pretty boy with a sexy mouth and long, pretty eyelashes. He wasn't extraordinarily

built, in fact he had a small pot-belly and his shoulders were a bit sloped, and he could definitely have stood to have more of a chest. It was something intangible, a part of his mood, his presence his whole make up. There was a solemnness to him, she thought. And it was this quality that she wanted to know how it felt, and to have him physically, she thought, she might be able to feel it. It wasn't just this yearning to feel the intangible, it was to feel it as it was packaged in this man, Templeton Beaumont. So against her "better judgment" she let him inside of her and fell in love in the process.

It was the love that let her off the hook when it came to her guilt. She was a Christian, but she wasn't fanatical about her beliefs. She did believe that only Christians were saved at the end of all time and any other faith or non-faith no matter their age, sex, gender, race, sexual preference, politics, etc. were condemned to hell if they didn't believe in the god she believed in. Yet she believed that her god was a forgiving god and that once a person surrendered him/herself or to his grace then they were saved from anything bad ever happening to them. So she didn't think pre-marital sex was a bad thing, she had had boyfriends before Templeton. She didn't think drinking or rock music were bad things. One could indulge in the things of the world as long as one's complete devotion and focus were on the Lord. So the fact that she fell in love with Templeton assuaged any self-recriminating thoughts she might have had about pre-marital sex with him.

So when Jennifer told Templeton that she wanted a man who was willing to commit his life to her, he told her that he was that man. And he was. It hadn't been the sex that caused him to make his decision. There was nothing particularly kinky, weird or far-out about the sex they had. He had had a woman who would do anything, anytime, anywhere. They had had sex at a night club while Grand Funk Railroad played *I'm Your Captain* on the stage below. And he had

thought he was in love with her because she fucked him so well, but when she left he felt nothing but a sort of relief that he didn't have to keep up interest in the frantic, insatiable need that she was. Sex with Jennifer was all pretty straightforward. But, the intensity of the act between them was self-nullifying. When they were in union, they were in *Union*. They phased into one another and there was only the other that was visible and only the coupling was tangible. But it was the fact that Jennifer made him feel that made Templeton fall in love with her. He was a child at Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving and summer break all rolled into one with this new experience. He talked to her. He listened to her. He was interested in her life. He felt connected to her, to life.

He had felt disconnected for what seemed his whole life. He felt separated from everything and everybody around him. He was a moon without a planet, a satellite knocked out of orbit and drifting aimlessly in the cold, dark void of a starless space. When he was going to therapy and in rehab he was attentive to what Dr. Sakimoto and the counselors told him about himself and the generalities of maladies arising from abnormal psychology. The exercises and idea helped him a bit. They helped him to build a sort of functional relationship with the people in his life and his environment, but it was a superficial and surface relation. It kept him protected from the compassion of others and gave him the autonomy that he required. But he had never felt a bond between himself and anything else. He existed in life as a sort of specter, seemingly condemned to notice life in passing, never to actually feel it. He didn't tell his counselors, or Dr. Sakimoto, or his aunt and uncle, or his cousins, or even the people he considered friends. He attempted to tell a girlfriend he considered himself very close to at one time, but he never had the language to explain his situation with the type of clarity that he felt it needed. So, he used vague and clichéd explanations that made him sound as if he were clinically depressed. Patience had bought him books on depression and self-help manuals by the latest best-selling spiritual gurus.

He read them and even discussed them with her. He even pretended to go to the school counselor three nights a week (which he never did but instead spend the 3 hours a week in the student union playing pool or wandering the campus smoking more cigarettes than he normally did). But all he really ever got from all the books and tapes Patience brought him was the underlying fear of the author's own existence. The exercises and holistic ideas were supposed to help him feel like he was part of a greater community of humanity, that he wasn't alone in his pain over whatever had fucked him up and was disrupting his experience of a normal life. But, the solutions and suggestions felt desperate, frantic, like starving people scrambling to pick up crumbs of food dropped from some airplane. He began to feel actually depressed the more self-help books he read. He vacillated between sympathy and disgust for the people who actually bought those books in hope of having a life changing experience. He pictured them as cockroaches that darted for the safety of the sink drain and underneath the fridge.

He didn't know why he felt that way. For a time he was comfortable with the banal excuse that his disconnectedness had everything to do with his parent's tragic demise. Dr. Sakimoto told him that, Philbert and Rebecca told him that, his counselors told him that; his friends, books, movies, the whole damn culture told him that cause of his disturbance was due to the fact that he had witnessed a horrifying event in his young fragile life and his immature mind had created and sought refuge in detachment. So he thought that he should believe it too. But, in all honesty he knew that it wasn't true. He had dealt with the phantoms of his parents for years and didn't blame himself in the least. If anything bothered him it was that their deaths didn't bother him. He felt that it had been their decision to do what they did, and it was his life to do what he felt. And although those three lives were connected in a few ways, they were more disconnected. But he kept this idea to himself.

Jennifer dissolved that.

Even with Patience, who he had been more comfortable with than anybody in his life up to that point, he didn't feel connected. He loved her, for sure, but it wasn't an organic love like he felt for Jennifer. It didn't grow out of the two of them as themselves and as each other. It was more of a social love. A love that was commanded out of the fact that two people who met and spent time together, had lots of sex together, were monogamous, talked to each other about their likes, dislikes, fears, hopes, doubts and joys, their plans for the future, were eventually supposed to fall in love for the rest of their lives. So Templeton complied and believed he was in love with her. But Patience was smarter.

Living together for four years during and after college only added to the reasons that Patience left Templeton in their one bedroom apartment on Steele Street in Denver. One evening, he sat on the couch, silent, drinking Cutty Sark and watching reruns of Star Trek while she moved her belongings out of the apartment. It hadn't been a spur of the moment thing, she had been thinking about doing for four months before she actually did it. But she had always thought that it would go differently. In her fantasy she imaged them sitting down at dinner at Taki's over some grilled salmon and discussing that their situation had reached its logical conclusion. She imagined them setting a time when she would begin to move her stuff out in increments. First the big stuff, Templeton and his their friends would get together one Saturday after noon drink some beer, eat some pizza and move the stuff out (possibly she and Templeton would make love one more time that night on the floor of her new apartment) then she would go back during the week for her smaller stuff. But the Thursday night that Templeton got home from work already drunk and slumped on the couch with the already opened bottle of scotch, turned on the TV and tuned her out, was the night she slipped several jars, canisters, bottles and

tubes of dried up mascara, foundation, eye shadow, lotion, bath oils, her fantasy, her hope, and her feelings for Templeton into a white canvas duffle bag and carried them out over her shoulder to the dumpster behind the apartment complex.

“Long day?” she asked, standing at the kitchen sink washing a head of cabbage.

Templeton grunted and fell backwards onto the sofa. He searched for the remote between the cushions, saw it on the coffee table and turned the TV on. He flicked through the channels and pulled out the bottle of scotch from his back pack and drank it from the bottle. Patience rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“I’m making chicken oriental salad are you hungry?” she asked, drying her hands on a dishtowel.

“Unh unh.”

“You’ll probably feel better if you eat, you know.”

Templeton took another swig.

“Did it go that bad, Templeton? I mean, what happened?”

Templeton shrugged and rubbed the back of neck.

“You should talk about it. You can’t always keep stuff bottled up inside. You’re going to get an ulcer, go crazy or explode or something, you know. Let it out,” she said leaning against the wall leading into the living room.

Templeton looked at her from the corner of his eye with an expression as if he were having trouble with a bowel movement.

“What do you want to talk about? It’s the same shit every day. I tell you the same thing every time you ask me. What more do you want me to tell you.”

She sighed. “It would still help you to talk about it. There’s something different about every situation, right?”

“Jesus, Patience, I go into people’s houses, dumb fucks who don’t know how to raise the kids they bring into the world and don’t know how to quit fucking so they don’t have anymore. I take these children, who will never know anything better than the squalor, neglect and rage that they are apparently and naively being saved from,” he said, taking another swig from the bottle and leaning forward in his chair. “Under the authority of the state, another bunch of dumb fucks who wouldn’t know how to enrich these babies lives anymore than they know how to wipe their own dirty asses, I rip these children from the existence they have known all their scared, little lives, no matter how fucked up, and I throw them into the homes of other dumb mother fuckers who 75% of the time treat them the same or worse than the parents, and get paid for it.”

He set the bottle on the coffee table and slunk back onto the couch and began switching channels again. Patience looked at him and noticed the dark circles underneath his eyes. His skin had a beige tint to it, and there was a stain of spaghetti sauce or Taco Bell hot sauce just below his collar.

She tried to imagine the slightly shy, enthusiastic Literature Major she had meet at the University of Colorado that long ago fall morning at the Blarney Stone coffee house on Broadway in Boulder. He had been sitting in the corner drinking hot chocolate and noticed her at the counter as she decided whether to order a white chocolate mocha or honey java chip double espresso. He recognized her from the class they were taking together about Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Camus. They were both first semester juniors. It had only been two weeks into the semester,

and she had noticed how his attention vacillated between her and the professor's lecture. After the first semester they moved into together. If she had been smart, she thought as she looked at Templeton on the couch, she would have recognized him for what he was when he changed majors. But she had been in love with him.

Templeton in a moment of what he had considered supreme lucidity decided that literature was an absolute and complete waste of time. That's what he announced, after spilling a beer, at the top of his slurring voice one night as they watched *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* on the VCR. He decided that it had no value to society. It was a lazy past time invented and sustained for the bourgeoisie, and there was no utilitarian value to the making or the study of literature. Also, he was changing his major to sociology. And after a long eloquently verbose litany on the virtues of sociological study, he had convinced himself that his decision had nothing to do with the fact that his professor told him his second draft of his final paper read like something out of Cliff Notes.

She should have known, she thought to herself as she watched him slam down another shot of scotch, what he was about after he slipped into his funk and started counseling. He had suggested he go after he slammed his fist through the hall wall in their apartment after a night of drinking. He had accused her of flirting with a *white boy* on her way to the bathroom at a party. When all that had really happened was that she dropped her lip stick and a friend from another class of hers had picked it up, handed it to her and gave her a hug. Templeton through an alcoholic haze saw him kiss her on the mouth. For the rest of the night he was rude and ignored her until they started walking home and he went off on a tirade about the white man was always trying to take something from the black man, always trying to take their women, and how evil and despicable they were, and how much he hated them. It took all of her strength not to erupt in

laughter. She knew he was drunk and spouting off at the mouth; for one thing all of his friends at that time were *white boys*. The only black friend he had he didn't even hang out with. They played on the intercollegiate flag football team, and they only hung out long enough to drink beers after the games in the fall for three months once a week. She knew he was jealous, and it made her a bit proud, but his escalating rage soon turned her pride to exhaustion and disgust. When she told him he was acting like a baby, he put his fist through the wall. And although he had gone to counseling at the campus counseling center (sometimes she thought he didn't really go), something had turned off inside of her toward him that night. It was nothing conscious, and she still loved him, but some aspect of the image that she had maintained over that first year simply disappeared like dew in the morning sun.

“Are you sure you don't want to eat?” Patience asked as she dished up a plate for herself. “You'll definitely feel better if you get something on your stomach.”

“No, please. I said no. Can you just shut up and let me deal with this the way I deal with it, please,” Templeton said without looking up from the TV.

She would remember the feeling it as if something had jumped into her from outside and at the same time something burst from inside her. It was as if a bolt of electricity shot straight into her forehead and coursed through her entire body animating some strange alien presence that implanted itself inside her. It buckled her knees. She didn't see Templeton bounced up from the couch like a child startled by a thunder clap. She didn't see the confused and frightened expression jump onto his face, he thought that she might have hurt herself on accident, then the expression contort into one of near disgust and irritation which slowly returned to one of supreme detachment as he drew a long drink from the bottle. Patience watched in anger, embarrassment and despair as the clear glass salad bowl shattered against the linoleum on the

kitchen floor. The glass shards shot out like streaks of water exploding from the crash of a rock in a shallow pond and frozen in mid flight. Confetti strands of light green cabbage mixed in with the crystal strips as if in celebration. A pool of rice wine vinegar and oil formed off to the right of the crash. Patience was sobbing.

Templeton shook his head and fell back onto the couch.

“That solves a lot,” he said.

“Fuck you, Templeton, fuck you,” she yelled.

Templeton chuckled, shook his head again and turned up the TV.

“You’re such a prick. You are selfish prick and you don’t even fucking care.”

“So this is how you talk about things, huh?”

“Talk? Talk? You’re pathetic. You wouldn’t know how to talk if someone shoved their hand up your ass to your mouth and made your lips move, you prick.”

“Will you please shut up, please? Just get out of my face and leave me alone. You’re so melodramatic it’s pathetic. Go leave me alone.”

“Alright mother fucker. I’m gonna go. I’m tired of this shit. You’re a loser and I can’t stand you anymore.”

She packed her bags in silence and left without a word as Templeton sat on the couch with the empty bottle of scotch and watched TV.

Even the next day, when the serotonin levels in his brain were low to nil and the blues and the guilt descended on him like flies on shit, he didn’t feel as bad as he thought he should about Patience leaving. In fact, though he didn’t admit it to himself for a year or two, there was a

sense of relief that she was gone. But, the morning after she left, he cried for twenty minutes, called in sick to work the next three days, drank, watched movies and snorted dope with his friends. After two weeks when all Patience's stuff was out of the apartment, Templeton hooked up with a woman who was the daughter of one of the foster parents he took a pair of twins to live with.

After grabbing a burger from a fast-food joint up the street, Templeton went back to Jennifer's place and read some more of Cleveland's journal. He fell asleep with the journal folded open on his chest. He dreamt of spiders. He dreamt that he was in a dense, humid forest. Trees, whose tops disappeared into darkness above him, blocked out the light of the sun. Spanish moss, olive drab colored with a thin white fuzz, hung from the branches. Large disc shaped toad stools grew out of the decomposing trunks of long ago fallen trees. A dark, fecund musk permeated the air. At first he was scared. Strange noises sounded then fell flat and dead in the thick air. The sound of his breathing was hard and ragged. He climbed over moss covered tree stumps and large rocks, every once and awhile his clothes would get snagged and ripped by a sharp branch. The ground was wet and vegetation covered. It gave way with a spongy squish as he stepped on it. He wanted to find his way out of the forest but he had no sense of direction. He began to get panicky. Then he felt something brush across his eyebrow. It was light and tickled him like a strand of hair. Then he felt another and another until he felt them all over his body. He looked at his arms and hands and saw that it was spider webs. They had a glossy sheen and seemed to glow silver. Soon they were pouring down over him like rain and he was becoming entangled in them. They stuck to his body like wet clothes. He struggled but could not tear himself out of the silver filaments. He became scared and yelled for help. He thrashed around

and the more he thrashed the more entangled he got. As he flung himself about he happened to look up and saw that the sky above him was glistening and descending toward him. As it got closer he could see that it wasn't the sky but millions of black, shining spiders about the size of a toddler's hand. He opened his mouth to scream again but then he heard music. Strings and voices. Samuel Barber's *Angus Dei* forming like a shimmering mist around his head. And he fell slack and felt peaceful. The spiders landed on him and crawled. They crawled into his mouth, his ears, burrowed into his skin and under his fingernails. They spun webbing over his eyes and nose, tunneled into the soles of his feet. And Templeton smiled. He felt as light as the music that floated in the moist air. The spiders continued to cover him with silk from their bodies until he was completely covered and resembled a cocoon stuck in the center of an intricate web. But the spiders kept weaving until there was nothing but a solid mass of web plastered between tree and stump and rock and ground. Then Templeton woke up and sitting next to him on the couch was Gandhi with spider webs hanging like Spanish moss from the folds of his homespun.

Templeton jumped up from the couch and backed into a corner.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t expect this,” Gandhi said in a voice that sounded like Ernest Borgnine talking through a tin can, and brushing a web off his shoulder.

“Who the hell are you?” Templeton said, looking around to see if anything was in hands length to use as a weapon.

“You’re being awfully dramatic aren’t you? You can’t tell me that that wonderful imagination you had has completely deteriorated. You used to greet me with a gasp, wide eyes, smiling, and the first words out your mouth were, ‘Let’s fly!’ Don’t you want to fly anymore, Templeton?”

Templeton stared with his mouth agape and an expression mixed with fear and confusion. His mind raced. There was no question that he wasn’t dreaming. So the refuge of the man being a figment of sleep was not available. He unconsciously pressed himself closer against the wall. Gandhi stood up. Templeton slide down the wall and rested on the floor with his knees folded against his chest. Gandhi started swaying and humming a tune that was vaguely familiar to Templeton. Then the sage started dancing, doing Motown moves like the Temptations, The Four Tops, The Pips. Templeton gawked at him. Gandhi started singing the Isley Brother’s *This Old Heart of Mine*. The music to the song started playing out of no where. Templeton put his hands on top of his head, lowered his head to his knees and closed his eyes and shook his head.

“*I Love yooou, yes I doooo. This old heart of mine darling it’s weak for you. You remember this song don’t you, Temp? It used to be your favorite. Remember? Remember we would dance to it together? That’s what we did before you met the invisible people, remember?*”

The absurdity of the situation shook in his head like a giant ape in a cage. He remembered the Changing Man from his childhood, but he had pushed him away in a far corner of his mind until he had seemed that he was only an imaginary character that he used to dream about or had made up. The solidity of imaginary friends never occurred to him. The thought that there were other things in the world beside what he had known up until that point chilled him. If this was real why not the boogie man, aliens, vampires, the devil, God. He had managed to convince himself that the other experiences he had had recently had been due to stress or psychotic episodes for past drug experiences. The idea that he was having a psychotic breakdown passed quickly through his mind. It frightened him, but again it gave him a form of security. This is an unreal experience; medication will take care of it. He didn't know which scared him most. The idea that he was having a psychiatric breakdown in his girlfriend's living room, or that his imaginary friend had suddenly come to life again in her living room. Neither bode well with him as far as she was concerned. What would she think if she walked in at that moment? He thought. Him cowering on the floor and nothing there, or a dead East Indian man dressed in a sari dancing like Smoky Robinson. He tried to wrap his mind around it. He told himself to face the image, to know what it wanted, he would be scientific about. He lifted his head and the old sage was still dancing and singing. Templeton stared. There was no explanation he could make work. The image was too far-fetched. He looked at the old man's bony, brown ankles in his sandals and just started to laugh. There was nothing else to do.

“That's my boy,” Gandhi said. “*But if you leave me a hundred times, a hundred times I'll take you back.*”

It wasn't a hysterical laugh or a laugh that tried to keep the unreality of the situation at bay. It was a genuine heart-felt entertained laugh. Who else had ever seen Gandhi sing and dance to the Isley Brothers?

"What is this about? What's this mean?" Templeton asked.

Gandhi kept on singing and dancing until the end of the song. Then he fell back onto the couch with a loud sigh.

"Nice, nice," he said. "I haven't dance to that tune in what, thirty years. What'd you think?"

"Why's this happening? Have I gone crazy? Did I die in my sleep? What's going on?"

"I'm the Changing Man, Templeton. The Changing Man comes when things are changing."

"What's changing?"

"Everything changes. If there is an absolute truth in this universe, change is it."

"Am I changing or someone else? Is Y2K really gone happen? Is it good or bad?"

"I don't know. Change is change, Templeton. I'm not a judge. I'm just an agent of it."

"Am I supposed to do something about it? Is that why you appear? Are you here to teach me something? Are you like part of that tribe of ...people that were dancing at Meridian's? Are they important in all this change?"

“The invisible people are all the people who have disappeared over the eons due to some type of change. They’re from all over the world and time. They are tribes and cities of people, individuals. Some type of change, besides, a natural death, made these people disappear. Whether they judge it as good or bad, you have to ask them. Is their dancing and singing a celebration or a mourning, you have to ask them. I just like them because they changed.”

“This is nuts. What the fuck are you?”

“I am the Changing Man, Templeton. A change is gonna come.” Gandhi said, shuffling backwards like Sam Cook and disappearing through the wall.

Jennifer snuck into the office from the rear entrance of the building. The chants “God’s Land’s wrong, Christian shouldn’t steal” penetrated the thick silence of the office. She pulled her chair away from her desk. She turned on the computer, put her purse and coat on the coat rack, sat at her desk and started on the work she needed to finish. The door to Reverend’s Hine’s office opened. He stepped through, said good morning to her and got a cup of coffee.

“You’d think those silly people would have coats on as cold as it is, today,” the reverend said, standing next to Jennifer’s desk. Jennifer stopped what she was doing, put her face in her hands and started crying.

“Jennifer, Jennifer its ok. It’s ok dear. Calm down, sweetie,” the reverend said, patting her on the back.

He poured her a cup of coffee and handed it too her. He stroked her hair as she took a sip. She had wanted to be strong. When she left the house after being with Templeton, she had convinced herself that she was going to take some drastic action to counter her mother’s

impertinence. She was going to march up to the Black coyote and tell him what she thought of the protest and his ideas, chastise the rest of the protestors then go find her mother and demand that she stop her childish tantrum or she would call the police. But the closer she got to work she thought about how the reverend must feel. Guilt eroded her courage and she parked her car a block away and snuck into the building from a different entrance. She felt as if she had let him down, doubly. She had failed to convince her mother the last time they talked to leave the Reverend alone, and then in a grave state of weakness she had abandoned her duties to satisfy her own selfish desires. When she saw the soft, blue eyes of the Reverend she felt as if she had betrayed everything that she held holy. She became angry and cried harder. The anger was unfocused, intense, irradiated. It swirled in a cloud like piranhas in a pool of blood. It drummed across her forehead and temples down through her neck to her shoulders. She needed to direct it to something before she passed out and the first thing that popped into her head was Templeton. Then her mother. She knew Templeton was irrational, it had been her that sought him out and it was mainly guilt that she felt, but if he hadn't have been so accessible she wouldn't have gone to him. She wouldn't be so weak if she didn't feel the way she did for him. So he was interfering in a way with her well-being. If he was a source of distraction for what she needed to do for her salvation then he was a justified target for her anger. She thought about her mother and she cried harder. Her mother had simply betrayed her, she thought. She disregarded everything that she knew was important to her, as if in spite. As if she hated her for some reason. She had always thought that in the back of her mind, anyway.

She had never really understood anything her mother did. She didn't understand why her mother had kept her secluded on a reservation and didn't let her go to school until she was eight. And because of that she was the oldest kid in the first grade, even though she skipped

two grades the next year. Meridian had told her she needed to retain her culture. She never really questioned it, nor did she see it as anything abnormal. They spent a lot of time together and had fun, and Jennifer had only seen it as a strange idiosyncrasy of her mother. She saw other kids going to school and leaving the reservation all the time, but when the other kids left for school or off the res, she and Meridian spend the day in the desert learning the names of plants, animals and old rhymes and stories. But, none of the things Meridian did ever penetrated her. The old stories of corn woman, who she pictured as the Virgin Mary, from a picture she had seen in a book at the shelter, walking through a corn field dressed in long, flowing white gowns with a halo around her head, picking corn to feed the multitudes of the hungry, and stories of coyote and the others never affected her the way the stories the woman in the shelter had read to her. She always associated the stories of the old ways with loss and fear. She always felt afraid. She never really felt secure. There was always a nagging anxiety that some kind of agent would come through and take away her mother again and again. When she did ask her mother why she couldn't do what the other kids did, Meridian would only answer, "you'll understand later, baby." But it didn't erase the feeling that she was different from the other kids, strange. She and Meridian didn't associate with most of the people on the reservation, only a few "strange" men and women ever came by. Other people always stared at them when ever they went out, too. She didn't understand why her mother would have raised her like that. Later she would only see her mother as a sad lonely woman who was trying to hold on to a past that was gone. After they eventually moved from the reservation, she didn't understand why Meridian was so upset when her first boyfriend in high school was white, and why she was so upset that she was a cheerleader and got mad when she didn't speak Diné around the house. She didn't understand why Meridian had never let her look for her father, why she had lied to her when she was a child that her father

had been killed in Viet Nam, but told her that he was really alive when she was thirteen but that he was not the type to be a father so it was best to just leave it alone. She didn't understand why Meridian was upset that she had majored in business accounting. She didn't understand why everything in her life her mother seemed to have fault with it. She didn't understand why everything about her mother seemed to point to the fact that her mother probably never really wanted her in the first place and had wished she'd never been born. Self-pity fanned the fire of her anger and she cried harder.

The Reverend put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a Kleenex. She wiped her mascara smeared eyes and blew her nose. He sat down on her desk and smoothed her hair back on her head.

“Remember what the Lord said, child. ‘Forgive them Father for they know not what they do’, and ‘when your enemy smacks your cheek turn so that he may smack the other’. This type of persecution goes hand-in-hand with being a Christian, my dear. You have to be stronger than the people that are jealous of you and hate you for your faith. They want you to lose faith and turn away from the Lord. You can't let them make you do that, Jennifer. Nothing can come between you and righteousness if you stand in the grace of God. Do you understand?”

Her tears subsided and she drew in heavy breaths, her body heaved as she released them. Hines handed her another Kleenex and she blew her nose.

“That was a good one,” he said.

Jennifer giggled between a sigh and looked up at the Reverend. A thin smile drew across her face.

“Sorry Reverend, I just...”

Don't worry about it. Just stay strong. The Lord is your shepherd, remember that. That's all you have to know."

He stood up and got her purse and coat and handed them to her.

"You go home for the day and get some rest, Ok. Spend sometime alone with the Lord today and let him rejuvenate you. If you need some time off you go ahead and take it. Get your head, heart and soul straight again, ok," Hines said, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Thank you, Reverend," she said, putting her arms though her coat as he held it for her. "God bless you, Reverend."

"We shall overcome, child. Don't you worry," he said, smiling.

Young didn't think there was anything sandy about Sandy Morkowski. She was pale as a freshly painted white picket fence, and had a field of freckles that dotted her face from cheek to cheek and stretched over a long, too symmetrical, point of a nose. Her cheeks were high, too high, they gave the eyes behind the over-sized spheres she wore as glasses a squinty, hawkish look. Her mouth was a line seemingly drawn across the bottom half of her face. A shock of red hair, parted in the middle, stood out from around her head like the wake from a motor boat. But, she was extremely well developed otherwise. Her body was lithe, but not hard and muscular. She was full bodied, but not fat. She had a certain voluptuousness to her. She was aware of her body and didn't hide it, yet she didn't parade it, either. And it was her full, round hips, in the tight army-style pants, that she moved with a slight swing, as she walked in front of Chris Young up the stairs into the meeting room at the library.

She sat next to Young and between writing down notes in a well worn composition book, she glanced over at him. She smiled when he looked back at her and then quickly turn away. She watched his expression change when Meridian said something he didn't like or agree with. Several times she watched as he and The Black Coyote looked at each other from across the room after something Meridian said. During the break in the meeting she walked over to Young and the three old men and asked if she could talk to them. She asked them if it would be possible to interview them for a section in her thesis. She was getting her masters in political science and part of her thesis was social activism and the necessity of resistance, she told them. The four men looked at one another then at Sandy and shrugged. "Whadda ya want to know," Peter Sanchez asked her, crushing a cigarette under his boot. "Everything," she said, and looked at Young and smiled.

“Yeah I guess we can talk a little,” Young said, looking at her suspiciously. “I don’t know when. I don’t have anyway for anyone to get hold me, so when did you want to do this?”

“Well, if you’re not doing after the meeting maybe we could meet and have some coffee and talk,” she said looking over the four men and smiling.

The three older men, almost in unison, said they couldn’t. Young shrugged and said it was fine with him.

They sat a booth in White Coyote Cafe and Young ate a second slice of key lime pie while Sandy finished her third cup of coffee. She asked him questions about what he did, why he did it and if he thought what he did was of any importance politically, socially and psychologically. He didn’t mention anything about what he really did and gave safe, stock answers that left her with even more questions that he veered away from. She wrote down everything he said in her comp book. She tried to get him to go into more detail about things, but he kept her at bay with eco-platitudes from pamphlets he’d read over the years. After awhile she realized she was not going to get anything further from him and closed her notebook. For a moment they sat in silence. She sipped her coffee and Young ate his pie and drank a glass of milk.

“You don’t like Meridian too much do you?” she asked.

“What are talking about?” Young answered.

“Meridian. The Indian woman who’s organizing the protest. The woman we just spent an hour and a half listening to at the library.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well the way you were looking at her when she said certain things.”

“What things?” he said pushing his empty plate away and sitting up straight in the booth.

“I don’t know. Just some stuff that she said, you kinda wrinkled your forehead like you didn’t like what she was saying.”

“What stuff?”

“Well, once she said that only aggressive, but non-violent confrontation was the only way to solve problems like these people stealing Indian land.”

Yeah, so. She’s right. What’s you’re point?”

“Well, I know she’s right, but then you wrinkled your forehead when she said it, so I just thought you thought something different that’s all. Forget it. I’m sorry.”

Young stretched his arms across the back of the booth and looked at Sandy. She sat back in her seat and put her hands in her lap and hunched her shoulders as if she had suddenly got cold.

“I like Meridian a lot,” Young said. “She’s a very smart lady. She knows exactly what’s she talking about. This isn’t her first time around. She was at Wounded Knee in 1973. You know anything about Wounded Knee?”

Sandy nodded. “A little,” she said.

“That’s why violence doesn’t work for her. That’s why she talks the way she talks. I agree a hundred per cent with her, do you?”

Sandy sat forward in her chair and shook her head side to side. “Well I don’t agree with anybody a hundred per cent about anything, but I know where she’s coming from, you know.”

She waved the waitress over and had her pour her another cup of coffee.

“Where are you’re two friends that you came with last time? Why aren’t they here with you tonight?” Young asked.

“They’re organizing a protest of their own down in Cruces. I came back up here to try to talk to you and the other guys so I could get some stuff for my paper. Do you think the Indian guys will talk to me too?”

“They said they will. They pretty much think the same way I do though. I don’t know what else you can ask them that you didn’t ask me.”

“Well they’re Indian for one thing. This thing affects them a lot closer than it effects either one of us. Plus, they’re older. They’ve got more experience in life than you or I. They might know more about stuff like the Weathermen in the sixties and things like that, you know.”

“I don’t see why they would. They’re just some old guys who don’t want their land snatched from them is all.”

“Didn’t you say they were at Wounded Knee?”

“No I said Meridian was at Wounded Knee. Why would you think they were at Wounded Knee?”

“They’re friends, right? Meridian said, when she introduced them at the last meeting that they had been friends for years so I just figured maybe they were there too.”

“Not necessarily.”

“I was just thinking is all. I don’t know, geez. I’m just speculating. I don’t know, I saw this video about those Weatherman the other day and that whole period just fascinates me. They grew up in that time, they’re activist now, I was just speculating, you know. What’s the big deal?”

“You drink beer?” Young asked getting up from the booth and putting ten dollars down on the table.

“Sometimes, yeah,” Sandy said, putting her notebook in her bag.

“Come on lets go,” Young said.

They ended up at a bar called the Gila Monster on a road just south of T and C. It was western-style dive bar that Young had been going to often. The floor was constructed of 2 by 4s that were wore smooth from years of honky-tonking and line dances. A permanent, dusty, scuffing covered the nicks and gouges in the floor. And Young and Sandy added to the marks as they danced to Lynyrd Skynard’s *That Smell*.

“You’re a bad influence,” Sandy said, flopping into her seat, stilling breathing hard.

“Not the first time I heard that,” Young gasped after guzzling half his beer.

Sandy moved the seven empty glasses, picked her beer up and drank a long draw.

“Ahh,” she said, wiping her forehead with a napkin and her mouth with the back of her hand. “I should be back in Cruces working on this paper and not getting drunk with some outlaw.”

“Outlaw? That’s a new one. Haven’t been called an outlaw before. I like it though. Let’s get a shot.”

“Oh hell no, I have to drive back an hour and a half to Cruces.”

