

Michael DeWolfe
Po Box 31029
3980 Shelbourne St.
Victoria BC Canada
V8N 3J6

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RAGNAROK

The Twilight of Western Civilization

By

Michael DeWolfe

PROLOGUE

"It was Bor's three sons... who founded a special family of gods..." - Man & Myth on The Creation Of The Gods

A bright spring day cast light on to the field behind the high school. Grade eight was a grueling test of social acumen. Three lanky thirteen year olds sat on the grass eating their lunch and talking. Easter break was a week in the future and they were running on vapor until then.

James was a slender, almost feminine lad. Beside him was Larry: an average kid wearing old jeans and a pilling polo shirt. The trio was rounded out by Eric. Eric was the tallest kid in school but refused to play basketball, calling all sports, "lame." The three of them clung together, outcasts from the norm. They didn't do drugs, they couldn't get a date and none of their parents were rich. But the three were kindred spirits; kids who were rebels in the truest sense of the word. They bucked the school establishment and the ersatz order of their peers.

Together they shared happy days of the school routine, they hung out at each other's homes and played video games and watched movies. Life was good and they pledged themselves to stay friends for their entire life...

CHAPTER ONE

"It was a firm belief of the northern nations that a time would come when all the visible creations... would be destroyed..." - Bullfinch's Mythology on Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods.

Like a lion pacing his cage, he went through the routines. But this lion had no teeth to lose-- no claws to be snipped. To those who remembered, he was Lawrence Davis: Larry to most.

The lobby was empty. The odor of asbestos and rancid butter permeated the walls. All three shows were feeding Hollywood pap to the masses. A mild key tapping came from the girl at the concession stand balancing her receipts. Outside, two of the ushers played hackey-sack out on the street. They just finished a joint in the men's room upstairs. The ushers' official excuse for being up there was to unplug a toilet. The theater was an aged remnant of a forgotten era: marble pillars, brass railings and decorative ceilings. Wallpaper peeled from where the walls met the ceiling. The decorative crafting above was yellow from age and ancient cigarette smoke. The tiles at the front door and in the washrooms were chipped and cracked. The seats in the theater were more duct tape than velour. The projectionists disallowed drinks in the projection room because none of the electrical outlets had grounds. The poor design of the building put the men's room above the electrical room. On this night, the overflow of a toilet shorted out the main junction box and shut down the theater for twenty minutes. It forced a complete refund on three packed houses.

The shows ended and the throngs of people milled out. Larry and his fellow ushers toured the theaters. The floors were strewn with popcorn and dried pop-- the leavings of thirty, forty and fifty year olds. Since age eighteen-- six long years-- it was Larry's task to clear up the popcorn and assorted debris.

He changed wordlessly in the communal change room. It was the end of the shift and his co-workers crowded him for space. The girls stripped down their panties and bras and he did not notice-- why torture himself? The girls didn't care; Larry was too tame to be a threat, too mediocre to be an object of desire. In the hot summer months, one of the girls would forego wearing a bra. Larry ignored what he saw for he could do nothing about the desires within him. After all, his favorite, Fanny, was not working this night.

Larry was not an ugly person-- not even unattractive. People, relatives and some friends could not fathom why Larry's life did not fall into place. He was acceptable, clean cut dirty blond hair, average features, none too severe or too recessed. He was five-foot-eight and average in weight only having to work on excess weight three times in his life. Only when agitated, did his voice falter and stammer; apart from that, he was a fine orator. Of all these qualities, Larry lacked only one trait: success.

The walk home was empty. People walked into the heart of town from the parkades, destined to waste away their night in some club or bar. Skinny punks in leather jackets finished off smokes outside of video arcades; their girlfriends wore layers of make-up and coontail purses, like members of some unspoken sisterhood. Two

kids in leather and cotton jackets, with their baseball caps on backwards, eyed Larry. It was part of a ritual. He saw a number of these people more often than he saw his friends or his family.

Larry heard a commotion behind him. In the intersection, three toughs took turns kicking a boy of their age. At the crosswalk, a small crowd gathered to watch. No one helped. Larry went back to get a ringside seat.

"Oh look!" said a girl near Larry. She motioned to a police car, fast on its way, its lights flashing. The brand new cruiser closed on the intersection. The bruisers stopped the beating to contemplate escape. Police sirens wailed out and the police cruiser sped past the scene, almost running the delirious victim down in the process. Members of the crowd were confused, their mouths agape. In all the confusion, the casualty ran off with his pursuers close behind.

With the excitement over, Larry continued his walk home. Walking past Pizza's Pizza, Larry recognized the same police car from earlier. Coffee time.

Larry came to his building. The elevator had broken down a week ago and was still in need of a repair. Management said a repair was impossible given his money situation. Larry, at his third flight of stairs, wondered what would be said if he refused to pay rent given his money situation. In his suite, Larry shut the door to the world. he played with the rabbit ears to retrieve a fuzzy image on the TV. He went into the kitchen to set out food for his cat. The sound of the can opener roused his pet from its slumber. Tsitka was his pride and joy. Once or twice Larry

pondered escape, but the thought of abandoning his tabby, Tsitka, held him back. Larry grabbed two pieces of aging bread slapped them liberally with sticky, raspberry jam.

He watched an hour of television before turning in. First, the news. It was dominated by stories from America: shootings, cults and children being abused. Watching a story from L.A., Larry recalled a friend's tale of her trip down there. The locals ignored the reports of murder and mutilation because they were so common. The announcer's voice was pure and without impediment. The next story was about South America: "...Warning America of his power in the region, Peruvian strongman Antonio Corvez today..." Larry clicked it to another station.

A young kid, about five years his junior, was being interviewed. Police hovered in the background. The kid spoke of the virtues of the police force and how they saved his life. He rolled up his shirt and exposed an angry, baseball sized bruise where his heart was. He thanked the police for shooting him in the chest with a plastic bullet round rather than the standard--lethal-- metal incarnations.

He turned the channel. Images of slums and ruined buildings; shots of the homeless and of Depression era footage of soup kitchens. The announcer blared out, "A Nation in Bankruptcy." Images changed to an anonymous urban setting with a reporter in the center of the shot. "Declaring bankruptcy: thousands of people in this nation go bankrupt every year. Massed with insurmountable debts and pressures it becomes the only alternative. But not only people have debts. Entire nations now are billions of dollars in

debt. Billions in debt and millions more everyday. What if insurmountable debts and pressures push entire nations into bankruptcy?" More doom and gloom. Larry turned the channel and his mind blanked out to the flickering of empty entertainment.

Close to falling asleep, he realized it was Friday night. Elsewhere, people were out enjoying themselves. Elsewhere.

He was awoken at six am by the phone. He answered it. A voice said, "Mister Lawrence Davis? This is equifare. We are still waiting for last month's six hundred dollar payment on your student loan. You're a month behind already." They were demanding prompt payment for a student loan he never benefited from. After two years of listening to the rambling to self-important instructors and amassing a great debt, he left school to enter the 'working' world.

"I only make four-fifty every two weeks. I need some more time."

"Mister Davis, we have given you time. You leave us little choice; without a payment into the office within two days, Mr. Davis, we will have to guarnsee your wages."

"I can't afford it. I'll lose my apartment."

"I'm sorry, that's not my problem, Mr. Davis. When can we expect payment?"

"My next payday is in almost two weeks..."

"Then I take it that you were just paid?"

"It went to rent."

"Then please make some arrangements to pay. Your current situation is unacceptable."

Thus began another day...

CHAPTER TWO

"He is handsome and well made, but of a very fickle mood and most evil disposition." - Bullfinch's Mythology Of Loki and His Progeny.

James woke up in his Miami hotel room. It was past ten. Morning light and the distant sound of surf came through the balcony door. James felt the vague sensation of a hangover not bad enough to call a hangover. He thought back through the events of the night before...

James fell asleep with the vision of Lara in his mind. She was getting dressed in front of the bed, silhouetted in the predawn light. Eager to depart, she stuffed her bra in her purse rather than put it on...

Earlier, James talked Lara up to his hotel room after hotel's coffee shop closed. Upon first arriving, James had hidden all of the chairs in the closet, leaving only the bed to sit on. Lara discovered the absence of chairs and sat nervously at the foot of the bed. James pulled a bottle of wine from the bar fridge and brought over two glasses.

She asked, "You've got the room to yourself? Where does your friend sleep?"

"My buddy snores like you wouldn't believe. So, he got the next room..." James paused and listened to the silence, garnering Lara's complete attention in the bargain. "You can even hear him. Listen." James pulled himself up and put his ear near the wall adjoining the two suites. She crawled up the bed to share in his discovery. A faint noise bled through the wall. Indeed he did not

lie, someone was snoring with enough volume to pierce lumber and gyproc.

James looked to Lara, noting his find. She was gorgeous, single. Actually single; not a woman on a last fling with a sloppy boyfriend at home working a forklift while she fucked her way across the tropics. She looked back at him and smiled. "Why did you ask me up here, James?"

"For some wine."

She asked, "Is that all?" He wondered why people did this dance: the guessing, the games, the feints and dodges. This was no time to question human nature, not with a find like this almost in his grasp.

He felt the moment for action was at hand. He touched her chin and guided her to him for a kiss. The kiss lingered; their mouths opened and they darted their tongues into each other's mouths. Each was so drunk they didn't notice the smell of liquor and cigarettes pervading their breath. He held her close and ran his fingers up and down her back. He grabbed her by the rear and pushed her pelvis closer. She flexed and against him and relaxed. She moved down him and undid the buttons on his shirt and slicked his chest hairs with wet, tonguey kisses. She looked up once or twice and let out a wanton giggle. She opened his jeans and reached into his shorts. She grabbed the head of his penis and squeezed it rhythmically.

James sat up and looked at her to silently convey his wishes. He pulled her top over her head and she took off her bra to reveal small, firm breasts. He lunged at her, kissing and

sucking on her nipples. She laid back to enjoy it, cooing and giving out slight moans. James moved down her torso. He pulled off her jeans and dove in between her legs. She moaned and whimpered louder, responding to the ferocity of his tonguing...

He met Lara at an open air night club.

It was a beautiful, clear night, still warm after midnight. Lara was confident no cops were lay in wait so she was pushing her jeep for all it was worth. James stood in front seat. The wind blew in his hair. His life was on the edge of a knife. Things got no better this...

For James, the adventure was coming to a close. His flight left on this day. At home, Geena-- his wife, awaited him. A wife he married to make certain his leash on her was never broken. She loved him beyond all doubt. He knew it because of his pledge to leave her with the slightest provocation. She had a deluge of loser boyfriends; they beat her or messed around behind her back; or turned gay and waited until too late to tell her. James was a great puzzle that grew into an obsession and later a passion. James hunted after her then dropped her before their first kiss. When she was with another boyfriend, he pursued her endlessly: flowers to her door; notes on her car; attention unbound. When they finally got together, James' affections would wane from time to time. To stem this, Geena's affections waxed in response. He was never outwardly cruel or manipulative. He never called her a diminutive in even the most pitched of arguments. All this considered, Geena's fate was sealed. Her fate was to be with James for as long as he saw fit.

James' job at the Reihold's department also waited for him. Every hour at Reihold's was like running a gauntlet. The sole task in his job was patience; and a willingness to be badgered, interrupted and annoyed. It was irony: the same job that taxed his good nature afforded him a stable life; that stable life allowed him little escapes; those little escapes made him more aware of his reality and his misery back at work. A friend, Eric, held a similar job to James. When they talked, Eric put his decidedly alternate spin on the occupation. He likened the customers to animals without consciousness; or, as humans behaving like plants, closing on clerks in a straight line-- ignorant of racks, counters and fellow customers. Never did he see them as people with lives and individuality. On a glimmer of deep reflection, James came up with two theories: Either, the entire job was so dull and empty that to both of them the people they encountered in their jobs were objects-- two dimensional. Or, the consumer mentality that made everything in a business consumable also made consumers treat staff like resources or products, no more important than good lighting, clear price tags or muzak.

James shook of the edges of his fatigue and hangover and filled his luggage in preparation for home.

CHAPTER THREE

"Night Elves were a different kind of creature
...they avoided the sun as their most deadly enemy... and
their dwelling places were subterranean caves and clefts."

- Bullfinch's Mythology on Night Elves

Apoethothesis' O'Fortuna beat Orff's remix into the club. Lights splattered the walls and shot blinding darts into the eyes of the patrons. The music thrummed in the chest and resonated through the skull. Smoke hovered high and dry ice hovered low.

Eric Penzance sat on his stool and gripped the table ahead of him like a life preserver. He was fried. The night started early with a plunge into altered states. First, the pot hit him, clearing his head like an adept copy editor, snipping out the difficult bits and amplifying the obvious. His Friday night ritual was in full swing. He went to Val's house and got stoned. More friends arrived; they ordered Szechuan takeout; and drank whiskey, vodka and sambuca in deadly sorties.

Val was Eric's best friend; far more a confidant or a kindred soul than his friends from his youth. She was a contradiction: in love with comic books and Star Trek, Nietzsche and Holst. It was a schismed tapestry that Val wove into popularity.

A blurred cab ride got them into town. Eric stood in the lineup in front of Schism with his friends. Most of the world mumbled at the edge of his senses. Occasionally, he caught a

line of conversation and blurted out a reply. The doorman saw how gone Eric and his friends were but let them in just the same. They were regulars and easily remembered. Eric stood a stick-insect six foot tall, almost like a mast amid sails in his loose cottons. His hair was a dyed black and close-cropped. Cloud or shine, Eric wore his red, box rimmed sunglasses. On sunny spring days, he wore a black bowler.

Val stood beside Eric when not dancing. She was his best friend. He lost his virginity to her age seventeen but the relationship fizzled after his lack of interest in sex. They took their first semester of university together. Eric fancied himself an artist. He got into the fine arts faculty on a very thin portfolio and a thick patch of excuses. By Christmas he was out, marked incomplete by every instructor.

Val was short and heavy, falling short of obesity. Her natural carrot-red hair looked fake when set against so many fake-blondes, fake-redheads and fake-blackhairs at the club. Her affinity for black clothes gave her skin a pale, pearly gleam.

Val danced with Jonathan, one of her friends from work. Eric sat at the table, trying to hold it all together. A warm hand glided across his back to stop on his shoulder. The gesture made Eric feel calmer almost sedate. He looked over to see a man beside him. He was in his forties, wrinkles mapped his age. He had a permed coif and immaculate clothes. He was drenched in Obsession and his breath smelled of tequila sunrises. "Did your friends leave you?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Eric."

"Nice name. Eric. Are you single?"

Eric giggled. His stepfather would leave the room when he giggled. Before Eric could answer, Val came up and put her arm around Eric. Purposefully, she squeezed him close and pinched off the man's fingers in the bargain. "Did you miss me?" She asked. The man extracted his hand and went on his way.

Val found the ability to focus anger and chagrin against her friend. "Jesus, Eric. Watch out."

He gave her a silly, glazed look. "Why? What?"

"He was trying to pick you up, Eric. You don't want that. Do you?"

When Eric was this gone he lived only in the present. It was his grand escape. No thoughts existed of his lame job at the theater; no thoughts of himself as a black sheep in a family of mediocres; no thoughts of a life full of adventure but desolate of spirit. In this state of delirium everything happily confused him. "Why? What?"

Val snorted. "Just watch it, Eric. You're really fucked up. So just watch it." She gave him a stern look and headed back to the dance floor. She kept a free eye on Eric.

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The moron in the firefly revved his engine. Keith 's bug flared in reply. The highway ahead beckoned them. Red changed

to green and tires squealed. The engine of the volkswagon rebelled but continued to propel them. The bug pulled ahead.

Richard looked out the side window. "Keep it up, man! We're doing it!"

The bug distanced itself from the nonplussed firefly. Victory was theirs.

"Cruise a bit before we park," suggested Richard.

"Sure." The bug putted down the tributary to Douglas Street. Kids were assembled in the movie lineups. They milled about outside the arcade. The scum awaited the buses back to their posh suburbs.

Keith turned his faithful vehicle for the parking lot next to Cabbies Cabaret. It was always busy-- a vehicular beehive. A lineup languished outside the nightclub. Richard and Keith parked and disembarked. Richard and Keith were of similar appearance. Their hair was long in the front and buzzed at the back; baseball caps were on backwards; loose jeans; big leather and cotton jackets-- Richard's sported an eightball, Keith's had a variety of flags encircling the Mondetta emblem, none of which he could name or locate on a map. Richard was average in height, clean features and just over eighteen years old. Keith was a little shorter, a few vestiges of acne remaining and two months from his nineteenth birthday and legality.

Three of their friends stood apart from the line up-- two girls with done up faces, looses jeans and tight tops; and Edwardo, a Portuguese kid with the reputation for being

cool. Edwardo had clean skin, a lean body and impeccable curly black hair. Richard and Keith exchanged pleasantries.

Keith asked, "What's the deal?"

Edwardo replied, " They had a crackdown a few days ago so they're paranoid. They're IDing everyone. We don't have a chance."

Richard asked, "So what do you guys want to do?"

"I dunno," one of the girls returned.

"Let's see if we can get someone to boot for us." Keith suggested.

"I got a better idea," Edwardo said in own cool way. He gave the lot of them a devilish look that filled the girls with expectation and misplaced trust. "Back in my Rabbit I got some first class chemo weed. Maybe later cruise around town and see what's happening."

Everyone was quick to accept Edwardo's suggestion. They followed him to the shade windowed, magwheeled, lowriding Rabbit Edwardo called his own.

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Eric had stopped drinking and-- by comparison to earlier in the night-- he was sobering up. Jonathan was exiting his Goth phase and entering a middle-of-the-road alternate look. He still wore his black leather jacket and steel toed army boots. He and Eric trundled down the street, loaded and delirious after their night of debauchery. Val took up the rear several paces behind them. They had their Cokes; their next stop was the bank machine.

Eric went to crack open his bottle of Coke. Jonathan stopped him. "Why?" Eric asked.

"It's two-thirty: just trust me." Val took heed of Jonathan's cryptic demand and left her plastic bottle of pop sealed.

They filed into tiny bank machine space annexed from the bank. Jonathan was first in line, Eric was second, Val was third, and another man was fourth. He had tailed them from the store. Jonathan and Eric took their turns at the bank machine. They milled about as Val performed her withdrawal. The fourth man acted. "I'll take the money," he said. He held out one hand and boasted a switchblade in the other. He was one of those scruffy, streetwise types: not too scummy to be a street person, not at all clean enough to be a part of society. Jonathan had a reputation for a bad trait: fearlessness. Now came the logic of why he hadn't cracked open his bottle of Coke. He swung his full pop bottle catching the punk in the cheek. Val turned to witness the scene. The punk lunged with his knife. Jonathan slipped out of the way hitting a wall in the process. By instinct he swung up a heavy boot and caught the thief in the stomach. Val screamed. Eric watched, confused. Jonathan swung down his pop bottle again, catching his enemy behind the ear. Val looked but couldn't find an in-- a place to put in a punch. Eric realized what was happening. He grabbed a handful of jacket and gave the punk a gleeful push into the glass window. The glass cracked a spider web shape and was left smeared with blood. The punk was on all fours, his head was down, bleeding like a spigot. He moaned and tried in failure to rally himself.

Eric was still a little confused. Jonathan stood there, ready for round two. Val grabbed both of them and gave them was sharp tug into reality. "C'mon! Let's go!" She knew better than to wait around for the police. Teenaged weekends on downtown street corners taught her to avoid the police at every turn. Her friends obeyed and the fled.

As they ran into the night, Eric said aloud, "Did you see me? Did you?" Then, Eric broke his run and paused into intropection. "Hey, do you think someone called an ambulance for that guy?"

At first, Val couldn't believe what Eric just said. But this was Eric: his unpredictability was only surpassed by irrationality. "Don't fucking worry about it. He reeked of booze. They'll probably get to him, toss him into the drunk tank and patch him up in the morning. Besides he deserved it. Fuck, he deserved worse."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Death is a black bird. Insignificant when it flies overhead, it is all encompassing when it strikes." - The Second Book of Thoughts.

On his way to work, Larry noticed a pigeon sitting on the street. One of its wings was broken, laying flat against the asphalt. His first impulse was to help it. He decided to instead let nature take its course. Larry drew an odd simile between himself and the bird: broken and laying out in the open-- doomed by what came next. Did people avoid Larry to let nature take its course? A car drove by him on a rendezvous with the little creature. Larry felt sick at the thought of the bird's fate. He dared not look back.

He got into work and dressed for duty. Fanny greeted him and went about her job. Her full name was Francine Elizabeth Albert. Fanny was a spontaneous girl: straight blonde hair, luminous, impish eyes. She was both unattainable and irresistible-- like a rainbow. Something in her eyes made her gaze hypnotic and unique. She was two years older than Larry and already had to fight the nags of age: a constant battle with weight, lines under the eyes that lingered too long after late nights and all the other minutiae that gathered momentum with time. For the first few months of her time at the theater, she was called "Francis" but after a call from her father asking to speak to "Fanny," her appellation changed.

Larry's boss, the overtly trendy Leo, approached Larry.

He chewed a massive wad of peppermint gum. In mid-chew, he said, "Your little friend, Eric, called in sick. I guess your date's off." The girls within earshot giggled. Leo displayed a shit-eating Cheshire cat grin and bobbed his head in lieu of a guffaw. Larry slinked off to his duties. This was doubly a hell shift. Leo worked as did Steele. Steele was Hitler's idea of perfection: tall; fit; blonde; straight, white teeth; clear, blue eyes; and a good dresser. He was also the girls' idea of perfection. He had money piped to him from his family back east. They were geniuses in business and the stock market; Steele's family name popped up in the Financial section from time to time. They sponsored his schooling, his lifestyle and his excuse for an acting career. Fanny mooned over him for a while until his parade of girlfriends disheartened her. When Steele worked, the staff were brisk with Larry, not wanting to waste their time on him. But on this day, a small fortune did shine. From the front door, Leo called to Steele: "Hey! I'm going to grab a burger at Rotten Ronny's. You coming or what?" Steele gave chase; they jogged out of the lobby to Larry's relief.

This was Sunday afternoon. That was WAT day: World Adventure Tours. WAT films prepared a view of far off lands for those who had not seen the world, had never sensed adventure nor could survive a tour. The lion's share of the audience were senior citizens. Aging white dinosaurs-- they wore fine, conservative clothes, drove big cars and lived in good homes in the stately old parts of town. In short, their lifetime bore the fruit of comfort in their old age. They readied the legacy of a world of scant

prospects for the young. The film had an intermission and after filed out and in again, they left one behind. An old, frail man came to Larry. He recognized this man: having greeted him on similar occasions and talking from time to time. The man opened with, "Dear me. I'm a little late for it, aren't I?" In the past, Larry exchanged words with this old man-- or an old man like him. Larry often interposed people, lumping them together like ants in a colony or cattle in a herd.

Every time, these conversations went from word go. Larry lost track of how many times he had filled him in on his dreary state. It was an audit of Larry's lot in life.

Larry was in one of his miserable moods and these bits of dialogue nagged at him. Still, amiability was his greatest job skill. He made a good show of it. "Yes, sir. It's gone back in."

"I suppose I'll just wait..." A pregnant moment separated the old man's comments. "Have you worked here long, son?" He was working hard to achieve kindness towards Larry. The efforts were repelled with indifference.

"A few years," Larry replied.

"Married are you?" The dinosaur knew how to work Larry's buttons.

"No." Larry felt a need to explain-- to excuse his failure. "I haven't been able to settle down yet."

The old man nodded but only half understood. "I used to work here when I was your age. But back then, I was married."

"Mhm," was the only reply Larry dare offer from the host of responses that loomed in his mind.

"Don't feel so bad about it, lad. We had it lucky. I don't know how kids today make a go of it. Everything is so expensive. Why around every corner someone's waiting to cut your throat-- not just on the street, I mean at work.

"I-- I do volunteer work at the hospital, eh. Every month, they close off another room here or there-- then the odd ward. Nurses quit and are not replaced. Every one's cutting back, laying off. You can't get a decent job, can't get into a good school. I don't know where it's going to end. It scares me to just think of it.

"As a boy, I remember a doctor down the street. When the Depression hit, he lost his house, his wife-- everything. He had to sell apples on a street corner. We pulled out of the Depression-- I have a doubt we'll pull out of this-- this," gesturing to the world around him, "state were in. It scares me to think of it all. I've got a farm up island. I rent it out to a bunch of hippies. They're alright kids, you know. They've never made for me any trouble. Why if I were younger, I'd live there myself and escape all this madness."

Larry listened but said not a word. The future was always full of dread for him-- indefinite, oppressive dread. The old man's words changed that and poor Larry didn't know how to react-- what to say. Bloom gave Larry's future a shape, a taste. It was like eating at a restaurant only to espy the filth of the kitchen and compare it to the last such similar restaurant.

"Say, you know what? Those, ah, those hippies I rent my place out to are good kids. I- I ah, I seen you working here for a

awhile. I can tell you don't get away too often. So, if you ever need to get away, why not look them up." He produced a business card and scribbled a phone number on its back. The front said: H. Bloom, mechanical engineer and gave a company name and address. "Don't look for that business, son. I used to work for them. They went under two years ago."

The man patted Larry on the arm and offered the feint of a smile. "I have a habit for being gloomy, son. Cheer up, the end hasn't come in my lifetime. It may not come in yours."

On his walk home, Larry walked by the spot where he earlier saw the injured bird; it was gone, no carcass or traces of blood. Only feathers remained, sullied by dirt and automotive oil. Nature took care of its own and removed its spoor. No one but Larry would mark its fall, its passing.

Larry dived into his pocket to pull his mind away from the bird and the metaphor it carried. He pulled out the business card the old guy had given him earlier. Larry studied it for a moment and then returned it to his pocket. It was-- in a way-- a good luck charm-- his key to salvation.

#

Monday. Dan Foster prepared for work. As he did up the noose knot of his tie, he watched a snippet of the news: problems in Peru grew; the scum on the streets; the druglords in the jungle; their second border incursion into Ecuador this year. He knew all too well the wars they had to fight for they were his wars too.

Every morning, Dan Foster rode the bus into town. Like a number of mornings, lunatics rode the bus into town. Some bleeding

heart put a halfway house only a mile from Dan's home, nestled safe in suburbia. They gave the scum bus passes-- free rein to the transit system. One scum of note rode the bus his morning: the one Foster labeled the 'layered-look.' On this day, the lanky madman wore three jean jackets, a cotton shell and a leather jacket-- all simultaneously. The layered-look licked his palms before touching a rail and frequently buried his pinky up his nose. All-in-all, it made for a long trip.

Every morning, Foster ran the gauntlet of beggars and street people: from the everpresent Indians to the scruffy derelicts that never even held a hand out to beg. One morning, something snapped.

CHAPTER FIVE

"...seems to take pleasure in bringing them into difficulties and extricating them out of the danger by his cunning, wit and skill..." - Bullfinch's Mythology Of Loki and His Progeny.

James rushed to clear up his affairs. Two days earlier, his father called with the offer to go Central America. James was in the last days of his job at Reihold's. His request for a week off work was met with enmity but granted. Those who received his shifts were grateful for the money.

Reihold's was an independently owned, faltering, department store. It relied on elderly customers who were dying off without replacement. James worked in men's underwear. His job included presiding over people's indecision; to endure endless tales from ancient fools about how their scrotums would fall out of their shorts. Old, deaf women made purchases in a fog of confusion and came back a day later to return the lot of it.

James was fed up with the job, teetering on the edge of frustration for long months. From time to time, friends from high school cruised in to make a purchase and then catch up with James. When they learned that James was at Reihold's for so long they showed disappointment; for a while they too worked part-time for a poor wage, yet they went on to good paying careers. When James foresaw the company's imminent demise, he prepared to go into business for himself. James' store was ran by an incompetent. short tempered buzzard: Harold Boss. Harold: that name was a title of authority to James; both his boss' and his father's name. James saw authority as a barrier to his achievement. James' job

consisted of hours of boredom punctuated by moments of nagging from customers. To relieve the tedium, he would talk to the other staff. Without a customer in sight, such an act as crossing a linoleum aisle was met with anger from his superiors. They lectured him on how to deal with customers despite his six odd years of experience. They reminded him of how to sell people things they didn't need, things they didn't want; all the while, espousing the virtues of such a philosophy. Boss's lectures grated against James like broken glass. After one session, James was left shaking with rage. He spoke to no one until he was home. And then, he related his anger to Geena--he even broken into reluctant tears. Geena, his wife, was so moved by her husband's frustration she offered to support and fund him through the rough spots of an escape.

His new venture: a home renovation company. It was unshakable-- he was certain of it. As he said often enough: "everyone needs a place to live."

Geena and James picked up James' father and drove to the airport. Geena carried their luggage into the terminal, kissed James good bye and promptly left.

On the plane, James and his father, Harry, drank like fish. Harry was an older, wider version of his slim angular featured son. While James was a sandy blonde, Harry was greying and his hair was receding. He passed his piercing green eyes on to his son. In midflight, Harry said, "Name your profession."

"What?"

"I'm Doctor Harold Smith, gynecologist. Chicks down there

love doctors. And gynecologists-- well, a chick thinks that if you can fix their pussy, you can do no wrong." A woman across the aisle looked on in disgust. Harold didn't care. He also didn't care that his son was married. Harold spent too long on the see-saw of relationships to know what fidelity, trust or love meant. He was proud of his son; able to get a girl as good as Geena and still have the chutzpah to get some on the side when the urge arose. James told his father of almost every extracurricular activity. James was good but needed honing here and there. In a few ways he was still that timid ten year old boy he once left. The same one Harold feared would turn out gay.

"They expect you to fuck them and be stupid enough to bring them back with you. So, if you want some action, son, figure out a profession."

This was James' first time out of the country with his father. His father knew all the ropes, all the routines to survive such banana republics. James obliged his father and offered up: "Writer?"

"Nah. Everyone knows that writers are failures who think they're intellectuals. I know! James Smith, investment banker. Take it to heart, son. When they ask for specifics, bullshit them. Deugos don't know the difference. But, don't say you're involved in anything to do with resources. Y'know, oil, food, water. They take a shit over anglos who want their resources."

Harry intended this trip and vacations like it as reparations-- reparations for the nightmare of Harry's own childhood. James' grandfather beat him and tortured him. He force

fed Harry as a child until he vomited and forced him to eat what he brought up. He whipped him into toilet training. He poured a kettle of hot water on Harry's groin when he caught a nine year old Harry masturbating. Harry vowed two things: to laugh at his father's funeral and to make sure James had nothing of the same life.

The plane dropped through the clouds on its approach to the Panama City airport. James noted the Atlantic on the horizon and the Pacific below. A canal bridged a continent. The airport ran surprisingly well. Clean linoleum floors, clear multi-lingual PA announcements and none of the seediness associated with Central America. Clusters of families were being reunited with their American serviceman sons. Harry and James gathered their luggage. Outside, they hailed the first available cab.

The cab was an ugly, rusty, paint peeling hulk from the seventies. Inside, the cab driver was a sullen Hispanic in shorts and a stained white T-shirt. James and Harry took in the images of the city. Ruined buildings were all around. Trash was piled in heaps by the side of the street. An American army APC weaved its way through the traffic. A shanty town was set up in the ruins of a commercial block. Tents, sheets, cardboard and scrap wood replaced the walls. The sector of town fell to the invasion of 'eighty-nine and it was doubted that it would ever be rebuilt. Empty tracts, awaiting investment and growth, lay in better parts of the capital. Instead of oaks and willows in the better parts of city, palms and ferns adorned the streets. The cab stopped near an alley: a boy was stooped over, completing a bowel movement.

They passed by a bizarre construction site. All the machines and tools of building were present but sat on the sidelines, unused. In the center of the dirt patch, two dozen men dug at the earth with care. Clusters of women consoled each other and observed the work with dread. They wore the same good dresses that the poor donned to attend weddings and funerals.

"What's going on there?" James asked. The cab driver was shaken by the sight but did not reply. James repeated his question. The driver slammed his car to a stop. Cars buzzed around the car, honking their high pitched horns.

"Get out! Get out! Get out, mother fucker!"

Better than to debate the issue. James hopped out. Harry stayed in the cab and argued. The driver hopped out of the car, stormed to the back of the car and opened the trunk. He threw their luggage into traffic. As he hauled out the bags, the driver called out, "You fucked us. We hate you! Go back, you mother fucker."

The driver got back into the cab, squealed away in a U- turn, leaving Harry and James confused. The driver's last blow was to wing a Coke bottle at them, superficially striking Harry in the shoulder.

James paced over to the crowd. Workers in the pit had paused and women screamed. A few of them fell to their knees. Three solemn diggers hauled a plastic bag from the dirt. A man in rubber gloves and a white surgical mask intercepted the bag. They put it down before James and stepped back, reverent and melancholy. The man in the mask, cut open the bag with scissors. From twenty feet

away, in the heat and the windless air, a stench caught them, it was almost like rotten meat or an old compost heap. James and Harry shared a bewildered look. The man in the mask ventured into the plastic bag. He hauled out a mummified, severed arm. Wails louder than before came from the women. Grumbles and dissent brewed in the crowd.

A U.S. soldier in fatigues came up to Harry and James. He used his rifle like an extension of himself. He waved off spectators including Harry and James. Harry was reluctant to move, to break his observation. The soldier called out, "This area is restricted. Move along." Harry and James complied. They hailed down another cab and completed their journey.

That night, Harry took his son to a bar on the edge of the slums. It was a hangout for locals after payday and whores at work. Harry and James stood out. Their money spoke for them like diplomats.

Harry paid heed to only the most attractive of the prostitutes. Some of them were black haired, some red. They all looked from Hispanic to black; none were the Anglo pale of white-trash wenches at home. Within twenty minutes, four of them shared the table in the hopes of business. They asked what Harry and James did for a living. James held up the illusion of a career as an investment banker. Harry told them he was a doctor.

"A doctor? What kind?" Martha asked. She was clearly in her thirties, but her breasts were still firm, her nipples still hard. They sat like citadels, covered by a tight, tubetop. The good thing about whores in the third world was that their breasts were

real.

Harry had a playful look on his face like an imp at work. "I'm a gynecologist. A damn good one."

"Oh, yeah?" She stood, swung one leg up and rested a foot on the table. She hiked up her pleated skirt to reveal herself to Harry. He looked in between her legs and regretted his lie. "What do you call this?" She asked. Whatever disease was rampant across her genitals, Harry couldn't guess.

He offered, "The name is too long. See your doctor, he'll give you some medicine... Maybe take the day off work."

A drunkard looked across at Harry and James. His stared garnered their attention. He asked, "Americans? North Americans, eh?"

James knew enough of the world to never let anyone mistake him for an American. "Sorry, Canadian."

The drunk was skinny-- he spent his money on booze rather than food. He had black, greasy hair, an ill kept moustache and three days growth. "Canadian? Just as bad. Still North American. Smarter than us, but just as bad." The Panamanian took a healthy drink from his bottle of Bud. He adjusted his chair to face James and his father.

"You let the Americans fuck you for a long time so they get used to it. Never do it too hard. Us? We wouldn't let them near us. It got them so worked up and horny they just came in one day. They held us down and fucked us so hard that we can't see straight." The drunk slammed his fist into his hand repeatedly to represent his thoughts.

"Buddy, you gotta be nice to tourists." Two big Americans leaned over the drunk. They looked like half of their life was devoted to surfing and the other half to weight lifting.

The drunk looked up and back. He smiled. "Hey... Fuck you, Yankee."

"That's it." One of the Americans put his arm around the drunk's throat and pulled him from the chair. The drunk gagged, grabbed out in futility and kicked at nothing. The huge man pulled him towards the door. The few locals did nothing. The bartender looked the other way. The whores knew that dissent would cost them American money.

One of the blond Americans had a Texas drawl--similar to the speech patterns of someone with a head injury. He assisted his friend, holding open the door and making sure his path was clear. He walked out backwards, smiled and pointed at one of the prostitutes. "Keep it warm, honey. We'll be back in a minute or so."

Harry was nonplussed. He looked to a couple of the whores. "Do you ladies want to go and party?"

Harry and the prostitutes exchanged details. He displayed money to prove not only his word was his bond. They paid for the drinks and left. Before they embarked, Harry looked to the diseased prostitute that sought his advice. "Take the night off. That's a doctor's advice."

Outside, the Americans were laughing their faces off. Their eyes were red with pot smoke. The air was heavy with the reek of it, making James crave a joint. The drunkard lay on the sidewalk,

moaning and bleeding. If one of his arms wasn't broken it was dislocated.

Harry, James and their hired women made the rounds of the bars. When they were too drunk to walk, they took a cab back to hotel. With little romance or intrigue, they took their women to their rooms and worked them over until spent and sore. James rolled into a ball when finished and his girl passed out beside him. Harry fell asleep on top of his, saying only, "Wake me up before you leave."

James awoke alone. His wallet was open on the floor beside him. Luckily he had spent every penny of cash the night before. It left none to steal. His credit cards were still in place. Common scum didn't know how to convert stolen cards into cash. Experienced scum knew that stolen cards were a glut on the market. They fetched ten to twenty dollars and a year in jail, if caught.

He washed up and went to wake his father. His father left a note saying that he had gone into town to sightsee-- he had tendency to be a lone wolf.

James decked himself out for a day at the beach, soaking up the tropical rays. Before he left, the desk clerk stopped him. "Are you going to the beach?"

James paused. Then, "Yes."

"Sir, do not go to the beach."

"Why?"

The clerk shuddered from a pain deep inside. "Please."

James shook his head and left. There were few people on the stretch of shore. James sat on the sand on top of his towel.

Absently, he put his fingers through the sand. He parted pebbles and stones and something that was neither. It looked like a bone: a finger bone.

It was from a long dead soul, free of flesh and rot. James studied it with a grim curiosity. His scrutiny was interrupted by an agitated electronic whine. A man came down the beach with a metal detector in his hand. He was scanning the sands, stopping to dig at this or that by order of his device. He had three days growth, shorts, hat, short brown socks and a deep tan. He wore a Harley-Davidson T-shirt.

James saluted him and said, "Buenos Dios." That exhausted his command of Spanish.

The man looked up. "You sure don't look like a spic." His accent was American-- mid-west.

"Ah-no, I'm not. I'm Canadian."

He broke a slight smile in finding an ally in this foreign land. "You finding it warm?"

"A little. But that's why I came to the tropics."

"Is it snowing back at home?" He asked.

James sighed and bit his tongue. It was impolite to insult a slow person, even if they were average in the eyes of their own people. "No. It doesn't snow much where I'm from." He pointed to the mechanism the man wielded. "Say, any luck?"

The man considered his metal detector. "Nah. A watch, some spare change."

"You live down here?"

"Yeah, retired here seven years back after they booted

Noreiga. Love it. People are great-- a few surly ones-- but mostly, great."

James held up his find: the finger bone. "What do you make of this?"

The man took it and studied it. "A finger bone?"

"That was my guess. Any guess as to why it's here?"

"Don't know. The Panamanians say that there's a bunch of bodies that were dumped in the ocean. I don't believe it-- I've only found a few of these and part of a jaw."

James was now confused. "What are the bodies doing in the ocean? Who dumped them there?"

"Us, supposedly. They say when the army moved in, so many people got killed that they had to dump 'em into the ocean. Problem is, why didn't we see it on the news? I mean, if so many people were being killed, we would have seen it, right?" He studied the beach, nearly empty of this clear calm day. "These duegoes got some weird ideas."

#

Another two nights of the same followed. They drank cheap liquor until they were nearly blind. They tried to get freefucks out of the locals. Then came a clumsy attempt to fuck the whores they culled from the streets. An indefinite feeling of a binge overdone came the next morning. The days were spent wandering the tourist traps. The beggars were mostly children. They wore signs in English and Spanish: "War Orphan," "Give me food," "God can't let me starve." The people they handed money to--merchants, beggars, whore and the like-- were grateful to obsequious. The

people they stood in front of in lines and queues were resentful. The odd pedestrian, seeing their passage via taxi, fingered them and called insults. Streets were blocked off by military blockades without reason. At night, spots of automatic gunfire rang out. The tourist air hung around them but acted like a thin fog that--under examination-- yielded a strange other world throughout Panama City. Despite their effort to ignore all but their carousing, both James and Harry saw through the haze and noticed the environment.

From the plane, James looked down on Panama. "It's become a hell down there."

His father disagreed. "No. It's become a cancer and cancers spread."

#

Dan's life was changing fast. His wife left him a week earlier for being too intense, too close-minded. Her refusal to bend to his ways forced him to punish her-- beat her. When she left, Dan had regrets. He regretted telling her that she deserved worse. That was certain to come out in the divorce hearing.

CHAPTER SIX

"...they amuse themselves... and fight until they cut each other in pieces. This is their pastime..." - Bullfinch's Mythology
Of The Joys of Valhalla

A sweet moment came for Eric. His friend since Grade six was Larry. To Eric, Larry was a flat monotone person. But he was trustworthy and kind. Larry got him a job at the theater. A job he hated. The manager, Leo Marcos, was a slimy eighteen year old with a cool car and the entire Polo clothing line. The girls were surly to empty. The guys were lazy to dull. They were losers from rich hardworking families who coddled their kids and turned them into punky little fucks.

Two weeks earlier, the ribbing began in earnest for both Eric and Larry. Everyone knew that Larry had spoken up for Eric and pushed him past the resume pile and into an interview with Leo. Leo had managed to squeeze in an interview between a hackey-sack game and a phone call to his girlfriend.

Eric hated his work but living at home had disqualified him from welfare, leaving work as a sorry alternative. Frying himself at Val's became more than a hobby, a diversion or a ritual. It became an escape, a sanctuary inside of a stupor. More than once, he came home tripping on acid. Thinking nothing of it, he would sit up and talk to his family-- even Carl, the old man. Eric would awake to a household of distant people who all acted as if they about to commit him.

At work, the dogging insults began. Quips began as

hushed giggles out of earshot of Larry and Eric. They grew to cryptic comments like, "Big date tonight?" and "Walking funny, Larry?" When both Eric and Larry were in the change room, others volunteered to hurry so as to leave "the two of them alone."

Even Fanny joined in the diversion, once mentioning to Larry that he should have brought Eric to the Christmas dance instead of coming stag. To Larry, the comment held the weight of a collapsing star.

One week earlier, Eric didn't show up for a shift. Leo marched him into the office with much pomp and circumstance and reamed him out. It made Eric's blood boil.

Three days past that, Eric forgot to turn in a cash drawer from the upstairs concession. Larry even warned Eric of Leo's wrath for such an offense. Eric knew well that for Larry to put forth any viewpoint, it had to be truth. Eric responded to the news of impending doom with, "If he wants trouble, he's come to the wrong guy." His pitched voice and delicate manners punctuated the threat with humor rather than portent.

Leo overheard them talking in the lobby. Leo opened his office door and pulled off his walkman earphones. He put his index finger to his lips-- a pause enacted with practiced ease. He said, "Eric: could you come in here for a moment. Larry, can you check out the men's room upstairs? This time: clean it if it needs it."

Eric strutted into the office and Leo shut the door behind him. With good manners, he offered Eric a seat. Leo began his monologue by describing the demands and advantages of Eric's job. Then he outlined the quality of work put out by other ushers and

contrasted it with Eric's performance. Then he dug into the heart of the matter: the cash drawer.

"Your work can't continue like this, Eric."

Eric stood up with a dramatic air. "No, it cannot. I quit." Leo showed little reaction. "I'll expect my cheque within two weeks. I'll be back to collect it."

"Fine by me, bud," replied Leo trying to maintain control over the situation.

Eric opened the door, turned like he had seen Beccall do to Bogart, and said, "I'll remember all this. You can count on it."

Eric got his last paycheque from the theater and knew what was to become of it. He appeared at the coffee house where Val worked, two hours later. She looked to him and was mute with shock, surprise and then elation. "You did it!" She exclaimed.

Eric ran his fingers through his new head of short orange-burgundy hair. He asked, "Do you like it?"

"Yeah. Did you tell your mom?" She was used to Eric's occasional excesses: hundred dollar pants that remained in fashion for weeks; sunglasses he left on top of video games; colognes worth a week's salary.

"No. She won't care."

"Your dad will."

"Mom will stick up for me. Besides, he's not my dad."

Short hours later, Eric stood in the kitchen of his home. The earlier exchanges were severe and full of insults and threats. His stepfather, Carl, was a greasy punk. He had grown into middle-age and had fallen into a shirt and tie job. She met him at a bar near

the Navy base. She knew their relationship was special right from the start: the morning after he first met her--first fucked her--he took her out for the nicest breakfast in town. He paid for that on a defunct Visa. He was only five-foot-nine but another half of Eric's breadth. His hair was salt-and-pepper grey and shoulder length. He wore it like that to appeal to a wider range of customers. For his favored clients, he'd close deals with a joint smoked in their new car. He'd send them away fried and their money in his wallet. More than once, he used pot that he scammed off of Eric. When Eric protested, Carl threatened to expose him to his mother. When Eric once threatened the same in return, Carl said, "Go ahead, kid. Who do you think she'll believe?"

Eric's stepfather renewed the attack: "Did you spend all of your cheque on that goddamned haircut?! A fucking dye job?"

Eric did. He turned cold, hedging for a good lie or an easy truth. Then, "Most of it..."

"I knew it! I knew it! You stupid little prick! Do you expect to find another job with that hair?"

"Yeah." Eric's voice cracked when he spoke up. "A few places don't care what your hair looks like."

"Like those fucking faggot coffeehouses? Minimum wage?"

"Don't knock where I go to. It's a lot better than that car lot!"

Eric's stepfather burst with rage. His eyes bulged and he grew red. "You little--" Eric's mother ran interference, grappling with her husband. He fought a hand free and batted his knuckles across her face, throwing her head askew. For Eric, it was frozen

moment: his mother's face-- contorted by the impact of his stepfather's rage.

Eric stood up against the counter. His stepfather pushed his mother out of the way. By instinct, Eric yanked open a drawer. He pulled out a hearty kitchen knife. His stepfather stopped in his tracks-- cowardice usurped all else he felt.

"Get the fuck out of here," Eric said. The world swirled around him, propelled by adrenaline. A split second passed, a seeming century. Eric bellowed, "Get the fuck out of here, you fucking prick!" His voice was deep-- guttural.

His mother said, "Eric..." She was crying. She was scared. Fear was the thing steered her course in life.

"Mother, tell him to get to fuck out or I'll take this fucking knife to him!"

His mother became hysterical. "Eric! Eric, please!" She was more afraid of making a decision than seeing blood shed. Bravado-- the falsetto mask of cowardice-- came out in Eric's stepfather. "You want to give it a try you freak! You faggot! You little mama's boy! If your mother wasn't here to hide you, you'd be crying like a baby!"

Eric wanted to lunge at him and kill him. Nerves and fear and mediocrity overwhelmed him. Eric knew it. His stepfather knew it. In the blink of an eye, the kitchen door was open, Eric was outside and his stepfather and mother argued in screams and shouts. It started to rain. The rain masked Eric's tears and snivelling.

The buses weren't running at this hour. He didn't have enough

for cab fare. Eric made the long trek to Val's house. He went through every emotion along the way. More than once, he did an about face and backtracked a block. Then another emotion took hold and he resumed his way to Val's house. Sometimes, the same emotion sparked vastly different feelings. Thoughts of his mother ignited once a feeling a betrayal and later a feeling of emptiness. He looked to the past and wanted for those simple Saturday afternoons. He yearned for the lost feeling in his heart when all there was were times of play and grilled cheese sandwiches.

He looked again into the past and longed to block out the parade of men that passed through his mother's bedroom door. He wished for a blindness and a deafness that would take away from him the nights when his mother and Carl would come home drunk and head straight for the bedroom. An avalanche of pillows could never shield him from his mother's cries, from Carl's cries. Almost like clockwork, Carl would scream out, "Suck it! Work it out, you cunt! You cunt!" before he moaned, groaned and fell silent. He hated them both. Eric grew to hate his mother; as hate was love twisted and still rife with emotion. By an odd twist, he recalled university and a Greek fable taught to him. Competition was behind Oedipus when he struck down his father and took his place by his own mother.

Val had an apartment near the park: constructed in the late thirties-- stucco, rounded ceiling corners and hardwood floors throughout. Some nights the gang got ripped and played on the swings, kicking and pumping themselves to new heights. Now the swings and seesaws were empty, unmoved by the wind and the rain.

Val's lights were on.

Eric buzzed the door. Nothing. He buzzed it again. The intercom clicked on, a pause followed, then, "Hello?"

Eric erupted. His demeanor was lost in the events of this night. "Val. Help me. Let me in. Please!"

"Why? What is it?"

"Just let me in! Please, Val! Please!"

"Eric--" She sounded impatient. Frustrated. The door unlocked. Eric bolted in and up the stairs.

Val met Eric at her apartment door. She leaned across it, as if to bar his way in. She was dressed in her pullover nightgown. She wore it for quick access by lovers. "What's so important?"

Eric sounded hysterical. His voice intoned like a calliope. "I had a bad fight at home. I have to leave home. Help me, Val."

Val looked to the floor like a trapped animal, trying to hide her rage at Eric's timing. Behind her, someone came to the door.

The guy's name was Tony. He was one of the mainstream people in life who-- though they feel they are individuals-- melt into the corporate of society like ice in the sun. Eric recalled Val mentioning him. Tony took the same interest in Val that a gum card collector takes in the cards of another League or another sport. Val liked his wallet, his choice of coffeehouses and movies, his tenacity. He was a welcome change-- a firm tanned body and short natural hair with only a touch of gel: no pallor; no flab or green hair; no pierced nipples or the smell of musty clothes. Beside all that: when he rambled on, she could shut him out and nod and reply

as if on autopilot. Tony assumed that scoring an alternative chick was quite a score. Others assumed it was a quirky mismatch. Val assumed he was predictable in life and competent in bed.

"It's not a good time, Eric."

Eric couldn't beg for the help he needed so desperately. He looked at her and spun around before the tears became noticeable. He stormed down the stairs and out into the rain.

Eric walked the streets until dawn. The rest of his clique had gone out of town to a cabin, leaving he and Val behind. He had no place to turn, no place to hide. Larry was up at his mother's place up island. James-- well James was hard to get a hold of without an appointment. Exhausted, he returned to Val's and crashed on her stairwell after gaining access along with the paperboy.

Val didn't answer her door. She was too caught up with Tony or too fed up with Eric. A poor rest buoyed his survival through the day. Six calls to his home and he finally got his brother on the line. The remainder of the calls were intercepted by his step-father would entered tirade after tirade with each call.

Eric brother, Jason, sounded nervous. "Eric! Why are you calling?" Jason hated their step-father as much-- maybe more-- than Eric. Unlike Eric, Jason never stood up to their mother's husband. Eric didn't know if that was because of cowardice or affection.

"I need my stuff. Can you help me?"

A pause. "He's freaked out in your room, Eric. I don't how he'll react if I try to get your stuff out."

"What am I supposed to do? All my stuff is at home. You've got to help me."

"I'll try. Where can I call you?"

"Val's I guess. She's got a machine. You've got to help me, Jason."

#

A weathered bum held his hand out to Foster. He had a desperate look like a confused, but timid animal. The bum began to mouth his request. Foster welled up a spitball and sprayed the derelict. Beaten yet again, the derelict backed off.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"When night came on they... searched on all sides for a place where they might pass the night" - Bullfinch's Mythology Thor's Visit To Jotunheim

It was crisp cold night. The streets of James' suburbia were lit up in full Christmas regalia. Eric hopped off of the bus and it grinded down the street. On this Christmas Eve, the bus was nearly empty. People were home with family and friends in this festive season. But Val was on the mainland seeing her folks. Eric's other friends were home with their family. Eric's immediate family treated him like a leper and his extended family were a scarce breed. It was kind fortune that James learned of Eric's plight through Larry. In this season of giving James felt he had to invite Eric, his high school buddy.

Eric climbed the rickety, uneven steps. He heard laughter inside and could see a Christmas tree with all the trimmings. James' wife always took intense pleasure in decorating the house for Christmas. Eric paused at the door for a moment, hesitant. The next bus home was due by in ten minutes and he could furnish James with an excuse in the morning. But at 'home' nothing more than a bottle of shitty wine and a half bottle of scotch awaited him. For Eric, his home continued to be Val's one bedroom apartment. Eric rang the doorbell. The conversations inside stuttered and James' shadow filled the front door window.

"Eric! Merry Christmas!" James opened the door wide and ushered Eric into the house. James brought Eric into the crowded living room. Gathered were family members of James and Geena and

friends of the two. A tangible sense of tension came with Eric's arrival. Too easy was it to see Christmas as the season of goodwill until one had to enact this goodwill towards others.

To the crowd, James said, "This my friend from high school, Eric." Then he pointed out the family and friends in the assembly. He called out a roll call; his aging Aunt Janet; James' father, Harry; his sister, Lisa and truck driver boyfriend, Dale; the pudgy Hispanics, Ricardo and his wife; Kyle, his business partner; James' in-laws, Alice and Alex; Geena's co-workers, Crystal and Cory. Eric nodded in recognition as they were introduced. He hoped he there wasn't a test; he had already forgotten their names.

Geena got up and offered to fetch Eric a drink. She was always nice to Eric, sincere, friendly. As usual, this reaction first put Eric at ease then threw him into a state of tension: it was the same congeniality extended to a court eunuches and Eric knew it. He accepted a rum-egg nog and took a seat near the hall. The conversation flowed back into sway. They even went so far as to include Eric in the conversations. Geena's friends did nothing to make Eric feel welcome or comfortable. They were of a predatory nature. They would've done anything for the attractive likes of James or Kyle, someone as strange as Eric was a waste.

James sensed Eric's tension. He asked, "Hey, Eric have you seen the renos in the basement?"