“Don’t worry about it, you can stay with me.”

Oh yeah, huh? Guess again.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m too drunk to drive; you’re too drunk to drive. There’s a motel up the road you get the bed I get the couch.”

“How do you know there’s a couch?”

“I don’t,” he said and walked up to the bar.

He came back with two shots of Jack Daniels. On the jukebox somebody had played Journey’s *Anyway You Want It*.

“I like this tune, let’s dance again,” Young said, slamming his shot and taking her hand.

Sandy shrugged, smiled at him and drank her shot. Her face screwed up as if she had just walked into a port-o-let that hadn’t been emptied in a year. Young laughed and dragged her off to the center of the floor where two other couples and two single girls were dancing.

The sex started and ended awkward and quick. Sandy had basically tripped into Young's arms on the way in the motel room and Young, open-mouthed and swaying glued his mouth over hers and started trying take both hers and his shirts off at the same time. They fell on the floor and Sandy managed to pull her shirt half way off but it got stuck as she tried to lift it over her head. Young had torn his shirt getting it off and then stood up and started to help pull Sandy's shirt over her head. They finally managed to get the shirt off, but Sandy's glasses came off with it and flew across the room as the shirt popped off. "Shit," she said, I need to get those. But, Young was already wrestling with her bra, trying to pull it over her head before unclasping it. "Wait, wait," she said and pushed him away." Sorry," he said, and backed up and fell onto the bed. He unbuttoned his pants and tried to take them off but his shoes were still on. Sandy stood up. Her bra was off and her nipples at point. "Whoa," Young said, and shrugged faster to get his pants off over his shoes. Sandy moved to the bed and helped him pull off his shoes and pants then fell on top of him. He rolled her over and started kissing her all over her face. She shoved a hand in his underwear and squeezed his prick methodically. Young moved to her breast and lathered them with his mouth. He moved quickly to her panties, planted his face between her legs and inhaled. "Ah Jesus," he mumbled. He pulled the panties off and put his mouth between her legs. Sandy started to fidget and clamp her legs open and closed. Young moved faster. She began to giggle and push him away at his shoulder. He kept going. Sandy wiggled her away from his face giggling. Young looked up a startled anxious look on his face. "What, what's wrong?" he stammered. "It tickles," she chuckled. "Sorry, I'm sorry," he said, grabbing her by the waist, pulling her back toward him and inserting two fingers inside of her. Sandy closed her eyes and gyrated her hips. Young, wiggled out his underwear, and entered her slowly. She moaned. He came. He let out a low, deep gasp and he shivered. Then he lay on top of her still, except for the

quivering in his legs. Sandy lay still too except for slowly rubbing his back. Young lifted himself up and looked at Sandy's chin. "Sorry," he murmured, "it's been a really long time." "Don't worry about it," Sandy said, smiling. "Let's do it again later. It'll last longer." Young nodded and smiled. He rolled over onto his back and Sandy lay on her side rubbing his chest. He fell asleep.

The next morning he awoken by an act of fellatio. When she finished he fell back onto his pillow with his eyes closed. Sandy rested her head on his stomach and lightly raked her fingers over his chest. They lay like that until they both fell back asleep. When they woke up it was 11:45 in the morning. The maid was knocking on the door.

After they dressed they walked back to the parking lot of the Gila Monster and drove back to White Coyote Cafe for breakfast and Sandy's car. They sat in a comfortable silence most of the time looking and smiling at one another. When they finished Young paid the check and they walked out to their cars. They hugged, kissed and then started all over again. Young held her face in his hands and looked at her. Sandy kissed him then got into her car. She rolled down the window, wrote her number on the corner of a piece of paper and handed it to him. Young folded it up and started to put it in his shirt pocket, but the pocket had been torn off the night before. So he put it in his wallet.

"Call me soon, ok," Sandy said.

"Definitely," he said.

"There's a meeting slash party Friday night you should come to in Cruces. It's got nothing to do with what's going on down here. There's a thing down in El Paso with this copper smelting mine that we are investigating, so come on down and check it, ok?"

"I'll do that. I'll call you tonight if that's cool, and see you Friday."

Sandy nodded, rolled up her window, blew him a kiss and backed out the parking space. Young watched her until she drove out the parking lot then got in his car smiling.

“Oh Albert, please. Stuff can’t work like that anymore. You’re going to get yourself in trouble with that white boy. He’s smart, but he doesn’t think,” Meridian said.

“Chris is a good guy. He just doesn’t think, like the rest of us, that fliers and signs are the answer. And how is anything going to get solved with people parading up and down the street with signs and papers? Now we got phony documentation, what do we do about that? Try to fight them in court? That’s their land, they own that territory. We can’t beat them there.” Albert said, walking over to the fireplace with two mugs of coffee.

“You can’t just walk into places and take them over anymore, Albert. Or whatever you four are planning to do. It’s not like it used to be.”

He sat on the couch next to Meridian and handed her a mug. She cupped the bottom of the mug in her hands and sipped from it. Albert, after taking a drink from his mug, burned his lips and set the mug on the table in front of the couch. Meridian stared into the fire.

“These politicians don’t know anything else, Sunshine.”

She glared at him over the rim of her mug.

“Sorry I always forget. I won’t call you that anymore. My mind slips. I get sentimental. I’m old, I guess.”

He got up from the couch, stoked the log in the fire with the poker and put another one on. He stood up and looked at the pictures on the mantle. There was Jennifer's high school senior picture, a picture of when she was a baby, one of her and Meridian with their arms around each other smiling wide smiles with the buttes and outcroppings of Monument Valley spread out behind them. Albert picked the photo up and looked at it.

"She looks more like you. Always has," he said.

Meridian looked up at him and sipped her coffee.

"I don't know how to get out of this one. Delbert's trying to locate the originals but they're probably destroyed. They have to have deep, deep pockets and long arms to pull this off. There's a lot of people in on this I bet. Who falsifies documents like that and gets rid of the originals," she said staring into her mug.

"So what's up between Templeton and the girl?" Albert asked.

"Hmm," Meridian said, still staring at her mug.

"They spend a lot of time together, what's he about?"

"What? Oh, Templeton. He came down here to write a book about his uncle. He's harmless. What's it matter to you anyway? I shouldn't matter to you. Don't let it matter to you, ok. Right?"

"That's not fair."

"We've had this conversation. Drop it ,ok."

"Yeah. Right."

“Delbert said they are trying to get an injunction against us so we can’t protest in front of Water’s and Hine’s offices anymore.”

“Is it good?”

“What are you talking about, Albert? How can an injunction be good?”

“The book. This book Templeton is writing.”

“I don’t know, Albert. I don’t want to talk about Templeton and his book or he and Jennifer right now, ok. I need to figure out our next move.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing.”

“What? I haven’t read a sentence of it. I don’t care if it’s good or not.”

“An injunction not to protest. The girl works there right?”

“A good thing? Albert, please not now. I’m being serious.”

“I am too. This thing between you and the girl is only going to get worse.”

Meridian set her mug on the table, pulled a blanket around her and sat back in the couch. Albert leaned against the mantle and picked at a hole in the heel of his cowboy boot with the end of the fire poker. The wind rattled a window.

“Ok, I’m going to go. Have a good evening,” Albert said, setting the poker against the hearth, picking up his mug and taking it to the kitchen.

Meridian pulled the blanket around her tighter with one hand and picked up her mug with the other. The coffee was cool enough that she didn’t have to sip it and she finished half of it in one drink. Albert walked out of the kitchen toward the door.

“You know this isn’t Wounded Knee,” Meridian said, turning to look at him.

Albert stopped, shook his head and turned to her.

“Ok, the talk stays on this.” He turned back around and sat on the couch.

“What kind of craziness are the four of you planning, Albert?” she said and drank so more of her coffee.

“Do you mind if I take the boots off? My feet have been hurting all day.”

She looked at him from the corner of her eye and shrugged. Albert took his boots off and set them on the side of the couch. He stood up stretched his legs then sat back on the couch. Meridian watched him with a thin smile on her face. She shook her head when he sat back on the couch and put his feet on the table.

“Comfortable?” she asked.

He leaned back into the couch, put his hands behind his head, looked at her and smiled. Meridian took her foot out of her slipper and pointed to a hole in his sock on his right foot with her toe.

“Can’t you afford socks anymore?” she said.

She rested her foot on top of his.

“You ever still wonder what it would be like to have had the real thing?” he asked.

“This is as real as anything else,” she said, setting her mug on the table. She opened her blanket and pulled Albert to her.

They were silent as they sat on the blanket in front of the fire. Albert stoked the fire then leaned back and rested his head against Meridians bare shoulder. She rested her head on top of his. He hugged her and they laid back. Albert lifted himself onto his elbow and looked at her. The fire casted its orange glow on her face and the shadows of the flames made her look as if she had a thin, sheer veil covering half her face. Albert kissed her.

“You really want to know what we have planned?” he said, his face half hidden in shadow.

“Mmm hmm,” she answered softly, concentrating on the dim outline of his smiling face.

“We’re going to blow up the God’s Land Resort on New Years Eve.”

“Oh, for fuck sake,” Meridian said, and closed her eyes.

The Salamander waited at the exit just off I-25 at the highway 187 exit between Hatch and Truth or Consequences He had been there an hour before he saw the little white Honda CRX emerging out of a cloud of dust. He leaned his head out of his car window and peered over the rim of his sunglasses. He looked at the license plates to make sure the they were the same as before, but the most important detail he looked for was the spot of orange paint above the right rear wheel well. As the car got closer he didn’t see the spot. He reached inside his suit jacket and unfastened the clasp on his holster. The Honda came to a quick, dusty stop a few feet away from the bumper of The Salamanders car. He saw the spot on the wheel well and took his hand out of his jacket. Sandy Morkowski hopped out of the car with her notebook. She got in the car with The Salamander.

“We were supposed to meet an hour ago,” he said.

“I know I got my times confused. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re father said you were dependable. Your father is very dependable. Your father is a very good man, Sandra.”

She ran her hand from her forehead across her hair and to the back of her neck and sighed.

“Mr....Salamander. I know you and my father go way back, to Oklahoma or somewhere, right. He told me about the underground stuff you guys did. It’s commendable, but I’m not some street enforcer out to save the world by shaking down hippies and street gangs. I’m doing this strictly for the money and five grand doesn’t give you the right to make judgment calls against me.”

“What have you found out, then?”

“It’s all right here in the notebook,” she said and tossed it in his lap.

“Your penmanship could use a bit of work. Could you work on that for me?”

“God, you’re too much. Maybe you should get somebody else, you know.”

“It’s too late for that, Sandra. We need you. Here’s an incentive for you to keep going. Find out more about this guy and his Indian friends for us, ok?” he asked, handing her an envelope.

She opened the envelope and counted the 12 one-hundred dollar bills. She looked at The Salamander and nodded.

“Yeah, ok. When do you want to meet next?”

“I’ll call you.”

“All right then,” she said and got out of the car.

“Sandra, your father and the men we worked with in Oklahoma were a vanguard. Remember that,” the Salamander said, smiled, rolled up his window and drove away.

“Whatever, freak,” she said, watching him leave.

The Salamander looked back at her through his rearview window. I feel sorry for Jack Morkowski, he thought. He is a good, conscientious American. He deserved more than a little whore for a daughter. He trust her too much, I don’t.

Jennifer walked through the door a second after the Changing Man disappeared into the wall. Templeton was still crouched in the corner staring at the wall. Jennifer stopped in the doorway.

“What are you doing, Templeton?” she asked, an annoyed look on her face.

He stared up at her with a blank expression then slowly got up off the floor.

“I was...I was asleep. I...fell off the couch. I fell off while I was taking a nap. Are you ok? You looked tired. You're home early.” She closed the door and set her coat and purse on a chair. She walked over to the couch and flopped down. Templeton looked at the wall then sat next to her and put his arm around her.

“What's the matter, beauty?” he asked.

“Templeton, you haven't seen all those freaks with signs marching around the streets? They're protesting God' Land.”

“Yeah, I know. Is it causing a lot of shit?”

“Yes, she's got people in front of my job, Templeton. That friend of hers, the coyote man, he was standing in front of my job when I got there this morning with a bunch of people, chanting and slandering my employer. At my job, Templeton.”

“Have you talked to her again?”

“I don't ever want to talk to her or see her again. I can't believe how incredibly selfish she is. That's where I work, Templeton. That man writes the checks that pay my rent, car, food any everything else. And she can't understand that. She can't even stop her crazy

little, worthless, because she has no life, charade so that her flesh and blood can make a living. How crazy is that Templeton? How crazy is that?"

Templeton hugged her and searched for something to say. They sat in silence for a long moment.

"I'm...I'm going to go and see her about the book pretty soon. You want me to talk to her, or something?"

"Don't even mention my name to the woman. I'm done. I can't take it anymore. Let them throw her in jail if they have to. That's exactly what they are going to do if she keeps this up. You tell her that. If she's dumb enough to keep messing around like this she's going straight to jail. And I hope she does," she said getting up from the couch and pointing her finger at Templeton.

"Don't say that. I'll talk to her, ok. I don't know what she'll say, or what I'll say for that matter, but I'll talk to her."

"You do what you have to do. I don't care anymore. I'm done with her."

Jennifer went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water. Templeton followed her, stood behind her and rubbed her shoulders. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. A soft moan sounded in her throat

"I was thinking we could do Italian tonight, what do you think? Is there a nice Italian restaurant anywhere in town?"

She finished her water stepped away from Templeton and put the glass in the sink.

“I think I’m going to stay in tonight. I need some time to myself, ok. Don’t take it personal or anything, ok. I just want to take a nice, warm bath, jump into bed and read. It’s been a hard day and I just need some rest, ok?”

“Yeah of course,” Templeton said. “Hell yeah, don’t worry about it. I understand. You get some rest. You need it.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Mad? For what?”

“It’s not personal, you know.”

“Of course not. I know that. It’s cool, really. You take it easy. I’m gonna go and give you some peace now. I’ll just walk back to the library and I’ll give you a call later, ok.”

“You sure you’re not mad?”

“Yes. I love you. You know that, right?”

She nodded her head. They kissed. And Templeton left.

But he was mad. He felt rejected and the anxiety of the doubts that had plagued him earlier swarmed in on him as he walked. He tried to think rationally and fair and see Jennifer’s point of view: she had had a harrowing day at work, she was fighting with her mother, she was tired and needed to sort things out in her head. It would show more compassion and understanding, he knew intellectually, if he accepted this and hoped the time alone would help her. He wanted to have her best interest in mind. He knew the way he felt was selfish, clingy, needy and he despised himself for it, but the idea of why she couldn’t find solace in his arms persisted. Why could he not be the one thing that she looked to comfort for? She was that to him, why not they other way around. Small things crept into his mind: maybe he really had seen a

look of aggravation in her eyes when she looked him as he walked into the kitchen to rub her shoulders? Why did she just nod when he told her she loved him and why didn't she say it back the way she usually did? What was the point of fucking him if she was only going to toss him out later? What if she really just wanted him gone so she could have one of her namby-pamby Christian "friends" come over and comfort her? What if she only needed physical attention from him and held what was inside of her for her church friends? Fuck it, he, thought. He tried to evade the thoughts by doing what he did best, hiding in a cover of detachment. He would just go and get drunk and forget the whole thing. He could always fuck Mandy if worse came to worse. But the idea of never seeing and touching Jennifer again caused him to feel physically ill. But he persisted in trying to push away the hot, nagging ache he felt and find the cool, nothing he was comfortable with. Yet the tint of her hair in the sun that morning, the way she smelled, the curve of her cheek, the way she put her hair behind her ear assaulted his wall and made him long for her.

But the thoughts bombarded the shield he rose to feel detached and wouldn't let him completely protect himself. Yet, there was a spot outside the line of fire, in the back of his mind, a small dark spot that appeared after a soft pop sounded in the distance of his consciousness that felt he could let it go if he had too, that in the end everything ended like this anyway, that the relationship was probably doomed anyway and he would eventually get over it, just as people go on living after the death of a loved one, that nothing really ever penetrated to the deep core of ones being that would break the noose of self-interest and let the them experience some sort of Nirvanic release and immersion into a realm of absolute egolessness and freedom, that it wasn't worth the time to lament, that it was part of the fabric of everything, the law of change, the dance of the Changing Man, that nothing lasted forever and to believe that it did was clinging,

struggling, grasping manically at untruth. Nothing was permanent. And everything that happened did happen for a reason. A reason of choice. Every action that a person took she/he was ultimately responsible for. And the only way to truly live ones life was to be ready at every instant to let go of what one thought was so precious and fulfilling and to be alone to face the beautiful, terrible ambiguity and uncertainty of life. That was power, he thought. That was self-knowledge. He didn't know if this flash of a thought which caused him to feel a strange bodily failure as if everything inside of him had turned to gelatin for an instant, was a back up defense system, or a true flash of insight. He pushed it away and walked, heavy in stride, to his truck parked at the library.

In the library he tried to concentrate, but images of Jennifer rolling around in her bed and staring into the eyes of some unknown man kept slipping into his head. He tried getting up and walking around the library and it didn't work. He packed up his notebooks and books and left. He walked around Ralph Edward Park but it didn't help. He drove pass Jennifer's apartment. The curtains were drawn. That made it worse. He decided he was being psychotic and headed back to the motel. On the way he passed the Golden Hornet. Pavel's truck was there. He decided to go in and have a beer.

He hadn't been to the Hornet or seen Pavel in two or three months. He hadn't gotten drunk since he started seeing Jennifer. They drank together, he drank more, and she made her snide comments about it, all the time, but he hadn't gotten trashed the way he had been doing since they had been together and for Templeton that was comparable to being sober. He had felt good getting up in the mornings without an alcoholic haze buzzing in his head, or his nasal passages throbbing. He had lost a few pounds even and had more energy. His attitude was different to him too. He parked his truck and shut off the engine then he started it up again. He

thought that he should just go get something to eat, call Jennifer, do some work and go to bed early. But the thought of sitting in the motel room alone seemed pathetic and sad. For all intent purposes they had been living together, and he had gotten used to being around Jennifer and sleeping next to her. He felt somehow defeated that he had to retreat to his empty motel. Plus it's Friday, he thought. So he turned off the engine and decided to have two or three beers so he could sleep.

Mandy sat on Templeton's lap and pulled at his goatee. He slammed down the rest of his beer and asked her for another one. He looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. Damn, he thought, I've been here six hours all ready. A small distant voice in the back of his head told him he should call Jennifer, but hushed as he gulped down a quarter of the new mug of beer. "She's probably sleep anyway," he murmured under his breath. Mandy sat back on his lap.

"You got any shit, Pavel," she asked.

"Yeah, so. What do I get?" Pavel winked at her.

"Shit, you get to pay regular price for those drinks if you don't hook me up, fool."

"Damn, that's messed up, huh, bro?" Pavel said handing Mandy a seal underneath the table.

"You coming with", she said standing up and squeezing Templeton's leg.

Cocaine is insectiodal. It communicates with the regular user via neurological pathways that it has formed in the brain. It's not addictive in the way heroin or nicotine is addictive. The user doesn't crave it physically. It allows the user to confirm and justify his/her prejudices, to neatly fit things into categories that become verifiable realities: all women are sex objects, only squares don't do dope, all men are dogs, everybody cheats. Coke constructs a world

that is comfortable to the user. And the user can be away from the drug for months, years at a time. And actually the longer a user is off of coke the more viable a future looks. Plans can be made and acted upon, they become interested in the mechanics of everyday life, but while the user is still using the future seems a ponderous, insurmountable, darkness that is too taxing and frightening to even contemplate. It is a dark spot in the mind and only the immediate matters. The maintenance of that cocaine construct is the goal of the user. When the dope has been out of one's system for a long period of time, it is usually forgotten and even despised by the user. But the first time it is reintroduced, or a situation triggers those neurons to fire up that old network, whether like in Templeton when he gets drunk, or by the mere memory of a situation that somehow involved the drug, the physiology of the brain, like a pheromone, or some other type of chemical communication system, like ants, bees, termites, roaches or any other colony animal that communicates via non-auditory signals, the cocaine network in the brain and the desire, like the thirst of a dehydrated person, kicks in automatically with just as much force and involuntary reaction. At the suggestion, Templeton's stomach muscles started to contract, saliva welled in the back of his throat, the neurons in his brain waited like children on Christmas ready to open gifts to feel their molecular structure saturated with cocaine. At first he thought about Jennifer and what she would think if she saw him right now and if she found out if he snorted cocaine. For a quick moment the guilt over rode the desire and he stuttered out a no. With one eyebrow lifted, Mandy looked at him and said "What?"

"Naw, I'm cool right now," Templeton said.

Pavel and Mandy looked at each other. Mandy shrugged and walked into the women's restroom.

“That’s good shit, güey. You should check it out, bro,” Pavel said, downing his Jack and coke.

The network fired in Templeton’s head. The guilt quickly dissipated in the heat of chemical reaction. She won’t find out, he thought. It’ll only be this one time and I’ll only do a line or two. No way am I staying up all night doing this shit. I’ve got to work tomorrow. Plus, this is just a way to kick back and relax. She needs her way, I need mine. He got up and followed Mandy into the restroom.

It was 4:30 in the morning when Templeton stumped out of the back door of The Golden Hornet with Mandy and Pavel and drove back to his motel room. He had to try three times to get the key in the door and when he finally got in he fell on the bed, passed out and didn’t wake up until he heard a banging on his door. He looked up with blurry eyes and saw it was 7:30.

“Templeton, wake up, are you ok? It’ me,” Jennifer said.

He stumbled to the door and looked out the peep hole. Jennifer kissed her fingertip and pressed it against the hole.

“Open up sleepy head. Let’s go get some breakfast,” she said.

Templeton’s stomach turned at the mention of food. He opened the door, Jennifer took a step forwarded then stepped back.’

“Whoa, you smell like a distillery.”

“I got a little toasted last night,” Templeton said with a crooked grin, his eyes half open and a white curst in the corner of his mouth.

Jennifer shook her head and looked at the ground. Templeton reached out to hug her. She stepped to the side and he stumbled out the door.

“What?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“What? What? Look at you. I’ve never seen you like this. Is this what you go and do when we’re not together? Do you have to go off and hang out at bars and get drunk the minute you’re not with me?” she said, standing with one knee bent and her hands on her hips.

“What. I just had a few beers.”

“A few beers. You’re a liar. You smell like you used Jack Daniels for aftershave, Templeton.”

The volume of her voice rolled through his head like a fog horn. And he flinched as she talked. He was getting dizzy and he leaned back to stand against the door frame but missed and fell backwards in the room. He started to laugh but a pain shot through his head like an ice pick tearing brain tissue. He grabbed his head and moaned. Jennifer rushed to help him up, but as she took his hand and started to pull he farted. She let go and he fell back to the ground. She turned around, got back in her car and drove off.

The fury of a mountain storm gathered. Mercury colored clouds hung dense and heavy like udders over Blue Feather Lake. A strong breeze blew through the spruce and carried dead pine needles, leaves, dust and the smell of lake water. Thunder sounded fat and dull in the distance. A lone, out of place sea gull bobbed up and down on the waves of the lake. In the middle small white caps were starting to form. The aluminum canoe tied to a wood pylon by a rope tossed against the rocky shore. Charley Running Cloud crushed the sandy mound of a red anthill with the bottom of his boot as he walked to the edge of the drive and watched the red, white and blue Jeep emerge from a cloud of dust as it approached the cabin.

“Is this him?” he called back toward the cabin.

Chris Young, Albert Alvarez and Pete Sanchez came out of the cabin. Young jumped over the rail of the porch and stood next to Charley rubbing his hands together. Albert looked up at the sky.

“That’s him, alright old buddy. Now we can get down to some real business,” Young said waving to the Jeep. Pete and Albert came down and stood next to the other two. As the Jeep pulled up. An older white guy with a dirty bandana designed like the American flag on his head stepped out. He had a full gray beard and dark sunglasses like a highway patrolmen’s. He and Young shook hands and hugged. Young put his arms around the man’s shoulders and introduced him to the others.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, this is Terry Cluck. Tribesman extraordinaire. We’ve done a whole hellva lot together guys, and this dude is the best. Terry these gentlemen are,

respectively, Albert Alvarez, Pete Sanchez and Charley Running Cloud. Cluck held an electro larynx under his chin and in a voice like gravel run through a food processor said hello.

“So guys you want to see what Terry brought us?” Young asked grinning.

A crow flew overhead and cawed loud. A sprinkle of rain started to fall. Pete Sanchez zipped up his jacket and they all walked to the back of the jeep. Cluck opened the tailgate and inside was a faded and paint chipped army footlocker. Young opened it and inside were 35 pounds of plastic explosive.

“Let’s take it around back and put it in the hole,” Alvarez said.

Young and Cluck lifted the box out of the jeep and carried around to the back of the cabin. Sanchez, Running Cloud and Alvarez cleared away tree limbs and a half a foot of dirt from a latched lid buried in the ground. Sanchez unlocked it and they all pulled the lid away. A rank, musty smell escaped. They walked down a set of wood steps leading into a cellar. A Coleman lantern sat on a shelf and Alvarez lit it. The room was about ten wide by fifteen feet long. Most of the stuff that was down there was junk. An old rotting skiff, old motorboat engine casings and parts, oil cans, rusty tools, coffee cans full of nails, nuts, bolts, screws and stuff. Alvarez motioned for young and Cluck to put the footlocker on a table in the corner. He held the lantern toward the table. On top of the table were two gun racks. Three M-16s, five pump action 12 gauge shotguns, a lever action 30-30 rifle and two 308 bolt action rifles with scopes, and an assortment of handguns.

After they set the box down on the table, Cluck gave the three old men the thumbs up and nodded, smiling. Alvarez nodded back.

“How about a beer, fellas?” Young asked.

Big, heavy drops of rain fell against the windows in sheets. A loose screen rattled against a window and the wind sounded through a crack in the backdoor like a night owl. The five men sat in the living room at the table drinking beer and playing cards. A fire burned in a big iron stove.

“How long you been here?” Cluck hummed at Young.

Young looked at Alvarez and shrugged.

“What three four weeks now, or longer?” he asked.

“Something like that,” Alvarez said.

“When’s your gig going down?”

“New Year’s Eve. They got some midnight prayer meeting or some shit going on to ring in the New Year and their new millennium. They’re going to get a bit more than they expected that’s for sure,” Young laughed.

“What kinds...collateral damage you thinking?” Cluck buzzed.

The three old men looked at one another than at Cluck.

“Naw man, you know me. I never hurt people or animals. Ever,” he said looking at the old men.

“You said there was a service or something.”

“Yeah, but the construction site where everything is already built is a good mile away, man. They’re breaking new ground for a new structure on the 2nd or 3rd or something. They’re having their Christian shit on New Years Eve to bless it or something, right Al?”

“Yes, if you can believe that. They’re christening Indian land for their church,” Alvarez said.

“Gin,” Running Cloud said slapping his cards on the table, and swept the pile of coins toward him.

Shit the others said in various tones of voice. Thunder roared and a flash of lightening tore across the sky.

Cluck pulled a joint from the folds of his bandana and held it out to the other men. Alvarez and Running Cloud shook their heads no. Young and Sanchez accepted. Cluck lit the joint and inhaled it deep then handed it to Running Cloud. Cluck blew out the smoke and leaned back in his chair. On a shelf above the couch he saw a picture of an army platoon.

“Who was in the army?” he asked.

All three men raised their hands and then picked up the cards Young had dealt.

“My old man was in Nam, I did my time in Grenada and Panama. Seen my share of shit. That’s why I do what I do now. Well mainly I’m a business man, but I only sell to people I know got a cause behind it. A real American cause. These big business fucks and their religious cronies are all in bed with Uncle Sam. It’s time for stuff like this. Time for America to be American again. Know what I mean?”

“Hell yeah,” Young coughed.

Alvarez laughed and shook his head. The rain pounded harder against the cabin and the wind shook the frame of the place. Charley got up from the table and looked out the window but all he saw was a sheet of water poring down the window. A crash of thunder exploded. Then there was loud crashing sound. They all went outside on the porch. Rain

whipped in their faces. Visibility was only a few feet in front of them, but they could make out the outline of the jeep and a large shadow sticking up behind it.

“Holy shit I hope that’s not on top the jeep he,” Cluck said. “Hold this thing so it don’t short out while run out and see,” he told Young and handed him his electolarynx and ran out into the rain.

Pete chuckled. Cluck jumped off the porch, slipped and fell face first into the mud. Charley laughed and Young shot him a look of surprise then followed Cluck out into the rain and helped him up. The two of them disappeared into the rain. The three Indians watched the shadows of the two move around. They heard the two shouting but what they said got swallowed in the roar of the wind.

“Why don’t they just wait to do whatever they’re doing until the storm is over?” Pete asked.

Alvarez shrugged and the three of them went into the house.

Reverend Hines sat on his porch drinking coffee. A cold breeze blew and he gathered his robe around himself. He watched the dark clouds in the distance and wondered if they would reach Truth or Consequences or not. He didn’t trust what they said on the news. Weathermen were about as trust worthy as a six year-old with money for rent passing by a candy store. When the Lord wanted to change his mind about the weather pattern there was nothing or no one who could predict it. Just ask Noah, he thought. He decided that he would take his umbrella with him to the office just in case. He would also take his overcoat because who knew if the rain would turn to snow. It was just better to be prepared for anything, he thought. He

picked the paper up and opened it. The front page was plastered with the face of Jennifer's mother. A flash of rage shot through him, but he took a deep breath, held his hand to the sky and asked God for forgiveness. "That poor child," he said to himself as he walked back in the house.

"What's that, Earl?" his wife asked him from the kitchen.

Good Lord, the woman has sonar for ears, he thought. "Nothing, dear. Just talking out loud, he said.

"Well breakfast is about ready. Why don't you go finished getting dressed and it should be done by then, ok."

Hines walked up the stairs to their bedroom, took off his robe and satin pajamas, put on his pants and started putting on his shirt when the phone rang. He looked at the clock; it was 7:46 a.m. He sighed and rubbed the top of his head. Phone calls that early rarely brought good news. He heard his wife's all too stained pleasant phone voice offering good mornings and God Bless you's. Then she was silent. He knew what was coming next. He stood next to the nightstand and rested his hand on the phone. He heard the "oh my" and before his wife could say let me let you talk to the Reverend he picked up the receiver and said hello. A soft female voice whispered on the other end.

"You'll have to speak up, dear. I can't hear you," the Reverend said.

"Good morning, Reverend Hines. I'm so, so sorry to call you so early in the morning I hope I didn't wake you," the whisper breathed.

He recognized the voice of the woman. He was good at that. He had hundreds of sheep in his flock but he knew them as individuals. He noticed something particular about each of the members of his church and if he didn't know their names he knew something that

distinguished them. The woman on the phone was Mary Zuckerman. A young woman newly widowed after her husband died of hypothermia on a back packing trip in Rocky Mountain National Forest.

“I wouldn’t have called unless I ...”

“Mary you’ll have to talk louder I can hardly hear you.”

She was silent for a moment then he heard the swell of air in her lungs that rose into a high pitched whine and erupted into a deluge of tears. He held the phone away from his ear and sat down on the bed. He let her cry for a moment than talked to her.

“Mary, dear listen to me. It’s, ok. Whatever it is it’s, ok.”

The screechy cry subsided a bit to gasp of squeaky air.

“Mary, can you calm down to tell what’s bothering you?”

More squeaky gasp. The reverend sat silent until the all the air escaped her and she talked again.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I shouldn’t have bothered you. I know you’re so busy and you don’t have time for all this silly stuff.”

“Mary, you need to tell me what’s wrong, ok. I’m here to help you. The Lord is here to help you.”

“The bank people came and took my car lat night. I got no money to get my car. There aren’t any buses out this way, Reverend. I can’t get to work. I don’t make enough anyway. Rent is due in two weeks and I don’t have a dime. I don’t even have bus fare to ride a bus if I could,” she said and started crying again.