"No."

"C'mon, I'll show you."

The two descended the flight of stairs into the basement. The walls were finished and the floors were linoleum covered. Eric

stopped to feign excitement and admiration of the handiwork. James went over to the cabinet and fished something out. He joined Eric on the steps and lit a match. He put the match to a joint and puffed it to life. He drew from it and passed it to Eric. Eric inhaled the pungent smoke and felt a rush of clarity and calm come over him.

"Why didn't you ask Kyle down here?"

In truth, Kyle couldn't people like Eric. James knew it and didn't want to expose either one to the other.

"I really appreciate you inviting me over, James."

"Hey, it's the least I could do. I guess that you couldn't have gone along with-- what's her name?"

"Who? Val? No, her folks won't let any of her friends over. They never have for years. So she only sees them at Christmas."

"So are you two back together?"

"No."

"Well, what is your girl situation?"

"There is no situation. There are no girls."

"Y'know, I think one of those girls upstairs re single."

"Great."

"What's the deal, Eric? You don't like girls?"

Eric's face grew into a scowl. "I like fucking girls and I'm not gay, if that's what you're getting at. Hell, if you're worried about old friends turning weird, why not ask Larry about his sex life."

"I can guess about Larry's sex life. None. I tried to get him together with some of Geena's friends but he just doesn't know

what to do with a woman."

"He's probably still a virgin."

"Probably. Good little Larry doesn't drink, doesn't do drugs, doesn't fuck chicks."

"I can't imagine how he survives."

"He has so little in his life that having nothing in some areas doesn't upset him."

Eric broke into his girlish giggle. "Hey, James, that's pretty deep."

James too laughed at his comment.

"James? When are you two coming back up?" It was Geena. She came down the stairs into the smoky environment and immediately recognized what it was. "Fuck, James! What are you two doing down here smoking up with your family upstairs! I can't believe you sometimes." It was ironic that Geena should produce such a temper. She spent every night of her teenaged life getting blasted with friends on the beach. She even served a suspended sentence when the cops busted her and her cohorts. But like anyone reformed but still weak to a vice, she could give nothing less than a severe reaction.

James stood up and looked up the few steps that gave Geena the height edge. He gave her a nonchalant look and said, "Hey, if you want to take care of the party by yourself then that's what you can do." James moved past Geena. But Geena took hold of his wrist, his hand.

"Wait, James. Don't blow this out of proportion. We can talk about this later."

"I don't think I want to talk about this, period." James tried, half-heartedly to continue his ascent.

"Dammit, James. We'll let this drop. Just get back up to that party and help me out."

No matter how fried, how drunk or how tired he was, James could always take control of his wife and work her like a fine instrument. He paused overlong and then conceded. "Alright. Let's not bring this up to the people at the party."

"Okay."

All three climbed back up the stairs and emerged in the opening scenes of a war. Ricardo was standing up with one fist clenched and stern look of anger on his face. His wife held him in his place with a tight grip to her husband's arm. Dale was standing by himself staring Ricardo down. Lisa was sitting in a chair, locked in fright.

Ricardo burst out with, "Whatta you mean: 'dumb diegos?'"

"Fuckin' don't worry about it man. Just settle yourself down, alright."

"Oh no no no. No little punk is gonna insult me, in front of my wife and try to get away with it."

Dale was quick to show cowardice, it was his only display of any sort of agility in his life. "Okay, man. I'm fuckin' sorry."

"Oh no no no. That's not good enough. You're comin' outside." Ricardo lunged at Dale to try to grab at him by the scruff of his shirt. As drunk as he was, Ricardo failed miserably and lost his balance. His wife let out a wail and her arm was wrenched

severely. The coffee table went askew and drinks went into the air. Cory and Crystal took exception to the spills that landed on their dresses. They squealed in protest. Cory managed an, "Oh Gawd!"

Dale dodged the side effects of the attack he provoked. He took a step back from Ricardo. Ricardo's wife was bent over him, trying to help him recover. Dale barked to Lisa, "Get your kids! We're going!"

"But--"

"Fuckin' get your kids. I'll be waiting in the pickup." With that, Dale stormed out of the house, shaking like a leaf.

Aunt Janet and James' dad, Harry, helped Lisa gather up her stunned, confused kids. They were napping in a bedroom until the blew up. As Lisa left, Aunt Janet reminded her that, "If things get too bad at home, dear, let me know. The kids are never a problem. You know that." Lisa left, teary eyed and mopey.

Geena was in the kitchen attending to Ricardo. He had a healthy goose-egg on his forehead from the fall. He uttered, "I'm gonna kill that little punk. I'm gonna kill him." Ricardo's wife suggested that they go home and Ricardo agreed.

James saw them to the door. There, Ricardo said, "I'm sorry, James. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"I know, Ricardo. It's alright." James dropped his voice and added. "To be honest, I would've liked to have seen you pound him."

Ricardo lightened his expression. He gave James a hearty slap on the arm and said. "Don't worry, boy: when I see that punk, I'm

still gonna pound him."

James closed the door then and looked at the dwindling sum in the living room. The girls were putting on their coats. Harry was finishing a smoke and a drink. Geena's parents were talking to themselves in a prelude to departure.

The remainder of the guests were politely sitting and waiting for an excuse to leave. Eric looked through a bus schedule and found when the next bus ran. He said cordial good-byes to those who remained and thanked James for inviting him.

At home, Eric got undressed and then flicked through the stations on the TV. He looked over the phone. The machine held no messages. No Christmas wishes, no word from other friends or family. Nothing. He considered calling his family but did not. He felt anger that they made no furtive attempts to call him instead. So complete was Carl's control on his family that they might never contact him or see him again in his lifetime. "Merry Christmas, Eric," Eric said to himself. He turned off the TV and called it a night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"The Edda mentions another class of being, inferior to the gods, but still possessed of great powers... Elves." - Bullfinch's

Mythology on Elves

Larry's life thinned over the years. In high school, he had a number of friends, a number of opportunities. Among his throng of friends were James and Eric. Eric, the weird kid, with a weird laugh and weird clothes. Larry endured the slights against Eric, comments like, "It's Friday: Eric's blow jobs are half-price;" "Eric: the Poo Pirate of Penzance;" or "Watch out for Eric, he's lurking the guy's can with a mirror." For Eric, puberty had not so much made a man-- or even a geek--of him, it made something less. Puberty had left him with a voice pitched higher than deep and prone to cracking with emotion. It had left Eric with a slight frame and almost no body hair. It was God's invitation to ridicule.

James was the skinny, pale kid with acne to spare and a stammer that forced him into silence in most gatherings. He clung to Larry like a barnacle. Larry's mother wasn't sure how to take the introverted figure of James. James, who sat outside of the bathroom while Larry was inside, rather than face a host of alternatives and variables. Larry was the nexus for many disparate people. They all found him to be a calm figure of neutrality. Not too tall or too short. Not fat but not skinny or well built. He didn't have any tastes in music, so anything was fine. He could hold a conversation with peers and teachers alike and passed his courses, if not with genius, with ability.

Over the years, people from his clique disappeared. A few moved out of town with family during high school. A few more went to colleges and universities out of town. James' acne and shyness faded. He became popular in grade twelve and had less and less time to spend with Larry and Eric. The two obsessed themselves with video games and video rentals. Eric met Val in senior high school and there the chasm widened. In Eric's first year studying art at university, he got into drugs and started hanging out with progressively stranger people. Every Friday or Saturday, Eric and his gang of academics would collect on the beach, drop acid and share descriptions of their visions with one another.

In many ways ephemeral, Larry remained unchanged. His ability at school, lacking genius, made admission to courses difficult. He stood alone in new circles because of his lack of conviction and direction. The changes stung Larry. For as he grew, he was able to hold onto many values and views. His friends abandoned their ethics as convenience dictated. And though his persona was a dim light, at least it was not darkness.

Unfortunately, as Larry grew to this age, he found he betrayed many of the important things he stood for. He honestly believed that the love of money was the root of all evil, but in these days he thought often of money. He craved it as other men craved air or water. Money promised an escape from his problems. It promised him a future. As a child, he planned for adulthood, marriage and children. Now, Larry was resolved to remaining single; the fact that he could not develop a romantic tie to any woman, was a settled matter. Without that first link in the chain

nothing more could follow.

The quarter century mark came upon Larry without praise or note. He was still a virgin, a fact hidden well from casual acquaintances who-- though they couldn't imagine Larry in bed, could also not believe in such a thing as a man spending over two decades alive and being unable to seduce even the most desperate or hopeless woman.

Larry remained in tenuous touch with James and Eric as both had remained in the city. Eric, on occasion, invited Larry to his parties. They commonly consisted of gouts of food to nourish appetites fueled by liquor and pot; floods of booze to satisfy all but pure tastes; and assaults of music, ranging from hard to very hard.

Eric lived at Val's. The two of them spent so much time together that it mattered little that he sheltered himself in her apartment. His move in took a whopping half hour; a procession of vital boxes and a small wardrobe that survived him stepfather's rage. His rift with his family was months prior and there was little chance of the fissure sealing. Jason, Eric's brother, fed him furtive bits of information. At home, the exile Eric was a rallying point for arguments and the stress in the house was unbearable because of it. Eric's stepfather continued to abuse Eric's mother and bully his brother. His mother's friends were so fed up with the situation that they washed their hands of her. A few of them even linked Eric's 'individuality' with the tension at home. Eric knew his stepfather's days were numbered. It would all come to a head and he would slink away. Until then, Eric survived

on UI and inhabited Val's living room.

Larry was introduced to Riga at a party attended by Eric's cadre. She was the first one to light up a joint and pass it around; at Eric's parties, such was a feat similar to being the first one in the door at a one dollar car sale.

When Riga brought the joint to Larry, he refused it. She was tall and sturdy; nice breasts and stringy blonde hair. She talked like Marcia Brady and smelled like old clothes. Riga drew from the joint herself, coughed and said, "I'll have to break of your good habits." Her playful manner sent a tickle through Larry's innards. He was in such a pit of despair regarding his lovelife, any woman's attentions sent a tickle through his innards.

Later that night, Larry and Riga ended up sitting beside each other. He was drunk and Riga was stoned to the point where the room behind Larry waved like a spirit's flag. He was her focus. Without him, she'd have to stare at the chesterfield arm to hold on to herself.

Larry felt a moment rise in their conversation. Enhanced by booze, he ventured to ask, "Would you care to come to my apartment? It's only a few blocks away."

She smiled and got up. She went over to a corner and talked with her friends. They all gestured to Larry and giggled. Larry was torpedoed; he began to sink. Riga returned and held out her hand. He looked at the hand. He was confused by the hand outstretched. She said, "Lead the way, sport."

They left the party. Val punched Eric's arm and pointed at Larry as he left with a girl. She couldn't believe it. Eric only

giggled.

They held hands as they walked back to Larry's apartment. They made small talk. Occasionally, Riga stopped, looked at Larry and accused him of trying to seduce her. She made him promise that nothing would happen. He promised. She asked if he was looking to get somewhere. He denied the attempt. He felt like a big game hunter, the high powered rifle slung over his back, walking beside the lioness-- imagining where to throw this trophy-- and attempting to make the same argument with credulity.

In the apartment, they talked some more. Larry fished an ancient bottle of cheap wine out of the fridge. Riga loved the wine, remarking, "It's sweet-- it doesn't even taste like wine. The first time I dropped acid I had been drinking wine all day." She looked at Larry and sensed the shortcomings in his life-- his weak spots. "Did you ever drop?"

He was coy. The world was full of secret societies: drug users, witches, gays, comic book collectors and many more. From the outside, a spectator gained no insights but pretenders to membership were let in freely. He replied to her question, "Way back..."

They sat in the kitchen and fought a duel of words. She played with Larry's cat as she talked. She knew he was trying to get her into bed and knew such prior knowledge would doom his attempt. It was this phase of the game that people like James could slip through like a fish in water. It was this phase that Larry felt he should have sought more advice about.

She asked, "Why did you bring me up here?"

His best diversion was: "I find you interesting."

"You're interested?"

"N-no. I said,--"

"So you're not interested in me?"

He smiled and leaned closer. "I didn't say that..." Like a pro, he reached a hand to her chin and guided her close to his lips.

She pulled back and said, "Don't. Don't try to kiss me."

Larry kept his cool as best as possible. "Why did you come up here?"

She looked him up and down. Being wasted, her thought processes were a little rough. "Because you said you wouldn't try anything. Because you promised we could split a bottle of wine... Because I thought you were a nice guy." She smiled to soften the moment. From ancient times, when kings' courts held eunuchs, there were guys to chaperone all women without fear of reproach.

They talked some more small talk and then she asked the time. "Four," he replied.

She said, "I'm tired. Can I crash here?" At first Larry was elated at the request. He welcomed her and she dragged herself to the couch and promptly passed out. Larry resigned himself to the situation. A few perverse thoughts crossed his mind as he watched her sleep. Her healthy breasts shifted beneath her top. Fear of discovery stopped him from action. He went to bed as dawn lit the sky.

He awoke to her looking through his tape collection. "Some cool stuff," she commented, pulling out some to inspect and

replace; others stayed out. "Hey, can I borrow some tapes?"

The chance of someone as desperate as Larry refusing a girl anything was slim. "Sure take a couple," he replied. "What are you up to today?"

"I've got to meet my ex when he gets off work."

"Oh."

She was pleasant. They swapped numbers, promised to meet soon and then she took off. Larry cleaned up the mess of the night before. He felt victorious yet bamboozled. Victorious for having brought a woman home. Bamboozled for not having done anything with her.

#

Every Sunday, James's Aunt Janet had a family dinner. She took care of the family at the expense of starting her own family or finding a love. She invited James and Geena; James' sister, Lisa; James' father, Harry--though he always declined-- and James' grandfather, Brandon. It was James' turn to pick up his grandfather. The first Sunday of every month was his turn. It was also Geena's Sunday to work. James was reluctant to let Geena really see his grandfather. It was as if his grandfather was a time machine--a portal for Geena to look into to see James at that age. James feared age, hated decrepitude and despised people lost beneath the cloak of senility. His hatred of the old was only compounded by his years at Reihold's; a place where the dead still walked. They still walked and they still wanted to buy underwear.

The Glentamor Lodge was a monument to the age wherein it stood. A half century earlier, the aged were doomed to months,

maybe years of madness and infirmity. But at least their ends came before too long. Now, people spent long years inside of brick prisons inside of crippled flesh prisons. An entire chapter of people's lives unfolded in a state of incontinence, drooling, constant aide and pills after pills. Because quantity of life meant more than quality, this monument was the surfeit of achievements.

James winded his way past the walkers and wheelchairs and people with canes. He came upon a figure: Brandon Smith, James' grandfather. His life was over and he had nothing to show for it. He still had legs but could barely stand. He still had eyes but could barely see. He still had his faculties but could barely display them. He was old. He knew he was a burden. For that reason he was miserable.

Glentamor was clean. Workers came in and mopped the floor of urine and saliva and messes of all other kinds. After mopping, a nurse in squeaky, white runners made the rounds to caution the 'residents.' Afterwards, they had to sit on their beds until the floor dried, for fear of slipping and breaking a bone that would never heal.

They fed them well. Three times a day they took everyone from the floor and forced them into an elevator. People made to endure bomb shelters and coal mine caveins were given little choice. All were served mashed and boiled food. If one fell asleep before a meal, they forgot them and they'd go without. If one told a nurse that they were forgotten, they'd tell them they were mistaken.

James' grandfather was never alone. When he felt lonely or

too bored, he could leave his little room and go down the hall to where the other patients were. Most of them couldn't hear. Some of them didn't know you were there at all. If he needed help in his room, he could try and reach the cord to ring for a nurse. If he couldn't reach the cord, he could hope they hear him calling before it was too late.

Brandon saw his grandson and a light appeared in his eyes. Escape. If not from this hell imposed by body, at least escape from this hell imposed by walls. James helped his unwashed, diapered elder into a wheelchair. The next stop was James' sister's place.

James dreaded these gatherings. It wasn't his sister or his aunt or his sister's current drifter of a boyfriend but his grandfather. His existence had a profound, negative effect on the family. His aunt had given up her life for her father. She sold her house because of its front stairs and because it could be liquidated and its money used to put James' grandfather in a better rest home-- a better gilded cage. James couldn't help but share some of his father's bitterness at the old man's existence. His aunt aged most by the burden of her father and by her trek towards poverty.

James' grandfather had only grown benign because of his age. Were he not decrepit, he would still strike others. If he could make it to a liquor store and escape criticisms of his drinking, he would be drunk. Were he not weak, he would still bark insults and demands. If his cage was rattled, Brandon would get more and more worked up, spitting out insults and laments. If left alone, he

would cauldron up attacks against his descendants and make them feel guilt and shame for throwing him in a home, for abandoning him. When they goaded Brandon and then aided him, he would apologize for his wretched state and behaviour and sob as he told them of his woes. The same man that knocked out some of his son's first teeth with a closed fist for shedding tears, wept often beneath a cloak of age.

The entire affair left James drained more than any other affair or exertion did. Over and above his grandfather's state, there was his sister. James had always held the view that Lisa was brain damaged. On his grandmother's deathbed, she made jokes and giggled. As a child, Lisa let the family's kitten play on a balcony and fall to its death. She once shut her head in a sliding door. As a woman, she let the fathers of her two children disappear without a trace. Her aunt had to teach her how to feed her children, diaper them, recognize their cries of hunger, cries of full diapers and cries of pain. Every day or so, one of the children was in a hospital or clinic for everything from concussions and colic to gas and teething. James' mother was long gone, first in heart and later departed in the flesh. One afternoon when James was six, he and his sister played in the backyard. Like all children, they would stay out until called in. Night fell and we was not called in. Both he and Lisa grew hungry. They came into the house to receive dinner from their mother. They didn't expect to find their father home--he was rarely home before their bedtime and rarely home in a sober state. On this night, neither his mother or father were home. Lisa searched through the

house for her mother: in the closets, the bathroom, in the beds. James found a note pinned to a couch pillow. It was from his mother to his father. The paper was full of big words, in James' head, they echoed out as he read them: "I'm leaving you. I've had enough of your neglect. If you wanted to have kids, you've got them."

James made peanut butter sandwiches for himself and Lisa. They stayed up and watched TV until his dad got home. He staggered in at eleven. The kids had fallen asleep in the light of the cathode ray tube. James woke up to the sight of his father, the note clutched in his hand and his other hand over his face. Harold cried and shook. James and Lisa flocked to his side and tried to comfort him. They each embraced a leg and hugged it tight. He cried and gulped down tears. He promised the children that he would not abandon them. From there on, for years, his drinking ended. From there on, James' father raised his children with periodic help from James' Aunt Janet. James' mother moved back east.

She returned when he was ten. In those four years, his father had secured a divorce but not another love. After some tense meetings, they resumed their relationship. By odd happenstance, Harold was then offered a job managing an oil drilling project in South America. The last four years had weighed heavy upon him. His hairline greyed and receded. Crowsfeet perched in the corners of his eyes. He knew it was all from the burden of both a job and children. He came home on the night of his job discovery to a woman he once thought of as thin. Instead, there she sat: she was sixty pounds overweight, her hair was a mess, her eyes puffy from

smoking all day long. She smelled like burnt coffee and tuna sandwiches. She barked like a fish wife into the phone. Harold told her nothing of the job opportunity. The next morning, he accepted. Two weeks later we went to work with an adidas bag full of mementos. He returned years later, when his sister told him of his wife's death.

On this particular Sunday, Lisa's boyfriend was in the bedroom for the day, drinking beer and playing video games on an Atari. Dale was a laborer at a produce warehouse, long haired with a scruffy moustache and perpetual baseball cap. James used to try to talk to Lisa's boyfriends. He didn't bother to give Dale the time of day, James only made sure his wallet was always where he expected it. He reasoned that the only reason such losers got together with Lisa was because she was easy. She interpreted her long list of sexual partners as a badge of prowess-- an achievement. She failed to see that something gotten easily-- even sex-- wasn't appreciated. It was a sad fact that Lisa couldn't fathom.

Aunt Janet called everyone to dinner. Dale wheeled Brandon to the table. Aunt Janet chopped and mashed his food. Lisa did the same for her children. James had a hard time eating while sitting beside his grandfather. The old man would half chew his food, some of it would drop from his mouth to his lap and he'd later recover the bits and eat them, oblivious that they sat on the same kleenex he used to wipe his nose. The children got up again and again throughout the meal, sending Lisa and Aunt Janet after them. Dale said once, "Geez, can't you slap 'em or something?" At this

dinner, Lisa ignored his advice. Given the kids' scratches and bruises, James believed this was a rare exception to her treatment of them.

When it came time to return Brandon to Glentamor, he resumed his liltany of questions: "Why can't I stay here?" "Where do I live?" "What day is it?" "Aren't we going to have dinner first?" "When am I going back to Glentamor Lodge?" James took him down to the car and loaded him in, trying to answer his battery of questions with responses of one sort or another.

They came upon the Glentamor Lodge. Punks blocked the sidewalk portion of the home's driveway. They stayed their place and dared James to run them down. James revved his engine in neutral. Something in his eyes-- his fatigue and exhausted patience-- told the punks that it would be unwise to call his bluff; they moved out of the way.

As James lifted his grandfather from the car to a wheelchair, Brandon said, "My bowels have been bothering me." The air around them filled with the smell of shit but his Depends caught the mess.

#

Eric's weeks of monotony were interrupted by a call from Jonathan. Jonathan had a pair of tickets to a Guns 'N' Roses concert in Vancouver. Though Eric thought of the band as 'white thrash trash' he accepted. Some of Jonathan's friends from White Rock put them up. They were dropped off by Jonathan's buddies at the far end of skytrain. A long ride took them into the heart of the city to BC Place. The stadium resonated with thousands of watts of

canned music. Police cruisers and paddy wagons clustered at every intersection. Police in riot gear sat idle, awaiting orders. This was the second of two nights for the concert and the night before was rowdy enough to warrant an increased presence. Still, the sight worried Eric. "That doesn't look good."

Jonathan replied, "They're just being paranoid 'cause of last night's concert."

"Great. Paranoid cops. Isn't that kind of like satanic devil worshippers."

"Don't worry about it."

"Yeah right. Remember the Canucks riot."

The concert was a long, loud, hazy blur. The pot smoke was enough to hotbox Eric and Jonathan into a stupor. They meandered out with the rest of the attendees. It was dark; hallogens atop thin poles and cars in traffic lit the night. The loose formations of police had filed into roadblocks and ordered lines of riot cops. The bastions of justice: in black; armed and armored. The cops beat their knightsticks against their plexiglas shields; the scene looked like the apocolypse but sounded like darkest Africa. Behind the lines of punks and police, the news cameras rolled.

Jonathan said, "This doesn't look good."

"Yeah..." Eric was considering the options that this situation presented. On one side, crowds in melees with overwhelmed police, beating the cops into a pulp; records stores with broken windows and easy pickings. On the other, overzealous cops picking off rioters like targets at a turkey shoot; a jail stay in something that closer resembling a cattlecar. "C'mon,

Jonathan: let's get to the skytrain and get the fuck out of here."

Jonathan agreed and they made a steep pace for the terminal.

Other punks weren't nearly so cautious. A band of them walked up to the skirmish line. They shouted at the cops: "Pigs!" "Baby Killers!" "Mother Fuckers!" The cops took the insults with little reaction. Then one of the punks threw a full beer can at a cops. It rebounded off his shield. Two of the punks' friends followed suit and pelted the cops with beer and booze bottles. The offended police moved on the punks and beat them to the ground with their batons. The spark ignited the crowd. Pockets of name calling grew into chants and sreeches. The police barked incomprehensible orders through loud speakers. Concert goers turned into rioters. They started smashing the windows of cars and shops. They swarmed into the lanes of traffic, cutting off the artery through the city. Where the rioters outnumbered the police, officers fell. They screamed for help as frustrated kids landed punches to their face and to their bared torsos. A massive headbanger had a cop down, crushed under the pleixlas shield that was to save him from harm. Other police fired tear gas rounds into the crowd; one cannister struck a sixteen year old in the neck.

Eric and Jonathan preoccupied with the scene of carnage. So much so that they didn't see the advancing line of riot police, bearing down on them. Eric was stunned. Jonathan grabbed him and tried to find a way through the police line: a way out.

A couple of cops saw Eric and Jonathan; they saw them as only another pair of rioters. Eric was going to try to reason with the cops. Before he could open his mouth, Eric and Jonathan fell

beneath the blows of knightsticks. Eric and Jonathan didn't take the implied demand to surrender and await arrest; they tried to get through the lines. The police kicked the two of them. The police pushed Eric and Jonathan with their combat boots to get them back within the confines of police control.

Eric was down for the count, never being one able to withstand a great deal of physical punishment. For Jonathan, the blows only made him enraged. He did a wounded soldier crawl right across the breadth of the police blockade. None of them bothered to stop him or beat with further. Jonathan surveyed the area. The pavement was awash in broke glass and broken merchandise. A bloodied police officer was screaming a berserker rage two dozen meters away. His victim was a prone little punk. Jonathan watched as the cop brought down the edge of the shield on the inert victim's back; chiselling a deeper gash into the boy's back. Jonathan took one of the cops by surprise, knocking him off balance. He was able to land a handful of incidental kicks and punches before the cops ganged up on Jonathan. They sprayed him with mace, before blurring his life with billy clubs and gloved fists.

Eric and Jonathan came to their senses under the ministrations of a doctor in a converted police interrogation room. Because of the sheer weight of arrests, they let some go for lack of evidence, Eric and Jonathan among them. Jonathan's 'lack of evidence' caused him a further two day stay in hospital, once he got back to town.

CHAPTER NINE

"... saw the pretended woman, inquired of her if she knew what the gods were doing at their meetings. She replied that they were throwing darts and stones at Baldur, without being able to hurt him." - Bullfinch's Mythology The Death Of Baldur

Several months of relative mediocrity passed for Larry. No changes of note. No changes past the weathers of time.

Larry one day found himself milling around his apartment. The day off took him by surprise and left him with nothing to do. Larry was not the empty automaton that everyone took him for. In quiet moments, he was prone to deep thought and introspection. Sometimes, thoughts of rage were borne out of these moments. He looked back on his life and to the paths that could have been. He thought of what his life could have been if his father had not ran out on his mother. He'd disappeared leaving behind an unpaid rent, hungry children and chaos. He surfaced somewhere back east and called for his family to come to him. His father did this repeatedly while he and his mother were together. After his flight, the call to Larry's mother was ignored. Though Larry did exceptionally well in school, uprootings made it impossible to finish grades in one place. By the time he adjusted to a move, he'd have to claw his way to a passing grade or move yet again. His mother saw the logic in a divorce. Her separation was as simple as not coming when called. Being raised by a single mother, Larry's paths diminished most rapidly. His mother cashed in an educational savings plan to pay for credit card debts. She goaded Larry into picking up a part-time theatre job in senior high to

help pay the bills at home. He worked in lieu of studying and his grades suffered again for this reason. All the while, Larry's mother reminded him of the debt he should feel towards his parents for the care and protection they gave him. He came to feel that instead he was the product of cruel folly; for his parents bore him but denied him a legacy and a future.

The phone rang and broke him from his downward spiral of thoughts. He dived for the it. It was a call from Riga.

His voice was shaky as he spoke. Lust and suprise were poor partners. "Well, I haven't heard from you in a while. How are you?"

Something was amiss. "Alright... I guess. Do you have any plans today?"

"No, why?"

"Do you want to do coffee?"

"Sure?" Larry was eager to do anything that would relieve his boredom. They arranged to meet within a couple of hours. It was the same coffee house that Eric's Val worked at. It had fallen out of vogue: the one up street-- almost identical-- was now the spot to be.

Val recognized Larry and they exchanged cordial greetings. Larry grabbed a coffee and sat in wait. Larry entertained himself with the snippets of conversation that bled from the nearby tables:

At one table came, "Read this pamphlet. It's telling us everything about the logging company's conspiracy to ruin the enviroment. They've planned to blocade the logging roads up-

island with stalled cars. All they need is thirty cars..."

At another table, "He's a bitch. He's looking for a sugar daddy that'll take him to Hawaii. Why else do you think he'd be fake'n'baking...?"

And another, "We're losing our rights in bits and pieces. We learn to accept every little loss. Just add it up: just add up all the changes and how we've sat back and taken it."

Riga arrived in short order. She had changed little. Same stringy hair. Same baggy unkempt clothes. Same voice. She gave him a cheery greeting like mariners at a seaside inn.

She got herself a mug of mocha java and took a seat beside Larry. He tried as best he could to hide the excitement of being asked out by girl.

They caught up on the past months. Not knowing Riga at all, made it difficult to form topics of conversation. There came large gaps in the discourse.

Then came the heart of the matter. She said, "So are you living at the same place?"

"Yeah."

"I'm looking for a place now."

"Oh, yeah. Any luck."

She shook her head. "No. That's why I got thinking... I don't have a lot of stuff. I'm usually out with friends. Y'know, I'm not home much, right. I was thinking about, well, how you'd feel about me staying with you for a while?"

Larry was shocked. This was out of the blue. To shack up? He hadn't even felt her up. The same feeling from earlier returned;

one of both conquest and trickery. Conquest usurped trickery and Larry replied, "Sure. I guess we can work something out."

By seven that night she was moved in: two duffle bags, two fruit boxes and a backpack later. Larry gave her space in his drawers and his closet. She refused his offer of dinner, saying she had eaten earlier. Though within ten minutes, she was in the fridge and rooting for food.

They talked a little. Larry touched on the subject of rent. She said, "I guess I could try to afford half."

"Half? Well, how about one-fifty?"

She was eager to accept that figure. They worked out other details and then Riga ran a bath. She dug into a pocket on her backpack and pulled out rolling papers, a candle, a baggie and a lighter. She excused herself and sank into the bath for almost an hour. When she emerged, she looked calm, almost serene or even dazed. Behind her, wafted the unmistakable aroma of pot. Larry's heartbeat a little faster at the daring of her to smoke up in his bathroom.

She rolled into a ball on the chair next to Larry. Tsitka sat close to Larry on the chair. He watched the eleven o'clock news, its glare illuminated the room.

The announcer came to the subject of the growing strife in Peru. "Influenced by Colombian drug cartels, the Torres regime of Columbia has sided with the Peru's strongman, Corvez. The President is returning to Washington to where he will meet with the cabinet and pentagon senior staff. He may either stiffen trade sanctions against both South American nations or even move to a surgical

strike on the Peruvian capital of Lima. Such a strike would only be ordered to send a clear message to Peru's dictator, Corvez."

"I hate the news." Riga said. "Actually, I hate Americans more. What about you? Do you hate them?"

"I never really thought about it."

After news, Riga said she was tired and wanting to sleep. She asked, "Who gets the couch?"

His feeling of conquest faded; the sensation of being a victim of trickery swelled. He said, "I need the bed." He got up and went to his bed. He tried to put out his mind the fact that a woman he desired slept within his apartment. She might as well been on the other side of the planet.

#

James cajoled Larry into breaking his new era of monotony. James discounted Larry's new living arrangements. He convinced Larry to dress up and join a gang of Geena's girlfriends at a bar. Larry was cautious of the offer-- word was the bar was a gay hangout.

James swung by to pick up Larry. He came upstairs for a moment to drop in and see the place his Larry's new 'roommate.'

Larry was in the bathroom when the knock came at the front door. Riga answered it. James stood there dressed in a nice silk shirt, tight blue jeans and an expensive leather coat. Riga asked, "Who are you?" Congeniality was a missing trait of hers.

He smiled. After all, James thought, she was female. "I'm here to pick up Larry. You must be... Rita."

"Riga. Come in. I guess." James followed her in and shut the door behind himself. The place had slumped a little. Dishes piled over the sink and counters. A pile of Riga's dirty laundry sat beside a pile of Riga's clean laundry. Larry's tapes were strewn across the floor. His sole plant was dying. The place smelled like a combination dump-chinese laundry.

Riga said nothing more and offered only her shoulder for James to talk to. Larry emerged from the bathroom to greet his friend.

"Ready to go?" James asked, eager to leave. Eager to leave Riga.

"Sure."

"Hey, Larry," Riga said. "While you're out, I'm going to have my ex come by. Okay?"

"Sure, I guess." Larry put on his jacket. "I'll see you later, Riga." She nodded and waved. They left without more.

In the car, James asked Larry about Riga.

"So, ah, how're things going with you and Riga."

"All right, I guess."

"You guess? How's, ah, how's the sex part."

Larry was quiet, contemplating a lie. "There is no sex. She's just living with me."

"What?"

Larry offered. "No. No sex. No nothing."

"I don't see a lot of point to living with her if there's no action happening. Fuck, I'm sorry to say it Larry, but your place is getting to be a mess. Does she at least pay rent?"

"Yeah. About half."

"About half?"

"One-fifty."

"I thought you paid five hundred."

"Yeah--"

"Larry, she's taking you for a ride. Dump her."

Larry didn't say anything else. James allowed the silence to continue for the rest of the trip.

There was a short wait in a line-up outside of the bar. A beggar made his way up the line, hitting up a captive audience. By the time he got to James and Larry, he still had nothing and was getting a little insistant. "Spare some change?"

Larry and James ignored him. He tapped James, no doubt sizing him up as someone with money. "Get lost, buddy," was all that James was willing to say. The beggar gave him a foul look and slipped into the night.

When Larry and James came in, events were in full swing. Geena sat in one corner with a seat saved for her husband. Around Geena were a number of her co-workers. Some of them were gorgeous, some were only made up; all of them brought their boyfriends and husbands in tow. Disappointed, Larry joined them.

Larry spoke little to the women. Talking to attached women, for Larry, seemed like a waste. Too, the next table harbored two women of roughly Larry's age. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed fertive glances in his direction.

He turned his attentions back to the table. He got into better conversations with men. One of the men was Ricardo Gravez.

He was a Chilean immigrant and local businessman. He repeatedly pulled the conversations to anti-American themes. At one point he met opposition from one of the women, a blonde named Norma. Ricardo stood and said, "Do you want to see what happens in a country where the Americans are calling the shots?" He unbuttoned his shirt and revealed his chest: six burns, each the size of a quarter, mapped a route of torture once endured. "When Ienende was killed they hauled thousands of people into the police station for a little 'talk!' This is what they did to me! This is what the Americans did to me!"

A hushed conversation developed in one corner of the party. A girl, Monika, fished through her purse and palmed a small object. A clique of the assembled stood up and went for the door. They had mischevious looks on their faces.

Larry was curious and James caught his look. James leaned between Ricardo and Larry and said, "Coming outside with us?" He put his thumb and index finger to his lips and took a deep pantomine inhale. With an air of calm, Larry declined.

Ricardo asked of Larry, "You don't use drugs?"

"No, not really?" Saying 'no' was nerdy. Saying 'yes' was degenerate. Saying 'not really' was cowardly. Society and its citizens loved cowardice; they called many acts of cowardice manners.

Most of its citizens. "Not really?" Ricardo's dark eyes burned into Larry.

"Well, no. I don't."

Ricardo patted him on the back. "Good. Back where I come

from, all the people buying the drugs are dressed in rags. All the people selling drugs drive Mercedes. And the pigs: they know they've got you if they can find drugs on you or drugs in you. If you stay away from them, you're safe. Look at what's going on in Peru. Hey!? They mess with drugs and now America is trying to own them. It's a way people can control you. It's a way people can own you." He gestured in defiance. "No one controls me."

For the first time in his life, Larry felt good about his stance on drugs. For the first time in his life, Larry had a clue why he had a negative stance on drugs.

James returned to the table and sat beside Larry. Shortly thereafter, Geena got up, with purse in hand, and stood before James.

"What? Are you going?" Asked James.

"I've got to work in the morning. Were you going out with Larry?" It didn't matter to Geena whether James stayed out all night or was home by six. They still had times together and when he was away from her side, she felt in her heart she could trust him.

James considered a night out with Larry. His old friend. His buddy, in need of a boost from time to time. "Yeah, I think Larry and I might head into town for a while."

"You're not going to drink, are you?"

"Me?" He gave her a smile and a cackle. She too laughed. She kissed him a good night and skipped into the night air.

Until now, James had missed the tensions brewing in Larry, regarding the two girls at the next table. Ricardo had not. "You

like them, eh? Good little pussies. Heh heh."

"They seem alright," Larry replied.

"No, no. A taxi ride can be alright. A fuck is either really good or really bad."

James assessed the women in question and nodded. "Nice yah-yahs."

"Your friend here, James: we must get him one of those women." Ricardo got up and took his drink with him to the next table. In the audio clutter of the room, Ricardo was out of Larry's earshot. The Chilean interrupted the girl's conversation. By gesture, Larry told he was introducing himself and asking to sit down. His request was accepted. He sat down, shook hands and exchanged introductions. Larry felt a thrill of excitement. For he knew that he himself could bring himself to court a woman. By luck, he had found somebody who would do it for him.

Larry watched the thrust and parry of comments between Ricardo and the girls. Their delight at his words and reactions was a mystery to Larry. He felt if he had the power to sway people like this he would have a great power indeed. Ricardo broke from the conversation long enough to ask that Larry and James join them. The two complied and took seats flanking Ricardo. The women were introduced: the brunette was Rita and the blonde was Angela.

Ricardo bought them into the conversation. "We were just talking about-- about, ah, men and women. I was just about to say that a woman should keep her mouth shut except when she's got a dick in her mouth." Larry couldn't believe what he heard. James looked for a waitress to refresh his drink. The girls were mute

with shock. They looked at each other.

Rita gestured to Larry. "He's your friend?"

Larry stammered. The man had befriended him an hour earlier, opened the door to these girls and then torpedoed the whole affair.

Angela assumed an answer from the indecision. "I thought so. What about you?" She pointed at James. It became the women's strategy to line up all of their enemies, certain they could not withstand the counterattack.

"Me?" James asked using the pause to come up with a rebuttal. He put a hand on Ricardo's shoulder, like Mother Teresa with the lepers. "I think my friend has had a lot to drink. When he's this drunk he doesn't know what he's saying. I can't excuse what he said."

That diffused the situation a little. Rita said, "But do you agree with what he said?"

"No. I couldn't agree with what he said."

On that, Ricardo turned to James. Ricardo looked to be a wildcard of a person. The sort, that with the slightest trigger, would lash out and rip apart his opponent. Or, he may chuckle and retire from the conflict. "It's time I went home." He bid his farewells to the nonplussed ladies and stumbled out to his car.

The lineup outside of the Water Station was long as it was every Friday night. The chill in the night air was noticable but far short of severe. James soon grew short of this wait. He knew the DJ inside and a secret route into the courtyard beside the club. James said to his company, "I might be able to scoot us past

this line."

"Really?" said Rita, fascinated.

"Yeah. But somebody has to stay in line in case this falls through."

Angela suggested that Larry wait outdoors while she, Rita and James went in search of a secret passage. Larry agreed. It always turned out this way for Larry: wait on the outside while others get to go in and experience what was going on. They waved goodbye in a cavalier fashion and took off down a back alley.

They stole into the courtyard, a beautiful aerie lit by a myriad of tiny bulbs. A bouncer at the open door spotted them immediately. "Hey! You can't be out there!"

James turned and closed the gap between himself and the burly bouncer. "Neil!" James called, having met the man twice before at parties. "Hey, Neil: is Danny working tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, can you sneak the three of us in?"

The bouncer looked into the packed bar and said, "Sure, I guess so. But if anyone asks, it wasn't me."

"Got it." They slipped into the throng and the dark chaos.

Rita fanned herself and declared she needed a drink. She broke away from James and Angela.

Angela said, "Say, Jim: do you want to dance?"

"James. Sure, let's go."

The dance floor was crowded. They danced close and talked. Angela's eyes remained fixed on James'. He could tell her thoughts. On cue, a slow song came. They embraced and moved to the

rhythm of the music.

Angela said to James, "I have something to tell you."

James grinned. "You do?"

"But I have to whisper it." James gave his silent consent for her to reach up to his ear. Their cheeks brushed gingerly. Rather than saying anything, she stuck her tongue into his ear and then bit on his earlobe.

"We should talk about this more." James led her from the floor to the shadowy door of the DJ's booth. He rapped on it twice and his old friend, Dan, opened it. They exchanged pleasantries and trivial conversation. Then James went to the heart of it.

"Hey, Dan, do you have one of those half hour tapes?"

"Yeah, I was just about to throw it in and grab a break. Why?"

"Can I use your booth for a little while?"

Dan eyed James then Angela then James again. Dan grinned and said, "Give me a sec and then don't touch anything in there, okay?" Dan slipped back in, worked some switches and levers and surrendered the room to James and his new friend.

"So this is a DJ booth?" she said.

"Mhm," replied James. Her guided to her and they began to kiss and probe each other's mouths with their tongues. She moaned slightly as he slipped his hands up her top.

She broke from their necking. She said, "I'll do you first then you do me, okay?"

"Sure." Angela slipped down James' body. She undid his fly and pulled out his penis. She began to work on it fervently. The

ferocity of sensation threw James off balance.

She was relentless. Rather than resist the impulse to let go, he gave in with a passion-borne cry.

She wiped off her face and stood up. They kissed and she said, "Now its my turn." She pulled down her panties and panty hose, hiked up her skirt and propped herself against a wall of records and CDs.

James kneeled and went down on her. She started to puff out gusts of air to pace her ecstasy. One of her legs shook as he nuzzled home. She ran her fingers through his hair and held his head in place. In her reverie, she called his name to urge him on, "Jimmy! Ooh, that's it Jimmy!"

James insisted on being called James. Even when he was having sex. To James, a woman screaming, "James!" at the top of her lungs sounded like an evocation of power. Calling out, "Jimmy!" made it sound like the woman was doing Superman's sidekick.

He didn't bother to call out a correction. He realized he had gotten what he wanted and there wasn't a lot of point in keeping this up if she couldn't even remember his name. If he stopped now, he'd invite her wrath. But the room was small, surrounded by two hundred people, and it was the nexus of their entertainment. The danger of someone interupting them was everpresent. James slid one of his legs back towards the door. Angela didn't notice. He banged his foot against the door and the convincing sound of a door's knock. He shared in her shock. He pulled away from her and looked up. She opened her eyes and looked around, dazed. James said, "Shit! Someone's at the door!"

Angela threw her panties and hose back on and tried to compose herself. "Okay! Okay!"

James threw open the door but no one was there. They looked at each other in confusion. Certain whoever was there would return, they relinquished the DJ booth to Dan and slipped back into the crowd.

Rita caught up with them. "Where have you two been?"

They blushed in unison. James scanned the crowd. "Where's Larry? My friend?"

Rita offered, "I don't think he's come down yet."

"I've gotta get him. He's been waiting up there forever." He looked into Angela's eyes and mustered all of his sincerity into one volley. "I'll be a minute. I promise."

He charged up the stairs leading to the street and the lineup. Larry was a quartet away from the door. He was remarkably mild in temperment. Were it James there, forced to wait, he'd either be gone or he'd have stayed and fumed.

"Those chicks are a waste of space," James said to Larry.

"Why? What happened?"

"Don't ask. Let's go, Larry. I'm sorry they held us up this long." James gaited down the sidewalk and Larry puppy-dogged close behind.

#

This morning would be different for Dan Foster. His newbit of encumberence changed his outlook. It might even makethe world a better place.

His day of work went better than expected. The clients,

seeking loans, flowed past his desk like clockwork. His co-workers had easy dealings with Dan. Dan felt inner security: the fissures in his life were sealing up.

Winter nights meant it was dark by work's close. Dan bid a good night to the reception and stepped into the chill of the streets.

The gauntlet was thinner at night than morning. Beggars with full stomachs thought little was of consequence, once they gained food. This route to the busstop was not trafficked. One of the homeless lay in wait around the corner of a stairwell. He was the same one that didn't hold out his hand or clearly demand--the one that only mumbled a request as people milled by. The beggar looked up to Dan and mumbled. No one else was in sight.

Dan stopped and pivotted to face him. Expectant, the derelict held out his hand. Dan pulled a gun from his jacket and targetted the beggar's chest-- just right of center. With a pop, a round discharged into the derelict. Dan's arm went momentarily numb from the kick of the pistol. A massive pump of blood gave Dan an instant headache and he gapsed for a breathe. The shot was far quieter than he anticipated: like a firecracker or the drop of a handful of wood.

The impact of gunshot, threw the derelict against the pavement. He wheezed for breath. Blood seeped through his shirts. Vapor escaped from his mouth, his nostrils and the hole in his chest. He rolled on his side, in an attempt to get up. He was dying.

Dan looked on with grim facination. After a lifetime of

mediocrity and talking and boasting, he had finally done something. A sense of accomplishment washed over him. He was now part of a different chapter of humanity; a small band that killed their own kind. His wits broke from the reverie and he ran for the bus.

#

James, Chris and Kyle had a rare occasion to work together on a project. James and Chris both finished early and had nothing to do with rest of the week. Kyle was finishing a refurbishing of the woodwork in an old Victorian home near the park.

James was introduced to Chris through Kyle. They had gone to high school together, worked on their first project together under Kyle's dad's contracting. Working with Kyle, James made the best money in his life. James, Chris and Kyle were all eager to go into business for themselves. Kyle thought it worth his while to bring his two friends into a partnership in the construction business. Kyle arranged a meeting at Earl's coffee shop, months back....

Kyle was a skinny, wiry guy. He had shoulder length hair and a moustache that went out of style in the mid-seventies. He dressed in tight faded jeans and old nikes.

Chris had shifty eyes, a smooth face and a calm demeanor. He dressed in a sportshirt, jeans and a black biker jacket-- he lacked the motorbike.

They shook hands with James upon his arrival. James sat down and ordered a coffee. They made small talk. Then, Chris pulled out a ledger and opened it. He eyed both James and Kyle to be certain his spectators were enthralled. "We all want to get into business

so we should first straighten out some of the details."

James and Kyle nodded. James took a drink of his coffee. Chris continued. "Now, we're talking just a general partnership, right? Nothing fancy with a lot of bullshit, right?" They nodded. "Now, who's in charge?"

James said, "I thought we were equal partners."

"Well, that's fine with me."

James felt he little trust in this friend of Kyle. Minutes into the business and he was already trying to take over. He knew Kyle could keep a lose eye on things. Kyle would be the one to hold together this partnership-- like Tito in Yugoslavia...

During a break from work, Kyle asked of Chris: "Did you get the advance cheque from this job yet?"

Chris paused to measure and examine his choice of answers. "Yeah."

"Shouldn't we have seen out cuts?" James asked. To even out the flow of money, they pooled the money recieved from various jobs, subtracted their expenses and divided the rest according to how much work was logged. The system solved the common problem of a boom-and-bust money supply.

"Yeah. But I haven't had time to figure the money out yet."

"Seeing as the weekend starts tommorow, it'd be nice to get this settled," James said.

"Hey, I said that I'll get it done. Just don't hassle me." With that, Chris got up and pounded off to another part of the house. James observed that whenever he had to pressure Chris about specific numbers and amounts he lost control and stormed off.

Kyle knew the source of Chris's frustration but did not relate it to James. Instead he said, "He just gets stressed out where money is concerned."

James acknowledged the comment. "Great trait for a business partner." Then James too stomped off. He was scrapped for cash and relied on this advance for weekend booze money. There was no way that someone else was going to do him out of that. Not even Geena could accomplish such a feat. It brought back a memory of childhood when the kids in the neighborhood would gather up and return pop bottles. They'd always make the skinny, awkward James carry the bulk of the bottles, return them and hand out the profits of the venture. He always had an indefinite feeling of being cheating. One day, he questioned the method of dividing the money. The gang leader-- another Chris-- called him stupid for not being able to figure out the situation. James responded by clubbing him across the jaw with a pop bottle. It made a sickly crack, Chris panicked and wailed. The gang ran him home. Later that night, James' mother had to answer for her son. He broken little Chris' jaw. James recalled that from that swing of a pop bottle, his life had begun a slow constant ascendance like a roller coaster heading towards the peak. If anyone was going to weigh down on someone or cheat on someone it would be James on someone else and not vice versa.

CHAPTER TEN

"Although Thor was usually good natured, he was famous for his sudden fits of temper." - Man & Myth on Thor

Riga wore on Larry. Small. imperceptible things compounded themselves. The first thing of note was when he saw her picking her teeth with a business card. He asked what the card said. She withdrew it from her mouth and said, "Uh... H Bloom, mechanical engineer." She tore a strip off of the card and used it to ferret out of a piece of meat from between two molars. It was Larry's lucky card, his trump card. Her toothpick.

More than once, Larry returned home late to find a wet spot in his bed. Riga was either asleep on the couch or out for the night. The first couple of times, he assumed it was his sweating in bed. He deduced he was wrong when other sorts of stains began to appear.

Larry also noticed his tape collection thinned. Then, his walkman disappeared. A twenty disappeared from wallet during a night's sleep. The mysteries compounded themselves into a solution: Riga. He confronted her about the tapes and she denied a connection. He asked her about the walkman and she said it was on loan and left at a friend's place. When he asked about the twenty, she came back with, "How do you know you didn't spend it!"

"I know," he returned. "I know because I don't have any spare money."

She tried her charm. "I can't believe you're accusing me of stealing!"

He wanted to give up this argument. He wanted to salvage

something from it. But he had to bring this to a head. "I think this isn't working." A good start. It was Larry's way of holding his own hand through this affair. "I think you should move out."

"Yeah? Well when? I already paid up for this month."

"Okay, I'll give you back part. This can't keep going on. It isn't working."

"So? When?"

He was about to weaken. The end of this week could easier stretch into the far future. Tomorrow may be given a reprieve. So it had to be, "Tonight."

"What? No fucking way! Where am supposed to go?"

"I-- I don't know. Try your ex."

"I can't ask him. If I ask to stay there, he'll think I want to fuck him! I don't have anywhere to go."

Larry would have no more of this argument. He went into the kitchen to fetch food for Tsitka. He knew the cat's routine better than his cat. He, on occasion, beat the cat to the kitchen. He put the food out. No sign of the cat. He ran the can opener. No sign of the cat. He tinkled the fork inside the tin. Still, no cat. He called for the cat and Riga said, "He got out earlier."

His heart sunk. "What?"

"I was going out and the cat got past me."

"Didn't you try to catch it?"

"I was late. I didn't have the time."

"I'm not allowed to have a cat!" Larry threw open the door and stormed out into the hall. He damned regulations and called for the cat. There came nothing.

He searched the halls without luck. He then searched other floors, the parkade and even the stairwells. Each fruitless avenue cut into his heart. The cat was his tie to home and to the past. It was the only creature he trusted. It was the only thing he truly loved and the only he knew truly loved him. But now, Tsitka was gone.

Exhausted, he returned to his suite. The room reeked of pot as part of a nightly ritual. Riga asked, "Any luck?"

"No. I can't believe you let my cat out!"

"You really need to fucking relax. Chill out, it's just a cat."

Larry went straight for his room. He slammed the room shut and sprawled himself on the bed. He felt empty, like part of his soul was gone. For a man have so little, any loss was great. He dug his hands into bedding and tears came to him. Riga was ruining his life and he had to stop her somehow. But just how he did not know.

The next morning Riga awoke early and went off to her latest job as a morning janitor in a pub. In a sleepless night, Larry designed a compromise to satisfy his problems with both Riga and himself. While she was gone, Larry packed all of her things-- a meager number of possessions-- and put them outside the door. He locked the door, bolted it, chained it and jammed a stool against the handle.

He took a book from his shelf and read it. He dare not leave for fear of Riga coming in during his absence. He dare not turn on the TV: for fear of Riga hearing him; and for fear of more bad

news about Central America and the economy.

In the silence, he heard his neighbors as they traipsed down the hall. Most of them stopped to note the boxes. A few rummaged through the boxes. Larry didn't know whether he should stop them or not.

Riga was due home at one. The elevator opened and footsteps drew closer. Larry heard, "What the fuck...?" It was Riga.

Her keys jingled and Larry grew cold. She unlocked the door but the other barriers held her back. Riga shoved on the door a few times to no avail. Then she started the hammer at the door and call out, "Larry! You fuck! Open this fucking door! What the fuck are you trying to pull?"

It dragged up a memory in Larry. When he misbehaved as a child, he would hide in his room behind a barricaded door or in the attic after having pulled the ladder up with him. Now, the routine was meant to punish someone who misbehaved.

Her pounding became sporadic: bursts of fervor then spells of shouting. She called out, "This isn't all of my stuff!" "Some things are missing!" "You promised me money back from my rent!" "What's wrong with you, you faggot?" After a good twenty minutes, she gave up. She dragged the boxes to the elevator and it took her-- all of her-- away from Larry. Hours later, Larry's guts ceased churning. His shakes subsiding and he could turn on the TV in safety.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"'For this,' said Frigga, 'shall he have who will ride to Hel and offer Hela a ransom if she will ride to Hel and offer Hela a ransom if she will let Baldur return to Asgard.'" - Bullfinch's

Mythology on The Death of Baldur

Eric's weekend began naked. He sat in a change room cubicle with the curtain drawn, awaiting his turn to face the customs officer. Half an hour earlier, he was in the car with Val, Jonathan, Tammy and Garth at the border. A big, sweaty American customs officer waylaid them and ordered a strip search of everyone in the car.

Eric suffered this fate twice before and knew to never cross the border holding drugs. On the first occasion, a customs officer searched every inch of the car. He paused with joy upon finding something wrapped in silver foil. Like a glutton before a confectionary, he unwrapped the first layer to find more foil. Then he unwrapped the second to find more foil. Six layers later, he discovered an empty piece of foil wrapping. Eric and his friends had pooled all of their empty chocolate wrappers absently, unaware it would be the focus of so much attention. When the customs officer came to his discovery, Eric et al broke out laughing. As revenge, they were sentenced to the dreaded cavity search. The customs officer, an elderly buzzard was flanked by his aide, a young, musclebound punk who almost burst out of his uniform. The grim ritual progressed. First, a rubber gloved search of the obvious spots: armpits and behind the ears. Next, the obvious cavities, in the mouth and between the legs. Then the

piece de resistance: between the buttocks and up the anus. They cleared the test. Garth caused a commotion of laughter by holding onto an attack of flatulence until the final cavity was inspected.