Hines let her get it out of her system again. When her sobs turned to sniffles and little gasp of breath he talked again.

“Now Mary the first thing I need you to do is take a few deep breaths and calm yourself, ok. Now I need you to remember Job. You know the story of Job, of course.”

“UmmHmm.”

“Everything that happens, honey happens for a reason. Now you may think God is trying to punish you for some reason, but most of the time when the Lord takes us down a dark, sinister road it’s not to punish us, but make us aware of his ultimate love for us. OK.”

“OK.”

“Good. Like Job you have to keep faith in the goodness of God. This trying time is God’s gift to you to make you realize how much he really is there, and that your faith in him, even in times of darkness, is still strong. That is his gift. He makes you strong by testing your faith. If you pass the test you will only be that much stronger right? God helps those that help themselves, right?”

“Yes, Reverend. Yes you’re right.”

“Now I don’t see a problem here do you?”

No, Reverend. I’m so sorry. I’m so weak. I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, dear. That’s why I’m here. I am the servant of the Lord and I do as he commands me to do. I spread his grace to those around me. Now all you gotta do is remember that. Remember that you are a child of God and that you are one of the few, the proud, a Christian and you are saved, Mary.”

“God Bless you Reverend, God bless you.”

“Now I’m gonna have Elizabeth pick you up and take you to pay for the next two months car payment so you can get back and forth from work, ok.”

“Reverend I can’t ask you...”

“You didn’t ask me. I’m telling you what’s gonna happen that’s all. Also, I’ll need the number to your landlord. I’ll give him a call and see if we can’t work out some sort of situation where you can pay your rent in installments or something, we’ll see. Now you quit fretting. Get ready for your day and to receive God’s blessing throughout the day. I’ll have Elizabeth call when she’s on her way.”

“Reverend I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll see me at the services this week.”

Mary thanked the Reverend several times and wished him the blessing of the Lord several more. When she hung up she was happy. The Reverend walked downstairs and Elizabeth asked him how everything went. He told her and asked her to pick the girl up to get her car. He sat down ate his breakfast of two sunny-side up eggs, four pieces of bacon, grits, two pieces of white toast with butter and apple jelly, and two cups of coffee black.

Meridian stood at her screen door and watched the rain sprinkle tiny drops on the glass. She stared at the drops as they slid down the glass like tiny crystal serpents. The sky was gray above her house, but she could see the cast-iron black clouds approaching from the distance. The tea kettle whistled in the kitchen. She closed the door and went to pour herself a cup. She sat on the sofa and sipped her tea. She looked at the phone, picked up the receiver then

set it back down on the cradle. She knew Jennifer wouldn't talk to her anytime soon. She had called her three times that morning and Jennifer had hung up on her three times. She understood.

She thought that she had probably over protected her daughter. That the things she thought most harmful to her was what had attracted her the most. She knew that Jennifer was as stubborn as she was and rebelled against everything she had ever tried to introduce her to and swarmed to what she tried to keep her away from. But what Jennifer didn't know, she thought, was how much she loved her. She would have bore arms against the whole nation alone to keep what happened to her from happening to Jennifer. She didn't want Jennifer growing up avoiding herself in the mirror because the color of her skin wasn't white, because the nose was too pointy or her lips too thick.

She had only wanted her to know who she was and where she came from and to be proud of it. She didn't want her to be embarrassed that she was Indian like she had been most of her young life. And Jennifer wasn't embarrassed to be Indian, but neither was she proud and this is what Meridian couldn't understand. This is what bit into her like a needle in her blood stream. It was this that she had fought so hard to keep. She admired Jennifer's stubbornness, it was the one thing that she had gotten from Meridian. It had been what kept Meridian from being completely swallowed up in the Ship Rock boarding school. And it had been that school that forged Meridian into the woman that she was, who wanted to protect her daughter from the forces that had nearly disintegrated her.

Unlike most of the people that she had known who went to the boarding school, she wanted to remember her experience. Meridian held the memory in her mind with vise-like determination. She didn't want to forget. She didn't want to forget the wet, hopeless, anger in her father's eyes as she walked away from him, stuck between the two pasty faced women dressed in

lacy nursing uniforms that held her with their nails dug into the flesh of her shoulders, and loading her onto a bus full of other crying Indian children.

She didn't want to forget the cold of the November wind and the fire of the kerosene freezing and burning her skin at the same time as she stood naked outside in the dirt, surrounded only by a tattered wooden stall, while the woman with the finger tips made of sand scrubbed her with a straw bristled brush until skin felt transparent. "Just like niggers," the woman kept repeating over and over, "niggers, nits and Indians." Meridian didn't know what niggers and nits were, but the snarl on the woman's face when she said Indian let her know they weren't good things.

She didn't want to forget seeing her hair being incinerated in an old oil drum and looking around at all the other little girls weeping as they touched their heads and smelled the scorched air. She didn't want to forget the lumps on her scalp, the sting of the nun's hands on her cheeks, or the throbbing in her knuckles from rulers and yard sticks after she was smacked for talking in Diné.

She didn't want to forget the way Anaba's blood felt like oil in her hands as it ran through her fingers while she held the wound, as she led him to the nurses office, after Mr. Phelps cracked his head open with a cedar staff because he wouldn't answer to his English name, Anthony

And whenever she felt that the memories were slipping away into a gray area she would sort them out and look at them, one by one, placing them side by side and run them through her mind over and over until she could disappear back into the past and stand in the cold halls on the hard dirt ground of the boarding school. She would hear the voices, smell the food, and feel the

air of the place. She wanted to remember. She drew her strength from it. It heated her like electricity and it brought her focus on what was important in life.

The rain fell harder. She closed her eyes and listened to it drum against the aluminum awning she had above her front window. She set her cup down and wrapped a blanket around herself. This isn't going to let up for a long while, she thought, and picked up the book from the table she had been reading.

Templeton stood at the door with water running down his face and tiny beads of rain sprinkled over his knit cap. He had both hands in his pockets and was swaying back and forth and bouncing up and down on one leg than the other. . Meridian opened the door and he stepped inside. She took his coat, shook it out and put it on a hook by the door. He took his hat off and put it in his back pocket.

“You want some coffee?” she asked.

“Some tea would be better,” he said.

“Have a seat, I’ll be right in.”

Templeton stood by the fire and warmed his hands.

“There’s snow falling with the rain. I didn’t know it snowed in the desert,” he said.

“It gets below zero out here sometimes.”

“I hate snow,” he said. “I mean I love looking at it when its falling, and I even like being in it if the wind isn’t blowing, but the next day when you have to deal with all the shoveling and slush and traffic jams, no way. That’s what I hate. It becomes a hindrance and I try to avoid it like the plague. I hope it isn’t like that here. Is it?”

“It can get nasty out here sometimes,” Meridian said.

“You need any help in there?” Templeton asked.

“No, make yourself comfortable. I’ll be done in a bit.”

He sat down on the futon and picked up the book she had been reading, *Thank You* by Andrew McCallen. He had never heard of the book or the author. He read the dust jacket and looked at the picture of the author. It was a black and white photo of a classy, rich looking white man with thinning hair combed across the top of his head. He had a serious, stern expression and stared into the camera with an intense gaze.

“It’s not very good,” Meridian said walking into the room with a tray laden with a teapot, two cups, a cup of milk and a bowl of sugar. “I read these guys more as a psychology book than as fiction. Angry white men writing angry stories about an angry world. It’s the mind set I’m more interested in than what they think about the world. If you study your...obstacles you have a better chance of overcoming them.”

Templeton looked at her and nodded. He set the book back on the table.

“Have you talked to Jennifer today?”

She didn’t answer. She put the tray on the table and sat down. She poured the tea, put in a cube of sugar and poured a bit of milk into his cup and gave it to him. Then she did the same to hers, sipped it, and set the cup on the table.

“Templeton, are you here to talk about your uncle or involve yourself in Jennifer’s and my business?”

Templeton looked down at his cup stirred his tea.

“Actually I was supposed to talk to you about all this protest stuff, but she’s mad at me too now.”

“What did you do to her?”

“What did I do? Nothing, I didn’t...nothing. I just got drunk I guess and she got upset. That’s all.”

Meridian picked up her cup and sipped again.

“You guess you got drunk?” she said looking at him above the rim of her cup.

“Did you guessingly get drunk with her?”

“No. she wanted to be alone because of what had happened at work with all the protesting and stuff. I got drunk by myself. Well, I went to the bar by myself.”

“So you hung out with that *little dog*?”

“Well he was there too, yeah. But she didn’t get mad until this morning. I was hung over and she could tell. Now she won’t answer the phone when I call.”

“I know,” Meridian said. “I’ve called her three times myself.”

“She’s pretty stubborn isn’t she?”

“Yes she is. She’s like her mother that way.”

They drank their tea.

“You’ll lose her if you keep doing crap like that,” Meridian said.

“Understandable. I was just feeling lonely so I went to get a beer and got carried away.”

“Carried away is definitely appropriate. I’m not trying to tell you how to live your life Templeton, but I have seen, witnessed too many good men deteriorate in front of my eyes because of weak wills, drink and dope. I’m just telling you I know her. That’s another thing we both can’t stand.”

Templeton nodded. They sat silent for a moment watching the fire burn. Meridian got up and put another log on.

“So what do you think about your uncle? Have you been reading the journal?”

Templeton was silent and continued staring into the fire. Meridian looked at him. A bright orange glow lit his face. The back of his head was hidden in shadow. He looks more like his father than he ever has, she thought. There was strain etched into his face. His lips were taunt, stony and the corners of his mouth grim. He had an almost Grecian nose, the effect of white blood that flowed through the Beaumont family, the blood that Cleveland had so adamantly denied existed. His eyes, though long-lashed and pretty, held the strain the most. They were black and spacey, but not unfocused, piercing. They concentrated on something beyond what they held in their focus, in the immediate. There was a quality in them that seemed intent on something far away and he was trying to discern what it was.

Meridian felt a deep sadness looking at him sitting there. She wanted to take him in her arms, rest his head on her shoulder, rock him back and forth and rub the years away from his brow. She suddenly felt an overwhelming hate toward Eli and Silvia. But when he turned to her there was a different look in his eyes. It was that far away sadness that gave him a mysterious handsomeness. There was a charge mixed with the sadness, a flash, a light, a heat, and she thought she understood how Jennifer could be taken by him. It was similar to the look that drew her to Cleveland. But Templeton’s was sharper, hungrier, dangerous. A ravenous yearning to soak up everything. She thought it could be joy that he kept locked up deep inside of himself. Joy that he was looking at with that far away gaze. He looked up at her smiled and nodded his head.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s a bit overwhelming.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It makes me wish I had known him of course. Makes me wish I had known my dad. Makes me feel empty that I don’t really know anything about my family. I know now, because I read about it, but I don’t feel it. I didn’t live it. It’s like I missed out on an entire life. I’m something looking in on this family that just exploded one day for no reason. No reason whatsoever when you really think about it. I know I’m part of it, but I don’t feel it. I don’t feel part of this constellation that was the Beaumonts.

“Yet at the same time I’m proud that Uncle Cleveland was my uncle. It gives me hope. He was a deep fella. Beautiful mind. And my dad. I never had any idea, no clue, I knew nothing about him. I just saw him as crazy. Uncle Phil too. I had no idea he used to be so cool. Do you know what I mean?”

“I’m not sure. What do you mean?”

“Although I don’t feel it, I’m part of that family. I mean maybe, just maybe I’m not as messed up as I seem to be. I don’t know. I just never felt the way I feel when I read that journal.”

“How do you feel?”

“Enormous.”

Meridian smiled at him. Tears ran from her eyes. She put her face in her hands and wept.

“I wish he was here to hear you say that,” she said and hugged him.

He hugged her back and willed his lower lip to stop trembling. Meridian let go of him and leaned back on the couch

“I wish he’d had a chance to write his second book. I think it would have been great. Important,” Templeton said. “So was he as intense as his writing makes him out to be?”

“Yes he was. Too intense sometimes. He got obsessed with stuff. and God how he loved that Jennifer. He was running to the car to cover her when he got shot.”

She quit talking and stared at the swirl her spoon made in her teas as she stirred it.

“Now here you are in Love with that same girl,” she said.

She got up and left the room then returned with a yellowed envelope and handed it to Templeton. It was addressed to her, but there was no return address.

“It’s the letter I told you I didn’t have anymore. I didn’t trust you too much then. It should shed a little more light on the type of person he really was. Don’t read it now. Take it with you. Do what you can with it.”

“Are you sure? This is private. This is between you and him. I don’t want to invade on that.”

“This is between all of us now. Everything seems to becoming full circle. I don’t know how it will close, but I know it’s coming full circle.”

“Are you sure?”

“I never got to say good bye to your uncle. I never got to tell him how sorry I was, how I forgave him for leaving. I how much I loved him, adored him. I was too stubborn. I made him sweat and burn for the little bit of affection that I did show him when he got back and he still just kept on loving me. So maybe you being here is his way of asking me to do that, ok.”

Templeton looked at her and nodded. He put the letter in his back pocket and the two of them sat in silence again and watched the fire. After a long moment an ember popped and Templeton giggled nervously.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said, looking at her.

Meridian looked at him and saw the deep well in the expression of his eyes.

“Yes,” she said.

“I don’t even know how to ask this. I don’t know if I should. I don’t want you mad at me or thinking I’m crazy.”

“Is it about Jennifer, Templeton?”

“No, no not at all.”

“Then what is it?”

Templeton looked away from her and at the fire again. He rubbed his hand over his cheek and sighed.

“I’ve been seeing things lately.”

“What do you mean? What kind of things?”

Templeton told her about his experience with the Changing Man and the invisible people from when he was a child. He told her what he had seen in her backyard that night, about Mr. French on the corner, and the dancing Gandhi the day before. Meridian listened to him intently and when he was done she erupted into laughter. Templeton glared at her in complete disbelief. She saw the look and stopped herself from laughing. She looked at her hands in her lap and giggled.

“What if I’m losing it? What if I’m really having a full-blown nervous breakdown?” he said.

Meridian put her hand against his cheek and smiled at him.

“Sweetie, I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing because you are the last person I’d ever considered having visions. Visions you communicate with. I never saw it in you. It’s wonderful. Don’t you understand that? It’s as if everything is coming full circle to converge right here, right now. You and Jennifer, Cleveland and me, you having visions. It’s all moving to some singular point that’s going to contract then erupt like a volcano.”

“What is? what are you talking about?”

“Templeton, I’m saying that things don’t happen by accident however accidental they seem. You finding Cleveland’s book, you coming here you being together with Jennifer. It’s not accidental.”

“What? Are you saying this was all predetermined?”

“No. What moves us is not destined. What we desire and yearn for is not destined. That’s determined by the experiences we have in life, by how our being develops. The yearning for being is destined. All life yearns to be. The choices we make along the way are not. Our beings become intertwined because our desires for our being are similar. The Great Spirit, or whatever you happen to define the power of existence as. I happen to have a great affinity and it gives me a spiritual connection to name the force of existence the Great Spirit. It makes it more personal to me. Other people call it Yahweh, God, Nirvana, Shiva, energy. Whatever works for you is fine, I believe. It’s just that they get caught up in the dogma and the classifications and what to subject everybody else to what they believe is when things get ugly.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say to you is meaning is the convergence of like energies. The things that you surround yourself with create meaning or meaninglessness in your life. And at times those things come together with such strength and intensity that they form pockets or pools of energy and manifest themselves in different ways to the people involved. These convergences are reservoirs of potential to make transformations, to gather power, to recreate. They don’t last. Most of the time we are in a state of banal detachment from any source of power, floundering day to day. It’s only in times of turmoil that we show our true character, but in times of power you gain the strength to persevere.

“The Changing Man and the invisible people are the manifestations of power, Templeton. Most *super natural* occurrences are. You said the Changing Man said he was an agent of change right? So do you see what I mean? He is a manifestation of the Great Spirit, the great power which is flux. That is probably the only absolute there really is.

“That night you saw me dancing in the yard, I didn’t see or hear the people dancing around me. I felt them. But that’s all that ever happens for me. Which is fine.”

“So what’s it mean?” Templeton asked.

“What’s it mean to you?”

“Yeah. What am I supposed to do about it? Am I supposed to go to some shaman or priest or something?”

Meridian started laughing.

“I don’t know what *you’re* supposed to do about it, Templeton. That’s up to you. I use it to direct my will.”

“That’s what he said, Gandhi. I don’t know what the hell to do. He just shows up again after 30 years. I was a kid who thought I had a cool magical friend. Now it’s something to do with my very existence? What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“Well part of it should be pretty simple to understand. He’s the *Changing Man*, right. An agent of change. Something is changing, Templeton. That should be apparent. You have to figure out what and how it relates to you.”

“What if I’m just going crazy?”

“Is that what it means to you?”

“This is all crazy.”

Meridian patted his cheek again. He looked at her and smiled.

“I should probably head out before this weather gets any worse,” he said.

They stood from the couch and started to walk to the door.

“I’m going to stop by Jennifer’s on my way home do you want me to tell her to call you or anything?”

Meridian looked at him with her eyebrow lifted.

“I think she’ll call when’s she’s ready, Templeton.”

“I don’t know. She was really upset. I doubt she’s going to even answer the door for me now.”

“Well that’s her prerogative, right?”

“I suppose so. Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why at her job? I mean you know she has to go there everyday and deal with that and she knows you’re the one organizing everything. So I’m just wondering why there?”

Meridian turned around and ran her fingers through her hair. She walked back and cleared the tea cups and pot from the table and took them into the kitchen.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but do think I’m deliberately trying to cause my daughter undue stress?”

“Of course not, but think about it, Meridian. What is she supposed to think?”

It had been the first time he had called her by her first name and it startled her a bit. Did he somehow see himself as her equal now, she thought. It disarmed her and felt disrespectful, yet it also gave her a sudden respect for him she hadn’t had before. She glared at him for a moment and he looked back at her questioningly with an eyebrow raised.

“She’s bigger than that, I know she is. She’s just over reacting.”

“I don’t think so. She’s really upset. She feels betrayed I think.”

“Betrayed? Oh that’s crazy, Templeton. You’re reading into stuff. She’s stronger than you’re giving her credit for. I didn’t raise that girl to fall apart at the drop of a hat, and I know she’s getting upset to try to make me feel bad. She’s just trying to get a rise out of me. I know her.”

“I don’t know, maybe so, but she seemed pretty upset yesterday when she left work and got home.”

“She left work?”

“Actually she didn’t go in then we had breakfast and she went in for a bit and her boss sent her home. That’s when she sent me home to be alone.”

Meridian walked out of the kitchen and sat down on the couch.

“She knows what I’m doing,” she said staring down at the rug on the floor. “She knows how to protest and how to do it effectively. She can’t really believe I’m doing this to hurt her. That’s crazy. She’s not that weak. She’s not,” she said looking up at Templeton.

“Do you want me to tell her anything if I get to talk to her,” Templeton asked.

Meridian shook her head and looked back down at the rug.

“No,” she said.

Templeton stood up, walked over to her and hugged her.

“I’m going to go, ok. Can I come back by in a few days?”

Meridian stood up and walked with him to the door, gave him his coat and kissed him on the cheek.

“Come back when you can. Be careful in this snow.”

Templeton nodded, took the letter from his back pocket and put it in the inside pocket of his coat.

Young brushed the snow off his windshield with his arms. A half inch had already accumulated. The last time it had snowed in Garfield, New Mexico it snowed a quarter of an inch and they closed the town down. He and Cluck had stopped there to have a few beers, but he had been anxious to get to Las Cruces and Sandy. The weather didn't bother him though. He was prepared. He had been in Washington and Oregon for the last few months and he had warm and weather proof clothing. He also had a snow brush in the trunk of his car, but he thought it too much of a hassle to have to dig through all the knap sacks and other equipment to find it. He was in a hurry to get in the sack with Sandy. He had the most important things for the trip: a sack of skunk weed with hairs as long as a beard and colors that looked like they were stolen from a rainbow. He had a fifth of Johnny Walker Black to go with that. He finished clearing the windshields, tied his dreads in a pony-tail with a length of tanned elk skin, hopped in his car and drove on I-25 with a grin on his face.

Once he was on I-25 he loaded a bowl and put in a John Prine CD. The snow was moving North so he drove out of it and enjoyed being the only car on the highway through the rough, jagged landscape of the New Mexican desert. The mesas and buttes took on the appearance of mythological characters petrified by time and craved into the land. The humped back of some ancient serpent beast frozen in stone projected out of the surface of the earth, the arm of some great giant slain by a forgotten warrior, reaching still to grab the sun and devour it stuck out of the ground in the form of the shape of some outcropping of rock. He drove through an ancient museum of artifacts that only those in the right mind frame would ever notice. He felt as if he had slipped into a space between the folds of realities that two realities were in the process of merging into something completely new. He felt as if he were the witness of some

gigantic quantum event. An event that was not common, but not uncommon either. He felt as if he were travelling through the emergence of a new reality. It happened all the time, that's how things changed, two realities separate and distinct converging to form another reality itself a combination yet separate and distinct. Like the birth of a being. And then that reality will merge with another one and so on and so on forever.

Change. Change happens not like an amoeba splitting, but by things merging. Two or more things colliding and the resulting mixture, explosion, or whatever consequence is the change. Two people come together and form a new relationship, two musical notes form a harmony, two nations agree or disagree, form an alliance or try their best to destroy one another which will result in some type of a change. Change is the eternal force that can not be manipulated by anything else.

This is good shit, he thought, and loaded another bowl using his knees to steer the car. The John Prine CD ended and he put in Bad Company. "I'm Ready for Love" came out of the speakers and he turned the stereo up. "Yes, yes I am," he said.

He pulled into a Conoco station and called Sandy from a pay phone. Twenty minutes later they were naked in her bed smoking pot and drinking scotch.

"You're a bad influence, Sandy said. "I'm going to be too fucked up to go to the party."

"Naw, baby. The idea is to do it a couple more times then fall asleep, and by the time the party starts you're refreshed and ready for round two, get it?"

She took a shot of scotch from the bottle, set it on her night stand, tackled him into the pillows, and climbed on top of him. They did it two more times and fell asleep lying

across each other. When they woke up it was dark. The street lamp laid a milky swath across the room. Young woke Sandy up, they did it one more time, got dressed and went to the party.

The party was at Benjamin Patterson's house, one of the guys who had been with Sandy at the first meeting Meridian had held. He had been renting it from one of the professors in the sociology department. It was sparsely furnished with cheap, thrift-store furniture, but several bookshelves lined the walls. Young looked through them. There was everything from literature and theory, to philosophy, psychology and music. But most of them were sociological in nature, Pierre Bourdieu, Cornel West and those guys. A polyester tapestry of the Grateful Dead hung between the doorway of the hall leading to the bedrooms and bathroom. Posters and post cards of various revolutionaries and activist hung on the walls tacked up with thumbtacks. The ubiquitous Che poster hung like a firebrand on the wall of the kitchen. A print of Picasso's *Guernica* hung above the couch where Sandy sat with two other very pretty grad students dressed in tight-jeans and loose fitting flower print blouses. A Phish played CD on the stereo, and the smell of weed floated throughout the house like the fragrance of flowers in a greenhouse. A couple of guys with dread-locks sat at a table with a pitcher of dark beer and a bong and played backgammon. Young walked into the kitchen; a fat gray cat sat lazy eyed underneath a table laden with vegetable trays, hamburgers, bbq tofu, hot dogs, empty aluminum trays, and plastic utensils. He went through the back door into the yard. A keg of beer sat in a 30 gallon garbage can full of melting ice; two charcoal grills with dim red glow of dying embers smoked lightly. A girl and a guy lay in a hammock strung between two huge willow trees. Three dogs, a golden retriever mix, a black lab mix and a German Sheppard mix chased each other in the dirt that used to be a lawn. A group of people sat on the edge of the porch playing guitars and singing. Young found a plastic cup on a table and got a beer. The other guy, Peter Hurd, from the meeting held

up his beer cup in greeting to Young as he played hacky-sack with two other guys, both of which wore dread-locks and tie-dyed shirts. Young sat on the porch next to the singers and watched a strange girl who was dressed like a gypsy dance by herself off in a dark corner of the yard.

“She calls herself Salome,” Sandy said leaning over his shoulder and whispering in his ear.

He stretched up to kiss her cheek and she sat next to him on the stairs.

“She’s practicing her dance of the seven veils. She’s going to drop a veil every night for a week before this YK2 thing is supposed to happen. She wants to be free when it goes down she says. Whatever she means by that.”

“I kinda get the symbolism. I mean John’s head rolls at the end of the eleventh hour. Goodbye, kaput, that’s all she wrote and that kinda crap. But what’s up with the seven days.”

“Decreation.”

“Decreation?”

“Yeah, you know it took God seven days to create the world, so she’s dancing the dance of decreation. On January 1st 12am the world as we know is supposed to end, right? She’s ushering in the change, celebrating the fall of western civilization and all its soul-withering, spirit-sucking institutions. She’s anarchy’s princess now and wants to be queen of the new millennium. She’s a fucking flake, and she’s ripping off the Hindu idea of Shiva’s Dance which is much more beautiful and positive. It’s about life ultimately. Her, she’s just as bad as those religious zealots who hope for the apocalypse to prove themselves right and wallow in death so they can find some kinda salvation in escape. She’s just the political version. Anyway, her real

name is Amy and she dropped out of the woman's studies program because they wouldn't let her go to class topless."

"Yeah. Weird. She's got nice moves though and I really wouldn't mind finding out what's underneath those scarves, no offense to you of course, but you know," Young said, putting his arms around Sandy.

Sandy shrugged his arm off and sighed.

"You're all a bunch of maggots you know that. All men, you disgust me. And anyway, I bet you it's not half as good as what's right here," She said and shoved his hand between her legs.

"You want to blow this place and go back to your place?" Young asked.

Sandy took his face in her hands and crushed her mouth against his.

Young laid on his back with his eyes closed and a smile spread across his face. Sandy lay with her head in the crook of his arm. Young caressed the graceful curve of her ass. He was starting to doze off and Sandy bit his nipple.

"Hey, mama you ready to go again already?"

"Yeah right you pervert, and it's not as if you could anyway," she said swiping her hand across his penis nestled like a baby mouse in a pile of straw. "You're going to sleep just yet, homey."

"I love it when you speak a foreign language, baby."

“Come on, Chris I want to know what you’re going to do on New Years Eve. I want to be part of it.”

“Protest, baby protest. Protest until kingdom comes, which might not be that late after we start, right?”

“Come on, man,” she said smacking his chest with her open hand.

“Hey, man chill. What’s that about?”

Sandy sat up in the bed, turned on the light and stared at him.

“What?” Young said.

“Why are you fucking with me? You know you’re not going to just protest. I want to know why and what you are really going to do.”

Young sat up and propped a couple pillows behind his head and drew the sheet up to his chest.

“That smarts,” he said rubbing his chest. “That’s not cool at all.”

Sandy sighed and rolled over to get out of bed. Chris grabbed her arm.

“Hold on, hold on. Geez. Yeah so I’m not going to protest. It’s a waste of time and energy. People walking up and down the street with signs and fliers and ballots bitching about something most the 75% of the population doesn’t even know is going on and the other 25% don’t give a fuck. People look at them and turn the other direction. They roll up their car windows, lower their eyes, or curse at them. The people that do take the fliers throw them away a block later, or that night after they get their cable bill for \$100 with the fliers for carpet cleaning deals and two-for-one bifocal adds.

“It takes too much time to get involved in an issue. It takes too much thought, dedication, motivation. And the media isn’t going to get the issue across. Every time you see protesters on TV they’re made out to look like agitators, anarchist out to destroy the American dream. If they had enough money to buy the media they wouldn’t have the issue in the first place. So fuck the media.

“ Most shmucks what to get off work, from a job they despise, and get as close to oblivion through mindless television programs or drinking and drugs that they can. If their immediate gratification isn’t threatened they’re not gonna lift a finger to do a thing about it. And even if their preferred form of escape is taken away, after a heartless whelping of protest they substitute it with something else. If I can’t watch Seinfeld or Friends I’ll watch ER or Sex in the City, if I can’t drink Bud I’ll drink Coors, if I can’t drink beer, snort, smoke or shot some type of dope I’ll beat somebody up. Anything but become aware of the things that are happening in the world around me that aren’t necessarily pleasant or don’t have to do with me directly.”

He sat up in the bed, grabbed the bottle of scotch that was on the night stand and drank some. He sat crossed-leg on the bed and handed the bottle to Sandy. She took it and sipped from it. He grabbed it back, took another swallow and set it between his legs.

“See, how are you supposed to get through to an animal like that? They are like rabbits sitting in a hutch blissfully unaware that a fox is lurking around while they gorge themselves on lettuce and alfalfa pellets. You need to rattle their cages. You need to slam your hand against the wire mesh to make them blink even, much less make them move. They like that kinda shit. Big sensational hyper special-effects, hyper-violent movies and news stories about rapes murders and bombings that’s what they crave. Explosive shit like that. Fuck war, unless it’s two hours in a movie, they don’t want to know about that. With war comes an underlying

morality which takes brain-power to think about. No too much work. So they want some thing sensational, something that's going to take that dull glaze out of their eyes and light it up with a bright red brilliance. Does that answer your question?"

"You're gonna blow it up aren't you?" Sandy asked, leaning close to Young's face on all fours.

"What? What the fuck are you taking about? Blow what up? Who the fuck are you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, leaning away from him a bit.

"Why would you ask me if I'm going to blow something up?"

She sat back cross-legged and looked at him questioningly.

"I don't know. I just, the way you talked. The things you said. I mean what?"

Young tilted the bottle back and finished what was in it. He swallowed too much and he started to cough. He felt the hot liquid churning in his stomach and rising into his esophagus. He tried to swallow it back down but it kept rising. Finally with small particles of taco and cheese dip it flowed into his mouth. He held it there for a second and swallowed it back down. He gasped for air and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked at Sandy who had scooted to the edge of the bed. His eyes were glazed over and slightly crossed. She forced a smile and shrugged.

"You ok?" she asked.

He lay back on the pillow and put his forearm over his eyes and nodded his head.

“Listen, I didn’t mean anything asking you that. It’s just that you turned me the fuck on and made me horny as hell thinking about it. I want to fuck again,” she said and crawled over him.

This is the type of stuff Cleveland should have kept writing about in this book, Jennifer thought, as she laid the book on the coffee table. She had just finished reading a section from the book about two lovers who were desperately trying to reach each other from across the

United States after a nuclear accident. It was loving, compassionate and tender. All that metaphysical and blasphemous stuff is silly. That's probably why he got shot, she thought and immediately felt guilty. "God forgive me. I didn't mean that," she muttered under her breath. People should write about love and not hate, though, she thought. She got a strong urge to see Templeton. Partly because she felt guilty about the thought she had about his uncle, but mainly because she missed him. For a moment she thought that maybe she had over reacted, but then she felt justified. She didn't want somebody who was going to go and hang out at a bar all the time. She knew what happened at bars. But more importantly, she didn't want someone who was going to be selfish just because she needed sometime to be alone and think. She liked to drink too, she thought, but not to escape or need to cope with every little problem that came up.

She got up from the couch and went into the bathroom to run water for a bath. Just as she was about to climb into the steamy water, the door bell rang. She knew it was Templeton. She thought about not answering it, thought about testing him for another day to see what he would do, but that seemed silly and she decided it wouldn't be the most mature thing to do. She turned the water off, put on her robe and answered the door.

"Your book is on the table," she said and turned around.

She immediately felt bad, and turned backed around, her arms folded over her chest.

"Thanks, I didn't even know I had left it. Thank you for keeping it for me."

“What, did you think I was going to throw it away?”

“No, no, I just meant that...listen I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry for what I did. I was just...just scared you might not want to see me anymore and that’s why I got drunk.”