On the trip down they each put their own spin on the inspections. Without the personal intrusions, they would have had little to discuss.

They wended their way down the concrete highways to Seattle. Every so often, they'd see parked cars by the side of the road--far more than ever seen in Canada. A few had flats, one was a burned out husk of its former self.

They took the prerequisite offramps and turns to get to Leanne and Jack's place. Leanne and Jack were from Spokane but moved to Seattle where Jack could find work doing engineering for local bands. Leanne worked at a secondhand dress shop. They had met up with Eric's cadre during a camping trip on Orcas Island. From there out, they all kept in touch and occasionally visited each other as the schedules allowed.

They drove through the side street that closed on their house. Eric noticed that in this part of town, you saw only whites. Scummy whites, young whites, old whites, three-piece-suit whites-- but still, only whites. Eric knew that there were a number of visible minorities in the states, especially here, but he was damned in he could sight a single one.

Jack and Leanne lived in an old house. The paint was cracked, the fence a tattered skeleton of lumber and the walk a shattered piece of pavement. For all this, their rent was modest thus their lifestyle was secure.

Leanne greeted them at the door. She was a husky Germanic girl with full, long blonde hair and thick glasses. She wore a tie-dyed dress and a coarse woven top. She and Val squealed with delight upon meeting. She kissed Eric and the remainder of the group and welcomed them in. She explained that Jack was out running errands and that she had the day off.

When Jack got back from town, the party began. Leanne went to a sugar bowl in a kitchen cupboard. She fished tabs of acid out, enough for all of them, grabbed a two liter of coke, a twenty-sixer of rum and sat down at the living room coffee table. Jonathan was lighting up a joint, holding it carefully in a tie clip. Jonathan enjoyed the irony of using that tie clip: it was given to him by an ultra-religious aunt and uncle on his graduation from high school.

"What? No glasses?" Eric asked when Leanne plunked down the bottles.

"Get'em yourself." She let go of the handful of tablets then picked one out for herself. She threw it in her mouth and took a swig from the Coke bottle.

"These are a different batch, right?" Jonathan asked. On their last trip to Seattle, they bought part of a batch of Leanne called frantically and warned them not to take it, "It fucks you up really bad. Trust me: don't try them. I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy."

"No, these are fine," Leanne said.

Eric picked up the caky little tablet and swallowed it dry. He asked, "Is just one enough?"

Jack replied, "A friend of mine makes these. He works at a garden center so he can get all the ingredients he needs. They're pretty strong stuff." In short moments, everyone present had taken one. They drank rum-cokes and talked as they waited for the acid to take effect.

Garth was a lanky guy, who must have been a spider in every past incarnation. He would let his hair grow into a mop before cutting it Mormon short. The acid took effect on him first. He remarked, "This stuff is great. They should bottle it and sell it somewhere!"

Jonathan said, "Garth, it's illegal."

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

Leanne began to laugh. She put down her drink and went to her room.

"Where're you going?" Val called.

"Justa sec," she replied. She emerged a moment later with a bottle of hair mousse. Leanne rejoined them at the coffee table. Eric looked up and noticed that she had prestidigitated into existence a container of mousse. He giggled like a woman.

Leanne ejected a handful of the mousse. With a child's amazement, she studied the foam. "This stuff is the best stuff you'll ever find when you're on acid." She turned her hand upside down and, magically, the mousse remained adhered. Val examined a pile of mousse. She remarked, "Hey! It changes color! It starts off brown and then changes color a few times and then goes back to brown again."

Eric stared at those assembled but his glasses' lenses were

whited out with blobs of mousse. He remarked, "White out conditions!"

Eventually hunger seized the group. Leanne led the band into the kitchen. There, they began to pull food of all sorts from the cupboards and the fridge. The sounds of the mixing bowls and can openers, pots and pans echoed out of the kitchen.

Absent from the kitchen was Eric. He took to the dining room table and made that his fortress. He leaned on the white cloth and stared into the infinite variations given off by the fabric. Somebody in the kitchen decided that they needed needed more space at the table. Jack and Garth came out of the kitchen. They were oblivious to Eric's presense when they lifted the dining room table and pulled it apart. Jack went to get the center leaf. Garth returned to the kitchen. Eric presided over the cavity veiled by the tablecloth. He stared at the hollow. The signifigance of the ever changing sheet of fabric sagging beneath unseen pressures caught him. He became sad and melancholy. Tears welled in his eyes.

Val heard Eric's sobbing and came to attend to him. She knew that sometimes acid sent Eric into a crying jag. Back when he was in art school. she said it was his deep, artistic self coming out. Recently, she concluded that he had a slipped gear somewhere. Nonetheless, she came to his aid when he was in this state.

Eric had his head in his hands. He was staring down at the tablecloth-- at the cavity it fell into with both sides of the table pulled apart. "What's wrong, Eric?"

Eric composed himself enough to speak. "This tablecloth, it's

like the world... The surface is still there but the foundations are gone. We can't put anything on top of it now because it won't stand up. It'll all give way." Eric shook his head and lapsed back into his quiet, feminine sobbing. Val shook her head and left Eric to his imaginary dilemma.

#

The house started to rise at around eleven. Val played the role of rooster by heaving so loud that no one could sleep. She found her way into the kitchen where they had assembled. She fished a bottle of peppermint schnapps from a cupboard and took a swig.

Garth was still asleep but the rest of the household sat in the living room and watched cartoons. They looked like hell. Jonathan had dark puffy rings under his eyes. Leanne and Val had rat's nests of hair. Eric was unshaven and still half asleep. Val dropped down beside Leanne. The group exchanged banter regarding the logic of the Transformers and their motivations.

Eric grew restless. "So what's the plan for today?"

There was little to do in Seattle during the day. None of them wished to sightsee and hanging out in a bar during the day simply wasn't done. That left shopping. Val said, "Leanne and I are going to check out Cramps. Maybe get a leather jacket."

"Oh. I was hoping to get a look at Southgate."

Jack volunteered his company. "I can take you there. But I gotta meet a friend at four."

Leanne asked, "Who? Andy?"

"Yeah. He's going to buy a key."

#

Jack and Eric went to check out Southgate mall. The Seattle clique had come to hear of Eric's rift with his family. Jack asked Eric, "So what are going to do with yourself, now that you're out on your own?"

"I haven't really thought about it. I guess get another job, move into an apartment, maybe share a place." To be honest, Eric made no plans to do either. His days with Val consisted of watching TV, hanging with friends in similar circumstances and getting wasted. He was awaiting his triumphant return home, after his stepfather was deposed.

"Yeah, well you should think of something. You don't want Val to change her mind and boot you."

Eric paranoia surged. "Why? What makes you she'd do that? Have you two talked?"

"No. No. What? Are you two together again?"

"Us? No, the day I'd get back with her is the day I need my head bashed in. Y'know I love her, but it'd just be too much bullshit."

"Oh. Well, see: if you're not back together again. Then you're just living together. If you have to depend on her and something changes, you'll be fucked. That's why I said you think about doing something."

"Yeah..."

"Can't you patch things up at home? I thought your mother thought the world of you."

"She does. But with Carl there I'll never get back in. I'll

probably have to wait until he beats to death and leaves to find someone else." There, Eric let the topic trail off, in the hopes Jack would allow that to happen. By favor, he did.

The mall was unfortunately similar to malls everywhere else. Fourteen year old girls idled through the stores and the food fair. They met up with their boyfriends who were dressed in oversized jeans, oversized sports jerseys and backward baseball caps. They were the nemesis of the elderly. By walker, by cane or by slow shuffle, crocidilians thickened the congestion in the mall. By luck, Eric would scoot by one fossil to end up behind another. When he came within arm's reach of a few of them, they would push at him to ensure he kept his distance. One old lady, wearing yellow sun goggles put her head down and right hand forward and pushed her way through the crowds. Such was the ecology of the mall.

At a record store, the clerk behind the counter eyed Eric and Jack carefully. At one point, Jack started to go grey and trembly. Eric asked, "Are you okay?"

He managed to reply, "No. Let's go."

Jack led Eric to a public men's room. It was empty. Jack slipped into a cubicle with his backpack. Eric heard him rummaging through the pack. Jack stopped and rummaged again, this time in a frenzy. "Fuck. Fuck!" he called out. Eric pushed the cubicle door open. Jack's sleeve was rolled up. A rag was turniqued around his upper arm. The inside of his elbow was bruised and pindotted. In his other hand he had a syringe partially full. Eric guessed it was heroin.

"What is it?" Eric asked.

"I need to-- thin this stuff out. If I don't, it'll kill me."

"Well, what do you usually use?"

"Boiled water. I usually do it when I'm home. I thought I'd hold out longer. But I need some right now!"

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing." Jack snapped. He turned around and sunk the needle tip into the toilet bowl. With a craftsman's care, he drew water from the bowl. He agitated the syringe, turned it needle up and pushed out the air bubbles. He found a vessel erect in his forearm and plunged the hypodermic into his arm. Eric watched in mute shock. For all the drugs he had done he had never seen anyone shoot up. Jack injected the heroin then pulled out the plunger. Blood was drawn into the syringe. Then, the translucent red elixir went into his bloodstream. Eric expected an instant reaction, but it took near eternal moments for Jack to calm down. He gained a deathlike composure: peace unbound.

#

Dan took satisfaction that the local stations carried the news of his triumph. Dan took satisfaction that the beggars scurried from underfoot on the approach of himself and other productive members of society. Where before they saw soft touches, they now saw potential danger. They were once cowards, scared of life; now they were cowards, scared of death.

#

Larry's mother more than once called to speak with Larry and instead got Riga on the phone. Upon discovering that he was living

with a girl, she was elated at his apparent heterosexuality. Upon learning of the living arrangements, she said, "You're being made a fool of Larry. I don't what's wrong with you."

Larry recalled his recent request to return home. A request for cheaper rent, safer climes and new opportunities. His mother refused with, "Barry and I are moving into a new place in a few months and are planning to get only a one bedroom." Larry's brother, Will, never made such a request. He was living back east on welfare. He had shackled up with a single mother in subsidized housing. If Will had a job he'd be far worse off. It was a lesson that Larry learned too late after his debts were amassed and his options were eliminated.

Larry's mother, Stella, came down to visit Larry. Her boyfriend, Barry, was still up island working on this day. That gave the visit time parameters for she had to be back in time to see him for dinner.

She came into the apartment cautiously, like a cat in a new home. She kissed Larry on the cheek and told him how much she missed him. She next said, "So your friend is gone?"

Larry was tired of this subject. After being weighed down by its yolk for so long, it was a burden to reassume its heavy weight once again. "Yes, months ago."

"You know, I can't see why you'd let a girl live with you. It must've hurt your chances with other girls, Larry." Perhaps she was right, were there other girls. But as there were none, none learned of his presumed affair.

"Can we drop this issue? Let's just go out for lunch."

His mother agreed and they departed. At the restaurant, she resumed her attack. This time, from another weak front.

"So, how is work?"

"Alright."

"Do they still have that slimy little kid there? Leon?"

"Leo. Yes."

"You should've gotten that manager position, Larry, you've been there long enough." That was very true. He had several years on Leo and all the experience. What Larry did lack was either the demeanor of success or the illusion of concern for his position. Either way, he did not advance.

"Please, Mom, don't bother me about that."

She asked, "Well, have you been looking for other work?" Indeed he had. He developed massive blisters on his feet from his poor dress shoes as he walked the city in search of work. Everybody took his resume, thanked him and put it into a massive pile of similar resumes.

Larry's felt that wrench in his gut as he underwent this torture. "Yes. I've been looking. Did you come down here just to grill me about my life. Why not call Will?"

Her disposition worsened with the subject of Will. "Oh, Will is a lost cause. Living with some useless tramp. He never calls, you know. I couldn't tell you what he's doing with himself back there. Probably still on welfare."

"I'd be better on welfare. At least then, they'd take care of me. Who knows. they'd maybe even pay my debts."

"Well, if you had an education, maybe your life would be

better now. You should have stayed with school once you were in, Larry."

"What? You told me to not waste my time! You said that nobody useful comes out of university. When I started, you said I should have given back the money and got a job!"

"Well, some people can make a good living at it. Look at Barry: he makes forty thousand a year in insurance and he only has a Grade Ten education."

"Great."

"Don't be sarcastic, Larry. You know Barry suggested that you might take an insurance agent's course. He says that you're well networked here. You'd have no problem signing people up."

"Mother, listen to yourself! He's got you sounding like an insurance agent."

"Well, Larry you need a career. You can't go bumping through life like this. You need a girl too."

Their food arrived at that point. The topics were broken. They made only small talk over the rest of the meal. His mother drove him back to his apartment building. She kissed him goodbye, promised to call soon and left for home. Larry returned to his apartment. In his heart, he felt very full; full to the point of boiling over.

He returned to the room that comprised his home. It felt more empty than usual. The other voices that filled this hovel were gone. Riga's vibrant conversation and her occasional laughter. Tsitka's cry for food or chortle of pleasure. Eric's visits after work at the theater. Now, the small apartment housed only the din

of Larry's frustrated thoughts and the echoes of police sirens. If the eardrums that resounded his inner voices could be lanced, he would do it. He had no escape; no reconciliation within his mind and no repair in his life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"...the page was encouraged... to select some lady of the court as the mistress of his heart." - Bullfinch's Mythology on
The Training of a Knight

It was odd fortune that on the same night that Larry was to join his co-workers at a nightclub, James called. He also asked Larry out for a drink. Larry confessed his plans and James asked to come along. Larry saw nothing wrong with it. James was a reasonable, very likable guy; the others in the theater couldn't disagree with his company.

James picked Larry up at ten. As usual, James outshone Larry with his better hair, better shirt and better fitting jeans. Larry was used to being a vivid shadow of his friend's image. He recalled the early days of their friendship when James was giggled at by girls and ridiculed by all.

As they drove to the club, James saw that Larry was on edge. James prompted his friend by saying, "So is anybody special going to be there?"

Larry tried to be nonchalant. He also wanted to have no secrets from his old friend. "The gang... I think this girl, Fanny, is going to be there too."

"Oh yeah." That response asked for more.

"She's the one I've been trying for. I'm going to try to make my move tonight."

"Right on," was the only reply that James could come up with. He recalled that Larry lamented and dawdled over such issues until they were dead, buried and exhumed with the thrill of a court

order. Larry didn't know when a cause was lost. Not knowing that his cause was done for, he swam further out and got himself into water too deep.

The line up outside the club was mercilessly short. Nonetheless, Larry shifted his weight anxiously from one foot to another. James couldn't help but smile and shake his head.

"What?" asked Larry knowing that an insult lurked in James' gestures.

"Just relax, okay. Women can smell nerves. Trust me." 'Trust me' was a line that cooled a man's anxiety and set a woman on red alert. For Larry, it did nothing to calm him and nothing to set him anymore off key.

"Okay." Larry leaned more on his right foot as they waited.

Inside, the gang was assembled. Larry and James were amongst the last to arrive. James was introduced to the party. They nodded in acknowledgement though only two got his name out of the din of the dance music. The two stood by the table. James preened and posed. Larry checked and rechecked the dance floor. In amongst the dancers, Leo and Fanny danced. Leo had conveniently left his girlfriend at home.

Fanny and Leo returned to the table and two people surrendered seats for them. Leo said a quick hello to his underling, Larry. Fanny nodded and smiled. She asked if Larry was having a good time. Larry stammered back a positive reply. Then, she asked to be introduced to James. James shook her hand and made his greetings. Fanny said to James and Larry that she'd be back later to talk. She went to the far side of the gathering and

sipped on a drink. She and two of the girls chattered and motioned to the opposite side of group-- to James. Larry was used to this and his heart barely sank.

As promised, Fanny returned to their end of the table. She had a strong accent of liquor on her breath. It filled him with promise. Larry had heard tales of her behaviour when drunk. Two former ushers had done more than just hear of her behaviour. It was a point that drew men to her and put a distance between herself and the other ushers. Larry asked her to dance and she defered him by saying, "Maybe next song. I don't like this one." For Larry, it was a sad ritual: ask a girl to dance, hear the lame excuse, nod in acceptance and continue. It drained him of any jitters about dancing for his attempts rarely took him that far.

Fanny asked Larry, "So where do you know your friend from?"

Larry replied, "High school."

James took a drag on his cigarette and said, "We go back a long way."

"So what do you do now?"

"Contracting. Finishing contracting-- y'know renovations and refurbishing homes."

"I wish you could work on my place. I rent this suite in an apartment built in the 'twenties. It's a nice place but it needs a lot of work to fix it up."

"Is your landlord into doing repairs?"

"I don't know." Fanny looked into James' clear, perceptive eyes.

"Well, if he were I could look at the building, find out what

needs fixing and do up an estimate. I could even start in your suite."

"That'd be great." Two of the girls came up to Fanny with their purses. They motioned for her to follow them into the ladies room. She looked to the girls and then back at James. She offered, "Conference." Larry was always amazed by the group politique. Whenever Fanny worked, the girls made covert asides and assaults on Fanny's character. Outside of work, they made her a part of all their activities.

James nodded and took a drink. She departed. Larry, meanwhile, was drawing circles with the runoff from his glass. The world slipped away from him, leaving him only tiny tracing of moisture on the laminated tabletop. James interrupted the exercise. "She's a nice girl."

Larry shrugged. "Yeah..."

"Try talking to her, Larry. You gotta get in there. Show her that you're interested in her. The person."

"Yeah..."

James rung a bell in her-- exhumed an old memory. His slim, healthy frame reminded Fanny of the attractive boys in high school. More precisely, he reminded her of Alex, the boy she lost her virginity to in her seventeenth year. This was the first time in a year she had recalled him. Alex kept the accounts of a woman's first time an unproven illusion. With Alex she felt no pain, no bleeding, no fear. When she came, she feared her head would explode, that she'd never catch her breath and that she'd never want him to pull out. It was a moment that she would never

forget.

Fanny returned to Larry's end of the table. The other girls went to swarm around Leo and his lieutenants. The three of them made small talk. Larry noticed that Fanny hung on James' comments but she barely acknowledged his.

James looked at her chest. He stared at the pearly shade of her neck and below it, hung a tribal necklace of teeth, beads and stone. "It's African-- from Mali. My aunt lives there and she sent in over for my twenty-first birthday."

James, if not impressed, feigned it well. "Cool. I've always wanted to go to Africa."

She sparked like a firecracker. "I'm saving up money to do volunteer work there. I'll be ready to go in two months."

"My idea was to backpack around Africa and get the material together to do a book. Y'know a great novel based on my on-the-road experiences. Everyone writes about Europe or South America-- especially with all that crap in Peru-- but nobody has done a book like that about Africa."

She sparked again. "So you write?"

James found grocery lists difficult. "Yeah, but I never get the time to do anything long. Just short pieces."

"Short stories?"

To James, limmericks were mysteries-- not the form and function of one-- but what the words meant. Unfettered by such limitations, James continued his act. He looked up to draw insight from some unseen source. In response to her question, he said, "Mhm. Those and some poetry... 'Here come and sit, where never

serpent hisses, And being set I'll smother thee with kisses.'

That's part of the most recent one. I'd do more if I had the time." Larry recalled the line well. It stood out in his mind as being from one of the few poetry lessons in English twelve that both he and James bothered to attend. Since then, he only heard the line in conversations such as this one.

Fanny smiled and blushed. She shifted in her seat. "So you're a starving poet?"

"No. I couldn't stand to starve so I turned respectable."

A good song came from the speakers and James tapped his foot to the dominant drumbeat. Fanny stood up and asked James to dance. He nodded and she led him by the hand to the dance floor.

Larry watched from the table and felt cheated. That same sensation, an all too familiar one, welled in Larry: he felt cheated. Larry imagined once that this was a feeling he didn't mind at all, one he thrived on: he looked on from the outside while others lived their lives. It was all too easy to cut James down. A word to Fanny about the married man she danced with and that would be that. A word to Geena and James would be leashed. Larry knew that and James must have known it too. Perhaps that was why he held friends like Larry as close as he did. Larry sensed a code of honor should exist amongst friends; and that code should remain in place even when someone else violates the pact.

James and Fanny danced well together. James noticed that women rarely looked their dance partners in the eye when they danced. For etiquette and ego, he did the same. Now, on the dance floor with Fanny, he saw the juxtaposition of the concept. Fanny

kept her eyes fixed on James' eyes both when he looked at her and when he looked away. They stayed on the dance floor for three dances. A slow dance came and James took Fanny in his arms.

They talked as danced. James said, "I'm surprised you didn't bring your boyfriend with you tonight."

"What makes you think I have a boyfriend?"

"I assumed you'd have to have a boyfriend. I assumed you'd have your pick of worthwhile men."

"Maybe I'm picky." Her eyes sent telepathy: I'm picking you.

James dipped his head in silent reply. "Did you feel like going for a coffee somewhere?"

She smiled. The telepathy from her eyes spoke of a veiled hunger beyond words. "Sure."

They returned to the table after the dance. James sat back down beside Larry and looked at him with a slight smirk. Larry did not return the gesture. He had seen what was going on and had seen it too often before. Fanny saw Larry's look of frustration and hostility. She knew how he felt about her. She tried to get around that awkward barrier. She felt sorry that Larry put so much energy and hope into the chance she'd change. It didn't seem that Larry could fathom that for her desire did not spring from an empty well. Still, she felt for Larry's frustration. She needed to explain something to him.

She held out her hand. "Like to dance, Larry?"

The music was still slow and sensuous. Larry's heart lifted then fell from the new height. He nodded in a sullen fashion and went with her to the dance floor.

They were silent for a few moments before she said, "Having a good time, tonight?"

Manners outflanked honesty. "Yeah. An alright time."

"James and I are going to leave early."

"Oh yeah."

"I was hoping you wouldn't mind. You don't do you?"

Larry had lost already. It was a frustrating defeat: for he was a force with full salvos of ammunition; accurate weapons for the job; and a goal within sight-- within grasp. He had not strategies to win the battle but only to turn it into a bloodbath. A bloodbath that would leave no heroes, only victims. He replied, "No. It's fine with me."

The song was over. They came back to the table. Fanny said her goodbyes to those assembled. James too bid his farewells and they were off. Larry didn't have to look up to know that his co-workers kibbitzed over the fate of Fanny and her new suitor. They also made commentaries on Larry and his failure. That was always a popular subject. So benevolent were they towards the failure of Larry that the good-looking Steele even came to console Larry. His brand of consolation came as, "Hey, man, how's it going?"

Larry wanted to tell Steele to fuck off. He wanted to sucker punch Steele, the icon of of all his foes. If he were to sacrifice this icon, Larry could free himself of the burden that their lot imposed on him. Instead of action, he chose cowardice. "Fine, thanks."

Larry gulped his drink, said a brief parting note and left. He stormed along the streets that took him home.

#

Fanny and James took his car. He asked, "Where you like to go for coffee?"

She looked at her watch. "Most of the places are packed this time of night. I could always made a pot of coffee at my place."

James acted as if he were weighing the pros and cons of the offer. His mind was already made up. "Sure."

With her direction, he threaded a path to Fanny's apartment block. It was a nice, small place. She was lucky enough to live alone, free of the eyes and ears of others.

They removed their shoes and went into the kitchen. She drew a pot of water from the tap and began the ritual of making coffee. She flicked the switch and turned to face James. Rather than lean against the countertop, he stood in the middle of the room. She smiled to relax him.

He said, "I have a horrible admission I have to make." He took a step closer. She waited for the other shoe to drop. "I didn't really have a coffee on my mind."

She stood close to him and locked him in a gaze. "Really?"

"Yeah." He leaned down and kissed her. They embraced and continued to kiss.

She broke from the kiss, turned off the coffee machine and said, "C'mon." She led him past the living room and into the bedroom. Clothes were strewn on the floor. It didn't matter.

They stopped beside the bed. He kissed the edge of her jaw the probed her ear with his tongue. He moved down her smooth neck and kissed her chest. He reached around her neck to remove her

necklace. She stopped him. She said, "Don't. I never take it off." He nodded and moved past it. He unbuttoned her blouse and worked his tongue and lips between her cleavage. She leaned up and took off her top and her bra. She pushed his face into one full breast; he sucked on her nipple and left it awash in his warm saliva. She moaned and bit her lip. When he was done on one side, she guided him to the other. With a lover's care, he bit down on her nipple and she let out a scream of passion.

#

Keith and Richard milled around outside of the arcade. This night was the most boring they had entered in weeks. Few regulars were in attendance. The bars were jammed to capacity with the most boring of patrons.

An uptight figure approached them. He was a theater usher they recalled passing by on their way into various movies. Larry. He was in a sour mood with his head downturned and his hands thrust in his pockets.

He missed past Richard and Keith only to stand at the intersection for an eternity. Richard jabbed Keith and motioned to Larry. Wordlessly, they closed the distance between themselves and Larry.

They followed him uncomfortably close.

In Keith's best Eddie Haskell voice he said, "Excuse me, sir? Excuse me?" Larry ignored them.

Richard called out, "Hey! We're talking to you!" Larry ignored that too. He was so close but still a distance.

They closed the gap and flanked Larry. Keith leaned on one

shoulder and Richard the other. One punk said, "You're not being polite."

"Yeah, you got that right." The other said.

Larry said nothing. He swallowed hard and tried not to shake.

"What's wrong? You deaf?"

Larry still said nothing.

"He's too good us. Right? The usher's too good for us."

In a squirrel's voice Larry said, "Please leave me alone."

Richard falsified anger for Larry's benefit. He grabbed Larry and exclaimed. "Hey! Watch who you're pushing around!"

Larry stammered. It was like a red rag to a bull; or a green light to a motorist. Keith and Richard pushed him against the nearest wall. He hit his head with a superficial thud and gave up his resistance to the concept of uncontrollable shaking.

One said, "Do you ever piss me off."

"Please let me go." Larry said and feebly he fought to be free.

"Hey, we're talking to you. We're trying to set you straight. Don't fuck around."

Larry gave up. He was trapped and broken. Resistance would only make it all worse.

One of them demanded, "Give us your wallet!" Larry looked from one punk to the other. The wall he leaned against reassured him and supported him but it did not give him courage. He was scared. He was terrified. Richard and Keith cackled and waited for Larry to pull it out. They didn't need his money. What they needed was his fear and respect. Larry pulled out the wallet. Keith

snatched it from Larry and pulled out the money: a whopping thirty bucks.

Richard took his half and shook his head. "Fuck, man. This is all you got?" On the street, a police cruiser passed by. Larry nodded like he a man locked in a spasm.

"Stupid asshole," Keith declared. He added, "Hey, don't go telling the pigs about this. We know where you live. If you tell them, we'll fucking kick your ass." He threw the wallet back at Larry and took off back for the arcade. They cackled in triumph and gave each other a high-five in salute to a job well done. When Larry stopped shaking and crying he gathered himself up and made it for home.

#

To hold her in place, he braced himself against the bed, above her shoulders. When he thrust into her, he sent her shoulders against his arms rather than her head against the wall.

He pumped her until he felt his control slipping. He climaxed into a fugue state and geysered inside of her. To prolong it, he collapsed on her and dug his hands into her hair and into the bedding beneath her. She was close behind flexing her legs and arching her back to work every last drop out of him. She was driven by an impulse older than mankind.

The overture was over. They held each other close and gave each other passionate prolonged kisses. He rolled onto his back pulled her with him. He felt something on his chest: a sprinkling of pebbles. Fanny felt for her neck and exclaimed, "Turn the light on!"

"What?"

"Turn the light on! My necklace is broken."

Although James didn't see the point in so much upset, he obeyed. The light stung his eyes. She pawed the bed in search of bits and pieces of the necklace. Fanny found a handful and dropped them back onto the bed and broke out crying. James tried to comfort her but she moved away from him.

She explained, "That necklace was a one-of-a-kind. It was made for my aunt by a medicine man that said was specifically for me. It's supposed to protect me. It's all I have from her. She's my favorite aunt..." Fanny lapsed back into her tears.

"You're being superstitious, Fanny. C'mon let's find all the pieces and put it back together."

He cried aloud and turned her back to him. She sat on the edge of the bed and wailed.

James sat silent amongst the beads and devised plan after plan of how to console her, calm her, get another fuck out of her. He took his best arguments to her. She saw right through them and rejected every one. Exhausted by his attempts at concern, she said, "Maybe it'd just be best if you went home, James."

James realized his tether was spent. Unlike other such encounters he was certain not to fetch a shower out of the deal. That was doubly bad. He could smell her perfume, his own sweat, her oils on his penis and all over his groin. Other women had an uncanny ability to detect such clues. Such clues he had hidden until this night. He and Geena were still newlyweds. Even coming home at three, four or five, she would awake and nudge him into

making love. On this night, he feared, she would learn of his exploits.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"The service of his mistress was the glory and occupation of a knight and her smiles bestowed at once by affection and gratitude, were held out as the recompense of his well-directed valor." -Bullfinch's Mythology The Training of a Knight

Fanny and Larry worked alone concession upstairs. A lull hit just after the show started. It had been several weeks since she had met James. By coincidence, she stepped up her plans for leaving for Africa.

A kid came out from the art film playing upstairs. He was maybe eighteen, short-buzz cut hair and he wore a very commonplace black jacket. He came to all of the unpopular art films but never the blockbusters. He always serious, so mature especially for a kid. The kid ordered a pop and returned to the motion picture.

"So how are your preparations going for your trip?"

"Good. Good. I'm almost packed. I've got my tickets, my volunteer package. I'm almost ready to go."

"Good."

She tried to feign nonchalance; it left a pregnant pause in their conversation. Then she asked, "What can you tell me about your friend, James?"

"Not much. Why?"

Due to Larry's efforts at intimacy the two had grown very comfortable and very close. She was at ease talking to Larry about anything. Her failed affairs, her preferences in sex-- anything. "Well, I just can't get him out of my head, Larry. He hurt me, but I still want to talk to him again. I didn't even get his number."

Rather than angry, hostile retort, Larry came back with, "Oh yeah."

"Has he talked about me?"

To James, Fanny was a logged and completed conquest. Of course he never mentioned Fanny. But for Larry to hear Fanny go on and on about a man who cared nothing for her was torture. Torture especially considering how Larry felt about Fanny. In retrospect, women before Fanny meant nothing. His stray thoughts were of her. His motivations were hinged on her. She invaded his dreams and brought to his sleep powerful phantasms of passion: sex more real than reality, the scent of her perfume, her cry as he made her climax in his mind. Even when those dreams did not fill his night, he awoke and the first thoughts were of Fanny. The image of her face in Larry's mind both propelled him to awaken and brought the need to change and grow and become worthy of her. Early in his obsession, he shared these feelings with friends, including James, and they told him to get her out of his head. Try as he might-- using the solvents of reality, betrayal and pain-- he could not purge her from his life. He knew this infatuation was destroying him but was helpless to stop it. For in forgetting Fanny, he would be excising the one beautiful ingredient of his life.

For all her caring, Larry now saw Fanny as someone cold and mercenary. Talking with Eric once, he and Larry reasoned that perhaps women were incapable of true emotion: they came to tears with the skill of an actor; and they had the faith and devotion of a stray cat. Men always sought to legitimize their feelings of

passion by turning them into relationships while women always sought to have their physical pleasure and then seek to control their find or abandon them, citing the affair as a 'mistake.' Larry felt empty because he could not express how he felt towards Fanny. Fanny felt empty because she couldn't get more of James. Eric once pointed out that you never heard of heated arguments or fits of madness coming between lesbian couples--their relationships were exercises in cold pleasure. But, gay couples left a terrible spoor in the wake of their arguments and enacted terrible revenge when hurt or pained. Larry's best revenge against his love, Fanny, was honesty. "He's married, Fanny. It'd be best if you left him alone."

She thought this was a cruel joke or a barb of retaliation for turning Larry down. "Married?"

"Yeah, for two years. Like I said, there's no point in trying to turn him. He's had other women and none of them have made him think twice about his marriage." Fanny didn't acknowledge this. Her back was turned to Larry, her head bowed. He called for her attention. "Fanny?"

She sniffed. Her voice was broken and derailed. "Larry, I'll be back in a second." She ran to the ladies' room without looking back to Larry. It was forever before she returned. Her face was blotchy and her eyes were red and lacking mascara.

Larry was torn. Half of him felt revenged for abandonment. Half of him felt sorrow beyond measure. That half would rather take her pain and make it his own to relieve her. But the half that required vengeance won out. When she returned, he said

nothing good or ill.

The work shift ended after all of the dried pop, gum and popcorn was cleared from the theater floors. Larry changed and walked home. As always, the city was a surreal spectacle. Punks clustered by a wall; plumes of pot smoke emitted from the band. Police dragged kids into a patty wagon; two of the kids were prostrate, handcuffed and pulled into custody by their feet. Prostitutes spread from the red light district to the rest of the city like a disease. He felt as if the world was running at a low ebb, bad karma. And rather than reaching out to Fanny to ease her pain, he let ill will flourish with her too.

#

Babies and disasters come early in the morning. Eric heard the phone ringing. Val slept too deep to get to it. Eric picked it up. "Hello?"

"Eric? It's Jason. Listen, you've got to come to the General-- it's Mum."

"Oh God! Is she dead?"

"No, but she's hurt pretty bad. Just get here."

Eric hung up the phone-- or at least dropped it near its cradle. He was shaking so bad that he could barely button his jeans. He grabbed a cab card off of the fridge and called the number. It took three tries for Eric to give the dispatcher the right address. He ran out to street with his wallet but without his keys. There was a chill in the night air. It was only November but they predicted it to be a cold long winter.

The cab ride left him penniless. He found the emergency ward

and tried to get help from the reception desk. Jason intercepted him. Jason was Eric's height but with a body builder's frame. He was mainstream all the way. They began to diverge when Eric was seventeen and Jason was fourteen. Jason got into sports and Eric got into drugs.

Eric's voice was a high pitch squeal. "What happened?"

"Carl. They had another argument and he lost it. He beat the living shit out of mom and took off."

Eric had to see her. It was the first time in all these months that he had and wished it were on better circumstances. "Where--where is she?"

Jason took Eric down a hallway littered with injured souls. Around two corners, they came to a treatment room. Eric's heart sank. His mother lay on the treatment bed in a hospital smock. Her torn, bloodied nightgown sat in a police evidence bag underneath the table. Her hair and face were caked with blood. Stitches weaved a path from her temporal past her eye and to the edge of her mouth. She had a fat lip, two black eyes her nose was broken and pushed into her face. Her arms and legs were a mass of bruises and cuts from where Carl had taken his cowboy boots to her. Eric's footstep made a noise that she perceived. She looked to see him. She was able to say, "Eric."

Eric wailed and sobbed like a baby. He came to her side. He wanted to hug and cry and beg for forgiveness. He felt to blame for this. But he couldn't touch her as every spot on her body was bruised.

"Mom!" Eric exclaimed. "Oh, God. Mom: what happened?"

"We had an argument." She coughed. When she opened her mouth, Eric saw that she was missing teeth. "We had an argument about you, Eric... I took your side. Look what happened." Eric renewed his wailing-- partially in grief, partially in frustration. As sick as she was now, she would not give up something once she had sunk her teeth into it. Like a pit bull, she tore at Eric. "You can probably move back in now, Eric. Carl has left me for sure. You've won. You've ruined my chance at happiness." She paused and then rallied. "But when you come back, there's going to be some changes..."

Eric had enough. He charged out and down to the waiting room. Jason followed him. He said, "She's so upset, she's just lashing out at everyone." Then Jason softened this all more with a lie. "She ranked on me half an hour ago."

Eric nodded. He regained enough composure to ask, "What did the doctors say?"

"It could have been worse. Broken nose, some broken fingers and toes, a concussion, a lot of bruises and cuts. She'll survive."

Eric's eyes cleared and dried. A scowl grew on his face. "I'll kill him."

"Not if the police find him first. They're out looking for him. We were lucky: a woman cop answered the call to the house."

Eric paused for a moment of thought. He began to cry again. Jason tried to comfort his brother. It was a difficult task; the junior aiding the senior was not the natural order of things. Too many times did Jason end up in fights defending his brother's

honor, his brother's safety. In the end, his heart sided with those who ridiculed Eric. It was an easier path; and, Eric-- with weird friends, weird fancies, weird mannerisms and attitudes-- looked like a justified target. At this moment, Jason squeezed Eric's shoulder and offered him hope. He was, after all, his brother.

#

It was James' turn to do the deposits for the business. He handed over the week's cheques and cash along with the bankbook. The clerk eyed him with an impish smirk. She was a cute brunette with a full face but compact frame. She returned a minute or so later. The money was in and the bankbook was up to date.

James smiled, thanked the teller then stepped away from the wicket. He had an impulse to look over the balance. The numbers looked wrong-- by how much he couldn't say. Yet they were wrong.

In his car, he examined the bankbook more closely. A couple of cheques were written on the account without good reason: one for eight hundred and another for six-fifty. Too, there were a few withdrawals totalling another sixteen hundred or so. James picked up his cellphone and dialled Kyle. No answer. He tried Chris next. We would rather kept Chris out of this, suspecting that he was at the heart of the matter. A few rings later, Chris picked it up.

"Hey, uh, Chris, I think there's a problem with the bank account."

"What sort of problem?"

"I can't say for certain, it's just that the numbers don't seem to jibe with what I expected."

Chris snorted then took a drag from his cigarette. James expected that the delay was work up an excuse. "Where are you now, James? Do you want to meet and look over the books?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Uh, how about Coffee Mac's in half an hour?"

"Okay, I'll see you there."

James took the shortest route to the coffee shop. Halfway there, he heard a hail of police sirens. All of the cars pulled over. Three police motorbikes passed by the traffic. One stopped in the intersection and the other two continued down the road. Traffic started up again but the bikecop at the intersection diverted vehicles, turning them away from the straightaway. Someone in a car ahead lipped off to the bikecop. The cop hailed him down, ordered him to stop and called for backup. James obeyed the cop's demands and hung a left.

At the next intersection, another police unit was blocking the way. The same unit let an ambulance go through its blockade but stopped a news van. James slowed with the traffic. He rolled down his passenger window to hear what the police officer had to say to the reporter:

"Just move along," said the policeman.

The driver of news van replied, "I've got a right to go through there."

"You also have a right to spend a night in jail. Now move it."

The reporter shrugged his shoulders and drove off. James could hear more sirens closing from the distance. His curiosity

was quickly buried beneath his worry over his business. He continued on his way and gave the police blockades no more consideration.

Chris was already at the coffee shop. When James came into the lobby, Chris was standing there on the payphone. He gestured for James to wait, returned his attention to the phone and said, "Kyle: it's Chris. James and I are at Coffee Mac's, it's two-thirty. Can you meet us here if you get this before, um, three-thirty." He hung up the phone and said to James, "I thought we should have him meet us here if he can."

"Fine." James thought poorly of Chris, even now, well over a year after going into business with him. He often used Kyle as the liason between himself and Chris. He would never shoot the breeze with Chris. James knew he had a wife but didn't know her name, if they had kids, what he had in the way of relatives-- he had never even seen Chris' house. Chris felt this animosity. At first Chris tried to break down this wall. Later he put up his own barrier over the cocky guy with a background-- in of all things-- retail. He watched as James always hefted the lightest loads and later came up with good excuses to leave early. Chris' opinion of James was uniformly low.

They ordered coffee and fries and killed time in the hopes that Kyle would show up. Ironically they sat in the same seats as they did when they formed the company. Chris suggested, "Why not look over the books."

"Shouldn't we hold out for Kyle?"

"Well, we could. But if we can solve this now, we won't need

to bother him. Besides, we're here already."

James couldn't come up with a reason to swat the suggestion. He complied and lifted the books to the table. They divided the books between them and started to pour over the figures. For the first time in their life they co-operated with one another. Chris made note of this situation. He said, "Y'know, James, this is the first time we've sat together like this-- co-operating."

James riled against the observation. Not because it was focussed against him but because it was true. He had to admit the logic of the observation. "Yeah... I guess it is."

James turned back to the books. He studied them with his best effort. He nodded to himself putting forth the illusion that he was making sense of the figures. In truth, a close study of the numbers only confused him more. In school, his highest mark in math was a C-. He never admitted to anyone-- not even his physician or his closest friend-- that the numbers became a jumble, decimals jumped like ticks and the columns interchanged. The official term he had heard once was dyslexia but James called it only a distraction.

Chris flicked through the pages of the bank account records. He stopped on a page of recent entries. He asked, "Who did the deposits last week?"

"Kyle did. Why?"

"Well, remember that guy who paid for the bathroom-- part cheque, part cash? The big sweaty guy that kept badgering us."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well look at the bankbook from last week. There's no deposit

for the cash part of that payment. Six hundred bucks just missing."

"Well how then?"

Chris looked at the books and sought some answer other than the most apparent-- the most likely. "Someone didn't deposit it." Chris paused to give James a chance to pounce on him like James was so practiced at doing. Nothing. "And that someone might be Kyle."

James said, "He's not here so he's the easiest one to accuse."

"He's also the most likely. It was his deposit that's out of whack. Did he tell you where he was going? Did he tell you that he and Sue broke up?"

"No." James realized Kyle left gaps in his life. Kyle did come to work sullen and distant. He and James went out drinking, pick up girls and Kyle would make a point of going to the girl's place and leave a smokescreen for both Sue and his cull. Recently those habits changed. Sometimes he would do the girls he found at their home and sometimes at his. James now recalled voicing concern over Kyle taking one home and Kyle said, "Don't worry. Sue's staying up island with some fiend of hers." Kyle more than once cut deals with clients to save them paying the G.S.T., providing they paid in cash. James always assumed that he doled out fair shares of this cash. Now James questioned the division. This train of thought took James back to his childhood, to the kid he thumped for cheating him, to his declaration to never again be made a pawn. He felt rage. Worse still, a person that he always

saw as inferior and untrustworthy was now his ally.

Chris saw James' jaw set. He tried to back pedal to diffuse the situation. "But right now he only have a lot of questions. Not really a lot of answers."

"How much do you think he could have scammed?"

Chris was a little shocked that James was on his side in this situation. "I don't know." He checked his watch. The day was wearing thin. "I think we should check his place."

"Yeah, good idea."

James paid their bill. They took separate cars to Kyle's house. As expected, Kyle was not there. As expected too, his girlfriend, Sue, was not there. There was no sign of a car. Mail had gathered in the post box along with a scrawled warning from the postman. James judged that he had been gone for at least two days, maybe more.

"I think he's fucked off," Chris declared. He trodded back to his car and propped himself on the hood pf his car. "So what's the next step?"

"I say fuck him. We can keep working, just get someone else to do his share of the work."

Chris agreed. "Hell, if he shows up we can nail him then."

They said sparse good-byes and drove away. James was almost blind with rage. His high school buddy had backstabbed him. He had embezzled from their company and almost ran them aground. Well over a decade and a 'buddy' can still rip him off. This time, James avowed, that if push came to shove James would end up on top. He had already been fucked over by Kyle. He was not going to

be outdone by Chris. James was not going to be left holding the bag in this fiasco. That he swore.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"The fearful day of destruction will not... be without its forerunners. First will come a triple winter..." - Bullfinch's

Mythology on Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods

It was evil portent that on the night Eric returned home to live, it began to snow. It was rare in this balmy city for it to ever snow. Eric took it as an omen.

The family home was still the same, physically. It was a standard split level dwelling with an old Japanese car in the car port and junk leaning up against the wall. Eric's family had rented the place for years never commanding the foresight to own their shelter. He was returning home to live with people of this mindset. Here, his heart sank in his moment of triumph.

Jason arranged not to be home when Jonathan, Val and Eric arrived with a scant collection of possessions. Eric's mother worked wordlessly on crosswords, while clothes and such were ferried into Eric's room.

Sensing the tension, Val and Jonathan sped off as soon as they were done. Their wheels spun as they tried to get down the slushy road. Eric went to his room to put away his things. He hoped that by not talking to his mother, he could avoid the conflict. He was wrong.

His mother came into his room and said, "That can wait."

"What should I do instead?"

"Don't get smart with me."

"Did you want to talk?"

"Yes, I suppose we can talk, yes. You came into this house

and retreated to your room. You didn't look for what had to be done. You're not going to get away with that routine now, just because you pushed Carl out into the street." Eric had a hard time believing the words his mother pulled out of a vacuum. He knew this was her way to fish for a fight. She'd provoke an opponent invisibly until they burst out. From there, she'd be the defensive player. And in our society, the victims, the defenders and the weak are loved regardless of any and all details. They can secure true victory through failure. "In case you haven't forgotten, Eric, I'm still recuperating."

Eric held on to his temper.

"You have got to start pulling your weight, Eric. You're going to have to do the housework and I expect some rent: four hundred a month. That won't cover what Carl brought in, but you'll have to get used to doing without."

"I don't have a job. How am I supposed to pay four hundred?"

"Welfare. I know even you can dredge up a welfare cheque, Eric. Anyone with a pulse can do that."

"But--"

"No buts, Eric. I know you were getting your cheques over there, when you lived with fat dyke."

"Don't call her that! I'm sick of you knocking my friends. I'm tired of being torn apart. Maybe if you'd raised me normal, I wouldn't have so many problems in life."

"I did you raise you normally, Eric! You always had your own idea of how to do things!" Her voiced boomed loud, short of a scream. "Your father left because of you! One too many times did

you sneak into my room, put on my earrings and shoes and come in to watch TV with him! That's why he left! That's why Jason never even knew his own father! Well, you've been a shit disturber all your life, Eric! I'm fed up with it! There's a change in this house! You're not going to ruin anyone else's life! You tow the line, you pay your rent and you do the housework! And you won't dare get in my way! If I have some chance to get back with Carl, some day, you'll stay of the way! You were the reason he lost his temper!" Tears came to her eyes. She came close to the core of her angst. Though the periphery of everyone's soul is cast in porridge the heart is made of stone. And when that stone stronghold is broken into, it shatters. "He always knew I loved you more than I loved him! Well, it's over! You're not going to ruin my life anymore!" She slammed the door behind her and stormed up the stairs. Part of Eric's heart ached and urged him to apologize and capitulate to every one of her demands. Part of his heart closed to her forever.

#

The ushers chipped the doors open and repeatedly shovelled snow from the outside vestibule. The crowds were sparse and demented in appearance. Larry knew that only fools and madmen ventured out on this day of icy cold. He wondered which of the two he was.

The lights in the theater went out at two. Leo cursed and took a flashlight into the electrical room. Outside people gathered in the half light of the lobby. They were the hearty, dirt stupid people that drove economies through the bleakest of winters and the worst of disasters. By happenstance, they were

also the first to freeze or careen off the road. They grumbled and grated against Leo's calm. He tried to throw the master switch to no result. Larry saw Leo was in a conundrum. He knew what the cause of the blackout was. It was a similar occurrence that chilled Larry to bone on the night before and forced him to eat a cold sandwich with lukewarm kool-aid for dinner. He came to the door and said, "Is this one of those planned blackouts to save power?"

"A what?" Then Leo recalled the paper this morning. It did mention a planned blackout for this afternoon. Leo stormed past Larry and into the office. He couldn't understand why the head office had not sent word or instructions for how to cope with this. Sitting on the fax machine were detailed instructions for placing signs and calling staff to keep them home, thus saving their wages. Leo groaned. He recalled his district manager's diatribe from months earlier. "Strike Two, Leo," Mr. Bradley said to Leo. Leo, the same boy he hired years prior, confident that Leo was a boy going places. They were grooming him for upper management and the head office by age thirty. Six weeks into the job, Leo found the job without challenges, only headaches. He used the shifts to polish his skill with card tricks and hackey-sack. Leo felt a sinking sensation well inside of him. Something like this-- a day of wasted wages, a theater of grumbling customers and a day of wasted film rentals-- could be the end of Leo's career. And in this day and age, the end of a career meant the end of a working life, poverty and misery.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"...warriors reside, who, at the end of the cosmic eon, are to rush forth to the... battle of mutual slaughter of the gods and giants." - Jospheh Campbell's Occidental Mythology

Eric had the house to himself. His brother was up island in a ski lodge with some buddies. His mother recieved word from his stepfather. Carl wanted her to come east to visit. It wasn't a surprise. Every holiday, every long weekend was either spent with her man Carl or spent at home, berating Eric for his hand in keeping her too poor to travel to her man's side. Within a day, she had booked the time off work, bought a plane ticket and was ready to leave. Eric made the mistake of questioning the wisdom of travelling three thousand miles to meet the man that beat her senseless and then promptly left. She attacked Eric for the comment. She blamed him for every fault she possessed. Over and over she called him a "Shit disturber!" She remarked how happy she'd be when her children-- Jason at, twenty-four, and Eric, at twenty-seven--finally moved out and give her back a life. She chastised Eric for his inability to find a job or a girlfriend. She ripped apart Eric's choice in friends. She described Val as "the fat dyke with the hair." His mother left the next morning long before Eric had awoken.

Val headed over earlier in the afternoon with Eric's welfare cheque. He had meant to put in a change of address but didn't get to it. At first, he put off the change, waiting to move away from home again when he was too fed up. When finally got around to going down the local offices, he discovered they were closed for

two weeks; a move to save money. For Eric it brought only an added inconvenience; after all, he and the other welfare recipients had nothing but free time and government money.

Eric and Val split three joints between them before anyone had arrived. They redefined fried. Val gained an eager, adventurous look. She nuzzled up close to Eric and said, "We've got probably an hour before everyone else arrives..."

"Yeah. So?"

Val shifted herself and brought her face close to Eric. She ran her nails along Eric's chest. She spoke in a quiet tone and breathed a pot tainted aroma into his nostrils, his mouth.

"I've been thinking about us, Eric. Do you want to try again? We haven't been to bed together for almost a year, Eric."

He took on a Peter Pan zeal. "Yeah, sure."

They got up and ran to his bedroom. He got to the bed and turned around to face her. His room was still adorned in the trappings of his childhood: a Star Wars poster, a shoddy 8-track. New posters of punk bands and Marlene Deitrich littered the walls. Eric was grateful that all these things survived his stepfather's rages.

Val pushed him back. He collided with the mattress and Val was on top of him, ripping his shirt open. He protested. She replied, "Shut up and take it." She bit hard into his chest, lashing her tongue over the wound. She straddled his hips and they embraced for warm moments of necking. The requiem turned into an overture. They stripped off their clothes and began to wrestle. Every experience was amplified. Every experience felt like a

cascade of the senses.

Val put Eric to his back and massaged him to a state of full erection. Val kissed the base of his penis and then took him into her mouth. He felt the pitch of a fever grow inside. Val worked on him like there was no tomorrow. Eric was drenched in her saliva. Though he thought he would burst, nothing came. An impenetrable wall separated him from orgasm.

Val massaged his penis and kissed his glans. In between the kisses, she said "C'mon, let it go. For me."

"Try it again."

She sucked on him again. Again nothing.

Lying there, Eric remembered one of James' anecdotes. In the same situation, he also couldn't come. The girl was relentless. To get it over with, he faked an orgasm and pissed in her mouth. She swallowed every last drop and was none the wiser. Reviled by the notion, Eric withdrew from Val. She asked him what was wrong and he only replied, "Never mind. I-- I just don't feel like doing this anymore."

She was struck to the core. Val got up and walked into the kitchen to get a drink. Eric sat in bed, his head full of questions. Later the crowd arrived to find them both dressed, drinking like fish and wasted like never before.

The line-up at Schism was ridiculous. The entire class of a prestigious college was awaiting entry. Amid skaters and punks in black and earthtone regalia, the school boys stood out in their blue, crested blazers and regulation ties. Eric's crowd decided to take off for another club. The streets were slushy with

everpresent snow. He was surprised that the residents of this balmy city had adjusted to endless months of snow. Well, most of the people had. The TV reported record numbers of the homeless now inhabited the lockers in the city morgue. The endless cold had preyed on them. Those who didn't freeze to death, succumbed to pneumonia or died in fires or fell prey to all of the accidents common in snowy climes.

Eric's gang found a cheesy dive that had gone through a dozen name changes and had lost prestige every time. They sank into the depths beneath the building that sheltered it.

The night went slowly. Val drank away her paycheque in short time and bummed drinks off of her companions. She went to Eric for a free drink but he was already broke himself. Val was nonplussed by the discovery. In spite, she said, "You know, Eric, there is something we have in common I think." He looked to her for the punchline. "We both hate it when we suck someone's dick and get nothing out of it."

"Fuck you!" Eric called aloud. Val stormed to the far side of the club. Eric contemplated leaving.

Eric stood in the midst of the club. Light splashed the ugly walls and the arrogant girls. A big form pushed past him. He turned to look. The musclebound figure was dressed like the rest of nightclub staff. He had perfect features, clear skin and well kept clothes. He looked down at Eric and said, "Don't try it again!"

"Try what?"

"Okay, that's it!" The bouncer grabbed Eric by the collar and

dragged him up the stairs. He gagged on his buttons and started to pass out from lack of air. The bouncer threw him to the pavement, skinning Eric's cheek.

Eric rolled over and looked up. "'I'm calling the police!"

"The police?" The bouncer kicked Eric in the ribs. His cry rang out into isolated night. "I'm on the auxillary force, you faggot!" Then the bouncer kicked Eric again and again. In the groin, in the head, in the chest and other spots for good measure. He interspersed through the assault lines like, "You make me sick!" and "Teach you a lesson." The doorman and his buddy shared in the beating. One of them said, "Missed a spot."