“You really hurt me, Templeton. I don’t know why. I’ve never gotten that mad at anyone before for getting drunk, but this was different somehow. I feel more about you than I have about other people, I guess.”

“I was being selfish. Stupid and insecure. I’ve never felt like this about anyone either, Jen. Can you forgive me?”

She looked up at him. His eyes were as wide and wet as a baby fur seals. She wanted to laugh because he looked so pathetic, so silly. She knew his effort to make himself look sincere was sincere, but he looked ridiculous. She put her hand over his face, smiled, closed her eyes and shook her head. She softly mashed her hand against his face.

“Enough with the expression already. I forgive you,” she said.

She put her arms around his waste and drew him close to her. He wrapped his arms around her and embraced. They felt the strain of anxiety melt from their muscles and fell into one another. The feel of their bodies against each other gave them both a renewed sense of energy. They kissed. Long, hard and with earnest.

“I was just about to take a bath, do you want to join me?” Jennifer asked.

“Most definitely,” Templeton said.

She kissed him again then took his hand and led him to the bathroom.

“Just one more thing, “she said.

Templeton nodded.

“Please don’t ever do the sad face again, ok,” she said slipping off her robe and stepping into the tub.

Wilbur Jefferson sat at his desk in the dark with a rocks glass full of gin, tonic and ice. He picked up the phone for the twelfth time that night, began dialing Delbert Graham's phone number then hung up before the phone rang. He drained his glass, and poured himself another drink. He got up and walked around his office, stared out the window, cursed and kicked the wall. He had wanted revenge, not remorse. After his initial decision to have the land boundaries altered for Waters and Franks, he had slipped into a sort of somnambulistic reality in which was only dimly aware of the things around him, not in touch with them or what they were supposed to mean. When he was approached by Franks he made the decision with out any hesitation, but afterwards, after he received the money, went home and looked at his wife and son, he felt sick to his stomach.

He took a sip of gin and swished it around in his mouth. The tangy, pine flavor felt like astringent in his mouth and he sucked in air to feel the tingle more. He didn't normally drink, but he had started more after he had received the money. He could afford good stuff now and not rot-gut, so why not, he thought. Most of the time he passed out in the chair in front of the TV. His wife would wake up between two and four and not find him in the bed. She would get up, put on her robe, pull at him until he got up, limp and staggering, and help him to bed. He picked up the receiver again then slammed it down. He put his face in the palm of his hands and started to weep. He hated himself. He hated that he was crying, and he hated that he couldn't revel in his revenge for being passed over, year after year after year for a promotion. He hated the fact that he knew he really didn't deserve it. He hated that he knew that he was going to call Graham and tell him everything. He hated that he knew that was the only way he was going to be able to live with himself. He hated that he knew he would be fired, that he might lose his family, that he

would be disgraced in his community. But he could run from all that he thought. He could always run from that, but he couldn't run from what he felt about what he had done. It nagged at him like summer cold, like a toothache, it was a constant all encompassing nausea. He hated that he was weak. He picked up the receiver again and dialed Graham's number. He let it ring until the other phone picked up. An answering machine let him know that Graham was not in his office. He left a message for Graham to call him back. He hung the phone, downed his drink and poured another one.

Samuel Waters and FBI agent Macon Trudeau sat at Trudeau's desk reading the notebook The Salamander had given them.

"Who did you say gave you this again?" Trudeau asked.

"A fella I'm working with in town here. He's an ex-cop that is protecting the churches and my interest since all this protest stuff has been going on. He's got a plant, some girl that's a friend of his or a friend of a friend. She's posing as a protester to find out what she can find out, what they got planned, you know," Waters answered.

"This fella Young and this old lady Yellow Thunder I recognize from old files," Trudeau said picking up a cup of coffee off the desk and sipping.

"Cold," he said, and got up from the desk. "You want a refill," he said walking over to his coffee machine and pouring to old coffee in to drain and refilling it.

"Only if you got some bourbon to go with it," Waters said. "It'll help to take off the bite of this damn cold."

“I hear ya,” Trudeau said. “I haven’t seen this much snow in these parts for years, about tens wasn’t it?”

“I don’t remember. I hate this stuff no matter how much or little we get.”

“Anyway, that Young guy, the one with the crazy hair, he’s been implicated in a number of eco-terrorist type acts. But, he’s a slippery fuck and we don’t have no real evidence against him,” Trudeau said, tearing open four packs of sugar at one time and shaking them into his coffee.

“The old lady is from all that ruckus at Pine Ridge in the 70’s. That Wounded Knee stuff. Same with those old injuns there,” Trudeau said, pointing to the pictures spread out on his desk. They all had something to do with that A.I.M. crap back then. That one, that Alvarez fella, he was one of them to break into the fed building with them other crazies. You know the Indian Bureau building.”

Waters watched Trudeau rip open another four packets of sugar and pour them into his coffee. Trudeau sat down again and rummaged through the drawers of his desk.

“So what can you make of these notes?” Waters asked.

Trudeau pulled out a pint of Bailey’s and pushed it across his desk to Waters. Waters took the bottle, got up and poured himself a quarter cup of coffee and filled the rest of the mug with Bailey’s.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? What do mean nothing?” Waters asked between sips.

“There’s nothing here except some dizzy broads notes about some tree-hugging hippy. This notebook is filled with the same stuff that a hundred-thousand of these crazies spout off as a litany on a daily basis.”

“What do you mean,” Waters said, setting down his drink and flipping through he pages of the notebook. “Look, look here. He claims that ‘protesting is a waste of time and energy and other more permanent and aggressive actions must be taken if things are to change.’ You can’t tell me you think that’s nothing.”

“Do you know how many people say they would like to kill the president? Do you know how many people say the president should be killed? Hundreds of thousands of people say these things a day. Thousands may truly believe it and a few hundred may be even making plans about how it can be done. But unless there is hard, cold evidence that a person did say he or she is going to kill the president then we can’t do a damn thing about it. It’s the same thing here. Sure we should probably keep a close eye on these clowns, but we got nothing to go on now.”

“This is shit, Macon you know that,” Waters said.

Trudeau shrugged. He leaned forward and spread out the pictures.

“Who’s this black one?” he asked.

“Oh some guy who’s banging the old crone’s daughter or maybe both of them I don’t know. You don’t recognize him?”

Trudeau shook his head and leaned back in his chair.

“All we can do is keep an eye on them, Sam.”

Jennifer watched Hines walk across the parking lot to his car too. Then two protesters started following him and circling him. Hines ignored them and got into his car and pulled away, but Jennifer got furious. She felt like going outside and yelling at the protesters, but Hines had said that's what they wanted. They wanted "us" to engage them so that "we" looked like the ones in the wrong. The best thing to do is just to pretend they didn't exist, he had said. She fought back the urge and sat back down at her desk. She folded her arms across the desk and rested her head on her arms. She started to cry, but stopped. She felt weak and disgusted with herself. She lifted her head and dried her tears on her sweater sleeve. She watched the two protesters march back and forth across the parking lot. She seethed with hatred toward them. She wished that the Reverend had gotten an injunction against them like Waters had, but the Reverend said that the Lord would take care of everything, that there was no need to spend the people's money to keep people away from the office. In fact, he had said, by being so close to the incarnation of the spirit of Christ might drive some of them to the Lord. Jennifer closed her eyes. She felt like screaming. Then a sudden calm came over her. This is my test, she thought. I am supposed to endure these people and not lose my Christian love. This was her role as a Christian soldier. She sat back in her chair, straightened her sweater, picked up the phone and made a call. Meridian's answering machine came on.

"Mother, this is Jennifer. We need to talk. Tonight. I'll be there at eight. God Bless You."

The streets of Truth or Consequences were decorated for the Christmas season. Strings of silver, green and red garland connected lamp post. Wreaths hung from the doors of government buildings and store fronts. Several Santas, ranging in size from nearly malnourished and semi-

jolly to overly nourished and overly jolly elves, rang bells at street corners and asked for donations for The Salvation Army. Mechanized elves, reindeers, penguins and snowmen went about their eternal task of ice skating on cellophane ponds, decorating miniature Christmas trees, popping out of presents and other festive activities in the windows of stores. Instrumental version of Christmas carols played outside over loudspeakers from different stores mix together in a cheery dissonance. Signs on stands on the sidewalks and in the windows of stores shouted in bright neon red and green *half-off and two for one sales*. People smiled as they walked down the street bundled up in their overcoats, hats and scarves. Templeton walked and smiled with them. It was the one time of the year that he truly enjoyed. There was a lightness to the world during the holiday season, he felt. And even the commercialization of it all didn't bother him. It was a time of comfort for him and he felt satisfied. There was the gift giving part, of course, but over the years that had disappeared. He had quit getting excited over getting gifts ten years prior. There was the whole gaiety of the season, visiting friends and family, the parties, the food, the drinking the overall sense of togetherness. But, he felt, that he was basically alone for Christmas 1999. Of course, he had Jennifer and Meridian, but they were new friends. they had no prior Christmas' together to give history to it. Plus, Meridian didn't celebrate it and Jennifer was in to the religious aspect of it. Very into it. And yet Templeton still felt that fulfillment he felt during the holidays. What the holidays did was transport him. He had had the most supremely satisfying time of his life alone one Christmas eve and the holidays took him back to that experience.

He had been about seven, it was the first Christmas Eli had been back from Nam, before he really started deteriorating, and he had been unable to sleep, too excited anticipating what presents he was going to get. His parents had put him to bed at nine. They had let him stay up an hour longer to decorate cookies for Santa. He remembered the cookie. It was a big gingerbread

cookie cut out in the shape of Santa himself. Templeton had painstakingly decorated it with three different types of icing for his beard, hair, gloves and boots, silver candy balls for the buttons on his coat, and rainbow and chocolate sprinkles to give it pizzazz. He slept for two hours then woke up, went out to the living room where Eli and Silvia sat watching Alistair Sim in *A Christmas Carol*.

“Did he come yet? Is it time to open presents?” he had asked his parents.

They looked at each other, smiled and shook their heads.

“No, he didn’t and no it’s not,” Eli said, getting up and carrying Templeton back to his room. Eli tucked him in and told him Santa wouldn’t come until he had slept the whole night. So he closed his eyes and tried to force himself to sleep and not think about presents. Eventually he really did fall asleep, but he woke up at four in the morning and crept back out to the living room. He had come. Presents surrounded the tree in all different colors of wrapping paper. Templeton lost his breath for a moment and gasped. He rushed to the tree and picked up presents and shook them. He turned to the table where he had left the cookie and saw that it was gone and there was an empty glass with milk coating it. He squeezed his way behind the tree and picked up a few more gifts. The heater turned on and he felt the warm air blow against his back. It was comfortable, soothing, enveloping. He lie down in front of the heat register and let the air flow over him. He curled up and listened to the deep, low breath of the air being pushed out against him. The sound filled his ears and he was completely surrounded, absorbed into a warm cocoon. Everything disappeared. the excitement of opening presents, the anxiety that he might get in trouble for waking up so early and messing with the gifts, the anticipation of seeing relatives and eating a banquet of food, the fear of seeing his cousin Michelle who beat him up all the time, it all faded. There was only the sound and the feel of the warmth. He felt as if he were nothing but

the sound and the warmth of the heat. It was all that there was and he fell into a deep dreamless sleep and didn't wake up until his parents woke him up five hours later. And for the first thirty seconds he was resentful of them and felt like crying and to just slip back into the heat. but the bright colored wrapping paper snapped him out of it and he jumped up, grabbed a gift and tore in to it.

As he walked down the street, Templeton felt connected. It was partly because he had gotten to wake up and see Jennifer's face that morning. Partly because they had made love the whole day the day before and once before she had left to work. It was partly the way that she looked into his eyes and told him she loved him before she left, and what he felt he probably wouldn't have if all that had not been a sort of catalyst, but it was also something else. It was the way that the sun reflected off the snow that had accumulated on top of a lamppost. Sharp, scintillating, blades of white light that glowed like a living thing. He had thought he had never noticed anything so beautiful and its beauty made him want to weep. The sound of someone's child laughing behind him hit him like a blast of hot air against the coldness of his face. He stopped and looked around him. The sound of cars crushing snow beneath their tires reached him, the scratchy ruffle of someone's corduroy pants reached him, the squeak of boots over an icy patch reached him, someone sneezing, someone coughing, a greeting of good morning, a curse about stepping in slush, the reflection from the green light in a stoplight against the window of a pharmacy, a sheet of newspaper blowing across the street, the color of a persons cheeks in the cold wind, the scowl on a man's face as he waited at the cross walk, the seemingly randomness of the pattern of the branches of a tree, the distant caw of a crow, a small stone protruding from the asphalt of the street, all this and a myriad of other things reached him in a schizophrenic frenzy of information. At first he was dizzy and felt faint, but he leaned against the

wall of a building and he looked out again. Goddamn, I'm alive, he thought. He grinned and he felt buoyant. "Mother fucker," he thought. "I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten I was alive. Oh god, I forgot. I'm alive and it's so fucking beautiful. He put his face in his hand and weep a little. He felt an energy more intimate, more engaging, more compassionate and understanding than love swell inside of him. He felt that he was a part, an integral part in the world. He was part of the world. And everything was exactly how it was supposed to be. He bounced up and down. I'm part of all this beautiful, ugly life! He thought. He felt as if he were about to explode. That so much beauty couldn't be contained in him much longer. He wanted to call Jennifer, his uncles, aunt and cousins and tell them how much he loved them, but he knew that even that could not express the feeling that was surging through him. Only if he could compose a symphony would it even only minutely come close to expressing what he felt, he thought. He didn't know what to do. So he walked. He walked and looked at the world. He walked up and down the streets and alley ways and parks of Truth or Consequences, back and forth until his ankles hurt and then some more until the feeling started to dissipate and he forgot how connected he really was and became irritated when a man walked in front of him out of a doorway and didn't say excuse me. So he walked to the library to get out of the cold and work on his project.

The letter fell out of his coat pocket when he draped his coat over the back of a chair. The yellowed envelope was wrinkled and had little tears along the edges. Templeton took the letter out of the envelope. It was fold three times and there were tears along the folds. He carefully laid it out on the table and read it.

Meridian,

My God where do I start? I suppose I should start by apologizing. Firstly, for all the things I've ever done to hurt you. I know I have been a hard man to live with. I must have driven you damn near crazy with my wanderings around the desert all hours of the night, not coming home until late in the morning, locking myself away in the bedroom for hours at a time, not talking, and now this. You must be thinking what kind of coward leaves a letter and just takes off without saying anything. Perhaps this is a form of cowardness, but not of confrontation, but because if I had seen those eyes of yours, if I had kissed those lips, if I had held you in my arms and I smelled your hair, I may not have had the courage to leave. And I had to leave. So I am also apologizing for just leaving you a letter instead of saying goodbye to your face.

I'm not leaving because I am unhappy with you, please don't ever think that for one minute. I have never been more happy or comfortable with another person in my entire life. Ever. My whole body aches as I write this, thinking that I may never see you again. I'm trying not to think about it, I'm trying to be objective in this decision of mine, but all I can see is your face. I see the way your hair lays over your face after we swim in the river and the sun reflects off of it. I see the curve of your thigh underneath that old itchy blanket, I smell the beans you cook, the bread you bake. I smell you everywhere on my own body. I hear the timbre of your voice every time I breathe. To say nothing of your laughter because I don't think I have the strength to carry that with me. Like I said, if I saw you I wouldn't leave and I have to leave.

You're probably thinking if I love you so much why do I have to leave. Is this how I treat someone I love? If you're happy with someone don't you want to stay with them? I love you more than I even have the energy to think about it. Like I said, I've never been happier or more satisfied with another person in my life. But, that's the thing. I'm happy with you, but not with

me. I don't know why? Something just isn't right. What more could I ask for right? I have a gorgeous woman who loves me, I'm a published author with a decently received book, I live in a secluded southwestern landscape that just invites creativity, I don't have to wake up to an alarm clock, I'm not caught behind some desk punching numbers or pounding out some banal report about stock market options. I'm healthy, I'm alive. What else do I need? I don't know. Something though. Something is incomplete, Meridian. Something is off balance.

When I'm out there in the desert wandering around, the air is warm and dry and smells like dust, not like the dingy, asphyxiating smell of house dust, but like wind, a mild wind perfumed with earth. And I'm walking along watching little clouds of dust billow around my feet and land on my boots and I might scare up a little Iron Cross Blister beetle or a horned toad that'll scamper off and bury itself in the dirt again in the distance. And then that'll draw my eyes to a massive saguaro and I'll just catch the head of a Gila woodpecker peeking out the trunk before it darts back in. Then I might sit down, the hum of some insect close by echoing in my head, and just look over the landscape and watch how all the little bees dance in and out between the petals of the flowers of some shrub or cactus, or I might catch a wolf spider digging a den at the base of a crucifixion thorn, or a road runner pausing to take a look back at me before it dashes off to swoop up some unlucky lizard in its beak, or just the breeze blowing the through a patch of deer grass. Just little stuff like that taking place under a deep blue sky with huge cumulus clouds moving slowly across like a pack of migrating herd animals across some ancient plain. And everything looks just right, perfectly in place and being exactly as it should be. But then there's me out there searching for something. I don't want to sound hokey and make it seem like out there searching for myself, whatever that means in the scheme of things, but it is like I'm wandering around looking for something. Something that will make some kind of sense

of things. I want a cactus to live in, a beetle to hunt, a patch of flowers to blow through. Hell, I don't know what I'm trying to say. I don't want to bring up a bunch of philosophical and metaphysical bullshit, I hate that crap, but I don't have any other language for it. The closest I can come to describing it is I feel like I'm back floating in a sea as vast as eternity. It is dark, black water and I am floating, directionless, anchorless in a continuous, perpetual nightscape. Dully existential, I know. But it is a real, seemingly quantifiable experience going on inside me. The book just released it, I think. Now I need to know that longing, not just intellectualize it. I want to face it, I need to face and know what it is. I want it to manifest itself into something tangible. A demon or a dragon or something I can plunge a sword into and conquer it, or at least know what it is. I need to go into the desert, draw my circle and wait until the devil shows up. Hell I love all these metaphors this is bringing up. But you know what I'm saying I'm not having some Buddha or Jesus episode where I need to find the truth. Not The Truth, you know I don't fall for that control mechanism crap, but I do believe each and everyone of us has a truth that pertains to our own being. Something that we have to know about ourselves, about our relationship to others, to the world. Without knowing what that is life gets wrinkled, blurred, opaque, closed off, stifling, suffocating, nasty, brutish and short, or rather very long. What part do I play in the world and the world in me? Maybe it's a redundant, self-absorbed, romantic, pathetic question. Maybe I should just make do with what I have, accept it, appreciate it. My God, who wouldn't cut their legs off not to leave a woman, a person like you. Maybe it's something as simple and Freudian as I didn't get enough love from mommy and daddy, maybe it's egotistical, self-absorbed, cosmic arrogance, or maybe this is just the way things are supposed to be and the answer is the life we live. I don't know and I don't care what the answer is; I just need to know one, or that there isn't one.

I can't begin to think what you are feeling as you read this. I hope that you understand, but I think, probably that you are really hurt and confused. I wish I could take whatever it is your feeling away, unless, of course it is joy and relief, which I would understand too. I have probably put you through hell these last three years. I wish I could somehow make it up to you. More than likely you're feeling anger and cursing about me as you read this. Please don't break anything. I've caused you to destroy so much of your beautiful things, and I'm sure much of what was beautiful about you, yourself. I'm sorry I ever put you in a state of anger, sorrow, remorse and any other painful emotions. That's not what you do to someone you love. But, lately that's all I've been doing, which is a small part of the reason I'm leaving. I know you don't understand Meridian, or maybe you do who am I to tell you what you understand. I just need you to know that I love you. Anything more that I could say would probably just be redundant.

Love You.

Cleveland

Templeton folded up the letter, placed it back in the envelope and put it back in his coat pocket. He leaned back in his chair, folded his hands behind his head and drew his arms around his head enough to cover his ears and eyes. He exhaled audibly. I'm just like him, he thought. My father was probably just like him and so is uncle Philbert. Empty. Searching for something we don't even have a clue about. At least uncle Phil has his God, Templeton thought as he got up to go to the restroom. He washed his face with cold water and then stared at himself in the mirror. He noticed the dark bags under his eyes. Little spikes of gray hair sprouted up in random places in the dark crop of black. The skin around his face was firm and even soft, but he noticed a small pouch of flesh accumulating under his chin. He lifted his neck and pulled at the

skin. A man with dishwater blonde hair walked in and Templeton pretended to wash his hands. He squirted the slimy pink soap into his hands and ran them under the water until the man finished his business and stepped over to the sink. They smiled at nodded at each others reflection in the mirror. Templeton wrung his hands under the cold water. The man dried his hands with the brown paper bag towels, smiled again at Templeton's reflection and said "Have a good day." Templeton said you too, and waited until the door to the restroom was completely closed then started examining his face again. Even with the growing chin, he didn't think he looked his 39 years. His face except for the bags was still fresh and youthful. He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and flexed his bicep. He squeezed it with his other hand and tightened the flex. Not bad he thought. Then he lifted his shirt and crumpled it up above his chest and held it with his chin. He stuck out his chest. He ran his hand over his chest. His pectorals were not very developed so he poked his chest out more and sucked in his stomach which protruded slightly over the waist of his belt. I've already live seven more years than my father did, he thought. He noticed the skin right under his armpits was loose and rippled and he turned to get a better look. He pulled at it. He released his pull on his stomach muscles and his belly popped back to its place above his belt. He rubbed his hand up and down his torso. He looked intently at his reflection in the mirror as he did so and shook his head. It's coming, he thought. It's just around the corner. He lowered his shirt and pointed at his reflection like Uncle Sam does in the posters. "I want you," he said out loud. He made a grimace and formed his hands into claws at his reflection. "I'm coming for you, Temp. There's not a goddamn thing you can do about it either. Death takes what he wants mother fucker, and I'm coming for you. Better be ready, bitch. Better be ready." He stared at his reflection. He felt silly and depressed that he had stood in the mirror

talking to himself. He felt depressed because what he said was true, he felt depressed because he had no idea what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

He straightened his shirt and went back to his desk. He sat down and took out Cleveland's book.

“We’re gonna blow the mother-fucker up. Straight and simple. On New Year’s Eve.”

Young said, looking forward out of the windshield and not turning to see Sandy’s expression.

“Serious?” Sandy asked, staring at him.

“Serious.”

“God that’s so fucking cool.”

“Yeah, maybe for us, but now I have to cut your throat,” he said, unsmiling, staring forward. He slowed the car down and pulled over off the highway. He turned to Sandy and stared at her. She looked at him with a grimace and straightened her back. Young erupted into laughter.

“Got ya,” he said. “Hell we’re not gonna blow-up anything, baby. I’m not that crazy.”

Sandy rolled her eyes at him and called him an ass-hole.

“You should be there when we decide to do what we’re gonna though, it’ll be something to remember that’s for goddamn sure.”

“Well what are you going to do?”

“You’ll see if come.”

I’m going back to Maine for the holidays, Chris.”

“Your loss then, It’s gonna be good.”

“Well hell, tell me what you’re gonna do. Give me something and maybe I’ll stay.”

“What do you mean give you something? I gave you something last night and this morning. What more do you want,” he said smiling.

Sandy sighed and shook her head.

“Yeah, well make it worth my while this time and I’ll consider joining your little holiday party.”

“We’re going to blow it up,” he said, looking at her and winking.

“Oh fuck you then. Forget it.”

“No seriously, we’re going to blow it up.”

“Never mind. Forget it,” she said, and looked out the window.

Young put the car in gear and merged onto the highway. He put his hand on her leg and she moved her leg.

“I’m not kidding,” he said. “I told you because I trust you and I want you to be there. It’s a huge statement that you should be part of. I’d like you to be part of this. It’s going to be historic, you know that right?”

She looked at him and he put his hand on her thigh and squeezed it.

“You’re serious?” she asked him.

“Dead.”

She sat and looked at him and he looked back at her for a moment then turned back to the road nodding his head. She squinted her eyes and her lips stretched taunt.

“Are people going to die?” she asked.

He looked at her and frowned.

“Hell no, man. I’m not a fucking murderer. There’s not going to be a soul around and we’re setting off the charges from a distance. Only the structure will be destroyed. It’s always like that. No human life is ever taken. No animal life is ever taken either if it can be helped. I’ve gone as far as to remove plants and trees from an area that was going to be taken care of.”

She stared out the passenger window at the rugged desert landscape. Blankets of snow covered the highest buttes and mesas. A thin frosting of white dotted the lower land. She looked back at him, and he turned to look at her. She smiled a thin smile. He didn’t smile. She nodded her head and looked back out the window. They drove in silence until they came to the exit to Silver City. She turned to him.

“Ok,” she said.

“Ok what,” he asked.

“I’ll stay. I’ll stay here with you this holiday.”

Young turned to her, smiled, squeezed her thigh and leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“It’s gonna be historic, baby. Fucking historic.”

Meridian sat on the couch wrapped in a Navajo blanket watching television. A fire burned in the fireplace. She sipped on a mug of Chamomile tea. The clock shaped like a horse's head read 7:49. On the screen Charlie Parker's *Summertime* played, and Bill Cosby pretended to play the saxophone and dance with slow, stilted, shuffling moves, while Phylicia Rashad looked on with her mock sarcastic expression and smiled. The banging on the door exploded in the house like thunder. She's early, Meridian thought, and unwrapped herself from the blanket and went to the door. The knocking erupted again.

"Jennifer, I'm on my way, and you had better calm down before you come into this house," Meridian said, pulling her fleece robe around her shoulders.

Meridian opened the door and Jennifer stood there with her arms crossed glaring at her. Jennifer wore a fur-lined brown leather coat and a knit cap with black and brown checkers that was pulled down to her eyebrows. Her long, black hair flowed from underneath the hat and framed her face. She's so damn pretty, Meridian thought, why does she have to be such a prima donna.

"You're alone, right?" Jennifer said snippy, as she pulled open the screen door and walked into the house.

"Good evening to you too," Meridian said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't have time for niceties, mother, I need to say what I need to say and go."

Listen, child. Don't come in here with your prissy little attitude. I..."

“No listen, Meridian. I’m tired of you thinking I’m still twelve and you can tell me what to do and take control all of the time. I want to know what the hell you think you are doing.”

“Don’t talk to me like that girl.”

“I’ll talk to you or anybody else I feel like talking to any way I want to talk to them. I’m a woman, Meridian. My own woman and I’m sick and tired of you not treating me like it. Not treating me with respect. Why do you continually have to belittle me? It’s not enough that you had to embarrass me my whole childhood preaching about all your damn Indian crap. Dressing me up like some little sqaw and parading me around at pow wows for your pathetic friends.”

“Jennifer, calm down ok. Listen to me,” Meridian said, reaching out to hug her daughter.

Jennifer slapped her hands away and stepped back.

“No, you listen. You listen. It’s about time you listen. You never listen. You never listen to anybody. You always have to be the one who talks, who thinks she knows what’s right for everybody. You’re not mother. You’re not always right and you don’t even know what’s right for yourself. You know what you don’t know, mother? You don’t even know that I changed my last name, do you?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Look mother,” Jennifer said, took out her driving license and flung it at Meridian. Meridian pick it up and looked at it. Then she looked at Jennifer and shook her head.

“Johnston? You couldn’t think of anything better than Johnston. What is wrong with you girl?”

“You, mother. You’re what’s wrong with me. Johnston is the most un-Indian, most ubiquitous, whitest name I could think of. As long as I was stuck under your red-power flag I was never going to be my own person. I was never going to be a real part of the community of Christ. Does it piss you off, mother? Does it make you ashamed of me?”

“No it just makes me sad.”

“Well know you know how I’ve felt being your daughter all these years. Sad. angry, alone. Because you never recognized me for my own person.”

“I made you the woman you are today standing in front of me taking pride in her life. That’s what did for you, Jennifer.”

“Christ did that for me, mother. that’s why I’m standing in front of you right now. I have the grace of the Lord to give me my strength. That’s why all your worthless protesting is not going to change a thing in this town. I’m still going to be a Christian no matter what.”

“Is that what this is about? You think we are protesting because you are a Christian. You’re just as vain as you are blind, child. This has nothing to do with you. This has to do with what’s right.”

“I don’t care what it has to do with, mother. I work there. I work at that place. It how I make a living and you are making that place miserable for me. Don’t you realize that? Can’t you for once think about how all your political crap affects me? I’ve been dealing with this stuff since day one, mother. Can’t ever once think about me. No it’s always about your ideas and

saving the Indian Nation. You always need to be some hero saving something, but you never once thought about saving me.”

Meridian stepped forward again and Jennifer backed away.

“That’s not true, Jennifer and you know it. I did take care of you. I instilled, or tried to instill a sense of pride into you. I just wanted to protect you. I didn’t want you swallowed up by their world.”

“Whose world, mother? It’s your world and their world. It’s one world. One world under the power of God Almighty and that’s the truth. That is the only truth, mother.”

Meridian shook her head.

“You’re lost, child. They’ve swallowed you up. You need to find yourself. You need to take some time and find yourself.”

“Oh my God, mother. You’re too much. I have found myself and I am saved. You can be too if you just let your shield down.”

“Let my shield down, let myself be saved? You should hear what you sound like. You talk like a robot, like some programmed religious automaton. I don’t need false ideas and promises of eternal rewards after death. I’m alive now, Jennifer. I wake every morning to what I need and go to sleep every night with it. If you would open your eyes you would see what I’m talking about and you wouldn’t need your dogmatic crutch. You wouldn’t need anything but what you see.”

“Well you need something, mother. You need something. You’re just bored, unfulfilled that’s why you do the crazy things you do. Well you need to stop it. Stop it right now.”

“Jennifer, you are starting to get on my nerves. Your attitude is entirely too much for me right now. When you’re ready to talk instead of preach then come back. For now go. Go away.”

“So typical of you. Just step away from your problems. Tell them to flutter away like leaves because you’re tired of dealing with them. Is that what you told my father too? Go away. I’m too busy trying to save the Indian Nation to be bothered with you.”

“Watch your mouth Jennifer.”

“What? Does the truth hurt, mommy. I know he didn’t just leave because it was best for the three of us. What kind of lie is that? I’ve swallowed that for 29 years and now it’s time I got it off my chest.”

“Child, you need to go, now. I love you but you have worn out your welcome tonight.”

Jennifer zipped up her jacket and shook her head.

“Yeah, chase me off just like you probably chased him off.”

Meridian slapped her across the face. Jennifer jump back, her eyes wide, staring and full of tears. Meridian moved to her, but Jennifer backed away and moved to the door glaring at her mother. Meridian lowered her head and brought her hand up to cover her eyes. She shook her head slowly.

“Baby, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you ever speak to me again, old woman. I don’t care what happens to you. If they throw you in jail for what you are doing, do not call me, if you are dying of pneumonia

out here in the cold do not call me. I not your daughter anymore. Thank you, that was all I need to completely let go and enter my new home. God have mercy on your soul, old woman.”

“Jennifer, will you...” Meridian said, as her daughter opened the door and walked out.

After Templeton left the library he stopped at Jennifer’s. She told him she was going to meet her mother and that she would call him later and they could go out to eat if it wasn’t too late when she got back. He decided that he would just go back to his hotel room and wait for her. On the way back he passed the Golden Hornet. He saw Mandy getting out of her car, and the urge to stop almost made him run a red light. He turned and watched her sashay across the parking lot and stop and kiss some biker looking guy on the cheek then disappear into the bar. Damn she is sexy, he thought, but she’s a coke ho and I don’t need that mess. He decided to get a bite to eat and pulled into a Dairy Queen just around the corner from his hotel. As he pulled into the parking lot he stopped abruptly to avoid hitting a pothole. A navy blue Chevy Prism slid on the ice and almost ran into the back of Templeton’s truck. The driver fish tailed and spun around backwards. Templeton stopped, jumped out the truck and ran over to the other car.