The doorman, a fat redhaired guy, bent down and held up Eric's head. Eric was crying and moaning from the pain. Blood and sweat and tears washed over his face. His words were incomprehensible. The bouncer said, "Kevin, hold his head to the pavement." Kevin, the doorman, obeyed.

The bouncer stood behind Eric and took careful aim. He exclaimed, "You," kick, "fucking," kick, "queers," kick, "ruin," kick, "it," kick, "for," kick, "all of," kick, " us!" Each booted kick landed right in the base of Eric's skull. The impact drove Eric's head in the pavement. His front teeth were broken out, not in whole units, but in painful little chunks. In the process, Eric's nose was broken and his jaw dislocated. He began to black out.

There were short asides of chit-chat. "I'd burn those boots, Kevin. You don't even wanna touch fag blood." "Hey, why don't somebody get some water to clean off the sidewalk."

Short moments later, a police cruiser pulled up. The officer, a portly man with a moustache and a cocky saunter, came to investigate.

The officer asked, "Mitch, what happened?"

"We don't know. He just came up to us and collapsed."

"Beat me..." Eric mumbled. A river of blood torrented past his eardrums. Despite the bitter cold of this March night, he felt hot.

"My guess is that he had one too many," said Mitch, the bouncer.

The pudgy officer sighed and replied, "What I guess is that someone laid into him. Oh well: the tank. Gimme a hand, Mitch." The two unceremoniously dumped Eric into the back of the cruiser. The cop pulled on his protective rubber gloves and gave spare pairs to Mitch and the other bouncer. "We'll clean him up in the morning." Eric lost consciousness as the cop pulled away from the nightclub.

The next morning, a fellow inmate saw Eric's state of injury and panicked. Blood, thinned by spinal fluid, trickled from his ears and his nose.

He had the best paramedics and the best doctors but time had done its work. Eric's family were a wreck. Before Jason even saw Eric's condition, Eric's brother headed out to seek vengeance. Eric's mother flew back from her interlude with Carl. Upon hearing word of Eric's hospitalization, she was angry at being dragged away from her love just days after arrival. When she got to the hospital she shook like a parkinson's victim. Val clung to the

door outside the trauma ward. She lost all track of time. Her last words to Eric were an attack. If there was a God, she hoped He would let her correct that mistake.

Jonathan sat in the waiting room with so many others. Around him: a woman collapsed from blood loss; another went into a frenzy, driven by her fever; two had passed out long before his arrival. In the past, when someone passed out the medical staff were supposed to panic and leap into action. Due to budget cutbacks and a tide of injuries that never ebbed, they revised their standards. The unconscious and the comatose were given priority in the queue-- nothing more. Jonathan was silent. He held his head in his hands and concentrated to break from the fiction of the event-- to awaken safe in bed with Eric, a phone call away. It was a cruel trick of fate that reality could not be put down like a book that grew too intense or sorrowful. There was no escape, no refuge. Only truth and doom.

There was worse than doom: Eric's mother.

Val made the fateful mistake of asking Eric's mother: "How is he?"

"He's dying. Thanks to you. Thanks all of you freaks! What went on last night? I got home and there bottles all over the place and God knows what you were smoking! What happened last night? What did you do to him?! What did you freaks do to my Eric!?"

Val's only reply was, "You're a cunt." Then she stormed off crying and trembling. Jonathan hid himself in a corner of the waiting room. Mercifully, Eric's family left him alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"The Valkyrrior are his messengers, and their name means 'Choosers of the slain'" - Bullfinch's Mythology on
The Valkyrrior

The nightclub closed at two. The bar staff filed out at three. Mitch, the bouncer, was among them. They talked outside of their cars and agreed on a location to party. When the car with Mitch pulled out, Val gave pursuit. With her were three of her close friends. Three of Eric's close friends. Friends that Eric would never recall again.

Val and her friends waited a half block away from the party the bar staff attended. At dawn, it broke up. Mitch, luckily, left first and by himself. Val alerted her conspirators and started her car. Mitch strolled down the suburban street to his car. He barely noticed Val's approach. Before Mitch got into the car, Val had closed the gap. She and friends leapt from the car. Two of them reefed back the bouncer's arms. Val tied a rag garrote around his neck. The last one opened the door and Mitch was thrown in. Surprise and Mitch's drunkenness overwhelmed the bouncer, making him easy prey. Val ran back to the wheel. Everyone jumped inside and they sped off. As they drove, Mitch shouted incomprehensible threats, one of the gang tied up his arms with chicken wire, blood gushed from the bouncer's resistance. Blindfolded, he couldn't even see them.

Val took them to Spring Lake. They disembarked near a clearing. Two of the gang dragged their hostage out by his feet; his chin and face caught the door frame and the ground on the way

down.

"Is that wire tight?" Val asked.

"He'll have to lose his hands to lose the wire," Brad said. Mitch screamed.

She said, "Do his legs too." Brad complied with Deanne's and Jonathan's help.

Jonathan pulled Mitch's wallet out of his back pocket. He look through the contents. There was a handful of money, about sixty bucks. Jonathan kept it. The credit cards were of no use-- he'd get caught on the first try to use them. Then, Jonathan found something interesting: a city police auxillary ID card. He felt his temperature rise at the sight of the card. In his head, he had an instant flashback of the beating he recieved at the hands of the Vancouver riot police. "Lookee here: he's a cop."

"Fuck, a cop?" Deanne asked.

"Auxillary. That's close enough though." Jonathan a handful of Mitch's hair and yanks his head up so that their eyes could meet. "I hate cops."

Val took something from her pocket. She knelt low, beside the thug's face. "This friend of mine learned how to make acid. He did some pretty good stuff but he also did a batch that gives you really fucked up trips." She studied the three crude tablets in her hand. She forced Mitch's gums apart and delivered the acid. With her friends' help, she held his mouth closed, letting his saliva do the work. Her heart raced with vengeance; the tablets dissolved against his cheek and gum. Within a moment, it was too late. He soon started to convulse and shriek like an animal.

Deanne took the car keys and opened the trunk. She returned with fish cludgels and a broom. They loomed low and beat Mitch with the clubs. Each blow was a new experience in terror.

When they were done, Val undid Mitch's jeans and jerked them below his hips. She said, "We'll let Brad handle this." Mitch cried like an abandoned baby. "You know what they say, guy: If you've ever been done up the ass, then you're as much a faggot as the next guy."

That was Brad's cue. He took the broom and ventured its handle between Mitch's buttocks. Finding his mark, he drove the stick into his victim. He pumped it and twisted it and worked it around, splinters peppered his rectum. Mitch repeatedly slammed his head into the ground, in some vain attempt at suicide or escape. His terror was undescrivable; he was in a world between expanded consciousness and Hell. Brad jerked the broom handle out, let out a satisfied moan and pissed into the blood and mess that was once Mitch's ass.

Deanne returned with a fishing weight and some twine. They tied the cludgels, his wallet and the broom together and weighted them down. Jonathan tossed the evidence into Spring Lake. Were it to ever surface, it would do so without fingerprints.

"Leave the empty condoms wrappers there," Brad suggested.

Before they left, Val said to the bouncer, "Remember, Mitch, at least you can recover."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"When they asked her to weep, her reply was: 'Alive or dead, the old man's son has been no use to me. Let Hel hold what she has!'" - Hermod's Ride to Hel

A number of people heeded the rest home's demands. For weeks, children, grandchildren, nieces & nephews came by to pick up residents. On the home's last day, a handful remained. A sheriff posted the court order of closure. Police wheeled the last residents out front to await retrieval. A police officer stayed until his coffee break came. Relatives picked up a number of the last. By sunset, two were left: Stella Preston and James' grandfather, Brandon Smith. Throughout the day, hoodlums beset the elderly refugees. With the veil of darkness upon them, the vermin came out in force. A pack came from a bar en route to the pool hall. They circled Stella and old Brandon. They taunted the two into a lather. James' grandfather swatted at one of them. The insignificant blow offended one punk. He swung his fist, breaking Brandon's nose. The old man leaned forward and began to cry. The assailant shouted, "Just watch it, old man!"

Another punk fixated on Stella, he began pushing her wheelchair around the lot-- her screams grew hoarse and tired. With an exuberant, "Wee!" the punk let the chair fly onto the sidewalk, off the curb and into the street. A poor driver's conscience had to weather the collision for the rest of her life.

The gang members cheered and saluted one another for the grand feat.

James and Geena got in at around ten. The answering machine flashed an angry strobe. Geena played back the messages. Four were friends, two were business. The second to last message was:

"James: this is Aunt Janet. They're closing down Grandpa's home tomorrow. I'm still in the hospital. Can you pick him up. If you keep him a couple of days, Brian can then take him. Thanks, James. They close the doors at noon tomorrow. Talk to you later."

Geena saw James' confusion. "Honey? What's all that about?"

James didn't know. The message was cryptic. Close what doors?
Why was she in the hospital?

James needed answers. "Give me your keys!"

"What?"

"Give'em to me!" He snatched the keys from her hand and he was out the door.

He was at the rest home within fifteen minutes. James parked in the lane. The building was in darkness. He ran to the front doors. He read the writ posted to the door. He looked around him for some trace of his grandfather-- some clue of his whereabouts. He found a pay phone and called his entire family. At his dad's and his aunt's homes he got a machine. At his sister's place he got a busy signal. A cousin, Adam, answered.

"What's happened to granddad?" James asked.

"Why? Don't you have him?"

"No!"

"You were supposed to pick him up. I thought my mom talked to you-- Jesus, James. We were counting on you."

"Fuck off!" He slammed the phone down.

He tried calling hospitals. He got either computer answering systems or busy signals. James hopped into the car and sped off to the nearest hospital. He had guessed that someone would have taken him there. The General was an old complex-- once appended by numerous annexes, it now relied on overcrowding to accommodate new growth. It played host to endless sirens and screeching cars-- James only added to the din and the chaos.

He ran into the emergency room. Two solemn Indians flanked an old, fat Indian woman. Dried blood covered her face, a blood soaked compress masked one eye. An old woman clutched at her chest; her husband held a cardboard box to her mouth and consoled her. Three punks in leather sat bleeding, watched over by a two-man police guard.

James went to the reception desk. A middle-aged nurse in thick glasses sat there. "Can you help me?"

"You'll have to take a number, sir!" She turned back to her work.

"To ask a question?"

"Take a number sir and we'll be with you in a moment."

James ripped a number from the ticket dispenser and paced the linoleum. The nurse called his next.

"I'm trying to find my grandfather, Brandon Smith." James stood over the nurse's desk, forcing her to crane up to see his anger and his frustration.

"When was he admitted?"

"I don't know! He used to be at the Glentamor Rest Home-- it closed today. I'm trying--"

"Have you checked with the police?"

"The police? No. I thought he'd be brought here."

"Well the police would be the ones to check with first. You'll have to call them." She turned back to her work.

James got to a phone and call 9-1-1. He plugged one ear to listen for someone to answer; in the process shutting out the conundrum of noise from the emergency ward. In the muffled background, one doctor said to another: "I can't make out what he said." The reply: "Harry. He said Harry."

James got through to 9-1-1. He asked to be connected to the police. The 9-1-1 operator said, "This is for emergency calls only. Is this an emergency?"

"I'm trying to locate my grandfather. I was told to check with the police."

"Then you'll have to call them on the non-emergency line, located in your phone book."

In the background, the same two doctors exchanged: "We're losing him again." "Call a code--" but "Wait, there's no point. With all his injuries, his blood loss, his age-- he's not going to pull through." Then, "We've lost him." "Call it." "Eleven-ten P-M. I guess get admin rolling to get the next of kin."

James got through to the police and explained his story. The police clerk on the phone paused, clicking some keys on her computer and replied, "There was a disturbance reported at nine-thirty at the Glentamor Home. Two elderly people were found and transported by ambulance to the General. Both were without I.D... We were trying to track that down. Maybe you could help us, sir."

Could you go down to the General and ask to see him-- the elderly man?"

"I'm at the General!" James slammed down the phone and kicked his chair down the hall.

He composed himself and returned to the reception desk. The nurse looked at him indignantly. She opened her mouth and began to point to the ticket dispenser. James broke her in mid-action. He loomed over her and made his small frame imposing, all encompassing. He said, "I just talked to the police. They said they brought in an-- an elderly man. He was picked up outside a rest home tonight. They said I had to see him."

She swallowed. "One moment." She picked up a phone, punched a couple of numbers and spoke, "I've got a man here at reception. He says he's related to John Doe 3." A pause. A look of discomfort. She hung up the phone and looked back up at James. "A doctor will be out in a moment."

"Why? What's the problem?" James stepped back from the desk. He looked around. His mind wanted answers-- his instincts wanted to run, to take flight. A doctor appeared: a small, asian man, roughly James' age. He pushed his glasses his place and cleared his throat. In a quiet voice, "Mister--?"

"Smith."

"Mister Smith, the man you're looking for was brought in an hour ago with head injuries and complications of an assault. Due to the trauma and his age, he suffered a C-V-E-- a stroke-- a few minutes ago, I'm sorry, Mr. Smith. He's passed on."

After a moment of realization-- the world closed in on James. Noises grew distant and faint. His pulse-- rushing over his ears became preeminent. His inner voices shouted diatribes and accusations, regrets and pains-- all in one chorus.

He diverted the torrent of thoughts and said, "I have to see him." His heart was buried in a frenzy of hope-- this dead man, maybe, was not his grandfather, but someone else.

"Mister Smith, that can wait."

"No, it can't. I have to see him, now."

The doctor complied. Orderlies were at the examination table, preparing to lift the body onto a gurney and from there to the morgue. The doctor asked for them to pause. The doctor hoped James would stop him. He didn't. The sheet revealed an aged figure with a bruised chin; misaligned black nose; one eye swollen shut; and cuts too numerous. Beneath all the wounds and the new pallor of flesh it was Brandon Smith-- James' grandfather.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Meanwhile, Hermod had ben riding down the dark road to thee land of the dead... but this newcomer was not like such travellers, and had the aspect of a living man." - Hermod's

Ride to Hel

Larry awoke at four AM to the ring of his telephone. He shook his head free of its cobwebs and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Larry? It's Fanny--" That was impossible. He and a contingent from the theater saw her off weeks earlier.

"What? Are you back?"

"No. I'm still in Mali. Larry: I have to have James' phone number!"

He was still half asleep. "James?"

"James! Your friend, James!"

"Why?"

"I just need it."

Larry complied and gave her James' number. Before he could say more, she cut him off with, "I'll talk to you later."

Ten minutes later another call came to the city from Mali.

James awoke to the ringing but let the machine get it. Geena sheltered herself in his arms. She did not stir from the ringing. It clicked on, spoke its spiel and then gave the caller a chance. The voice crackled out, "James, it's Fanny. Pick up the phone, goddammit!"

He had to think for a moment to recall who Fanny would be. Then it dawned on him. He grabbed the cordless phone beside his

bed and said, "Fanny... How'd you get my number?"

"Larry gave it to me. James, listen: I'm pregnant."

He sat up out of bed and took the phone into the bathroom. He shut the door and started the tap running. "What? How do you know it's me? It could've been anyone."

Her anger and venom cut unchecked through eight thousand miles of cables and satellite feeds. "I haven't been with anyone else for almost a year! It's you, James!"

"I don't believe it. For a girl that doesn't get it for a year, you seemed pretty well practiced. Listen, I've got a lot to lose from someone pulling this sort of bullshit--"

"You fucking prick! What about me?! I'm in the middle of Africa, three weeks into a year of work and I'm over three months pregnant! I can't get back home! I spent all of my money getting here!" The signal grew weak and poor.

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"I want to know what you're willing to do about it!"

"Fuck. This isn't my problem. Listen, get an abortion. I won't care. That'll solve this for you."

"What about me? I care!"

"Then keep it! Like I said, it's not my problem. You didn't worry about birth control, you didn't get a pregnancy test earlier and you decided to drop into fucking Timbuktwo without any way back. This isn't my problem. Don't call again!" He clicked off the phone and then opened the channel again to make sure he wouldn't get another call. He tried to settle down before returning to bed. Predawn light crept into the bathroom from the frosted glass

window. He couldn't believe that she'd call. He couldn't believe that Larry would be stupid enough to give her his number. With everything else happening in his life, this was something he didn't need. He relied on a few harbors of stability, namely in his home life. His home life included Geena, her savings and her trust fund.

Centered again, he got up and opened the door. Geena leaned on the door frame. Her eyes burned into him. She said, "Who was that on the phone? I only picked up the phone half way through."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" He budged past her for the bedroom. At this hour, a return to bed could disarm the entire affair.

Geena stamped after him, her small feet resounded against the ancient wood of the floors. "Don't give me that! Who is this woman, James?"

He lit another smoke and sat on the edge of the bed in the predawn light. With calm validity, he said, "Don't get paranoid, Geena. You don't know what you're talking about."

"The fuck I do! She said she's pregnant! You knocked her up! When? When did you fuck her, James? And who else? Who else have you fucked!?"

James drew smoke from his cigarette.

"You can start answering now, James! I'm not going to give this up like all the other things you try to pull!"

"Things? What things?"

Geena was about to begin the litany of James' sins before she recognized the ploy. "Don't change that subject! Who is this

woman?!"

He gave her a serious glare meant to infuse his reality into her viewpoint. "You've lost it."

Her voice erupted into a shriek. "I've lost it!? I've lost it?! You fucking prick! Get the fuck out of here! Get the fuck out!"

He stood resistant. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes you are!"

"Fuck off," was his reply. Her return was to begin slapping and punching James. He jumped up and tried to move from her. She continued to sob and scream insults and land blows against her husband. When he had enough of this hounding he felt as though he would burst. An ugly sneer grew on his face and he raised his hand to defend himself-- to attack back. Then he recalled his father and mother. When his father had enough of incidents like this, he would strike out. A few blows later and his mother would be howling for mercy and claiming her loss of the argument. Long after that, his father would continue to beat his mother until she gave up the will to scream or resist. Rather than start that here, James said, "You can fuck yourself, you cunt! Nobody else will!" He stormed out of the house, got into the car and drove away.

The past weeks dragged up many painful memories.

From his business: feelings of betrayal like those felt at school. James recalled how other kids would talk him into giving over his lunch money to other kids. They promised to run errands for him and bring back what he ordered. Instead, they laughed at his stupidity and displayed the stolen coins as a testament.

From his grandfather's death came thoughts of other deaths. He stood with his aunt as she went through every painful step of the funeral arrangements. The funeral director was a barren, Nurse Ratchet-sort of a person. James' aunt, so ravaged by her father's death, sat through the tedious process of viewing pamphlets and catalogs. She broke into tears again and again. She consented to outrageous arrangements. James' at one point squeezed her hand to alert to the fact that she was agreeing to a four thousand dollar casket. She wavered and the funeral director said, "He is your father, ma'am. Just how many corners do you want to cut on your own father's funeral?" His aunt broke into a full wail, the director reviewed her notes and from there, only the best would do for the funeral. James' father didn't attend the funeral, the burial or the reception later at James' aunt's home. But, within two hours of the will's revelations, his father had began a court case to declare the will null and void.

The ordeal at the hospital reminded James of his mother's death. She was overweight, a heavy smoker. She had a heart condition and a stubborn streak a mile wide. James' parents divorced when he was six. His mother kept the kids from James' tenth year until her death.

She insisted on doing all the housework, despite her health. James returned home to find all the chores complete. No matter how shitty the apartment was; how poor the surroundings; or how penniless they were, James' mother always made the place look perfect. One day, in the autumn of his fifteenth year, he found more. Their life had improved to the point where they could afford

to rent a house. Things seemed to be getting better. Home from school, he couldn't find his mother. She didn't answer his calls. She hadn't left a note. He checked in her closed bedroom to find: nothing. From the kitchen, he looked into the backyard. The oil drum incinerator was at work on fall leaves but slumped into it was his mother! He dashed out the door, swan diving off the steps and into the wet grass. Though winded, he got up and made it to her. Her clothes were reluctantly alight. Her hair was burned down to the roots. Her face was a massive red- black blotch of blisters-- like meat ruined on a barbeque. He pulled her from the fire and let her down onto the grass. She was certainly dead. Her heart had given way in the midst of her yard work. She collapsed on the incinerator after her death. With no one there to help her with work, she was done for. The helplessness and permanency that struck James down then was still at play where his grandfather was concerned.

Now, with this girl, Fanny, showing up to fuck up the works, James felt he was at the end of his rope. A rope from which every loose end was frayed and worn.

#

Larry returned home after working the matinee. There was now a physical presnce of oppression to his workplace: Corine...

Leo wasn't in yet-- he wasn't due in until later. But the district manager, Mr. Bradley, was in. The man was a bearish, loud, gruff soul that surprised everyone he spoke with by his civility and friendly manner of conversation. In the past, he took time out of his inspections to talk with the staff. Aside from

work, the apocalypse was his favorite of subjects. He spoke of the diminishing standard of living that people of the day bore. Mr. Bradley always concluded his makeshift sermons with, "times are changing."

Upstairs, a plain woman in a conservative, mediocre suit was wandering around, making an inspection. Larry assumed that this woman was Bradley's replacement. Larry lamented that this may be true and he'd have to see her every few months.

Shortly after Larry arrived, Leo did. The district manager came to attention and greeted Leo. His protege was in a state of seriousness and soberity. Leo was ushered into his own office. The door shut. Leo emerged minutes later. His aire of cool was breached but not gone. He cleared his throat and said to Larry, the nearest person, "It's been good working with you, Larry." He extended his hand. Confused Larry shook the hand offered to him.

Larry asked, "Are you going?"

"Looks that way." And with that, Leo escaped the ignominy of his dismissal. Mr. Bradley came out of the office moments later, to be met by the woman from upstairs. He introduced her as Leo's replacement, gave her a grand tour and then departed...

Leo's replacement, Corine, followed the staff around and reminded them of the most obvious of facts. In lieu of experience or ability, she at least had the talent for protocol. Larry spent a spare moment putting the janitor's closet in order. When he emerged, he found her standing there, impatient of his misdirected energies...

As Larry walked up the street he ran the gauntlet of beggars,

all of whom dressed better than he. Near the apartment entrance was a car not unlike James' sporty blue Prelude. The driver door opened and James got out.

"James," said Larry unsure of why his friend was here. It was rare that he could ever get James on the phone, let alone to come over.

James gave Larry a look that Larry could not interpret. He drew the last life from his cigarette, threw it into the street and slammed the car door shut. "I understand that friend of yours called you this morning." Larry didn't have his mind on the subject at hand. He reacted with confusion. James clarified things for him. "Fanny. That chick from your theater that took off to Africa."

"Yeah. So?"

"So she called me this morning. She called me and Geena listened in. That cunt friend of yours got herself pregnant. She calls fucking thousands of miles to tell me and expects me to do something."

Larry failed to see where he fell into this. After all, James at least got to sleep with her and then upset her so much that she'd ignore all others. "So, what are you going to do?"

James shook his head. "You're a fucking moron!" When James got really mad in an argument, his voice pitched high and closed the gap of difference between James and Eric. "Why'd you give her my number?! She can call anytime! Not that that matters-- Geena threw me out! She found out about me and that cunt of yours! All because you gave her my number! Fuck, Larry, I thought we were

friends!"

All Larry could offer was, "We are."

"Yeah, well not anymore! You've really done it this time!" He opened his car door. Before getting in, he said, "Just you remember this!" He sped with a squeal. An orchestra of horns heralded his haphazard charge on to the main street.

Larry stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do or where to go. His default refuge was the apartment. Inside him a match of emotion was being played out. Anger at James for sleeping with Fanny after he knew the impact it would have. Anger at Fanny for sleeping with James rather than Larry. Anger at James for blaming Larry for the fiasco and for asking him to cover up affair after affair. Anger at himself for betraying James even in the minor way of offering a phone number. Again in life, Larry missed the passion of pleasure but had to suffer the fury of the fallout later.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"But the other gods... amused themselves with using Baldur as a mark, some hurling darts at him, some stones, while others hewed at him with their swords and battle- axes..." -Bullfinch's Mythology on The Death of Baldur

Larry knew his days at the theatre were numbered. Without even that second-rate job he was doomed. He pounded the pavement in his poor shoes. He went to every storefront, every office and every manufacturer to drop of his resume, to find another port in the storm this modern day life. The blisters and sores on his feet brought him pain with every footstep. The ratty jacket he had worn for years protected him poorly on this chill day. His proper winter jacket had been stolen from work; a dilemma that Leo, in his day, dismissed with all the gravity of a missed hackey-sack kick. All efforts seemed futile: every receptionist and every personnel clerk took his resume with dread and apathy instead of zeal or interest.

A mass of anti-war protesters filled the sidewalks to capacity. They carried placards denouncing America and the military. They chanted, "Jobs not War," and sang songs of protest. Larry was carried two blocks by the crowd, before he could break off and head his own way.

Larry discovered Riga as he passed by one of the food bank queues. She was homely, drawn and wore ripped clothes. Her blonde hair was matted and uneven. Her lips were weathered and cracked. Her arms were a mass of needletracks and cigarette burns. It was clear she couldn't even make a living by selling her body. The

sight of her broke Larry's heart. Once he lusted after her. Once he hated her. Now, he only could pity her.

She recognized him and burned a stare into his eyes. There was no way she'd jump out of line and lose her place. Chances were already slim that she'd see food today. Going to the back of the line would make it a certainty.

Larry looked her up and down. His first words were. "Don't keep waiting in that line, Riga. I've got food at my place."

She didn't move. The street had granted her a feral wisdom. Again he said, "C'mon. I've got food at my place." He took her by the hand. Her hand trembled and she pulled back. "I-- I can't lose my place in line."

Larry felt a little rejected. He couldn't lure away a starving woman with food. "Well, I live at the same place. Why not come up when you got your food."

She agreed and took one step forward.

Larry hurried home to preapare for Riga's visit. A Japanese car sped by.

#

Traffic moved swiftly past the Anglican church at Quadra and Johnson. At noon, everyone was far too busy to sit and watch the cars. Hoodlums and derelicts queued up at the back door of the church. A free lunch awaited them. It was a hall of shame, all of Dan's favorites: the scruffy one he spat at; the layered look that rested saliva covered hands on bus rails; the blonde chick with an attitude; the Indian that look like an orangutan--all the good ones were there. Dan's A-list.

Dan practiced this at home, again and again. He now had nothing but time. The bank was cutting back like so many others. The bank sent to every branch a lengthy letter explaining why they cut back hours, slashed staff and reduced services. The long reason was 'budget reassessment.' The short reason was 'no money,' or more precisely, 'not enough money.' If the bank wasn't open, it couldn't hand out savings or close accounts. The best of the loans officers were kept on; those with bad accounts were dropped. Dan Foster was laid off.

The thin interior of Japanese cars was a godsend. On the passenger seat, sat an old wooden crate. It held three large wine bottles. Each of the magnum was filled to capacity with gasoline. An oily rag was stuffed deep into the body of each bottle. The car smelled like a gas station.