“Shit, man I’m sorry, “Templeton said.

The driver, a cowboy looking fellow with a thick graying moustache wearing dark glasses, a flannel shirt and his Stetson, looked at Templeton through the window. Templeton stood at the driver’s window motioning for him to roll down his window. The man just looked at Templeton. Templeton knocked on the window.

“You ok, man. I didn’t even see you behind me. Are you cool?” Templeton said.

The man continued to look. Templeton shrugged, and motioned for the man to roll down his window again. The man grabbed the brim of his hat, nodded at Templeton and drove off. Templeton watched him leave. then he realized he was cold and ran back to his truck. Weird mother fucker, he thought and parked.

Templeton sat on the bed and ate a double cheese burger and watched people in a Michigan hardware store loading baskets full of 5 and 10 gallon water jugs, flashlights, batteries, generators, kerosene, butane, rope, matches, tarps, axes, hatchets, tents, backpacks, canteens, knives, dehydrated meals, energy snacks, parkas, hammers, wrenches, screwdrivers, drills, bits, saws, fencing, masonry, cement, fencing, ladders, duct tape, electrical tape. Baskets full of electrical wiring, space heaters, lanterns, lumber and other similar items Lines were twenty people deep at one Ace hardware store. The reporter asked one man why he was loading up with so much material. He pulled his John Deere hand low on his brow and looked at the reporter as if she had a pus oozing sore on her cheek.

“Why? This is it lady. The “beep” is about to hit the fan. It’s every man for himself now, and I plan on being ready. I’m stockpiling enough “beep” for the next three, four years. We got barrels of gasoline, kerosene, rice, dried milk, beans, dehydrated food things, canned foods. I’d done probably spend damn nears five, six thousand dollars on survival needs. And I ain’t forgot my protection either,” he said pointing to his truck where a Remington 700 7mm Mag. I hunting rifle hung on a rack in his back window. “That ain’t all neither. Plenty more at home,” he said smiling.

The newscast switched to a montage of newspaper articles consisting of headlines claiming that: U.S., Russia cooperating to prevent Y2K glitch from launching missiles, Y2K concerns forces NASA to play it safe with shuttle, Credit card companies confident they will have Y2K bug squashed; website titles like: January 1st, 2000. The Y2K Doomsday Bug accompanied with a picture of a jet in flames nose-diving to the earth, several sites advertising special Y2K foods and supplies, MSNBC coverage of a town whose officials officially warn them of the impending catastrophe, an excerpt from the Last Days Journal, advice from the Y2K family plan... Templeton turned the channel. On another station the news interviewed a woman, a math teacher in Nashville whose husband was a doctor and the two of them had just purchased a new home in the country that was “Y2K compatible”, she said.

“It was important for us to find a place with fresh running water on it. There is a running stream that is ice cold so that if there are failures we can use the stream as a sort of refrigerator.”

The next man they showed stood in front of a room full of 30 gallon white barrels that had once been used to store Pepsi Cola. He claimed they were filled with dry milk, gas, water, rice and the like. He walked the camera into another room that was piled to the ceiling with canned goods, flour, sugar, coffee and other dried goods. He explained how his house was rigged to four generators and a water heating system he and his brother and law had designed. The scene switched to a Y2K Expo in Chicago and the camera meandered down rows of stalls selling everything from guns and ammunition, family packs of gas mask, Y2K seeds designed specifically to grow in pre-Y2K soil, outdoor cooking utensils, and portable stoves, C-rations, water filtration systems, old army helmets dating back to the Korean War, portable toilets, military issued chemical suits, machetes, bear traps, poison ivy and snake bite kits, surgical

instruments, combat training, food storage devices, bags of rope to leave as a trail if one should find ones self lost in the woods, guaranteed not to be eaten by crows, starlings or other forest creatures, pesticides, herbicides, rat traps, cat traps mouse traps, wild game recipe books, blowguns, dart guns, buck knives, switchblades, survival manuals and American flags.

Templeton looked at his watch. It was 5:15 and he knew all the news stations would have same stories on. He flipped through the channels and stopped on *Sesame Street* and watched Cookie Monster devour a huge letter C. He switched the channel again and watched five minutes of Gilligan's *Island*. He flipped back to a news channel and turned down the sound. He got up from the bed and rummaged through his duffle bag. He pulled out Cleveland's journal. He sat back on the bed and watched the TV without any sound.

They're really feeding the hype with this news coverage, he thought. He took a sip from his soda. Nothing's going to happen. It's all a bunch of bull-shit. He propped up the pillows and lay down. He took Cleveland's book from the night stand and thumbed through it then set it back. He took another drink and turned the sound back on the TV. A reporter from the BBC world news report was standing in front of a table laden with pistols, shotguns, hunting rifles and assault rifles. A man in dark glasses wearing a black baseball cap pushed low on his brow and flipping a toothpick from one side of his mouth to another was picking up the weapons and explaining each one's capabilities. He picked up a pistol and popped out the magazine. "This here is a Glock 9mm semi-automatic pistol, he said, holding the pistol up to the camera. "The ammunition here is a high-velocity Black Talmum bullet" He took out a bullet and held it up to the camera too. "This here bullet will stop a bull dead in its tracks if you shot it right. This is a deadly instrument. This thing when it's fired fragments so that when it hits the target it rips it apart. And you'd need something like this type a Kevlar," the man said, running his hands over

the black vest he wore over a t-shirt. “This here is military issued Kevlar, titanium laced and virtually impenetrable unless you shot at it with something like a 400 magnum or something like that. Even then you gotta know how to shot a weapon. And most the people out there, the mongrel races and so forth, of course, who gonna be out there trying to infiltrate compounds and so forth ain’t gonna know how to handle a real fire arm no way. But this type of arsenal, this type of protection is what’s going to be needed to survive this Y2K melt down. And me and mines are gonna be some of the ones who survive this hell on earth and start to repopulate it with the blood of a pure race again. Believe that,” he said, and flexed his bi-cep to show a tattoo of a skull, with a patch over one eye, and crossbones headed by the banner "WAR".

The camera switched to a close-up of the reporter.

“This is Albert Starks reporting from Fallbrook, California.”

Templeton turned off the TV and sat on the bed staring into the dark screen. He took a drink from the cup of coke but it was already empty. Fucking crazy, he thought. I should try to fit this stuff in the book. They want something to happen. They want Y2K to happen. They can’t wait to see the world burn so they can revel in it, so they can parade around preaching I told you so. They don’t have any imaginations to live so they hope to put an end to their banal existences more than they hope to win the goddamn lottery. Then in the light of destruction they can say that they were right, they can think that they had a direct line to God and he showed them his infinite wisdom by giving them insight to his ultimate plan of death. They are afraid of life. To live terrifies them. The great big mystery of not knowing is living hell for them. They need certainty and the only certainty that they have gotten from life is death so they worship it. It is the final rest from the insecurity of life. Yet they cling to life like a tick on the ass of bear too afraid to even let go to it because ultimately they know that is the final unknown. Destruction is

their known. It's what they know best. If you don't understand it, destroy it. Pathetic. Shit to hell with all that crap. I don't want to write about that shit, and nobody wants to read about it.

He took of the lid of the cup and sucked in a piece if ice. And just as quick as it took for him to swallow the ice the thought popped into his head what would happen if Y2K was real. He reprimanded himself for falling for the hype. He got up and looked out the motel window. Crisp, icy snow still lined the gutters on the roof of his truck. It would suck if we lost heat though, he thought. He sighed and pulled the curtains closed. He turned the TV back on and finished watching *Gilligan's Island*.

Jennifer called Templeton on the hotel phone and told him she was going to just to stay home. She had had a trying experience with her mother and she was very tired and just wanted to get to sleep. She had asked him, very slowly and deliberately, if he was ok with her decision. If he was upset or anything. He had said no. But she could tell that he was annoyed. She thought it had been because of the way she had asked him, and it had been a bit condescending, and yes, she thought, she was venting the last of her anger on him for what he had done. Yes, she was being unfair, but oh well. I have the right, right now. He had said he loved her very sweet and serious before they hung up. She had mumbled a hmmm me too and put the receiver on the hook. After the call she made her lunch for the next day, and watched an episode of *Will and Grace*. After the show, she turned on the CD player in the bathroom *Neil Diamond's Greatest Hits* started playing soft and low then ran herself a bath.

As the water ran a short black hair floated on the surface. She scooped it out with a cup and poured it into the toilet. Damn him, she thought. Why can't he clean out the tub after he uses it? Then she remembered they had both used it last time. Still she thought as she lowered herself

into the steaming water, he never does clean up after himself. She submerged herself up to the neck in the hot water and closed her eyes. The heat and steam enveloped her, and penetrated her skin, merged with her blood and spread into the folds of her muscles, tendons, ligaments. It wound itself around her bones and seeped in to the marrow of her body. She sighed as if a hundred hands caressed her. This is all I need, she whispered under her breath. This is heaven on earth. She leaned her head back and wet her hair. *Sweet Caroline* seeped from the speakers through the steamy air, and she started singing along with Neil Diamond. As she playfully splashed her feet to the crescendo of the horns in the song, another tiny black hair was dislodged from somewhere, floated gingerly, and docked itself against her chin. Awww gross, she shouted and stood up. She stomped out of the water, pulled the release knob in the tub, shut off the CD, and frowning started to dry herself off. The water was draining slow and with loud burps and gurgles. She looked in the tub and saw a wet clump of black hairs, long and short bubbling up from the drain. Just great, she snarled between clenched teeth. She snatched her robe off the door, went into the kitchen and rummaged under the sink. She went back into the bathroom with a pair of rubber gloves and a bottle of Liquid Plumber. She dug a clump of wet, matted hair and slimy balls of soap scum out of the drain. She tossed into the trash can next to the toilet and it landed with a squishing sound. She poured the entire bottle of Liquid Plumber down the drain, tore off the gloves and tossed them in the trash too then washed her hands and brushed her teeth. When she was done she shut off the bathroom light with a quick violent motion.

She put on her flower print flannel pair of pajamas, took two Motrin and fell into bed. But sleep wouldn't come. She was angry. She was angry still with her mother, she was angry that her bath had been interrupted, she was angry she had had to clean the tub, that she had a headache and that she couldn't get to sleep. And all of it somehow was Templeton's fault. She

knew how irrational, selfish and mean-spirited she was being, but she couldn't get the idea out of her head that Templeton was somehow the cause of all of her misery lately. How on God's good earth, she thought, could it be Templeton's fault that she and her mother had parted ways. This was a long time coming. It has nothing to do with him. Yet the fact that he even knew her mother and would probably still associate with her because of that damn book he was saying he was trying to write, made her anger towards him grow. She knew he would probably stop going over to Meridian's if she asked him to, at least for a while, and he probably wouldn't even complain about it, but that made her angry too. I shouldn't have to feel this guilt, she thought. I shouldn't have to be sitting up here not getting any sleep worrying about how he feels. Is he up worrying about me? I doubt it. He's probably sleeping like a baby, or reading that stupid book his uncle wrote, he might even be at the bar. For a moment she felt like calling him to see what he was doing. That made her angrier. She got out of bed and went into the kitchen. She fixed a glass of milk and took four cookies out of the Nutter Butter Peanut Butter cookie bag. She sat at the kitchen table and dunked the cookies into the milk. It was what she did when she was upset, and from the time she was a little girl it had always worked and it was working until she looked up at the clock on her wall and saw the time. It read 1:47, four hours and forty-five minutes before she had to get up and get ready for work. She stuffed the last soggy cookie into her mouth and downed the glass of milk.

She slumped back into the bed and put a pillow over her head. She began to itch on her calf. She scratched and it moved to her knee. When it disappeared from her knee it reappeared on her thigh, from there to the inside of her thigh. When the itch was gone she let her hand stay on her inner thigh and gently caress it. Soon the hand moved to her belly and slowly down to the other thigh. Eventually both her hands found their way between her legs and moved in soft, light

circles. A whispered sigh evaporated in the air. When she finished she wrapped herself up tight in her blankets and closed her eyes until she realized it wasn't Templeton that she had just made love to in her head. It had been no one she had known, but a mixture of a few people she had known, knew or thought she wanted to know. The guy behind the counter at Dunkin' Donuts, Kevin Spacey from a scene in *American Beauty*, Mark Spitz from a picture in life magazine when she was fifteen, her last boyfriend. But Templeton wasn't anywhere to be found. She reassured herself that she was in love and sexually attracted to him. He had a great body. Slender, trim and she loved how perfect he fit inside of her. And even though his belly stuck a bit over his belt, what was to be expected for a man eleven years older than her, she thought, he was still very attractive. And even though his body would get worse as the years went on, especially the skin from his chest to under his arms, which was fairly loose now, she too, she thought, would age along with him. She knew this. She believed this and felt it with all of her heart, but she could not shake the picture of him as he leaned over his typewriter without a shirt one day and his thin chest pointed out like tiny dilapidated tits and his stomach rolled in front of him like a small inner tube. She had stopped and looked just for a second before he noticed her and straightened up. Neither one looked at each other. She felt mean-spirited again and told herself that no man really looked like what she had in her head. Then she remembered Brad Pitt's scene in *Thelma and Louise*. She felt angry at Templeton again. Geez, she said, and threw the blankets off of her. Can't I just get some sleep tonight? She got up and walked into the kitchen again. She drank a glass of water, went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth again then went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of her bed and stared at the floor. After several minutes she got down on her knees and prayed. She prayed for understanding and patience. She prayed to be let into the heart of the Lord and given grace for all the bad things she had thought about

Templeton. She prayed for forgiveness. After her prayers she got back into bed and pulled the covers over her. As she drifted off to sleep she wished that Templeton was that type of man who would kneel with her and pray.

Templeton lingered in the realm between sleep and wakefulness. The voices from the television fused with the images in his head. Captain Kangaroo approached him from across the bedroom he had slept in as a child at his aunt and uncle's house. But it wasn't the same Captain from his favorite childhood morning TV show. This Captain wore a skin tight leather body suit and dark sunglasses. He strutted in slow-motion across the shag carpet. Templeton laid in his bed and watched the figure approach him. The Captain stopped at the end of the bed, legs spread, arms crossed and head nodding. Templeton pulled his blanket up to his chin and held it there with both hands.

“You haven't learned to play with air yet, have you?” the Captain said.

Templeton shook his head.

“How do you think you can participate if you don't know how to play with air?” the Captain asked.

Templeton shrugged.

“Get up,” the Captain said, grabbed the blanket out of Templeton's hand and flung it to the floor.

Templeton got out of bed and stood in front of the Captain in a pair of too small, powder blue, polyester pajamas decorated with yellow ducklings and white baby bunnies. The Captain nodded.

“What do you see in front of you?” the Captain asked.

“An old man going through a mid-life crisis,” Templeton said.

“Yes, humor. Humor is airy. It is definitely playful. Like air, it enriches the body. Oxygenates the soul, keeps you alive, can even be loving, but it isn’t true play. You have to play to participate. And playing definitely isn’t the snide humor that you use to hide fear or anger. That’s sarcasm. That’s a staving off participating. It’s definitely not playing with the air that surrounds you.

“What do you see in front of you besides an old man going through mid-life crisis?” the Captain said and winked.

“Nothing. I don’t know, space. What should I see? I don’t know. Molecules, atoms quarks and stuff. You know. Reality,” Templeton said, making quotation marks in the air.

“You can see that? Then you’ll completely understand this,” the Captain said and held up his hand in front of Templeton’s face.

He moved his fingers in a slow clawing motion as if he were massaging the air. Then he brought his other hand up and over his first hand and started the same motion. After a moment a liquidy glimmer appeared in the space between the Captain’s massaging fingers. Templeton, squinting with his mouth slightly agape, brought his face closer to the Captain’s hands. The glimmer began to take on a watery consistency. The Captain stopped the massaging motion and began to move his hands as if he were forming a snowball. A clear ball of gelatinous

material formed in his hands. He began to flatten the circumference of the ball and turned it into a square. The square was hard and transparent, not unlike a giant ice cube. The Captain tossed the cube up then caught it on his right index finger and balanced it there. When he took his finger away the cube floated. The Captain broke the cube apart and formed it into several small balls and juggled them. When he took his hands away the balls continued to move in the circular motion. Templeton reached out and touched one of them with the tip of his finger. It was solid. It bounced off his finger and moved in a different trajectory hit the wall and shot off toward the ceiling.

“Open your mouth,” The Captain said.

Templeton opened his mouth. The Captain targeted one of the small spheres and flicked it with his finger into Templeton’s mouth. He swallowed and his mouth, throat and lungs filled with a burst of air. He coughed and a cool, penetrating, freshness exploded in his chest. For a moment he felt as if he breathed with a set of new lungs. The Captain adjusted his glasses, smirked and nodded.

“You gotta play, man. You gotta ‘*Thump, Thump, Thump*’”

Templeton furrowed his brow and shrugged his shoulders.

Thump, thump, Thump. the Captain smiled.

“I don’t understand,” Templeton said.

Thump, Thump, Thump.

The Captain nodded and started to dissipate. The thumping sound continued. Templeton saw Kathy Lee Gifford’s smiling face in the TV set. Someone banged on the door of the hotel again.

Thump, Thump, Thump

Templeton jumped out of bed, pulled on his pants and opened the door. A frigid gust of wind blew into the room and Templeton wrapped his arms around his naked chest.

“Put some clothes on, dude. Let’s go get some breakfast. We gotta talk about something,” Young said.

Young, Sandy and Templeton sat at the same booth in White Coyote Cafe Templeton had sat at when he had first arrived in Truth or Consequences. Sandy ate granola in her yogurt and drank orange juice while Young wolfed down a plate of blueberry, buckwheat pancakes with whip cream on top. Templeton sipped a cup of coffee and nibbled on a link sausage. He was trying to listen to Young, but his mind kept wandering to Jennifer and what might have happened the night before with Meridian. He looked at his watch. It was 7:30 am. She would be leaving for work in 20 minutes. Young was talking about the philosophy behind the actions they should take.

“Sorry to interrupt, man, but I need to call Jennifer real quick. Either of you got a dime, I have a quarter, but I need 35cents.”

“Here you can use mine,” Sandy said and handed him her cell phone.

Templeton stepped away from the table into the hall leading to the restrooms. Jennifer answered politely but questioningly. She didn't recognize the name or number on her caller id. She was surprised and noticeably irritated when she heard Templeton's voice. He told her where he was at and with who and the edge in her voice disappeared slightly. Templeton knew she didn't really like Chris and Sandy because of their affiliation with her mother's organization, but she tolerated them because she had never seen them protesting and they were both real nice people.

“Are you hung over?” she asked.

“No,” he sighed. “I just wanted you to know what's up in case you called and I didn't answer the phone, ok.”

“That’s cool. Thank you.”

“Are you ok?”

“I’m fine. I just need to get finished getting ready for work. Oh and by the way, I might be a bit late tonight. I’m going on a short road trip with the Reverend and Mr. Fuhrman. We’re going to the jobsite for something. So I’ll try to call you when I get back, or you can just call and leave a message and let me know where you’ll be at, ok.”

“Ok. You have a great day alright.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Love you,” Templeton said.

“Me too,” she said and hung up the phone.

Templeton sat back down at the table. Young had finished his pancakes and was slurping down a glass of milk. Templeton handed Sandy her phone back and thanked her.

“Everything cool?” Young asked.

“Yeah. It’s all good,” Templeton replied.

“So what do you think about the plan?” Young asked.

“What plan?” Templeton answered.

Young and Sandy looked at each other and shook their heads.

“I just told you,” Young said leaning over the table to be closer to Templeton.

“We’re going to do something about God’s Land on New Years Eve,” he whispered.

“Sandy, do you mind if I smoke,” Pete Sanchez said as he cleared the dishes off the kitchen table.

“No please, help yourself,” she said.

“Templeton, do you?”

Templeton shook his head.

He took a pack of Pall Malls from on top of the refrigerator, popped one in his mouth and reached into his right pocket then he reached into his left, then both breast pockets of his denim shirt.

“What did I do with that lighter?” he mumbled. “Check my coat pocket.”

He left the kitchen. Albert leaned back in his chair and yawned.

“That was great food,” Sandy said. “I usually don’t eat that much, but I couldn’t stop. That was the best fish I’ve ever had. Thank you again for inviting me.”

“We’re glad you came, we’re glad you enjoyed it.”

“Have any of you seen my lighter?” Pete called from somewhere else in the house.

“You need to quit, Sanchez,” Charly said.

“I only smoke after meals, you know this. Get off my case and give me a light,” Pete said appearing again in the doorway.

Young pulled a Bic from his coat pocket and tossed it to Charly. Charly lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

The six of them sat in chairs in front of the fireplace. The flames spread warm orange light across them and caused their shadows to dance across the room. The old men and Templeton drank Pabst beer; Young and Sandy drank scotch and smoked weed.

“Did you hear the one about the three women having a tea party?” Young asked.

“Oh no not this again,” Sandy said.

“No I haven’t. Go ahead,” Pete said.

“There’s three women having a tea party one afternoon. One is blonde, one is red head, the other is brunette. The brunette says, ‘I feel terrible. I don’t know what to do. I found a pack of cigarettes in my daughters dresser drawers. I just can’t believe my daughter smokes.’

The redhead looks up surprised and says, ‘Wow that’s weird because I have a similar problem. I found a bottle of vodka in my daughter’s coat pocket and I just can’t believe my daughter drinks.

With that the blonde stands up aghast. “Oh how totally strange. I have a problem just like both of you. I found a condom under my daughter’s bed, and I just can’t believe my daughter has a penis.”

The men erupted with laughter; Charly actually shot beer out of his mouth into the fire. In the shadows Sandy rolled her eyes, but smiled. Young fell to the floor holding his belly and pointing at Charly. They all burst into a new fit. After the laughter subsided they sat silent breathing hard, a few chuckles still popping off intermittently. After it was silent for awhile and their individual thoughts were captured by the fire again, Young took a swig of his drink.

“She wants to help,” he said. “Sandy wants to be part of what we are doing.”

No one said anything. No one moved. The old men continued to look into the fire. Young scanned their faces in the orange light. Sandy looked down at her tennis shoes and played with the string.

“Does anyone want another beer?” Albert said getting up and walking into the kitchen.

No one replied. No one talked until Albert came back into the room.

“Maybe she won’t want to when she finds out about the visit we had today,” he said, popping open the beer can and sitting down again.

The blue-gray sky and a cold snowy fog blurred the distinction between the earth and the sky. The browns and blacks of shrubs and stones that dotted the new snow fall disappeared in the distance where the horizon should have been. The entire vast expanse of the desert landscape appeared like the mottled winter coat of some gigantic mammal. The air was stiff with a crisp, biting cold. The kind of cold that clings to the skin with tiny, icy barbs. A strong, sharp wind blew the top, unfrozen snow around in wild misty gust. The snow beneath the new snow was hard and brittle, frozen to the brown, stony soil. In the distance a coyote trotted across the frozen earth looking for a field mouse or some type of fleshy morsel to fill her empty belly. The earth exploded in front of her. She jumped with a snarl and bolted in the opposite direction. The Salamander ejected the empty shell from the chamber of his Glock and pushed it into the snow with the tip of his boot. He took aim again but the animal was too far. The cold air penetrated his nostrils and froze the hair in his nose. He pitched his nose shut hoping to warm the inside again. A gust of snow blew around him getting into the small pockets of space between his clothes and

flesh and chilled him. Some snow settled on his neck between his scarf as well as on his sunshades. He patted the back of his neck to melt the snow, took off his glasses, breathed on them and wiped them with a handkerchief. He adjusted the zipper on his Carhart, tucked the scarf in around his neck, put his glasses back on and pulled the brim of his cowboy hat down over his brow. He turned back to the car and looked at Jennifer and the Reverend and nodded.

Behind him the steel girders and beams of the skeleton to God's Land Resort stood up from the earth like ancient fossilized trunks of Devonian age trees. The frigidity of the cold they had absorbed seemed to radiate off of them in waves. The Salamander walked around the job-site. The snow cracked and crunched beneath his boots. His breath billowed out from his nose in dense, white plumes. He looked close at the ground to see if he could see if there were the outlines of any old foot prints. Construction had stopped because of the weather and he took it upon himself to keep an eye out for anyone who might try to trespass on church property. There was nothing apparent except drifts and the designs, like nautilus shell spirals, created from the wind blown snow. The heel of the Salamander's boot crunched through the center of one of the spiral designs as he leapt over a beam to run to the road. An old '67 Ford pick-up with wooden panels raised in the bed and towing an empty car trailer sputtered by. The Salamander stood on the curb as the truck passed the construction site. Two old Mexican men sat in the front seat. The driver waved to the Salamander, but the Salamander ignored him and pulled out a small notebook and a pen. When the truck passed him he wrote down the license plate number. He waited until the truck was out of sight over the top of a hill then he went back to the site and continued looking around. He had created a particular route that he walked. He could almost anticipate where his own footprints had been covered with snow along the route. As he walked under the boney, pre-construction of an arch he noticed a small bugle in the snow. He reached

down and picked up a butane lighter with a turquoise eagle soldered on to it. He brushed off the snow and stuck it in his pocket then continued his search.

“This is what we suspected,” The Reverend said, and handed Jennifer the lighter. “This is why I wanted you to come. To see first hand what kind of mischief these so-called non-violent protesters are up to, Jennifer.”

“What does this prove, Reverend?” she asked.

“It wasn’t there yesterday day,” the Salamander said and looked at her in the rear view mirror.

“Mr. Fuhrman, investigates the site on a daily basis for just such signs.”

“Whose is it” Jennifer asked.

“One of those protesters more than likely, right Douglas?” the Reverend asked.

“How do you know this Reverend? It could be one of the guys who work here right?”

“There hasn’t been any work here for three days. I’ve been here everyday since and it wasn’t here yesterday at four o’clock pm.” the Salamander said.

“What if a foreman or someone came to look around or something?” Jennifer asked.

“Every day I am in touch with every foreman from every contractor that has been hired to work on this project. They in turn are in contact with each and every one of their crew members and have told them anyone who is seen or discovered at the site after work hours will be fired. Unconditionally. It is not anyone’s who works here. I know it is one of those

people who associate with your mother, Ms. Johnston, because I know,” The Salamander said, adjusting the rear view mirror again so that she could see his sun shaded eyes.

“There’s no need to be rude, Douglas,” the Reverend said.

“I am sorry, Reverend. I am sorry Ms. Johnston,” he said and nodded to her in the rear view mirror.

Jennifer forced a thin smile and nodded back. The Salamander readjusted the mirror and the three rode back to the church office in silence.

Albert Alvarez told the others how he had seen the shadow first. He told them he had gone outside after eating lunch to get fire wood and fill up the generator with gas and had seen the shadow of a person from behind a group of trees. He said he didn’t look up in the direction of the shadow, but kept his head down as he walked slowly with the gas can to the gas drum next to the barn. He put the gas can on top of the drum and unlocked the door to the barn. Inside he stuck a 9mm in the waist of his pants and walked slowly out of the barn. He stopped in front of the barn and pretended to yawn and stretch, then like a sprinter off of the block he darted to the area that he had seen the shadow. He stopped and looked down. There were foot prints in the snow. He took the gun from his waist and followed the prints. They ended at an old access trail that had been the only way to the house before he and the others had taken it over. He could see the dark green hood of a Land Rover disappear through the trees below him.

“So what’s that mean?” Young asked.

“I don’t know,” Albert said, shrugged and drank from the beer. “But it sure is

strange that we get someone snooping around our place around this time ain't it? Never happened before. Yet, now that certain things are developing, we get strangers poking around up here."

"Maybe it was just a hunter that got spooked when he saw you," Templeton said.

"It's not hunting season," Pete said and shot a look at Templeton.

"What?" Templeton snapped and frowned at Pete.

Pete stared at Templeton.

"What, is you better know what you're getting yourself into," Albert said and looked at him hard.

"I'm not getting into anything. I don't even know what the hell you people are talking about," Templeton said.

"What I told you about at the restaurant earlier," Young said.

"You didn't tell me shit. You told me you were going to do something to that resort on New Years Eve. You didn't tell me what. Listen, Young don't get me caught up in some bull-shit. I didn't tell you I was getting involved in anything," Templeton said, darting his glances between the other people in the room. "I don't give a fuck what you guys do, to tell the truth. I didn't come down here to get involved in somebody's bull-shit politics; I came down here to write a book and that's all I care about except for Jennifer. So as long as I can write my book and Jennifer doesn't get hurt by what you're doing you can blow the motherfucker to kingdom come for all I care."

The room grew silent and everyone stared into the fire except for Templeton

who looked back and forth between the other people in the room. Although he felt the warmth of the fire on him, he felt a cold run down the length of his back. An ember popped in the fire. Young chuckled.

“An affirmation from life, huh,” he said.

No one responded. Young lit up another bowl took a hit and offered it to Sandy.

She refused. He offered it to Templeton; Templeton shook his head no. The other three refused too. He took another hit, tilted his head back and blew out the smoke.

“This sucks man,” he said. “Why is everybody tripping out about this? We’re all cool right. Templeton doesn’t have to be part of this if he doesn’t want to be, right?”

Everyone looked at Young.

“Temp, all we’re going to do is flood their little meeting with blood red lights and read off the names Native Americans who have been oppressed in the last twenty, thirty years. Then Albert here is going to give a quick little speech and bless the land in the correct way. Maybe have them thinking he’s putting a curse or something on them to freak them out, you know,” he said and looked at Albert.

Albert managed a thin grin and nodded.

“Nobody’s going to be hurt, no violence. We have a right to protest. Just don’t ruin it for us, man. Don’t tell the old lady please. Otherwise it eliminates the shock value we are depending on. Alright.”

“I can’t believe you put me in this situation. that’s really fucked up, man.”

“Listen, I thought you were down after the conversation we had a few

weeks ago that's all. I misinterpreted, I'm sorry. I wouldn't do that on purpose.

You know me I smoke too much dope, man. Really I'm sorry."

"So you want me to lie to my girlfriend?"

"Lie? Just don't tell her. No one is getting hurt, man."

"So what if I do. what happens then?"

Young sighed and lowered his head.

"Nothing, man. You'll just have the knowledge that you fucked up our plans and helped in getting Native land stolen from them again. You'll just be a knowing pawn in their lie, now that you know what our protest is about."

"You're shitting me right? You're going to try to pull that bull-shit on me?"

"Hey, man. I'm, we're just asking you to let us keep our protest a secret. You do what you think is right. We should get ready to go back. You ready?"

The drive back to Truth or Consequences was driven in silence. No one spoke when Templeton got out of the car either and he didn't turn around to wave bye before he let himself into the hotel room. He flopped onto his bed and stared at the ceiling for a moment then turned and looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was 9:45. He hadn't called Jennifer since 7:30 in the morning. He was apprehensive of what he might encounter if he called at that moment, but he knew it would be worse if didn't call at all.

The conversation was short but pleasant. They told each other what they had done during the day. Jennifer told him she hoped that none of the people he was hanging around with were

the people the Reverend and the Salamander had been talking about. Templeton said he doubted it and told her how good the fish had been. He did not tell her about the conversation at the end of the night. They promised to meet the next day and have Italian food for lunch. They said their I love yous and hung up the phones.

Templeton rolled over on his back and stared at the ceiling again. Why hadn't he told her, he thought. It hadn't been because he felt any affinity to the people he had just been with. In fact he had felt quite the opposite. He was pissed at them for the way they had treated him, and had planned to tell her in spite of them. He thought their politics were trite and useless, and to throw a wrench in their plan would somehow be mischievously noble. Jesterish, like that character in Harlan Ellison's story "*Repent, Harlequin!*" *Said the Ticktockman* and all those other anti-heroes in the movies who screw up the oppressive system. Only he would be the anti-anti-hero who screwed up systems for the hell of it, because all systems are essentially the same, systems. That's what he had been thinking on the ride back to his motel room. But he didn't say anything to Jennifer, and he didn't know why. He had been thinking that if he told her it would somehow smooth out the weirdness that he had been feeling between them. The feeling that they were falling apart. There was nothing evident in either of their actions or words, it was merely a suggestion of a suggestion of a vague impression. An intangible presence like the growing force between two magnets of opposite poles. Yet, the softness of her voice, she had actually sounded happy and glad, whether it was to hear from him or just the feeling in general he didn't know, and the pleasantness that pervaded the whole, short conversation, had short-wired the anger he had felt before he called her and he in no way wanted to ruin the comfort of that feeling. He would tell her at lunch the next day and everything would be fine and back to normal. He turned on the television but there was nothing on so he turned it off, shut off the light and tried to sleep.

But he couldn't get to sleep right away so he slid his hands beneath the waist of his boxers and thought about the round soft bulges of Mandy's ass.

Templeton watched the man and woman in front of him take out all the supplies from three shopping carts and sorted them into groups at the checkout stand. He had stopped at the Alco store to buy some duct tape to hold up the passenger side window of his truck until he could get it fixed. Charly Running Cloud said he was going to fix it, but now that he and the three outlaws, as Meridian called them, were on the outs, he doubted it would get fixed anytime soon. The woman, a short heavy set lady with head full of super curly blonde hair and a slow, high pitched voice sorted the things into groups as her husband, a tall, thin cadaverous looking man who reminded Templeton of Herman Munster slowly and silently unloaded the things from the carts.

“We’ll keep these in the upstairs closet in the plastic containers so no bugs or things can get at them,” she said putting five five pound bags of sugar together. “We’ll keep the can goods for later, ok. In case we can’t get no fuel for the stoves and generators we’ll still have food we can eat.”

The man silent and steady continued unloading things.

“Did you get more shells for the rifle?” she squeaked, not waiting for an answer but sorting canned goods into categories by food type.

Templeton looked at his watch. It was only 10:30 in the morning. He was supposed to meet Jennifer at 11:30. He was glad that he had left early. He looked around to see if any other check stands were open but he could see none. The man behind him sighed loudly and clicked his tongue. The couple continued to unload. First aid supplies, dried goods: rice, beans, noodles, dehydrated soups, stews and casseroles, bags of beef jerky, shotgun and rifle shells, tools:

hatches, screwdrivers, saws, hammers nails and screws; five gallon water containers, camping gear, and an assortment of miscellaneous stuff that seemed not to be for the impending doomsday but for the luxury of the last few weeks of the end days: the TV guide, ice cream, and frozen pizzas, tobacco, hair rollers and Gain detergent. After 35 minutes the couple lugged their packages out of the store. The cashier shook her head and sighed. Templeton smiled at the frazzled looking woman with deep crow's feet and faded makeup on her face.

"Everyday," she said. "Everyday they come in here and buy the damn store up. They don't leave anything for anybody else. I can see being prepared for this Y2K thing, but Lord have mercy, everyday. They must rob banks as much as they spend in here. Anyway, you need anything else sir?"

"No thank you," Templeton said. "You have a good day. I hope it goes better than the way it started."

"Thank you, sir," she said, and smiled.

"What's the matter?" Jennifer asked.

Templeton snapped out of his reverie, picked up his Peroni took a sip and sat it back down on the table. He took Jennifer's hand in his and caressed it. He looked up at her and smiled.

"God, you're beautiful," he said. "I can't believe I'm with you most of the time. It doesn't seem real that I have such a completely beautiful woman."

Jennifer smiled and squeezed his hand.

“Thank you,” she said in a soft whisper. “Are you ok? You seem a bit pensive. Is there something wrong?”

He shook his head and stared at her smiling.

The waiter came with a plate of calamari and marinara. The couple broke their contact so that he could put the plates down. Templeton finished the rest of his Peroni and asked for another. Jennifer looked at him. He didn't look at her. The waiter gave them each a small plate, took the empty beer bottle and asked if they needed anything else. Jennifer said no. They ate. Jennifer asked how he liked the calamari and he said it was good. He'd had better, but it was pretty good.

“It's like everything down here,” he said. “I'm probably being unfair and biased, but compared to the restaurants in Denver nothing is quite as good. I mean it's almost as good, even the fast food chains, it's almost as good but not quite. It's like there's some extra element of flavor missing from everything I eat down here. The Thai food I had the other day, the Phad Thai, it was good, but it just wasn't good enough. It wasn't as good as say this place called Tommy's in Denver. You know what I mean. I'm not complaining, and I know I grew up there and I'm used to a certain style or whatever, it's just that T&C has this absence of something. Nothing is quite as good as it could be. I guess it's just that small town syndrome.”

The waiter brought another beer, poured more water into their glasses, and informed them that their entrees would be out in a few minutes. Templeton took a drink from the Peroni and smacked his lips.

“I guess the beer taste the same, huh” Jennifer said and squeezed some lemon onto a ring of calamari. Templeton sat the beer down and grabbed a few rings and put them on his plate.

“I saw this couple today at Alco,” he said. “They were buying all this stuff to store for this Y2K crap. I mean literally hundreds of dollars of stuff. At first I thought they were stupid and it made me mad because I had to wait a half hour behind them and they just really looked like idiots. I mean I really didn’t like them. Then I started checking them out. I mean the way they acted the things this woman said and just watching them and I started feeling really sad for them. I know that sounds arrogant, but I didn’t pity them or anything, I just felt sad that they felt so afraid. I felt sad that they were spending all their money so they wouldn’t have to feel afraid.”

Templeton sipped his beer and squeezed some lemon on his calamari.

“I mean I don’t believe anything is going to happen. I think its all shit. Scare tactics for whatever reason. I’m sure Young and Sandy could elaborate on some socio-philosophical-political theory about it, some Orwellian master plan, and who knows maybe it would have some validity to it, but I just can’t buy it. I think people are capitalizing off each others fear and I think that most people want it to be real. They want to quit having to live the responsibility of everyday life. They want that Walt Disney promise, even if it means the destruction of everything they know. They want to rest eternally. No more pain, disappointment, suffering, you know.”

“What’s wrong with that, Templeton? Don’t you want to quit suffering, don’t you wish you could put an end to your doubts and fears?”

Templeton drank from his beer and looked at the other people in the restaurant.

“Everybody wants some peace, baby. Of course I do. But I don’t want it at the expense of the rest of life. I don’t want to be a happy zombie frolicking through the clover-laden fields of

happy land without a care in the world, completely oblivious to everything but my own happiness. That's not real, sweet heart and I hope it never will be, here or anywhere."

"Templeton, nobody wants that. We want to be free to love each other without fear and doubt and anger and pain, and only through God can we do that. This Y2K thing, if it's computers or whatever is a sorting out. The chosen have already been chosen and nothing anyone does is going to make a difference if they haven't made their peace with God. If you aren't saved it doesn't matter if the end is in two weeks or two millennium. I don't know what's going to happen in two weeks. I don't think it will be the rapture, but I do think sides are going to be decided and I know what side I'm on, and I know I'm not afraid because I know I'm saved."

Templeton took another drink and excused himself. In the bathroom he peed, washed his hands, wet his face and rubbed his temples. He could feel a headache coming on. When he went back out to the table the food had arrived. He sat down and Jennifer offered him a bite of her pasta pomodoro. He took a fork full and nodded his head and smiled at her. He took a bite of his muffaletta. The olives left a tart and tangy taste in his mouth. But the metallic taste from the pain forming in his head turned the olives bitter in his mouth.

After lunch Jennifer went back to work and Templeton went to the library to work on his book. That night Templeton made shrimp creole with French bread and butter for them. They decided to go to a movie. Templeton wanted to see *The Cider House Rules*, Jennifer wanted to see *The Green Mile*. They ended up watching *Stuart Little*. They liked it. They walked down the street after the movie wrapped up in each others warmth looking at the Christmas lights and automatons in the storefront windows. That night they made love to one another and were glad that it was each other in the bed.

“Are you going to my mother’s today?” Jennifer asked over the noise of the hair dryer.

Templeton cracked the bathroom door open and stuck in his head.

“What?” he asked.

She repeated the question. He opened the door, walked in and sat down on the toilet and watched her do her hair.

“I was thinking about it. Why do you want me to tell her that you’re sorry?”

Jennifer glared at him.

“Well I was thinking I could tell her that you were sorry, then I could come back here and tell you that she said she was sorry, and like in those lame situational comedies I’d have orchestrated a reunion and I’ll be the hero and you two can get over this silly stuff and be daughter and mother again. How’s that sound?”

“Templeton, don’t start, please.”

“What? I’m being serious. I think you two should apologize to each other and get on with life.”

“I am getting on with my life,” she said and turned off the dryer.

“How, by ignoring the fact that you have a mother. I’m not trying to draw pity to myself, but you should be grateful that she’s still around. Maybe you should concede a bit. You know how old folks get.”

“Are you saying I’m wrong?”

“No, not per se.”

“Not per se, what is that suppose to mean?”

“I mean both of you are wrong. But you could be the bigger one and just bridge the chasm.”

“Templeton, you have no idea what has been going on for years between my mother and I. Now you come along after a few months and want to play the mender. This has got nothing to do with you. My relationship with my mother has nothing to do with you. My relationship to you has nothing to do with my mother and your relationship to my mother has nothing to do with me. If you really want to be helpful, baby, make me a cup of coffee so I can finish getting ready for work,” she said and turned on the hair dryer again.

Templeton and Meridian sat in her living room and drank tea. They had been talking about some of the ideas that Cleveland had written in his journal. He told her that every time he read a passage from the journal or reread a chapter from the book he wanted more and more to know about his father. But he knew he would never find out anything more than what he already knew. His uncle never even mentioned his father's name, his aunt only told him quick, quirky Christian platitudes, and Meridian didn't really know him beyond the superficial. He figured if his uncle was so brilliant and illuminating that his father had to have had something going for himself as well. Even Philbert was a very intelligent man in a more practical, cross-word puzzle sort of way. He knew his father had talent. Philbert had let him keep three of the still lives he had painted. The more surreal and abstract paintings, and the found article sculptures he had either simply thrown out or had given to friends. Now, when he thought about it, he got furious with Philbert. If he could have seen his father's art he could know him, at least inferred him. As it had been he had had nothing but vague memories and horrific images that he associated with the man. And although he had never felt as if he had missed out on anything not having a father when he was younger, he had always just constructed him as a weak, fragile, damaged man who had been wrecked by too much absurdity in a jungle far from his home. He had begun to feel a vague sense of resentment and anger as he read Cleveland's writings. He felt it against Philbert and Rebecca for hiding his father's life from him, he also felt it toward his mother for slipping away so completely and with such anility, but mainly at his father. Not for not being there as a father, but for not being there as a physical, tangible reality. He had thought he had buried the man years ago, and he had. He had quit experiencing any kind of dysfunctional feelings or

thoughts over the matter when he turned 14 or 15. But he had started feeling the approaching presence of the dead man again the more he discovered about his uncle.

He didn't discuss of his thoughts about his father with Meridian other than he wished he had known him. Yet, Meridian sensed that there was something deeper going on inside of him. She told him that Eli and Cleveland were very much alike, but also flip sides of the same coin. Templeton smiled at her and nodded. They drank their tea in silence for a long moment.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about this," Templeton said, reached into his pocket and pulled out a small gold coin. "This dropped out of the letter you gave me to read a few days ago," he said and handed Meridian the coin.

"Yes, I left it in there. I found it after Cleveland left. We went to Nogales in 1966 and we met Mario Moreno, Cantinflas, you ever hear of him?" Meridian asked.

Templeton shrugged and shook his head no.

"Old Mexican actor in the 30s and 40s. Real popular comedian, like Charlie Chaplin in the states. Anyway, we met him and his wife in a bar down there and he gave Cleveland that coin because Cleveland had known the name of his first movie. I found it in a drawer when I was moving from the place we had lived and I stuck in it the letter. You keep it. It might bring you good luck or something."

Templeton put the coin back in his pocket and took a sip from his tea.

"You know anything about Albert and what they're up to with that God's Land thing?" Templeton asked.

Meridian was watching a shadow flicker across the floor but jerked her head toward Templeton when he asked the question.

“What do you mean,” she said quickly.

“I mean do you discuss his beliefs about the whole thing? You know, how he really feels about it.”

“I know how he feels about it, Templeton,” she said. “Why are you asking? What did he tell you?”

“Nothing, I’m just wondering.”

“Don’t bull-shit with me, boy. What did he tell you? What the hell did he tell you?”

Templeton looked at her with surprise. He had never seen her like that except for the first night he had shown up at her house drunk.

“Nothing, really. Young told me they were going to hold some protest at the ceremony that the church was going to have on New Years eve. They’re going to paint the arch red and put a bunch of dead Native American’s names on it or something like that. He asked me if I wanted to join them, but I told them no. I told them they shouldn’t do it. I told them Jennifer was going to be there and they...”

“What the hell are you saying? Jennifer is going to be where?”

“At God’s Land on New Years eve. The church is having some type of millennium party.”

“Oh Spirit. Dear Spirit, no. Templeton you stay away from them and you keep Jennifer away from that place do you hear. They’re not going to paint the place, those crazy bastards are going to blow it up.”

Templeton stared at her with his mouth slightly agape. He felt dizzy and started to sweat. He leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes. His head felt a size larger on his neck yet soft, wet and spongy. It took an effort for him to hold it up. Meridian mumbled to her self and paced in front of the fire.

“You get back to town and you tell Jennifer to stay the hell away from that place. tell her to tell that boss of hers not to hold his little get together. I’m seeing that bastard Albert tomorrow in the morning. He’ll be lucky if I don’t kick his old ass. This is too much, way too damn much. You go now. Go tell her, let her know.”

“I should call her now. Can I use the phone? Or you can call her and tell her I’m on the way.”

“Just go to her. She’ll freak out if you call on the phone. Tell her in person. Plus, she won’t answer the phone if she sees my number and if I tell her over the phone, she’ll be convinced I’ve completely lost my mind. So you go to her as quickly as possible and let her know that shit is about to hit the fan.”

Jennifer watched his hands. He had soft delicate hands with long slender fingers like what she imaged a violinist fingers looked like. He folded his right hand over his left and rested them on the table. He didn't gesticulate crazy and wild the way Natalie did when she talked. He sat with his back straight and parallel with the back of his chair and only moved his first and index finger up and down when he wanted to add emphasis to a statement. His hands were pale and she found herself contrasting them in her head to Templeton's. Templeton wasn't a dark man but in her head the difference between their hands was like coal and snow. When he made a joke she reached across the table and put her hand on top of his just to see the contrast in color. She liked the difference. It would make a great color combination for an outfit she thought. He smiled at her and moved his hand on top of hers. She pulled her hand away smiled, looked down at the table and took a drink from her glass of Zinfandel. She was glad that she had accepted Shawn, Natalie and Karen's invitation this time. They had been inviting her to Applebee's for over a month after church every Wednesday night, but since she and Templeton had started dating she had put them off. That night she had accepted after she noticed Shawn glancing over at her all night. She had seen him before looking at her but had never really paid attention.

Besides his hands she noticed how the corner of his mouth seemed to curl up when he laughed or smiled, and the way a thin lock of blonde hair kept falling over his forehead. He seemed to know everything about everything. Whatever the topic he had some kind of informed input to comment about it, as well as a verse or a quote from scripture that was analogous. He seemed to know the Bible verbatim by heart. The three women held him in their attention as if he had been one of Jesus' disciples. Karen sat next to him in a booth and scooted

closer with each comment he made. But Jennifer noticed the way he moved a tiny bit away from Karen each time, and looked up at her and smiled. Each time he looked at her she took a drink from her wine. Before they left she drank three glasses.

Outside they gathered together in front of the restaurant. They gave each other hugs and blessings. Shawn had ridden with Karen from the church to Applebee's, but he asked Jennifer if she would mind giving him a ride back to his car.

"Of course," she said. "Absolutely no problem at all."

She drove as if she were sixteen taking her driving test again. She didn't blast her radio, in fact she didn't even turn it on. She didn't rest her arm on the door ledge and lean to be comfortable like she usually did, she held the steering wheel with both hands at ten o'clock and two o'clock. Shawn, on the other hand, did not sit in the middle of his seat, although his back was still straight and parallel with the seat, he sat on the left edge of his seat closer to the emergency brake and he didn't take his eyes off of her the whole ride back.

"I'm really glad you came with us tonight," he said. "I was beginning to think that you might not like us."

She looked at him, giggled a bit and turned back to look at the road.

"No, no that's not it at all. I just like to get a good nights sleep so that I can get up and get ready for work and not be tired all day," she said.

"That's my way too, but I love these Wednesday nights. I need them actually because I don't get a chance to go out very much because of my job. So I make it a goal to get out on Wednesday and do something fun."

"What do you do?"

“I design airplanes. I work for Boeing. Not to honk my own horn, but I guess I’m kind of a golden child for them, my office is my house.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. That’s unbelievable. It must be fantastic to do something important like that. I’m impressed to say the least.”

“Yeah, I like it. It is a great job and I make a good salary and, well The Lord has blessed with more than I could ever have hoped for, Amen.”

“Amen,” she said. “So why do you live here? It’s so small and well you know there’s not much here. You could probably live anywhere in the world.’

“That’s why I live here. Because it’s small, and there is actually plenty to do around here. I’ve always liked this area. I grew up in Silver City. I love the open space. I love fishing at the butte lake, camping, hiking stuff like that. I’m not into big, busy cities and status quo stuff. I think I’m more in touch with the Lord out here than I could ever be in a big city, you know.”

Jennifer looked at him and murmured an uh huh.

He smiled leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

She felt the blood rise to the surface of her skin and unwrapped her scarf from around her neck.

“I’m sorry. I am so very, very sorry. I had no right to do that. Please forgive me. I can get out here. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what got into me. That was so absolutely inappropriate,” Shawn said, covering his face with his hands.

Jennifer was silent.

“Please forgive me, Jennifer, please. God, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, really. It’s ok.”

“It’s not ok. I way over stepped every bound that could be over stepped by doing that. If you want to file a charge or something I’m ok with that.”

Jennifer started laughing.

“Press charges over a kiss on the cheek? It’s ok, really. It was nice of you. I appreciate it. It makes me feel good.”

“I don’t know what else to say. I just saw you tonight and you looked so radiant, so illuminated I was taken aback by you tonight. I know that’s no excuse for what I just did but that’s why I did it. I’m sorry, I am.”

“You’re sorry you kissed me?” she said as she pulled into the parking lot of the church.

“Yes, I mean I’m not sorry I kissed you, I’m sorry how I kissed you. I’m sorry I didn’t ask you first or wait for a signal from you, you know?”

“I know what you mean. I’m just kidding with you. It’s ok really don’t worry about it.”

“I will worry about it, but if you don’t hate me for it I guess I won’t hide out in shame. Do you think you might want to go with us again next week?”

“Definitely.”

“Good. Well, again I apologize. I had a great time. I’ll see you next week at church. God bless you, Jennifer Johnston.”

They hugged each other and somehow their lips fell against one another's and they kissed until the bright beam of some cars headlights lit up the cab of her car as it passed slowly by them. Shawn opened the door and got out, they held hands until their reach was broken by distance. He closed the door then leaned down and smiled at her through the window, she smiled back. They waved to one another as they drove out of the parking lot. She didn't feel guilty until she saw Templeton's toothbrush in the bathroom drawer as she prepared herself to go to bed.

All the way back to town Templeton kept imaging horrible scenes of explosions ripping through the congregation of the Torch of God Christian Church on New Years eve. He ran through a hundred different scenarios in his mind. In some he found Jennifer's body in different degrees of dismemberment, in others he saved her just in the nick of time. He sped the whole way up I-25. When he reached her apartment complex her car wasn't there. He decided to go to the motel to see if he had any messages and almost ran into a parked car when he spun out on a patch of black ice. It was at the stop light at the intersection of Main St and N Pershing St that he changed his mind and decided to follow Jennifer instead. He saw them as they came out of the restaurant. He saw them all give each other hugs and he saw Jennifer and a man walking extremely close to one another and get into her car. He followed them from a safe distance and he saw the dark silhouette of the white man sitting awkwardly close to Jennifer as they drove. Because he wasn't following them real close he lost them, but he saw them turn and he knew they were going to the church. When he turned onto the street the church was on he saw them leaning into one another close and long until his headlights erupted in a blare light inside her car. He slowed then hit the gas and sped past the parking lot and parked on a street two blocks away.

His heart pounded in his chest and felt like it might burst out. He leaned over his steering wheel and tried to catch his breath. He was shaking. He was shaking so bad he could feel the dashboard vibrating. He punched the ceiling of the cab and leaned back in the seat resting his head on the torn, pine green headrest. He closed his eyes and held in the urge to cry. A grunt like he was holding back vomit escaped from his throat. He opened his eyes and stared into the silver and black tunnel the dimly lit street light created out of the length of street. He punched the ceiling three more times. FUUUUUUUUUUCK, he bellowed in the empty cab. He smashed his feet into the floor of the truck and flailed his arms against the seat and the dashboard. You cunt, you fucking slutty fucking cunt, I hate you, I fucking hate you with my goddamn soul, you fucking whore, he yelled. He punched his dash board and smashed the heater vent. After two or three minutes he stopped. He was breathing heavy, but still cursing her under his breath. He leaned his head back again and waited until he caught his breath. Tears began to stream out of his eyes but he didn't make a sound. He only stared down that dark tunnel through blurry eyes. After a bit he wiped his eyes and rolled down his window and spit outside. He started the car and turned on the defroster. Once the window was clear he said, fuck it, and put the truck in gear and drove off.

After his second shot of Wild Turkey he felt impressed with himself that he hadn't stopped at the church and gotten out and beat the guy to a pulp. He had convinced himself that it had been an act of restraint as opposed to a total loss of his faculties and a bit of fear. He convinced himself that the sight hadn't completely made his whole being seem to melt out of the truck and sink into the cold asphalt. He convinced himself that he had controlled himself like a gentleman. After his fourth shot, sixth beer and third line he had convinced himself that it wasn't Pavel and Mandy that had stopped him from going to the Reverend's house and demanding who

the blonde faggot was that was fucking his girlfriend. After his sixth shot, tenth beer and eighth line he cussed out Mandy and called her a lezzy bitch because she refused to go back to his motel and sleep with him because he was too drunk; he didn't remember that she told him to call her the next day when he was sober and ask her again. He bought a forty from Pavel, went in the bathroom and did a huge key full, walked out of the bathroom with powder still under his nose, threw money down on the bar and left. He drove to Jennifer's apartment.

Jennifer called Templeton's motel but he didn't answer. She left a message that she was sorry she missed him and that she would call him the next day. For some reason she felt as if she should call her mother. The tinge of guilt she felt toward Templeton for an instant spread to her mother. She had felt like calling her for a few days, but she was resolved not to. Yet at that moment she thought that her mother might have something to say to her that would make her feel better about what was happening, could tell her something that would put the thing into perspective. After she got ready for bed she stayed up and watched a rerun of *Cheers*. It was a good distraction. She didn't know what she felt, or rather she was uncomfortable and didn't want to admit what she felt. When she went to bed she kept trying to think of Templeton and how bad he would feel if he knew and how guilty she should feel, but Shawn's mouth against hers kept popping into her head. So she felt guilty for not feeling a great disabling chasm of guilt that she thought one had to feel when one had been unfaithful. She fell asleep only slightly disturbed.

She had been dreaming of the wind when the first sound of the banging at the door jolted her from sleep. She had been producing a warm spring breeze with her mother. They stood on the edge of a red rock mesa and blew the wind from their mouths over a valley filled

with wild flowers, cacti and desert grass. They hugged one another laughed together as they watched the wind push through the long grass in gentle waves. The banging sounded again. It sounded like the cops she thought as she jumped out of bed and threw her robe on. She remembered the sound from when she was a child and the FBI would come for her mother and her hoodlum friends. Something has happened to my mom she thought as she raced to the door. When she opened the door Templeton stood there blurred in a penumbra. He was swaying side to side.

“What, what’s wrong,” she said, squinting because of the brightness of the porch light.

“So you like white boys now, huh,” he said and stumbled pass her into the apartment.

Jennifer closed the door and turned on the light.

“You’re wasted,” she scoffed. “What time is it? What are you doing here so late? Did you drive here like this?”

“Where’s the fucking white boy. Is he in the bedroom,” he said, stumbling into the bedroom. “Did I interrupt a good fuck session? Is he here?”

“What the heck are you babbling about,” she said, and then it hit her. He must have seen her with Shawn. Weariness over came her panic and she was calm. She swept her hair back and walked toward him.

“Templeton, it’s late, you’re drunk, I’m tired, ok, baby. It’s not what you think, really. Why don’t you get some sleep and we’ll talk about it in the morning when we’re both fresh. I’ll make us some breakfast and we’ll talk about it, ok?”

“Fuck you. You kissed the mother-fucker, you kissed a fucking white boy. Fuck you, you’re a bitch.”

She lunged toward him with her hand raised, but she stopped just before she hit him.

“You need to go. You need to go right now. Don’t you ever talk to me that way again. Get out of here, now. This is over.”

“Fuck you, bitch.”

She slapped him hard across the face. So hard the palm of her hand stung.

“Slut.”

She slapped him again.

“Whore.”

Again.

“Cunt.”

A barrage of fists and slaps and scratches landed on Templeton’s face, neck, chest, shoulders, and arms. She was screaming high, and shrill that she hated him, for him to get out, that she never wanted to see him again. Templeton fended off as many blows as he could. He tried to grab hold of her and hug her but she wormed out of his grasp. He yelled I’m sorry, but she slapped him in the face harder. He told he loved her, a fist landed in his chest. He tried again to hold her and her hand slashed across his face and caught the bridge of his nose with her finger nail. He pulled his hand away to feel the scratch from instinct and then she was upon him. He covered up as best he could but she began to pummel him. A fist landed hard on his ear and

he yelled Get the fuck off of me and pushed her away. She flew away from him. He remembered that. She flew away backwards in slow motion. Her back was arched and her arms were spread out in front of her. He thought that she looked like an Olympic high-jumper about to bound over the stick. She fell in slow motion too. He watched as her head hit the floor and bounced a bit followed closely by her body. There was a moment of absolute stillness. A moment of complete and utter motionlessness. The world froze. There was no breathing, no blinking, no sensation of anything. And he stood staring down at her body laying there not moving and he did not know what to do. The stillness was broken by a soft, high-pitched squeak that escaped from her throat. Then he moved, he leapt across the distance to her and tried to hold her. She rose as if by the will of her mind and not her body and floated away from him and backed up against the wall. He looked at her with eyes welling with tears. She seared him with her glaze.

“Get out of my house,” she hissed.

“Baby, I’m sorry. I didn’t...I’m drunk I’m...”

“Get out.”

“Please, Jennifer. Let’s talk, please.”

“I don’t ever want to talk to you for as long as I live. You are nothing to me now. Nothing at all. I don’t hate you, I don’t love you, I don’t feel anything for you. Go. God bless, Templeton, cause he’s the only one who can.”

The alcohol and dope surged again in his body and felt indignation from the comment. Templeton straightened his collar, stretched his shoulders and neck.

“That’s the way you want this?” he said.

Jennifer nodded.

“Well fuck you and your selfish god, bitch.”

“Get out of here,” she yelled and picked up a little glass figurine of an elephant and threw it at him.

He ducked and it smashed against a wall.

Templeton smiled at her and shook his head.

“Fuck you, ho. Enjoy your white dick,” he said and slammed the door as he left.

Jennifer slumped to the floor and cried hysterically. Her body heaved with great convulsions. She cried until her muscles ached. When she finally quit and got up from the floor it was 5:13 in the morning. She called the office and left a message for the Reverend that she wouldn't be in to work. Then she shuffled back into her bedroom, curled up in her comforter, cried softly for a bit and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Templeton woke up scared. He didn't know where he was at. Nothing penetrated the viscous delirium that encased his consciousness. He saw objects, colors and shapes but no meaning was attached to them. He jumped up from the bed, still dressed in his street clothes, stumbled and fell to the floor. He jumped back up and the objects began to reveal a history to him. He recognized that he was in the motel room, but beyond that he had no recollection except the fact that he must have gotten drunk because he felt like shit and couldn't remember anything. He went into the bathroom feeling the world lifting and tilting as he walked and sucked great gulps of water from the bathroom faucet. He splashed his face with water, took a whizz, looked around the room to see if he could see anything that would remind him of what had happened the night before. He fell backwards onto the bed, closed his eyes and draped his forearm across his forehead. He didn't remember talking to Jennifer the whole previous day. He thought that he should call her soon so she wouldn't be mad at him. Then everything rushed back in a scintillating, sharp painful blaring light of memory. He remembered seeing "the kiss" and it engraved itself into the walls of his gray matter with the delicacy and precision of a scalpel. He remembered sitting in the dull, orange glow of the Hornet, he remembered running a stop sign on the way to Jennifer's, and then he remembered that horrific moment of stillness. He remembered it as it he was still there at that moment. Oh God no, please, he mumbled. Oh God, please no. He jumped up from the bed and rushed into the bathroom. The vomit reached his mouth before he reached the toilet and he couldn't hold it. He crouched on all fours for a full three minutes heaving and gagging his insides out. When he was finished he did not get up but stayed on the cold linoleum on all fours crying. After a while he got up, sopped up the floor with a bath towel, rinsed out his mouth, staggered back into the bedroom and called Jennifer at work. The Reverend

answered the phone and told him that she wasn't there and asked him if he knew why.

Templeton didn't answer and hung the phone up. He called her house and the answering machine picked up right away.

“Sweetheart please answer the phone, please. I'm so sorry. I'm so very, very, sorry. Please pick up baby. I love you so much. Please talk to me I...”

The machine cut off.

He jumped into his truck and drove over to her apartment. He saw that her car was there. He knocked on the door and there was no answer. He put his face against the door and repeated the same litany he had on the phone. He knocked a couple more times and when she still didn't answer he put his mouth close to the door jamb and said I love you. Then got back in his truck and drove to White Coyote Cafe.

He had three cups of coffee and a quarter of a cinnamon roll. He sat staring out the window not noticing anything. All he saw was Jennifer falling to the floor over and over again. Twice he got up from the table and went into a bathroom stall and cried. Once he called her and left a message about how sorry he was and how much he loved her. He felt wrecked, dismembered mentally, like some sort of diseased animal. He didn't look anyone in the eye because he felt that they knew what he had done and were judging him, condemning him, hoping his fate would take him to some place worse than any hell a human being could image. He felt as if he did not belong to the human race anymore, as if he had fallen out of grace with the whole of all existence, cast out of all time. A knot formed in his stomach as he thought about how his uncle, aunt and cousins would think if they found out he had done the previous night, the words he had uttered. For the first time in his life he thought that he may have had an inkling of understanding of what his father felt when he did what he did. He thought that it could be a

viable solution to certain situations. What was left when you lost your humanity? He was no longer a man, he thought. He had sacrificed his chance to become a human being in one single action. It takes a lifetime to become a human being, he thought, and he blew it. He started to shake and his stomach began to gurgle. It was an uncontrollable shaking that had nothing to do with the coffee. He grew cold and rubbed his arms. He felt as if he had to vomit again. He put a ten dollar bill on the table and left.

Outside the cold made him shiver more. He jumped into the truck and turned the heat on all the way. He wrapped himself up in his coat and leaned his head on the steering wheel and closed his eyes. The cab filled with heat. Eventually the shaking subsided. But he didn't move. He sat there with his eyes closed and his head on the steering wheel and let the heat penetrate his body. A knock on the driver side window startled him. It was the manager from the restaurant. Templeton lowered the window.

“Sir are you ok,” the man asked.

Templeton looked at him through foggy eyes and shook his head as if to try to clear his vision.

“You need a doctor or anything, sir. You've been out here sitting like that for good half an hour. Can I call someone for you?”

“No, no, thank you. I'm sorry. I'm just got the flu or something. I'll be alright. Thanks for checking up though. Have a good one,” Templeton said, put the car in gear and left.

The bartender at the Hornet was a guy. A big bearded, tattooed biker guy named Ernie Zuckerman Templeton asked him if Mandy worked and he told him not until six.

“I'm the day bartender,” Ernie said.

“Everyday?” Templeton asked.

“Everyday, all day from 6am until 6 pm, what do you want?”

“A bottle of bud and a shot of Wild turkey, please.”

“That’s my kinda drinker. Start hard early,” Ernie said and looked at the clock.

“Fuck it, it’s already 9:30 I think I’ll join you.”

Templeton and Ernie drank until Ernie got off and Mandy showed up. When Templeton saw Mandy he went to hug her but she ducked out of his way.

“You must feel better today,” she said.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“You don’t remember last night?”

“Shit,” he said. “Not all of it. What did I do here?”

Mandy told him and Templeton slumped on his stool. Ernie busted out laughing and told them that he’d love to see Mandy and another bitch together and then slapped her ass.

“I’m sorry. I’m a fucking jerk. You probably don’t want me in here, huh?”

Mandy glared at him and Templeton got his wallet out to pay for his drinks. She smacked him lightly on his forehead and called him a jerk then got him another beer. She leaned over the bar and motioned for him to lean in next to her and whispered in his ear.

“If you can remember what you asked me last night I might say yes,” she said.

“I hope it’s what I think it is,” Templeton said.

Throughout the night he called Jennifer eight times. She didn't answer. He left the same message each time, but each time it was less comprehensible, evolving more and more into a type of soggy, fat tongue sounding gurgle than any kind of speech. Eventually Pavel and Mandy quit giving him quarters. Pavel gave him lines to give him some type of equilibrium. The dope mellowed him out and he sat on the bar stool the rest of the night pontificating about George Clinton and Parliament /Funkadelic. Mandy went to the motel with him that night, but after giving him head for a half an hour and he still not getting hard, she let him pass out and watched Benny Hill until she fell asleep.

The next morning when he woke up and saw Mandy in the bed next to him the guilt felt as if slivers of ice were tearing through every muscle in his body. A dark hollowness crept into his belly. He felt weak and nauseated. It wasn't only the guilt that smothered him like a wet wool blanket in August, but the fear that Jennifer might come by to talk and there would be Mandy dressed in nothing but her underwear laying in his bed. He was also afraid that he had fucked her without a rubber. He reached down under the sheet and rubbed his hand over his crouch. He sniffed his fingers, but they did not smell like sex. He eased a bit. He got out of bed and peeked out the window. The day was already bright and only his truck and Mandy's jeep were parked in the lot. He still felt drunk and his guilt assuaged as soon as he got his bearing back a bit. He turned and looked at Mandy on the bed. She was uncovered enough for him to see the perfect swell of her ass in her panties. He leaned closer and looked. He caressed her cheek and she squirmed a bit and moved her ass against his hand. He massaged the cheek and she pressed her butt into his hand. He crawled back into bed and pulled her against him. Her hand reached behind her and found his groin. She kneaded him slowly. She felt him grow in her hand

and she turned around and started again what she had the night before. They stayed in bed until it was time for her to leave and go get ready for work.

When she left the realization of what he had done weighed on him like a lead coat. He tried to rationalize the whole situation with the usual excuses: she had probably done it too, she started it, it was probably for the best that they had broken up, they didn't really love each other anyway. But the images of her, the toe rings that she wore, the smell of her lotion, the soft curve of her neck and her crooked smile assaulted him. He felt as if he were alone, alone in a strange, gray desolate place and things, invisible things yearning to become visible for him only, things that had escaped out of himself and from other dark places he couldn't even image flitted around among black, barren trees waiting for him to let his guard down so they could reveal themselves in all their terrible glory. He didn't want to be alone. He thought about calling Jennifer again, but the idea that she wouldn't answer the phone horrified him. It was a fact he knew he wouldn't be able to deal with. He needed a drink. He knew it was his low serotonin level that was giving him the willies making him paranoid. He was having a mild case of the DTs he thought. He just need a drink to mellow him out and he would be fine. So he took a quick shower and drove back to Hornet.

After his fourth beer and a shot he was brave enough to call Jennifer. He called three times and there was no answer. He left his message each time. The fourth time he called there was an answer.

"Templeton, hi my name is Shawn. I think it would be a good idea if you quit calling Jennifer, ok. She's really upset and you calling all the time is upsetting her more. It would probably be a good idea to put an end to this before it gets out of hand, you know? Ok. Thanks a lot. Bye," he said and hung up the phone.

Templeton stared at the wall behind the phone. Numbers and names had been craved in the wood above the phone. *For a good time call Jessie 915-922-9277, Lisa's a Bitch, Carl is hot, quit craving in the damn wood assholes.* Then he stared at the receiver in his hand. It was gray plastic and tiny notches had been chipped out of it, probably from people smashing it against the wall like he felt like doing. But his limbs felt too heavy, as if they were filled with molten lead. He dropped the receiver and let it swing. He walked into the bathroom and into a stall, poured out the entire package of a twenty dollar bag and snorted it in two lines. Then he went back out to the bar, sat down and ordered a shot and a beer for himself, Mandy and Pavel and didn't say another word.

The decision to let Shawn answer the phone had been more his idea than Jennifer's. He had gone over to her apartment after Natalie called him and told him what had happened. Jennifer had called Natalie the day after the incident as she sat on the couch watching TV and eating cookies and milk. She told her everything. Natalie told her she should call the police but Jennifer said it wasn't worth the hassle, Templeton was out of her life and there was no need to make things more complicated. God will take care of Templeton, she said. Natalie called Shawn as soon as she hung up with Jennifer and told him everything. The next day he showed up at Jennifer's door with a pot of homemade chicken soup with homemade noodles, a Jasmine aroma scented candle and a bouquet of light pink roses. She was a bit startled to see him, not for the plain fact that she had not gone to work for a second day and she had no make up on and was dressed in sweats, but his face was the last face on earth she expected to see. She was both a bit irritated that he had the gall to just show up unannounced and impressed for the same reason. It also felt strange that he had shown up because he was a big part of what had happened. It was

something she didn't know if she wanted to deal with and she tried to show in her attitude, but the presence of another person made her restrain. She had been alone with her thoughts for two days and she physically felt the weight of them. Her body ached and she was restless and nervous. She had been alone with Templeton figuratively and literally, because he kept calling, and because she could not get him out of her head. She vacillated between love, hate, and apathy for him. She hated him deeply for the things he had said to her. No one in her entire life had ever said the things that he had said to her. She had never been pierced by words more than his words had pierced her. She felt them like grease on her flesh. She felt the heat of their malice still simmering in the room. He had meant every single thing he said at the moment he said no matter what he told her in the messages he left. He felt remorse, yes, but he had meant those things when he said them. She had felt the physicality of the words just as hard, and actually harder, than when he had pushed her away from him. And the hate with which he had said those things was lingered in her being like a ghost and it was from this that her hate stemmed as a way to protect herself.

Yet she didn't despise him, and she could not stop the good thoughts about the good times they had had from drifting into her head. This is when she cried the heaviest. She cried when she thought about the meanness that he had shown her, but she cried more about the good times they had had, and they had had some really, really good times together. Better than she had ever had with anyone. And she knew those time were unique and they would never happen again, ever. Different good times would happen of course, but never those times. He had been special. There wasn't anyone like him. Not that there was anyone like anyone in the world, but she had never met him before. She had never encountered another type like him, anywhere.

And she missed that person. She missed him so much it felt as if she would spilt in half with the pain of not ever being able to see him again.

And then there was the fact that it was over. That what had happened happened and was meant to happen, and to either love or hate Templeton was irreverent because it was God's will and she had to accept it as such. It was an experience she had to have, she thought, and she was supposed to learn something from it. Maybe that she wasn't supposed to love somebody so much, maybe that she should only love God that strongly. She didn't know exactly, but she was confident that she would realize the lesson sooner or later. So when Shawn showed up at her door, even though she was taken aback, she wasn't really surprised and took it as a sign, however reluctantly, that everything was supposed to be as it was.

Templeton's calls had been grating on her from the first one. Several times she almost answered, but pride held her back. He sounded so pathetic and sad. She could tell that he was truly sorry. She could feel the weight of his pain through his words, but she could not bring herself to face that. She could not ease him of his pain by answering the phone, because in all honesty, she wanted him to suffer. But the gravity of those calls were wearing her down and she broke down in tears several times, yelling at the phone for him to please leave her alone. Every time the phone rang she jumped and braced herself for that forlorn, heavy, dark voice to emit its presence from the speaker of the answering machine. And it was when she and Shawn were sitting on her couch eating chicken soup and watching *Touched by an Angel*, that Shawn noticed her flinch when the phone rang and watched her close her eyes and sigh as Templeton's voice rose out of the speaker. Would you like me to answer it, he asked and she shook her head no. Each time Templeton called he watched her, and on the fourth time he just put his hand on the receiver, looked at her, she nodded and he answered the phone.

Mandy went to the motel with Templeton again that night. He didn't pass out and they did it all the rest of the night as if it was their last day on earth. He fucked her with malice, with desire he had never felt, with despair, with longing and tenderness. He fucked her to disintegrate Jennifer. After he called and the man answered the phone something popped in his head. It was a physical feeling as if a nerve or a neural connection had been severed. A cloud formed around his thoughts about Jennifer, and solidified as he sat at the bar in silence and poured booze and cocaine into his body. Mandy completed the separation.

He woke her up and they did it two more times before they went had breakfast. She had to go after they ate to take her son to the doctor. Templeton didn't want to be alone so he went to the bar and hung out with Ernie. Around noon Young and Sandy showed up and they bought Templeton a shot, and he bought them one too.

“So we, re cool right?” Young asked.

“Why should we be,” Templeton said. “You lie to me all the time.”

“Sorry, man. Forget I brought it up,” Young said and stood up to move.

Templeton grabbed his arm and pulled him toward him.

“I want in,” he said.

Young sat back down and looked at Templeton with a half smile.

“Serious?” he asked.

“Dead,” Templeton said.

“What brought the change of mind?”

“Things. But quit lying to me.”

“What are talking about, man? I’m not lying about anything.”

“You’re an ass, Young. How are you going to pull it off? Are people going to die?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I know you’re going to blow the fucker up. So are people going to die?”

“How the hell do you know?”

“Doesn’t matter. If people are going to die I need to know so I can keep Jennifer away.”

“I’ve never killed a person or an animal or anything in my entire life, man. I’ve been doing what I do for more than twenty-years. People never get hurt. I’m not a terrorist. Where they are having their little prayer meeting is a mile away from the structure we’re taking out. They are having it at the place where they plan to break new ground. We’re taking out the structures that have already been built, a full mile away from any human beings.”

“Swear.”

“On my life.”

“So what do I have to do?”

Mandy’s snoring woke Templeton up. He sat up in bed and saw smoke drifting out of the bathroom. He jumped out of bed and went to the bathroom. The smoke didn’t smell like smoke but it grew thicker when he entered the room. It glowed with a dim orange color and

intermittently brighter orbs of orange flashed in the smoke. Templeton yelled for Mandy to call the fire department but no sound came out of his mouth. He turned to leave the room but there was no door only the dark swirling smoke. He tried to find the light switch but there were no walls. there was nothing but the smoke. Templeton turned around a full 360 degrees to get some kind of bearings, but he only started to feel dizzy. Then in front of him the smoke started to dissipate and seemed to part. Through the smoke was a long hall with a glass-like checker board floor leading to a huge vaulted door. Templeton got scared. He thought that he was dreaming and tried to wake himself up, but he couldn't. The door opened and a glaring white light erupted out of it. Templeton shielded his eyes with his hand and looked. A form moved within the light. It grew in size and he realized it was moving towards him. He turned to run but there was nothing but an impenetrable thick wall of smoke. When he turned back the form was in front of him. It was a featureless form, a form in the shape of a healthy, muscular male, but without any distinguishing characteristics. It was charcoal gray and it within it darker swirls and patterns formed and dissipated like miniature explosions. "Why have you come here," the form said, but there was no mouth to move and Templeton heard the question inside his head. Templeton was afraid, but he also felt as if he should bow down on his knees with his head lowered to address the thing.

"Why have you come here?" the thing asked again.

Templeton closed his eyes and tried to wake up again.

"You're not sleeping, Templeton. And I didn't trap you and bring you here. You came to me. That's the first time in your life that you've ever come to me. Why have you come here?"

I didn't go anywhere I got up and I was here. Where am I? Who are you? Why is this happening?"

"You know all those answers. You came here. Now I'm asking you why, can you tell me?"

"I don't even know where here is. I know this is a dream. None of this is real."

"Then why are you having this discussion with me? If it is unreal simply stop and go back to where you were at. Why have you come here?"

"God I swear I'll quit doing dope, just please let me come out of this," Templeton said, dropping to his knees.

"You don't recognize me, Templeton?" the form said, but the voice in Templeton's head was female.

Templeton looked up and the form was shaped like a woman.

"Why are you here?" the woman's voice sounded in his head.

"This is jacked, this is really fucked up," Templeton whimpered.

"The old shapes are meaningless anymore, Templeton. Tonto and Gandhi are dead. Why did you come here?"

Templeton dropped from his knees into a sitting position. He felt like crying. He looked up at the form and it was no longer in human shape. It was a sphere without any discernable boundaries. In the middle of the thing a gaseous cloud composed of a multitude of colored lights swirled and twisted in a serpentine like dance. Jagged flashes of bright blue light crackled across the sphere and tiny particles of innumerable shapes and colors darted to and fro through the swirling cloud, some ran into each other and exploded causing a tiny, tiny replication

of the middle of the big sphere. Templeton felt a vast deep yearning and at the same time a complete sense of well being pulsating through him. It was a thought as well as a feeling and he knew the form was communicating with him again, asking him the same question. “Why have you come here?” Templeton put his head in his hands and began to weep. He wept hard and deep. And when the sphere pulsated inside of him again all he could utter over and over is I don’t know, I don’t know.

“You need to know now. There won’t be anymore lessons in alchemy. I won’t be changing for you anymore.”

Mandy woke up and saw Templeton on the floor of the bathroom crying and repeating the phrase over and over. She got out of bed and kneeled next to him.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I don’t know...”

She put her arms around him and helped him up. She guided him back to bed and laid him down and covered him. She wiped his eyes with the sheet and caressed his head until his sobs turned into sniffles and he fell back asleep. In the morning neither of them mentioned it.

Jennifer spent Christmas with Shawn in Taos. He had a time share and they left on Wednesday night after she got off of work and stayed until Sunday afternoon. It had been a nice time and she had actually relaxed. Shawn babied her. He took out to restaurants, he cooked, he ran her baths, they walked through the town square holding hands laughing and smiling, they read the Bible together and prayed together at night and in the morning, he sat and listened to her complain about her mother, he left her alone when she seemed withdrawn and came to her when she was responsive. They went to a production of *A Christmas Carol*, and watched movies and ate popcorn on the couch wrapped up in a thick wool blanket. Neither one mentioned Templeton. The only stress she felt was the conflict of whether to call her mother on Christmas or not. She didn't celebrate the holiday any more the way they had done when she was a kid, but it was the first year that she didn't spend time with Meridian and she felt bad. They usually spent Christmas Eve alone together and watched *It's Wonderful Life*, swapped gifts and a good buzz drinking eggnog and rum until they fell asleep on the couch curled up next to one another. Then on Christmas day they would go visit friends and eat and drink all day. She missed it. But Shawn had cooked a ham with all the typical sides and extras and then they watched movies until they fell asleep on the couch together. She with her head resting on his shoulder. That night she slept with him and let him make love to her.

After they ate a dinner of rotisserie chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy with green beans with Mandy's son and mother then watched Brad, her son, open up his gifts, Mandy and Templeton went to the Hornet. They bought each other, Pavel, Ernie and some of the other regulars Christmas shots. Pavel, as usual, supplied the dope. They closed the bar down and went

back to Templeton's motel room with Pavel and Ernie. They snorted dope and drank Wild Turkey that Ernie and Mandy had taken from the bar. Templeton thought about Jennifer and called her. Mandy didn't appreciate it and they got into a big argument. Ernie left first, he said he had better things to do than listen to a bunch of silly bullshit. He did a line and took his bottle of Turkey and left. Pavel left about fifteen minutes later. Templeton and Mandy continued yelling at each other for another twenty minutes until she got tired of it and left too. Templeton drove to Jennifer's apartment and knocked on the door, then kicked it three times when no one answered.

Back at the motel he turned on the TV and got into bed. The loneliness that he had been trying so desperately to avoid jumped on him like a wild beast. He picked up the phone to call Jennifer again and noticed that he had a message forwarded to him from the messaging service at the motel. He played it. It was Meridian. He erased it and hung up before the message finished playing. He didn't want to hear her voice because it made him think of Jennifer. He felt guilty because he had not called his family for the holiday. Usually he went over to his aunt and uncle's house on Christmas day, exchanged gifts and feasted. He always took two or three plates of food home with him. He longed to be with them at that moment. Nothing seemed so absolutely comforting than to sit in the living room with his family cracking jokes, smoking cigars with his uncle, drinking eggnog and coffee and tea, remembering the good times in the past, playing with his cousin's kids. Only that could have alleviated the ache he felt, and since he wasn't there and he was alone in a ugly little motel room in a ugly little town in the south of New Mexico with no one there and no one in his life who he really knew or cared about in any deep way, the ache throbbed like a thing alive. He curled up underneath the blanket and closed his eyes. They pulsed with dope induced energy behind his lids. He opened them again, turned off the light and turned the sound down on the TV. He watched an episode of *The Twilight Zone* in silence. The silver

haze of the black and white images slid across the room like a ghost. He didn't fall asleep until the sun started to rise.

Hines, Waters, Franks and the Salamander walked into the office. The Reverend asked Jennifer if she could get them all some coffee. Waters stopped at her desk, took her hand and kissed. It sure is a pleasure to see you again, Miss, he said, and tipped his Stetson to her. She smiled, but wiped her hand and rolled her eyes once they had entered the Reverend's office. As she fixed the coffee she heard intermittent burst of laughter coming from the room. It was mainly Waters' loud guffawing, but she recognized the snicker of Franks and the haw, haw of the Reverend. She didn't hear the Salamander. She wondered if he knew how to laugh, if God had even created him with the ability. He did talk though. And she listened intently as his deep, slow voiced crept under the space between the office door and the floor. She only understood a few words because his voice was so low and thick. She heard FBI. Graham's cold feet, tabs on all of them. As she finished pouring the coffee she looked out the window. A dark green Land Rover pulled into the parking lot and parked in the handicapped space right next to the building. A big, pale, platinum blonde man dressed in a wool lined Levi's denim jacket and jeans, and a dark haired man with a big graying moustache and a cowboy hat got out of the vehicle. Jennifer knocked on the door to the Reverend's office, he told her to come in. She sat a tray with four cups, sugar and a mug with cream on the Reverend's desk. She asked if they needed anything else. The Reverend said no. She turned to leave and the two men from the Land Rover stood in the door way. They nodded at her. She managed a smile. The Reverend stood and the others stood up when they saw the men. The Reverend asked them in and to have a seat. Jennifer left and closed the door behind her.

She sat at her desk for awhile straining to hear what the men were talking about. But their voices were low and muffled. She wondered who the two men from the Land Rover

were. They made her feel nervous. Why had the Salamander been talking about the FBI, were those two men FBI agents? They looked like FBI, and she knew FBI. She had more than her share of encounters with FBI men growing up with Meridian. She had learned to distrust FBI, and even now, even though she was a Christian and saved, she felt uneasy around police and other agents of the law. She wondered why the Reverend would be associated with anybody or anything to do with the FBI. She had a feeling that it had something to do with Meridian's protesting, and she had the urge to call her mother and ask her what she was really doing. Something about the situation, whatever it was unfolding in the Reverend's office didn't feel right. For some reason she thought of trying to call Templeton. She didn't. She dismissed the whole thing as not having anything to do with her and told herself the Reverend was probably just preparing security for the celebration. She called the caterer and added shrimp stuffed mushrooms to the menu.

The six of them, Albert, Templeton, Young, Sandy, Pete and Charly sat around the kitchen table and went over for the twenty-fifth time that week how they were going to blow up phase one of God's Land resort. The three old men and Young had staked the place out numerous times and knew every square inch of the place. The main building and six dormitories were in various stages of completion. The buildings were empty but most of them were finished. They were going to plant charges on the corners of the foundation of all the buildings. First they were going to fire off charges around the perimeter which were not connected to anything. These explosions would be for nothing more than to draw the spectator's attention to the site. Then after those charges went off the charges on the buildings would go off. They would set the charges as soon as it turned dark on New Years Eve. Young figured with six of them working it

wouldn't take more than forty-five minutes to set all the charges. They wouldn't enter the site from the road, they would have to go across the desert from the west. He figured it would take them a good hour to get there from that direction and an hour to get back. They would set the timers on the charges for midnight, so, Young said, that as soon as Dick Clark says Happy New Year, the New Mexico skyline would be lit up like Rome burning.

They would all be dressed in black, completely cover from head to toe. They would wear special headbands that Young had created over the years. They were equipped with a spelunking headlight so they could see while they worked. They would only have two hand held flashlights on the way into the site as they marched through the desert.

Templeton grew excited. He felt a rush of adrenaline as he pictured the six of them dressed up commando-like sneaking through the desert like shadows. He pictured the dim beam of lights from the flashlights barely cutting through the thickness of the desert night. Three of them would advance then stop with the flashlight and signal for the rear to advance. And they would go in turns like that until they reached ground zero, each one assigned a building a piece and they all collaborating on taking out the big main building. He imagined them opening up their black knapsacks, taking out the plastic explosive and kneading it until it became soft and pliable. He would form his into tiny tomahawks. He imagined sticking in the firing pins and connecting the explosives together with thin black wire and setting the detonator, the red LED lights shining like demon eyes in the darkness. And then they would disappear as mysterious as they had appeared back into the desert.

“I'm fucking ready,” he said rubbing his hands together.

Charly looked at him. “I hope so. You better be.”

“I’m kinda scared,” Sandy said.

“That’s good thing,” Albert said. “It’ll keep you on your toes. This isn’t a Rambo movie,” he said looking at Templeton. “This has to go off exactly as planned or shit could get nasty. Is that understood?”

Templeton sat back in his chair and nodded.

On the way back to Truth or Consequences Sandy asked Templeton why he had changed his mind.

“Is this because you broke up with Jennifer?” she asked.

Young looked at him in the rear view mirror.

“Hell no. I could care less about that shit. Bitches come and go. No I just started to think about what you guys had said and it started to make sense. If it’s because of anybody, it’d be my uncle. The one who wrote the book. I think he would do this too.”

“It’s the right thing to do, you know that right?” Young said, still looking at him.

“Yeah I know,” Templeton said.

In the motel room he laid on the bed staring up at the ceiling. He had lied to them. This was all about Jennifer, he thought. He wanted her to hurt. He wanted her to feel the agony he felt everyday when he woke up. He wanted her to feel the emptiness he had felt alone in his motel room. For four days after Christmas he had not left the motel except to eat and he only ate microwave burritos, Hostess cupcakes, Cheetos and Jolt soda from the 7-11 up the street. He had not gone to the Hornet, he had not called Mandy and she had not called him. He had not called Jennifer, Meridian or his family. He had not shaved or showered. He didn't do dope or drink. He watched TV. For four days the TV was never turned off. He could not bear for it to be off. It was his company. It stabilized him. If it had some how gotten turned off, if the motel complex had lost power, if there had been a short in the outlet, if the transistor had burned out, he was sure all the things would escape from his head and he would have had a nervous breakdown. He would have gone where his mother had gone. He knew. He knew it like he knew he was going to take another breath or blink his eye. If he left the room to piss or brush his teeth he would turn the sound up so he could hear it clearly. He didn't shower because he knew he wouldn't be able to hear it over the water. He could bear walking to the 7-11 because people were around, even though he did his best to avoid them. They were distractions during the day. At night he sat glued to his bed stuffing his face with cupcakes and Cheetos watching the TV. And it was this fear and loneliness that he wanted Jennifer to feel. He grew to hate her in those ninety-six hours. His fear festered and transformed into hate. The day before Young came in and made him shave and shower and took him to get something substantial to eat, he had slid into a place in his head where he had entertained violent and sadistic thoughts about Jennifer, and he wanted to make her pay for the place he had gone because of her. He wanted her be seared with rancor the same way

he had been. He had no political agenda for wanting to blow up the resort. He wanted to blow it because Jennifer loved it.

The next morning Templeton woke up at 5:30. He got out of bed and stretched. He didn't see the light of the sun glowing behind the curtains as it did when he usually got up, so he peeked out the curtain. The world was still dark. From behind his truck a shadowed form stood up. He immediately thought about the creature from the other night and he jerked the curtain closed, but he knew it wasn't the creature so he opened the curtains just in time to see a navy blue Chevy Prism drive out of the parking lot. It was the car that had almost run into the back of his truck the other day. He went outside and looked at the back of his truck. Then he looked down the street to see if he could still see the Prism, but there was nothing but the empty dark street and the stop light at the end of the block swaying slowly in the cold morning air. He stepped back inside and turned the heater up. He wondered why the guy had been snooping around his truck. He thought maybe he was getting his plate number to try to file a phony insurance claim. He made a mental note to call his insurance and tell them about it to avoid any hassles. He turned on the TV and then got into the shower.

Jennifer saw the red light on her answering machine blinking. She dreaded to hear who had been calling. She looked at the caller id on her phone and saw her mother's number fourteen times, Natalie's number and an unknown number. She erased the messages without even listening to them. She regretted it as soon as she hit the erase button. She wouldn't have minded hearing from her mother. She missed her, but it had been a day before the big celebration and she didn't want to deal with the added stress that making up with her mother would take.

There were still a million little details that had to be taken care of for the celebration that was planned to happen thirty-four hours in the future. She made it a New Year's resolution to call her mother and make up with her. Pride was a sin, and it was only pride that was keeping her from calling her. She missed Templeton too. But her mind wouldn't even entertain the idea. It was her body that let her know. It wasn't a sexual need but the need for contact, presence. She had slept with Shawn, and it was nice, but it was not familiar to her body. There was the surrender of her body against his, but there was not the pull, the magnetic force, the hunger that it felt when Templeton held her. This was not a conscious knowledge. It manifested itself in a constant mild ache of her muscles, and a tightness in her shoulders and neck. And even hot baths, showers and a light massage from Shawn did not make it disappear. So when she saw the unknown number, she thought it might be Templeton, and she got a bit excited that it might have been, then got angry with herself for letting that little bit of emotion escape. She turned her embarrassment for herself against him and felt that she hated him even more than she had the night of the incident. She pushed it out of her mind. She had to take a shower and get ready. Shawn, Natalie and her boyfriend Todd, and she were going to Las Cruces for dinner and to see *A Night at the Pops*.

On the way to Las Cruces they listened to the CD of a new Christian rock band named Deliverance. To Jennifer they sounded like Pantera rip-offs who changed the lyrics to Christian themes. She didn't like the music but the others did so she dealt with it. She stared out the window across the highway. They were just north of Salem, when she saw a familiar Honda CRX travelling north on I-25. It was Sandy's car. She must be going up to the mountain to see Chris, she thought. She turned back and looked out her window. A few minutes later Shawn reached over and put his hand on her thigh. She looked at him. He smiled. She smiled back, and

behind him out of his window she noticed the Salamander's car travelling north on I-25 too. I'm just seeing everybody tonight, she thought. Now I'll probably see Templeton in Cruces.

They met at the cabin at four o'clock in the afternoon on December 31st, 1999. It had been a nice day, a break from the frigid temperatures, fifty-five degrees, with a clear sky and a low wind ten miles an hour from the south south west. Templeton helped Young pack the backpacks. Each one contained ten pounds of explosives, ten firing charges, a pen light head band and fifty yards of wire. Young carried the timer detonators. The three old men cleaned their guns. Sandy hadn't shown up yet. The reality of what he was about to do set in as he handled the gear. Young seemed excited and he made jokes as he checked and rechecked each backpack. The old men sat on the porch silent and serious. Templeton's muscles were in knots and his stomach hurt. He tossed Young a backpack.

“No one is going to get hurt right?” he asked.

He tossed Young a backpack.

“No one is going to get hurt right?” he asked.

Young put the backpack in the trunk, walked over to Templeton and put his arm around his shoulders.

“You have my word that *no one* is going to get hurt. There won't be any people around to get hurt. I swear, bro. This is going to go off without a hitch. It's gonna let those pigs know that we are dead serious about this offense. It's gonna knock them so far back in their scheduling and cost so much to rebuild everything that the place will never get build. That's what this about, not hurting people.”

Templeton nodded and managed a slim grin.

“Where's Sandy?” Templeton asked.

Young looked at his watch. It was 4:30.

“She’ll be here. She’s probably a little freaked out like you and taking her time. It’s cool. She was completely psyched last night, and we did a briefing so she knows exactly what’s going on.

At 5:15 she had still not arrived. Templeton grew more nervous. The three old men anxious.

“She’s not coming,” Charly said.

“We should abort this,” Pete said.

“Fuck that. She’s probably just nervous, man. She knows where the site is We’ll leave her a note to just meet us there. She wants to do this as much as you or I. She’ll pull through. That’s my girl. I know her. She’s down. Real down,” Young said.

“What if she got busted?” Templeton asked.

“For what?”

“I don’t know what if she got pulled over and freaked out and told on us,” Templeton said.

“Man, shut-up Templeton. You’re going to bring in some bad mojo with shit talk like that. She’s scared. She told me last night she was nervous, but swore she’d come through.”

“We can’t wait to find out, if we’re going to do this. We need to get there and back, now,” Albert said.

Templeton looked through the branches of some distant trees and saw the orange and blue glow of the setting sun. He felt weak kneed, and wanted a drink. Young looked at his watch again and nodded.

“Let’s go do this,” Young said.

Albert rode with Young, Charly and Pete took Pete’s truck and Templeton drove by himself. The site was about thirty miles west of T and C off of highway 152. It was seventeen from the cabin. They planned to park four miles away in the desert and walk rest of the way. They were going to go through Kingston and then go off road at the junction of FDR 157 and FS 57. When the other trucks turned off 152 to Kingston Templeton kept driving. He pushed in the accelerator and speed until he reached I-25.

He couldn’t bring himself to do it. It was something too enormous for his world. It carried an element he didn’t want to be associated with. To him there was something extremely wrong with what they were going to do. It was over the top, something that didn’t even seem like it belonged in reality. It was too weighty, too charged with something he couldn’t define but that felt sinister, malicious, conscienceless. It was something that held way to much responsibility to have to think about later in life, to have to think about alone, to have to keep a secret, to have to possibly face at his dying hour. And it was that that he feared the most. If at the moment of his death, no matter how he died, whether it be with bullet in his head or in a bed from natural causes, he thought that he would have a moment to reflect, and in that moment he could either say yes to death, accept it and pass onto whatever there is or if there is anything at all, or scream No, be afraid to let go because he had not lived the life he had wanted, to leave with regret, unwilling, angry and fearful. That he thought would hell.

There was also the plain fact that he was only going to do it for revenge. He was going to take a huge, drastic action, which could, no matter what Young said or thought, result in death. He shuddered and felt ashamed of himself for even entertaining the idea, for having taken it as far as he did. He felt as if he had to vomit as he thought about it.

He knew they would be mad with him, they may even want to hurt him to keep him quiet. But he didn't care. He was finished, finished with Truth Or Consequences. He figured he had enough information from Meridian that he could write the book without her anymore. He figured he would see her one more time to tell her thank you and goodbye. Then he would go. He didn't know where, just as far away from T or C as he could possibly get. He wouldn't see anybody else. Especially not Jennifer because it would hurt too much. He knew that. He knew if he saw her it would destroy him. He knew he still loved her, he knew he would always love her and this caused a feeling in his body as if it were composed of metal and being suck into the earth by gravity. The fact that he would never be with her again burned into his being like a corrosive.

And this is how this chapter ends, he thought. There is not a goddamn thing different in my life than there was in Denver. Alone in a city I really know nothing about, a relationship destroyed in a moment of drunkenness, and me barely escaping the consequences of some hair-brained idea. Why the fuck not continue in this humorless, joke that is my life and just go get fucked up to ring in the new year. So he pulled into Truth or Consequences and drove to the Hornet.

Jennifer made sure that everything looked perfect for the celebration that night. She had arrived at the tent they had set up for the celebration at 6:30. She meet the caterers who arrived to set up their tables and serving dishes and cooking area. She had planned and set up almost all of

the details. She called the generator company, the people they rented the big tent from, the bands, the caterers, the rental company who supplied the chairs, and a multitude of other big and small task that it took to make the celebration an enjoyable event. For five months she had labored at getting everything perfect, and as she looked around she thought that she had succeeded. So the panic that she felt when she heard what sounded like gun-fire in the distance, wasn't panic for her life, but that something might happen that would ruin the celebration. She ran outside and heard the pop of rounds being fired. She couldn't see anything because it was dark and the outside lights spotlights caused everything to be seen with a glare. Since she couldn't see anything, and the shots sounded far away, and they stopped almost as soon as they started she calmed down. She figured it had been some locals, drunk already and shooting off rifles in anticipation of the New Year. The Reverend had given her a cell phone for the event, and she thought she had better call him just to let him know in case they started again or something. She called and he told her that he and Mr. Fuhrman were aware of the situation and that it was under control and that it had been exactly what she thought it was. He told her that they had had security patrolling the area for the last three hours and they had told the parties involved about the celebration and they peacefully left, apologizing. She hung up and felt relieved. She went back into the tent and doubled and triple checked that everything was set up right.

Templeton left the Hornet early. Mandy had been ignoring him, which he didn't mind, and Pavel was in jail from being picked up for a DUI the previous night. There was only truckers in the restaurant and Templeton didn't know anybody else. He also didn't want to ring in the new year in the Hornet. That on top of everything else seemed spooky prophetic. For his symbolic act

of the new year, he thought, I'm going to be writing. They say whatever you do at the stroke of midnight will color what you do the rest of the year. I'm going to write.

The red and blue flashing lights caused his heart to pound. He was going to make a U-turn and get away from the motel and park the truck, but another police car pulled up behind him and flipped on the siren. This is fucking unbelievable, Templeton thought. This is the perfect end to all this shit. He started to pull the truck over and the police sounded the siren again. Get out the way, we need to get in there, a cop yelled out the window. Move it, move it, his partner yelled. Templeton drove forward and was about to drive away from the motel when he noticed all the commotion was going on in front of his motel room. There were six or seven police cars, and an ambulance. He noticed Delbert Graham sitting on the curb looking down at the ground. Templeton's first thought was to just keep driving. to get out of the city and not stop. But Delbert looked up and saw Templeton's truck. He stood up and waved. A cop saw Delbert and shined his flashlight at Templeton. He motioned for him to come over to him. Templeton froze. He still thought about driving away. A siren sounded and three cops started walking toward him, Delbert followed them.

"Sir we need you to step out the truck, please," Said the first cop shining his flashlight in Templeton's face.

"He's ok, he's ok," Delbert said.

"Mr. Graham you need to go sit back down over there, now. Thank you," another cop said.

Delbert backed up a few feet.

Templeton slowly stepped out. The cop asked him to turn around and put his hands against the truck. Templeton complied. They frisked him. All Templeton could think about is that they had busted Young and the old men and they had told them that he had been part of it too. He wanted to ask the police what the problem was but he couldn't form any words. He merely surveyed the scene with wide, shocked eyes.

“Do you live in room number forty-five or forty-six, sir?” the first cop asked him.

“Yeah, forty-five, Templeton mumbled.

He looked around and noticed Delbert standing off to the side. He looked at him questioningly and shrugged. Delbert mouthed something Templeton couldn't understand, lowered his head and shook it slowly. Templeton walked between two police to his motel room. The other cops were keeping people who had stopped to look away from the scene. Templeton noticed the fat, round head of the motel manager trying to see over the shoulder of a big cop. There was a small pool of blood in front of his door. Delbert rushed over to Templeton, but one of the cops stopped him.

“They killed her, man. They killed her,” he said, his voice shaking.

Templeton thought immediately of Jennifer and the bomb. He felt faint, his knees buckled and he almost fell except a cop held him up.

“What time is it?” Templeton asked.

“Eleven thirty-five,” a cop said.

“That's not right, she can't be it's not twelve.”

“What do you mean?” the cop asked.

“They killed her right here on the street, and put a fucking pigeon feather in her hair, Templeton. They took out the eagle feather and put a fucking pigeon feather in her hair. The fuckers killed Meridian,” Delbert said and broke into tears.

The cops questioned Templeton for about an hour inside the motel room. They confirmed that he had been at the Hornet at the presumed time of the murder. They asked him to stay around town for awhile just in case they had more questions. They told him they couldn't make him stay because he wasn't a suspect at the time, but it wouldn't look real good if he left until they pulled things together. Templeton merely nodded. He felt as if he wasn't all there. He felt as if he were floating above the scene watching it. And he felt numb. He didn't know if it was because he didn't feel anything because it was so overwhelming or if he felt so much and so many different things that they were cancelling each other out in numbness. He felt as if he couldn't move. When the police left Delbert came in and asked if he wanted to go get a cup of coffee or something.

They went to White Coyote Cafe and sat at a booth off in a corner.

“We were coming to tell you and Jennifer about what happened. All this stuff was about to end. This guy Wilbur Jefferson, an Indian guy who worked for the Navajo land Bureau called me today, or rather yesterday about noon and told me he had the maps showing the Navajo boundaries forged to get money from Samuel Waters the land developer who's building God's Land. This Jefferson had some kind of change of heart and spilled his guts to me. He said he would bring the papers down to me from Ship Rock tomorrow, I mean today, now,” Delbert said.

A waitress came to fill their coffee cups again but neither one of them had touched their drinks. She asked if they wanted her to bring them new cups and they both nodded.

“So what does this have to do with Meridian being murdered? Who the fuck would want to hurt her?”

“Waters and everyone whose hair she was getting in with her protest, I’m thinking. I didn’t tell those cops because I’m not sure yet, but what else could it be. I don’t want to say anything until I have those maps in my hand and a sworn confession by Jefferson. Anyway, we came in town to see if we could get hold of you or Jennifer, Meridian had been trying to call both of you for days but neither of you would return her calls.”

Templeton lowered his head and rubbed his temples.

“We were trying to get in touch with you so you could tell those idiots they didn’t have to resort to terrorism. Meridian told me all about it. Plus, she was worried sick about Jennifer. She had talked to Albert and he told her nobody would be hurt, but she didn’t listen. I guess she slapped him and told him to never come into her life again. We went to Jennifer’s and she wasn’t there then we came here. We went to your room and knocked. I left for two minutes to go and talk to the manager and when I came back she was laying on the ground with blood coming out of her mouth. Someone had strangled her so hard blood came out of her mouth.”

Delbert stopped and looked out of the window. Templeton saw the wetness glisten in his eyes. Templeton stared out in the darkness too. He felt as if he could sleep for a hundred years.

The cops showed up at her door at 3:15 in the morning. Jennifer had just gotten home from the celebration and she was very happy. Everything had gone off exactly the way she had planned it. Nothing at all went wrong. Until the police told her that her mother had been murdered. After that she heard the sound of words, but they meant nothing. Jennifer slipped outside herself. Everything else around her fell away in a gray haze. One of the cops got her a glass of water as she sat on the couch in a daze. Something in her would not register the idea that her mother had been murdered. It was too vast, too surreal. She didn't even know what death meant at that moment. It was something from a movie, maybe, and after awhile everything would be ok and she would see her mother again, maybe a little weary and older looking from her experience with death, but all the same she would see her again. She spilled some water on her evening gown, stood and walked into the bathroom and started dabbing at the wet spot. It wouldn't dry and she kept wiping it and wiping it. She started to cry and kept wiping at the wet spot. One of the cops, a woman, went into the bathroom and helped her. She told her that it was just water and it would dry. She led Jennifer, who was still mumbling about the spot, back out to the couch and sat her down. The male cop asked if she had any other family members in town, Jennifer said no. The two cops looked at one another. The male cop looked down after a moment and shook his head. They told her that they needed her to go to the morgue and identify the body. She sat on the couch still muttering about her dress.

“She’s out of it,” the male cop said.

“Ma’am, listen, ok,” The female cop said. “I know this hard but you have to try to pull yourself together. We need you to focus. We need you to come with us and tell us if the person who was...who passed away is someone you know, ok.”

There was a knock at the door. The male cop opened it. It was Delbert looking disheveled and exhausted. He told them who he was and that he was the victim's lawyer. He took them to the side and told them that he had already confirmed the identity of the victim. He gave them his card and told them to contact him instead of the girl if they had anymore questions. They agreed and left. Delbert sat on the couch next to Jennifer and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry sweetheart," he said. "I wish there was something I could do to take away what you're feeling right now."

Jennifer started crying. She leaned into Delbert and rested her forehead on his shoulder and wept. The reality of the situation fell upon her and crushed the tears from inside her.

"It's my fault, Delbert. In a way it's my fault," she said through deep gasp. "I told her I hoped she got what she deserved. I told her God was going to punish her. Oh God, please, I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry."

"No, honey, no. It's not your fault. God didn't kill her. A real living human being killed her because of what she was doing. Because they didn't like her doing what she was doing."

She put her head back on his shoulder and cried some more. She fell asleep that way. Delbert found a blanket, covered her and left.

Templeton didn't go to the funeral. Jennifer, being the only next of kin, gave her a Christian burial and he thought that it was a slap in the face to Meridian. Meridian had left no will or any kind of instructions as to what type of funeral she wanted to have. He had decided not to go the night before. He had called her the day after the murder. He told her he was sorry, she

said thank you and they sat in silence for a good two minutes. He could hear her trying not to let him hear her crying, and he could barely keep himself from crying too.

“I’d like to see if that’s ok,” he said.

She hesitated and he heard her blow her nose. She cleared her voice and said, “Ok. Yes I’d like that right now. But let’s make it tomorrow and some where we’ve both never been and where we can get a drink. I’m going to need to keep his going for another day or so.”

“Keep what going?”

“Getting drunk. I’m sitting here getting drunk on wine trying not to think about anything. I’ve been watching movies for the last six hours drinking white Zinfandel. Delbert is taking care of all the arrangements. I just...” she broke off and he could hear her choking up.

“Ok that’s a good thing if it’s helping, you know. I won’t keep you any longer, ok. I just want to. You know. I wanted to see how you were doing. I just. I was thinking about how you might be feeling and...”

“I know. Thank you.”

“Ok then. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Ok.”

“Where?”

“How about Rocky’s. You know where it’s at?”

“Yeah I’ll see you there. What time?”

“I don’t know. Five?”

“Ok see you there. I miss you.”

She was silent for a second and then she told him she missed him too.

They met at Rocky's Lounge. Jennifer arrived first and sat at a table drinking cheap Merlot. A cloud of smoke lingered throughout the place. It was crowded. The juke box played James Brown. Templeton saw her. She was staring into her wine glass twirling it between her hands by the stem.

"Hi," he said walking up to the table.

She looked and produced a smile. He had never seen her look so tired and out of sorts. Her hair was thrown back in a pony-tail, obviously unwashed and just slept on because it frizzed out at the bottom. She didn't have make-up on and the dark circles under her eyes made her look as if she hadn't slept for five days. She stood up and they hugged awkwardly. He kissed her on the forehead. She smelled like sour milk. She was drunk.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"I've been better of course," she answered, looking down at her glass again.

"You been here long?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"I can tell. I don't know if anyone else can. Not that it matters."

"How do you do this everyday? I feel like I'm about to fade away."

"It takes practice. You sure you're ok?"

"I will be. God willing."

"Has Delbert found out anything else? You know...have they found anyone?"

“Have they found the person who strangled my mother to death, is that what you’re asking? No. No they haven’t.”

A waitress came to the table, Templeton ordered a beer, Jennifer downed the rest of her wine and ordered another one.

“You’re gonna be sick. I hope you don’t have to go to work tomorrow.”

“Yes, I probably will be sick, very sick, but that’s tomorrow. Right now I like the way I feel. And I might do it again tomorrow because I’m off work the whole week. Delbert is taking care of the legal stuff and the Reverend is taking care of the burial stuff. I know what you’re thinking, Templeton and I don’t want to hear it right now, ok. I know I should be doing this stuff, but I can’t. I can’t. I feel weak and useless, but I can’t and I don’t want to think about it. Do you know what I said to her the last time I talked to her? I cursed her, Templeton. I cursed her and told her I hoped God punished her for what she was doing.”

Tears ran down her face and she wiped them with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. The waitress came back with the drinks. She looked at Jennifer then raised her eyebrows at Templeton. Templeton nodded his head to let her know everything was alright. He watched her go back to the bar. She leaned over to the bartender and they both looked at Templeton and Jennifer for a bit then went about their business. Templeton held Jennifer’s hand. Jennifer took a sip of wine.

“It’s not your fault. What you said had nothing, nothing whatsoever to do with what happened. In fact, and I shouldn’t tell you this because it’s all speculation, Delbert thinks Waters had something to do with it.”

Jennifer pulled her hand from his.

“Mr. Waters? Mr. Waters the contractor? Mr. Waters the Reverend’s friend? Oh, Templeton, please. I don’t want to hear this crazy stuff, you and your crazy ideas it’s always the same, please not now. I can’t deal with that kind of craziness right now...”

“I’m just saying it’s not your fault, Jennifer.”

She drank some more of her wine looking at Templeton and shaking her head.

“Listen, I didn’t mean anything except that God didn’t punish your mother for anything. Somebody here on earth in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, killed her. That’s all I was trying to convey. Ok. Forget I said it. I sorry.”

They drank in silence for a moment and looked around the crowd.

“What day is the funeral?” Templeton asked.

“I think on Saturday. I have to call the Reverend to make sure. I’ve been completely out of it and I forget.”

“Why is the Reverend handling it the burial procedures. Doesn’t Delbert know a shaman or something?”

“A shaman?” Jennifer said furrowing her forehead. “The Reverend is doing the burial. The funeral is being held at the church.”

“What? What for?”

“Where else would it be held, Templeton?”

“I don’t know? On a reservation or somewhere like that, I’d think.”

“Templeton, my mother’s funeral is going to be at the Torch of Christ Christian Church and she is going to be buried in Hot Springs cemetery.”

“Jennifer, your mother wasn’t Christian. She was totally about her culture. Why would you not give a Native burial?”

“Templeton, I am a Christian. I am not going to leave my mother’s body and soul in hands of some superstitious old man who prays to the wind and the rain. God took her life and demands her presence. I am giving her the type of burial God would want.”

“Damn you are selfish. I can’t believe you mean what you’re saying. That’s the craziest shit I’ve ever heard. How can you have so much disrespect for her?”

“I’m selfish? She’s not your mother Templeton. Just because you came down here and got buddy, buddy with her doesn’t give you any claim over her. She’s my mother and I’m going to give her the type of burial the Lord God would really want her to have.”

“Maybe, but it’s not the one she would want to have.”

“It’s none of your business, Templeton.”

“Yeah, you’re right, it’s not. And I don’t want to have anything to do with it. It seems vile to me. You have a good life Jennifer *Johnston*. I’ll mourn Meridian *Yellow Thunder* in my own way. Peace, Jennifer,” he said, took out a ten dollar bill, tossed it on the table and walked out of the bar.

The day of the funeral he watched the people from the Torch of Christ Church come out after the service. The Reverend walked on one side of Jennifer and Delbert on the other. Behind the Reverend was the Salamander. A very blonde hair guy walked next to Delbert and next to him was Jennifer’s friend Natalie. The other people, who seemed to stream out of the door he did not recognize, nor did he care to continue looking at them. He hated them all at that moment. He

felt nauseated. Those people didn't even know her, he thought. They were there to grieve for Jennifer, not celebrate Meridian's transformation. He was sure the preacher proclaimed all sorts of dark, solemn things about death. Not once considering Meridian's ideas about the subject. This wasn't a funeral for her. It was a farce, a travesty, a blasphemy, a Christian PR production to show how forgiving they were that they could take one of their enemies and welcome them into their Holy kingdom. His anger flared like the flame of a meteor entering the atmosphere and for a moment, Templeton wished that the resort and every single one of the people coming out of the church would have been blown to hell on New Years Eve. But the rage passed as quickly as the flashing fire of the meteor, and he felt sorry he had thought that. Who the fuck am I to judge these people? he thought. Look at your life, Templeton. What the fuck makes it so special that you feel the need to admonish these other poor human beings. Why is my idea what should be done with her anymore important than theirs? Whatever gets them through their lives is all that matters. I don't have to live, think or even like anything they do and vice versa. I'm just as bad as they are, or worse because I recognize it and still do it. Meridian, for all intents purposes is gone from *this* life. Let Jennifer grieve, or whatever she's doing to alleviate her pain the way she wants to do it. I'll grieve my way. Who cares what they do with her body. That was only part of her, and if the other part of her continues to exist in any way shape or form, I'm sure it doesn't care a bit what's going on here. He followed the procession to the cemetery to find out where it was. He didn't enter with them. He drove pass it and went back to his hotel room. He wanted to get away from people as soon as possible.

After it turned dark he drove back to the cemetery. He stood in front of the small grave marker. A deep sadness overtook him, and he felt the tears coming, but he took out the little package he had, knelt in front of the grave and unwrapped it. Inside of it was an eagle feather,

small packages of corn meal, tobacco, and sage and in a little tin canister with a bit of charcoal and amber. These were things that Meridian had told him held special powers. He couldn't remember exactly what each item was supposed to symbolize or mean or what order if any they were to be used or even what the ritual was actually intended for, but he knew the act itself felt right. He took the charcoal and lit it. Once it caught he placed a bit of amber on top of it. Then he put the rest of the ingredients on top of that and fanned the charcoal with the eagle feather until a strong smoke swirled up from the pile. He closed his eyes and sat there. He didn't know what he was supposed to say, or think. He felt embarrassed. Then he thought about what Meridian had told him about when she and Cleveland had met. They had seen Smoky Robinson and the Miracles, so Templeton sat on her grave and sang *What's so Good about Goodbye*. After the smoke died down Templeton gathered the ashes in his hand and blew them into the night air. He didn't know why he did it, it just felt right. He placed the eagle feather in the ground by the shaft right in front of the grave marker, kissed the tips of his fingers and touched the marker and left.

He was eating beef Lo Mein, a PBS special on whales was on the television, but he was thinking about what all the people who had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars planning for Armageddon were thinking about and what they were doing with all their survival ware. Part of him felt smug and arrogant and wanted to point the finger and laugh and sneer at every idiot that had bought into the game. That part wanted to stand on a mountain top and preach about being naïve and being slaves to other's whims, about not having the courage to live their own lives and feeling comfortable being cogs in a decaying machine. He entertained different scenarios in which he could do it, but he soon got bored and disgusted with his arrogance. He was tired of being angry, tired of hating, tired of being afraid of vague, intangible things, tired of struggling to be something, of trying to escape from not being something, tired of thinking, tired of being,

period. He felt fatigued. His body felt like it was a million pounds and his head like it was stuffed with old, wet rags. He was reclining on the bed feeling like he could sleep for years, when he was startled by a loud knock at the door. It was Delbert.

“So what do you know about the little scenario that was supposed to take place New Years Eve?” he said walking in pass Templeton. He stood in front the desk with his arms crossed and looked at him. Templeton closed the door and sat back on the bed.

“Well?” Delbert said.

“Why what’s going on?”

“Templeton, I am now the defense lawyer for Albert Alvarez and Charly Running Cloud. Christopher J Young and Peter Sanchez are dead. They were shot at approximately 7pm in the desert by FBI agents who were alerted to the fact, because of evidence that was found on their person. The Feds knew that they were going to blow up the first phase of God’s Land Resort. What do you know about this? And who is this white girl Sandy? These questions are important to my client’s case.”

Templeton told him everything. Graham seemed satisfied, and told him that he would keep him out of the case unless something really hairy came along. Templeton shrugged. Que sera sera, he said. Graham stood up to leave.

“So they think Sandy set them up?” Templeton asked.

“That’s what Albert thinks. Charly thought you might be in on it, but I think he was just blowing off steam. But don’t talk to anybody about this and stick around, ok.”

“Seems I don’t have a choice.”

“Yeah well it doesn’t really matter now anyway. My source who was going to prove that he forged the blue prints was found dead the day after News Years in a car crash on I-25. I had talked to him the night before, that’s why we came looking for you and Jennifer, and we were going to meet the next day at location. I showed up he didn’t. The cops didn’t find anything in the car except his body, and an empty bottle of tequila. The bastards won, Templeton. They all died for nothing. I’ll be in touch,” Graham said and left.

Templeton went back to his food, but he had lost his appetite. He closed the Styrofoam box and threw it in the trash can. He turned off the TV and went to the bar. He sat alone again and thought about Young and the old men. He wondered if he could really call them friends. He wondered what they had come to mean in his life. He didn’t know if he had ever really had a friend, except maybe Patience, which of course he had fucked up. He loved Jennifer, but he didn’t consider her a friend, she had been his girlfriend, not a friend friend. It had always seemed to him that there had never been any deep connection between the people that he had hung out with. There were always reasons of course, usually intoxication of some sort, but he had never felt any deep connection to anyone, someone that he would seek out without any reason besides wanting to be around them because he enjoyed their company. He had always preferred his own company to anyone else’s. And he had never felt lonely, he had never felt it was wrong in any sort of way. It was just how he was. He didn’t particularly like people really. He wasn’t misanthropic, it was just that he didn’t understand them. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do with them, he had always looked at other people and himself from the sideline. As if he were looking in and only watching. He felt this separation, but it never bothered him and he could never understand why Patience would get so infuriated with him when he never wanted to do anything, or why his Aunt Rebecca had always made him go to other kid’s parties and get

together when he never wanted to go. He had fun when he got there and he mixed in well, but he always felt as if it were someone else having fun not him. And so he was upset that Young and Sanchez had gotten killed and the old men arrested, but he didn't feel it too deeply.

A few weeks after the funeral Jennifer and Shawn sat at the Reverend's table with The Reverend, his wife, Waters and his wife, Douglas Franks and his wife and Natalie and her boyfriend. The other tables where sat other members of the congregation and the business community sat.

It was Jennifer's birthday and the Reverend wanted to do something extra special for her because of her loss. He had rented a dining hall and had the catering company cook two standing rib roast, two pheasants and four salmon with all the trimmings. Before the main course they served fresh green salad and French onion soup, because it was Jennifer's favorite. For dessert he had ordered six different types of cheese cake. A string quartet played sacred songs in the background. For after dinner, The Reverend had gotten tickets to a play put on by another Christian church in Albuquerque.

After dinner the Reverend, Waters and Hines presented Jennifer with a gold framed picture of her mother. Jennifer wept.

Templeton stayed in Truth or Consequences for another two months after all the smoke had cleared from around his name. The police were no closer to finding who had murdered Meridian, but had cleared Templeton off their list of suspects almost immediately, and Delbert Graham never even had to mention Templeton's name in connection with his case. At first it had been because he didn't know what else to do. A whole section of his life seemed to have just been ripped from him for no reason at all. Every person he had come into contact with in Tor C simply seemed to vanish as if they had only been illusions. And perhaps they had been, he thought. Perhaps everything that he had thought was substantial was only an illusion that he had created. So the first two weeks he just drifted around the town trying to avoid contact with people. He developed a routine. He would go to White Coyote Cafe in the morning and have breakfast, and then he would go to the library and read until he got hungry. Then he would go and eat a little diner named Lucy's across the street from the library then go back and read some more. In the first week had read *Hocus Pocus* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn and half of *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami. In the late afternoon, if it wasn't too cold, he would sit in Ralph Edwards Park and drink a 24 ounce can of Bud. He would then go eat dinner at Lucy's and either go to the motel with a bottle of Cab, or go to a little dive bar a block up the street and read in a booth in the corner. Then at midnight he would go back to the motel and read some more until he fell asleep.

He always quit drinking before the urge for coke set in. He never had an urge for it until he got drunk. But, even though one night he had had a bit too much to drink and he felt like doing some he didn't pursue it. He didn't want to wake up with the feeling like his brain had

been scrubbed with an aluminum scratch pad. It was a feeling he was glad he had not felt in over two weeks.

One day instead of going to the library he decided to drive. He had no idea where he was driving to; he just got on I-25 and drove south. He ended up in El Paso on Mesa street at a bar called the King's X and hung out with a grizzled old white boy who played drums in a blues band. He sat and drank with the drummer who unabashedly accepted the shots of Tequila Rose Templeton kept buying for him. He closed the bar down and the drummer told him if he came back the next day he could hear his band play. Templeton told him might. But he didn't. He stayed at a Howard Johnsons and left back to Tor C the next morning about ten. He decided to stop in Las Cruces and eat something. He stopped at a little stand and ate some gorditas. Then he walked around a bit. He found a used book store and looked for Cleveland's book but couldn't find it. The owner said he had never heard of it. He bought a copy of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*. The store next door was part of the book shop and sold used CDs. He bought fifteen CDs including Beethoven, Vivaldi, Pink Floyd, Charles Mingus, Sly and the Family Stone, Billy Holiday and several others. He walked across the street to a Walgreen's bought a portable CD player with headphones and bunch of batteries and drove back to Tor C listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* and *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*.

Just after Salem he decided to stop and just get out and walk around. It was a warm day and he wanted to walk. He pulled off onto a service road, parked, jumped a length of fence that stretched as far as he could see in both directions, constructed out of three, rusted strands of barbed wire and rotting wood. There were thin cirrus clouds, poised above the distant rocky face of the San Andreas mountains, in a deep aqua-marine sky that spread out above and in front of him for forever. A thin, cool breeze blew through the tops of clumps of gramma grass. Scaly

trunk yucca plants sat big and round in the landscape amongst the tall, powder colored thin lengths of the white ratany, the urchin-like desert spoon, and sage. The ground was hard and brown, but bone-white stones were scattered in piles throughout. He heard the forlorn hooting of a mourning dove in the distance and watched as a jack rabbit sprint away from him from under a clump of grass. He walked until he could not see the service road. But he did not feel the fear he would have normally felt. He felt relaxed, at ease, peaceful. He walked to the summit of a hill and looked around in all directions. The desert spread out before him made him feel light and airy as if he could dissolve into the cool air and stretch across the land forever, expanding but never breaking apart, only covering and inching his way into and over the big things of life as well as the thin, dark crevices, and experiencing every little thing that happened on the planet like the air did. He squatted down and watched a line of red ants come in and out of their colony by the hundreds. Among them smaller, black beetle-like creatures, that he had no idea what they were, scurried seemingly aimless between the ants who took no notice of the creatures. He was excited that he saw the little beetles and that he didn't know what they were. He got on his hands and knees and crawled around the hill looking for other things he had never seen. Odd shaped rock, a cork screw shaped, emerald green, blade of grass underneath a stone, deer mouse shit, the downy under feather of some type of bird caught in the middle of a early blooming cactus flower, a small sun bleached particle he imaged to be the humerus bone of a kangaroo rat, even though he didn't know if they had humerus bones or even lived in this part of the vast stretches of the Chihuahuan Desert. He noticed the sun was getting close to setting behind the San Andreas. He figured he should leave before it got dark and he lost his way. On the way back he listened to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and thought he finally understood the piece.

His routines disappeared. He quit planning his day and tried to eat somewhere different as much as he could in a small place like Truth or Consequences. He would go to Cruces at the spur of the moment and see a play or just go watch a movie. He even went to El Paso again to see the drummer play. He lived this way for a good month until one day he woke and decided it was time to leave Truth or Consequences. There was no reason per se. He woke up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, brushed his teeth and while relieving himself the thought that he needed to go just popped into his head. So he took a walk around town. Stopped at White Coyote Cafe and said good bye to the wait staff he had grown to know. He stopped at Lucy's and ate lunch. He went in and saw the librarians he meet and stopped in at the Hornet, had a beer with Ernie, asked him to tell Pavel goodbye and left Mandy his copy of a Mozart CD with Serenade No. 13 in G major and Piano Concerto No. 27 in B flat major on it. On the way back to his motel room he stopped at Jennifer's house and left a letter he had written while eating a Lucy's. Then at five o'clock the next morning he packed all of his belongings back into his truck and left Truth or Consequences on I-25 going north.

He pulled off the interstate in Raton. It had started to rain and he felt tired. He pulled into a Loaf and Jug and bought some barbeque potato chips, a Coke, a bottle of cheap Cabernet and a Snickers bar. He saw a motel across the street and decided to stay there for the night. Inside the room the laboring motor from the heater droned incessantly. It was the type of sound that disappeared audibly after awhile and appeared sensationally in ones thoughts as an unknown element, or an obstacle to a conclusion of a problem one is working through. The heat came out in a thin sheet through the louvered vent cover. It sent out enough heat that Templeton had to take his shirt off. He sat on the window sill in a tank top and looked around the room. His

typewriter sat on the same style of faux-oak desk that had been in the motel he had just come from. The same arm chair with the fuzzy style upholstery was pushed up to the desk, and next to the typewriter an unopened bottle of wine, Cleveland's journal and book on top of the manuscript. His duffle bag was thrown on the bed, the wrinkled arm of a shirt stuck out of the top. He opened the stiff, heavy curtains to look out the window but it was fogged over with layer of precipitation due to the heat in the room. He drew a large circle in the liquid then drew two lines that intersected the circle both horizontally and vertically, then drew a smaller circle in the middle, like the cross hatches in a telescopic gun sight. He looked through the blurry center, but it began to fog over again. He wiped away the whole image with his forearm and left a long, blurry streak in the direction he wiped. He wiped his arm on his pants. The outside world peeked into the room through a wavy swath of clear film. Templeton got up and got a towel from the bathroom, opened the bottle of wine, wiped the window, leaving small fuzzy strands of terry cloth pasted to the window, and sat in the window sill staring outside.

Across the parking lot, where only two other vehicles rested, and behind the Loaf and Jug across the street, Templeton looked at the blue-gray sky of the approaching twilight over the New Mexico mountains. He reached in his pocket to get a napkin to wipe his nose and felt a coin. He pulled it out. It was the coin that Meridian had given him. He looked at it. He had never really looked at it before. It had the head of a conquistador on one side and eagle with a snake in its mouth on the other. It was a bit tarnished. He reached in his other pocket for a napkin, spit on it and tried to shine the coin. A bit of the gray, dullness came off. He flipped it and caught it in his palm. It came up heads. He reached for the wine bottle, but decided he didn't feel like getting drunk. Wiping the steam from the window and intermittently becoming aware of the drone of the

heater, he flipped the coin over and over, the result both heads and tails an equal amount of times, watched the sky turn to night before he got off the window sill and closed the curtains.

Vita

Trent Hudley graduated from Metropolitan State College with a Bachelor's of Art in Creative Writing. He has recently finished the Bi-Lingual Master's of Fine Arts program at the University of Texas at El Paso. He is currently working on his first novel, but has published several short stories in various journal both on-line and print versions. He was co-editor for the *Rio Grande Review* from 2007-2008. He has recently been honored by his peers and new editors of the *Review* as a featured writer in the current issue of the journal.