Dan slowed the car. Time slowed with it. The homeless turned to notice him. One stepped towards the car to panhandle. Dan flicked his lighter and ignited the rags stuffed in the bottles. They caught alight in brilliant fashion. Dan hefted the first one with his right hand and sent in through the open passenger window. He picked up the second, looking to the road to correct his approach on the curb. The first bottle smashed open at the head of the line. Gasoline and fire sprayed the derelicts. They caught alight. Dan tossed the second. The crowd was moving to escape. The next bottle exploded in mid-flight. Screams rang out. The blonde with the attitude-- Riga-- lit up like a human candle. The third bottle barely made it out of the car before it blew up, catching both Dan's car and the tail of the soup line up.

Mission accomplished, Dan sped off. Behind him, he left a mob of burning destitutes. The uninjured ones ran for cover. Those on fire, rolled along the pavement. One woman among the line up screamed and wailed. She tried to shake life back into her baby; the baby's face was blistered, bloated and red from gasoline burns. A molotov cocktail had hit the baby worst.

#

The elevator was dead from before the time the building fell into receivership. Larry took the stairs to his place. His usher's flashlight lit the way. From the steps to the basement came the faked moans and begging of a whore. From all around came the stench of urine left on the steps and landings.

Safe inside of his apartment, Larry went directly to the kitchen. He mustered macaroni and cheese; and a can of spam.

He came out of the kitchen to hear the sound of sirens from through the balcony glass. He stood on the balcony and looked down. The sirens and lights sped for the church where Larry had just talked to Riga. His stomach knotted.

#

Dan Foster heard sirens behind him. A police car closed on him. Someone from the soup line incident must have turned him in. He knew this was bad. He hit the accelerator and took off. His heart was pounded away at his chest. In this suburbia he called home, he knew a multitude of places he could hide; places to shelter his car. He made maneuvers through the short streets and endless lanes. The sirens grew closer.

A cruiser appeared in Foster's rearview. It spun to a stop,

blocking Foster. He was in a culdesac. There was no way out. Just the same, he bolted out of the car. Two pops from a service revolver froze him in his place.

"Don't fucking move!" Called one police officer. Another raced towards Foster, gun drawn and ready. Foster surrendered. Other police cars moved in. They handcuffed him. He shook uncontrollably. Foster was at least happy that he had emptied his bowels and bladder prior to all this or would have surely filled his pants. The routines of an investigation continued as Foster waited in the cruiser. He reflected on his state-- his situation. A detective car pulled up to his car. A fat man in a good suit got out. He and his assistant donned a set of surgical gloves. They began to pull apart the car's interior with textbook precision.

They took statements from the officers in pursuit. When it was all done, two officers climbed into Foster's cruiser and headed back for the station.

The police talked as they drove. The two officers sported moustaches and sunglasses and reeked of Brut aftershave.

"They're going to the throw the book at him, y'know."

"Yeah. Fucking bleeding hearts. The same fucking morons have made all this mess." He took a bite of his stale donut. "I watched this show from Brazil. Man, they have it right. Big businessmen send out hitmen to take care of the street urchins. Mow 'em! Budda-budda-budda. That's the way to fix it."

"If it weren't for the reporters, we could've let this one go."

"World goes to shit and people still turn on the news."

Foster's processing at the station was painfully long. They searched him and itemized him. They stripped him and probed him. When they were satisfied, they returned to him his clothes, short of his belt, his laces, his glasses and his personal effects. They marched him-- in clumping, loose shoes-- to an interrogation room. There, the same fat detective and his assistant grilled Foster for hours. When they were satisfied-- or exhausted-- Foster was escorted to the cell block.

Foster's cell had three cots and, now, four inmates. Two of his 'roomies' took instant note of the small figure of Dan Foster. One laughed and grabbed Foster. The other checked the hall for the unlikely appearance of a zealous guard. Prisoners in other cells pressed close to their bars to watch the spectacle of Dan Foster's fate.

#

The next day of work was hard for Larry. His mind centered on thoughts of Riga. After playing with his rabbit ears, he was able to see the news report of the attack. They showed the faces of the derelicts hoping that viewers could step forward to indentify them. Larry feared the repercussions of stepping forward; instead he kept silent. Leo's replacement rode Larry's back. Corine was Leo's oposite: thirties, married, frumpy glasses, mediocre dress, poor hair and the charisma of broken glass. She was hired to the presitgious nine dollar an hour job because of her fine standing in a two year business course at college. Larry's options numbered so few that he had to swallow his pride and obey her orders.

When one of the men's room toilets overflowed, Corine ordered

Larry up to fix it. He did his level best and then some. Corine didn't bother to thank him. She was perpetually upset with Larry. Not because of his workmanship but what-- who-- he represented: Leo Marcos. In Corine's first three weeks, she ousted two ushers and three concession stand people and cut five more down to almost no work. Larry was next on the list and he could feel it.

Just short of end of two films, Marcy, the concession worker, went to Larry and said, "It sounds like the men's room is flooding over again." She said it in a nervous tone, embarrassed for Larry and the task that befell him.

He acknowledged the problem and went to look at it. In the far two stalls, someone had left their mark. The plungers were jammed to continuously flush. Paper in wads and handfuls, blocked up the toilets. Larry started to work on them. The crowd sounds flooded into the men's room. To their disgust, patrons came into a wet floor and reminded Larry that one of the toilets flooded over. Despite his protest, a man used one of the blocked toilets, complicating Larry's problems.

While Larry was still at work, Corine came into the vacant men's room. "You were supposed to be in the theater."

"I had to fix this. If it overflows--"

"I don't want excuses. I'm tired of your excuses." Corine wore an ugly polyester dress, something from a wardrobe dating back a decade or more. She tore strips off of Larry; everything from his punctuality to his haircut. On his knees before flooding toilet, Larry sat there and took it from her. When she was finished, she closed with: "You're fired. I want you gone now--"

tonight."

Larry stopped his work. He walked past Corine without ceremony. Freedom was his. So was poverty and an empty future. One cancelled the other out and left him a void. He walked past his co-workers and out of the theater. There were no goodbyes, no declarations of freedom or revenge or revelation. Larry escaped without notice.

Later in the same evening, a toilet in the men's room once again overflowed. The new ushers knew that their job included taking care of the theatergoers and cleaning up the house after the shows. After that, the unlucky ones would be sentenced to checking the washrooms. The job was passed on down the line until it was lost.

The water from the men's room leaked into the electrical room below. Next, it shorted out the electrical systems. The theater went dark and silent but for the whines and jeers of the audiences. Poor emergency lights illuminated the ceiling well. The ushers lit their ways through the black with their flashlights. They found Corine in the main lobby.

"What do we do?" One usher asked.

Corine replied, "Get to the electrical room and throw the breakers."

The same usher returned, "Uh, where is the electrical room?"

Corine tried to give directions to no avail. Exasperated, she grabbed the boy's flashlight and went to the tiny room herself. This was the first time she had to deal with this. As her boss, Mr. Bradley, said, "there would be many occasions" where this sort

of thing would happen. The water seeped into her flat sensible shoes and dripped from the ceiling like a weak tap. She found the breaker and threw the switch. She couldn't scream, she could only gasp when the electricity coursed through her right arm and down her right leg. Her hand flashed with light and was seared black. Her dress caught alight and her muscles jolted, throwing her against the opposite wall.

Old boxes in this little room caught on fire. An usher came to offer help. He was aghast with what he found. He ran off to pull the fire alarm. In his panic he forgot that Corine lay on the floor.

The theater was cleared quickly. The fire department arrived to find a healthy blaze growing within the building. They put the fire out with much effort, leaving the lobby charred and ruined but the theaters themselves were only water damaged. The ambulance came to whisk Corine out of her imminent doom. Two solemn faced ambulance attendants ventilated her and she hacked her way back into the world of the living. Soon after they did their work they had her in an ambulance and they were away. With much haste, the fire department retrieved their gear and parted. These days, the emergency services were run ragged. They lacked the staffing and the funding but faced a plethora of disasters.

The theater staff, stood outside their workplace in a state of shock. They were little more than children and this was the greatest event they had faced. When the ambulance attendants took out Corine's burned, bloated and scarred person one usher vomitted and a few of concession girls broke into tears.

The fire inspectors questioned all of them. They were so new to the job, they did not know of the record of problems with the electrical room. Those who had experienced this before were either long gone or had never seen the infamous flooding toilet cause a shortout. It left the inspector a great deal of work. Had the office and its records not been destroyed in the fire, the inspectors could have drawn upon its files and information.

#

James was lucky too late. He returned home to find that Geena had gone out. He packed two dufflebags full of clothes. At the bank, there was a long lineup of people withdrawing their money. All the talk about Peru had made people edgy. The bank closures and talk of the collapse of the banking system made tensions bloom. James had his turn at the bank wicket. There, he emptied his company's bank account. At the bank machine, he emptied the joint accounts Geena and he shared.

He booked a flight to leave for Florida immediately. Friends there could shelter him, help him, give him a new life free of all the bullshit. And, if things got too rough, he was a short skip from the many nations of the Caribbean.

Within six hours, he was on his way to Seattle and then Miami.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"The endless stream... never ceases to increase. Everywhere... are victims of massacres, burnings, plunderings. The Vikings conquer all in their path, and no one resists them." - Joseph Campbell's Occidental Mythology

Rain backdropped the hapless faces. The scene outside the shelter was awash in greys: grey sky, grey buildings, grey streets, grey hair on the homeless' heads, grey skin exhibiting their pallor. Pastor Mike-- nobody call him Michael or Pastor Wilson-- went to the double door that separated the soup kitchen from the outside world. He grew up a well intentioned boy. Skinny in his youth, the hard work at the shelter made Pastor Mike leaner, stronger. He was ejected from his parish for refusing to tow the Catholic line. He found allies in a splinter movement of the Catholic church. He upset the status quo there too and was ejected. His predecessor at the shelter lauded his abilities. He was proud to have Mike replace him when he left. That was eight years ago. Eight years further into a recession that was promised to be temporary. Eight years of lengthening lineups at the door. Eight years of bags under Mike's eyes and gray hairs to usurp his black mane.

Pastor Mike unlatched the door, unbarred them and swung them open with tired ease. The homeless milled in. A pecking order had developed.

First went the punks: thin waisted, scraggly beards, long greasy hair and swaggers to bridge the gaps in their personality.

Second were the old guard: what they lacked in speed and

strength, they made up in guile. Years of street life had honed them: specialized them in the ways of begging and scrounging and survival. Their place second in the order of things was an example of their ability to survive: for who wants to be second best; who wants to dislodge someone from a subordinate position. Anyone on their way up a ladder never desires to stay short of supremacy.

Third class in the queue: the newly disaffected. They looked like sullied sheep. They had spent a lifetime, serving society and then were shoved out rather than bailing out. They paid their bills: answered to their bosses and to their debts. They bided their time and invested in a sham future. It was the status quo: violence followed when it was upset.

Then punks, the old guard and the newly disaffected milled past Pastor Mike. Something welled inside of him. Something had to change.

#

It ended without note. It started without warning. Two days earlier, the Prime Minister put the War Measures Act in place to mobilize the troops for Peru. People grumbled in stray conversations. The police were augmented with an army presence. On the night earlier, Larry thought he heard more shots than before. Larry awoke on this one morning to the sounds of a mob. He ventured a look out his window. A cloudy day. The buildings in the distance emitted smoke. The city was on fire. Angry tributaries of a mob flowed down the street. Some screamed. Others roared. The organized few chanted, "Jobs not war! Jobs not war!"

Like a gargoyle on the corner of a church, Larry had a

perched view of the city from the poor suite. There came gunshots of all calibers, bloodlet screams, car crashes and explosions. In the distance, the armory was in a frenzy. It stood like a fortress in a modern day city. It was host to functions large and small. Its staff were trained in matters of protocol, not civil unrest. Stacato bursts of gunfire and the thumps of grenade blasts signalled the armory's rebuke. Larry's gut tugged at him with a sinking feeling. His world was changing-- changing forever. Gone forever were quiet Saturdays off with his family or with his friends. Gone forever were his hopes of a good job and maybe a wife, a house and kids; kids who could live a life as he did. Gone forever were the days when he could count on money in his pocket. Gone forever was predictability, calm, promise.

Fifteen minutes later an APC cruised down the main street near Larry's apartment. It was equipped with a mounted gun and a loud speaker.

The APC speaker blared out, "Under the authorities of the War Measures act, you are ordered to return to your homes! You are ordered to disperse and return to your homes!"

A brave kid in a plaid shirt threw a molotov cocktail at the APC. It exploded with fiery brilliance and brought the military transport to a stop. Half of the people in cars assumed that the laws of the road were still in place. Half of the cars assumed that escape was the only goal. In intersection after intersection the two assumptions collided in a spray of glass and blood. Ambulances squealed through the city with their lights flashing and sirens wailing to carry the victims of the various accidents.

Another APC came to the aid of the molotov cocktailed carrier. Soldiers jumped from the back hatch of the APC. They shouted orders to the civilians nearby: "Get down! Get down!" "On your belly! Hands out!" Those that obeyed were allowed to wait without further abuse. A few hesitated; they were thrown off of their feet by nearby soldiers. A few ran; soldiers fired warning shots and brought those few to a stop. A kid came around the corner to discover the scene. He was maybe eighteen, short-buzz cut hair and wore a very commonplace black jacket. Larry recognized the figure as a face from the audience in the theater. He came to all of the unpopular art films but never the blockbusters. He always seemed so serious, so mature especially for a kid. He reached into his pocket while the soldiers' were distracted. Three shots rang out from the kid. One missed and two landed-- one in each of two soldiers. The hit soldiers landed face down. They screamed in fear and pain. Other soldiers spun around and shot the kid. He was thrown off of his feet, slamming to the pavement. Two soldiers ran for the kid. Two others ran for each of the injured soldiers. The soldiers approached the kid warily. One of them trained his gun on the kid and the other kicked the pistol away from his still hand. A military ambulance rushed to the scene to collect the dead and injured. They loaded the kid in last.

Larry watched from his perch unable to comprehend the logic behind it all. Streets that were safe to walk in daylight a month earlier, were now littered with stopped cars, burning transports, blood and shell casings. Years earlier Larry watched news from Yugoslavia; the skyscrapers and six lane streets, all scarred by

warfare. It now hit home that everyday life could collapse so fast.

Then he heard a commotion in the hall outside. There came a number of muffled calls: "Hey!" "Open up!" and "You're ordered--" That was followed by the sound of a door being forced and a number of shouts and activity. Rather than go out and investigate, Larry stayed in his apartment and considered his options should they burst in on him next. As it looked like nobody was coming for him, Larry went back to the balcony to see what developed on the streets.

He stood out on the balcony. "Hey! Get back inside!" He heard from his right. Larry looked over to see three soldiers on the next balcony-- the same one connected to the apartment with the commotion. Two soldiers stood as binocular-watching and the third manned a massive belt-fed machine gun. Larry hesitated and the same soldier called out, "Get inside your suite or you're under arrest!" Larry obeyed. After all, Larry never had resisted in the past so why start now when staring down machine-gun-toting soldiers.

He sat in his apartment over the afternoon. He ate a sparse meal and read over ancient magazines that remained in his place. The TV provided little entertainment but no news. Instead of information on the war in Peru, the protests and the rioting or even the weather, the local station broadcast a notice that restrictions imposed by the War Measures Act prevented news programming. From time to time, the machine-gun nest next door came to life and let off short volleys of suppressing fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"From the north there sails another ship, filled with the people of Hel, the shape-shifter Loki in control." - Joseph

Campbell's Occidental Mythology

James had a two day layover in New Orleans. Air traffic was being bumped and delayed because of the military traffic being funneled into Central and South America. He didn't feel good about carrying all of his money on his person but there were few options. Back home, if his wife hadn't frozen his money via their joint account, his partner had via a court order. He took a cab into New Orleans. The city had a small sideral riot after images of the Los Angeles Christmas riots. By fortune, New Orleans was no worse off than the other cities in the U.S.-- at least it escaped martial law. The route in was littered with stalled and abandoned cars. Three cars had collapsed over the meridian in collision. People were still inside the wrecks but the other drivers did no more than detour past.

In New Orleans, traffic was a tangle. It thickened to gridlock near the city hall. Armored personnel carriers blocked the street. A chopper flew overhead. Smoke and sparks of gunfire rose from a crowd of protestors outside of city hall.

James asked his driver if they could bypass the protest to get to the hotel. The driver replied, "I could take you part of the way, but not all the way."

"Why not?"

"It's a rough part of town."

"So why can't you drive past it? You don't have to stop."

"Where you from?"

"Canada."

The driver shook his head as if James gave the wrong answer. "We can wait here or I can take you near your hotel."

James felt resigned to the few options. He agreed to be let off near the hotel. The driver pulled a U-turn and used the vacant lanes going away from city hall to escape the traffic. They drove into the old, decidedly French part of town. The driver stopped, demanded his fare and gave James his baggage. In parting, the driver said, "Keep your head down, move fast and don't piss anybody off."

The cab screeched away. The street was run down. Turn of the century buildings built with French architecture in mind were splattered with graffiti and handbills; the plaster was cracked and sparse. It looked like the Peruvian warzones they showed on the TV. The only cars present were either idling sportscars or burnt out hulks. Clutches of two and three men hid in shadowy corners. They coaxed flames beneath glass bongs and sucked earnestly on the vapor.

More than once, men and women bumped into James. In their trance, they couldn't tell what had happened. They were the walking dead. A prostitute on the curb hiked her skirt up to passersby to reveal both willingness and no panties. Another more 'prudish' whore took exception and began shouting insults. The quick volley of words was replaced with a full out fist fight. The winner was the prudish hooker who didn't stop with mere victory. She grabbed her opponent's mane and kept ramming her skull into

the pavement. The winner repeated, "Cunt!" with every blow. James kept moving.

Blacks with shaven heads in leather vests and combat pants sat on the steps outside of the houses and apartments. They loaded and cocked and played with their guns. They only lowered them from clear sight when cars passed. They marked James' passage with cool vigilance.

At a corner, James waited for the light to change. A skinny black guy came up to James. The black shifted his gaze and repositioned his head like a dog or a cat sizing up prey.

"Hey, man. Yo' wallet!"

James couldn't believe the demand. He was about to floor the little freak down when he noticed three others watching intently. Were James to weaken or focus his attention on any one target, others would make their move. Were James to give in, the same would happen. A chill ran through him. He was scared. His fear was compounded when his thief produced a knife. The black man drew a breath to steel himself for combat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Ragnorok was foreshadowed by the chaos of the society of men and gods. It was preceded by a time of strife in which society was so evil that the bonds of kinship had become meaningless and murder, incest and intrigue became the order of the day." - Man &

Myth on Ragnarok

Gone from the city were the productive individuals: the workers, the commuters and the like. A purer breed of consumer existed now. One unfettered by the nuisance of work. They scavenged like rats from a renegade colony. Larry passed by the front of his old theater. It was boarded up, its windows were swept up splinters. Graphitti marked the walls, the marble and the tile floors. Broken syringes nestled in the corners.

The side door to the theater was broken open and nailed shut. Inside, addicts would shoot up, smoke up and snort; degenerates coupled for passion or for money; derelicts passed out. It smelled like urine and like vomit. On a good day, it only smelled like a thrift store because of the damp and the mould.

On this night, three scavengers played look out as two more hefted out theater seats and fine wooden railings. It was obviously not their right, as who did this as night fell and the city got rough.

#

The moon set in the sky outside Eric's room. He lay helpless in his bed. His day was busier than most: in addition to the routine of breakfast, lunch and dinner, he had his wednesday physio class. They often congratulated Eric on progress though he

felt no improvement, only frustration. The SPCA brought in puppies for the patients to play with before the animals met doom at the end of a sodium barbitol syringe.

His life at the rehab center was now a dull monotony-- too slow for even an invalid. At first, his mother came by daily. She coached his physiotherapy and spoon fed him. His brother came around almost as often. Some friends visited and some never did. Jonathan came by every couple of days and brought Val's apologies; she never visited-- not once. Larry came only a few times for short awkward stays; he brought word of his rift with James. The complexities of the story were lost on Eric.

Eric changed drastically. His slim, fit frame was now a sickly uneven combination of jutting bones and flabby muscle. His dyed, cropped hair-- a point of attraction or derision or hostility-- was now in a longer, plainer fashion with his false red hair only remaining at the fringe. His fashionable clothes sat in boxes at home. Here, he wore t-shirts, sweatshirts and sweat pants. In a little way his stepfather had won; Eric's days of weird dress and weird attitudes were over.

The nurses squeaked past his room in their hospital regular shoes. There came a noise at the window. A ladder. A man climbed up the ladder and contorted himself into the room. He landed on the floor with a thump.

Eric tried to alert the nurses. He wailed out. Before he could do so again, the first sneak thief was on him. He pulled the pillow from beneath his head and held it over Eric's mouth. Eric spasmed and fought. The battle was over before it began. Eric went

limp. The smell of shit and urine crept into the night air.

The thieves stole their way out of Eric's room and into the hall. They quickly found the night nurse. She was taking a respite from her duties, scanning the help wanted ads. They incapacitated her, took her keys and left her handcuffed and gagged in Eric's room. From there, they went on to raid the medical locker of every valuable drug possible.

On their way out, they had to address the nurse. She was full of fight and unsafe to release.

"Time to put her to sleep," one of the thieves said. She yelled in protest, muffled by the gag. The two hauled her up and into the bed with Eric. They took sick pleasure in the joke. Within moments, they, the drugs and the ladder were gone. The nurse was left in bed with Eric's dead body.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"The path to a good friend's house

Is straight

Though he is far away." - Man & Myth Moral Sayings of The
Norse

Larry awoke to voices in his apartment. He threw on a pair of pants and stood by his shut door. The voices were not the furtive whispers of thieves or the boasts of bullies. Knowing they would not simply arrive and depart, he was forced to confront them. At least, to discover why they were in his apartment.

He poked his head out the door, interrupting three men in conversation. Two were scummy, young men that looked younger than Larry. The third was a podgy, greying Mediterrean. He was smoking cigarettes and emitting plumes of tobacco vapor.

The Mediterrean pointed at Larry. "Hey! Din you get the notice? This place is in recievership. Everybody's gotta clear out. Today. So, ah, get your stuff and go. We're clearing everyone we find on this floor out by midnight."

Larry was stunned. "But-- but where can I go?"

"Hey, if I knew that I could tell everyone an' clean up the streets. So you got it? You gotta get out by, ah, two. Yeah, two this afternoon." He went to leave. But before going he added, "An' I don't want any trouble. Two o'clock!" They left. Larry collapsed into a broken down chair.

Larry couldn't call for help. His phone had long since been disconnected. His pocket held no change, no money. The telephone company stopped the practice of allowing collect phone calls--

part of its cutback plan. Besides that, his mother was-- at last word-- travelling Australia with her new man. His welfare cheque had been stolen. He made an application for a replacement, but that would take ten weeks. But all this did not help Larry. He needed salvation now rather than later.

#

Larry looked around the apartment. Two o'clock was quickly approaching. Larry considered what to take. Most of his tapes were gone. He rarely read his books. He couldn't carry his TV and there was no point in trying to sell it. An attempt a week earlier to sell it would have yielded him five dollars. His furniture was a collection of old ratty hand-me-downs. In the end, Larry gathered up as many clothes as he could stuff in a backpack. He fixed himself a sandwich; canned tuna in a moulding pita pocket. Short of the deadline, Larry headed out.

It didn't hit him until he was outside: he had been hiding indoors for the majority of the last month. He had hidden away from the protests, the derelicts, the sirens, the smashing windows and broken glass; the chaos. Everyone took note of Larry. He was now a potential threat or a potential victim. When he stopped by shops, he was goaded into moving on by either angry shop owners with foreign accents or by police and militia in flak jackets.

Night closed on the city. Larry was nearly penniless and grew tired of walking the streets. There was no one to stay with. He had no relatives in town, James and his friendship were gone; he dare not talk to Geena. Riga was dead. Eric was dead. He even missed his friend's funeral because he heard of it a week after it

occurred. When Eric was laying like vegetable in the rehab center Larry managed to see him only a handful of times. He had no friends from his former work to recieve refuge. But all these were empty points. He knew his doom.

There was a crisp chill to the air. From the year before, Larry knew what the feeling brought. Snow. Back east, their long periods of cold had to be braved without the aid of electric heat. For the past four winters, cold snaps blacked out the entire eastern seaboard. The cold there killed hundreds per year. Out west, it wasnt nearly as bad, snow brought only dozen or so to death by exposure. Larry was scared that if snow came, he would be one of the few found dead from the cold and the elements.

Larry dodged notice by many people. He slipped down an alley by another derelict theater. He moved in cautiously, sludging through rubbish of all sorts. The dark was a perfect shelter for Larry so he expected others to have found it first. He was relieved to be wrong. In the midst of the damp and the cold, the mess and smell, he settled down. He put his back against the wall, sat on his backpack and pulled his arms and legs close to his body. He remained cold but sleep overtook him.

Larry awoke to a sensation of primal fear. Three figures moved down the alley, backdropped by the stars and the moonlight. Their shoes resounded damp grinds as they closed on the back of the alley where Larry was concealed.

Larry's heart pounded. His fear was all encompassing. They had yet to know Larry was there but that tactical advantage was wasted by Larry's inability to defend himself or escape at a

critical moment. For Larry to break away, he would have to stand, pick up his pack and charge back them while still avoiding a slip on the litter in the alley. His chance of escaping harm by flight was slim; his chance of escaping harm by remaining was none. Larry stood, making himself visible in the dim light.

"Hey! Who's that?" One said.

"Dunno," said another. They closed on Larry. Larry burst into a run, damning his backpack. He tried to run past them. Two of them caught him by the arm and shoulder. He slipped and went face down into the pavement. He cried a full grown baby as he crawled towards the street. The three men stopped him with ease and dragged him into the back of the alley. "No! No!" he cried out in a vain hope a good Samaritan would hear him. But there were no longer good Samaritans, only scavengers.

There was a congress among the voices in the dark.

One of them said, "Hey look! A backpack!"

"Screw it, we'll get to it later..."

"Well, you fuck, what the deal?" He kicked Larry in the side, missing ribs but burying booted toes into soft flesh. They held down Larry by his arms and head. A free one searched Larry's pants pockets and frisked him for hidden treasures. One of them tried to undo his pants, saying, "His pants are a keeper!" The punk cursed and said, "Can't get off these fucking pants." In his frustration, he swung up and kicked Larry in the balls twice. Nausea and pain made Larry scream and then dry heave. He could hear scant cars pass by the alley. They roared close and then passed by. He just wanted to die now; die or wake up in bed, safe and sound.

"I'm going to ruin these fucking pants before I get them off." Another one said, "Here, let me." There was a changing of the guards at one of Larry's shoulders. This was it. A thought flashed in Larry's head. This is how I'm going to die: beaten and naked.

Shots rang out in staccato fashion. Flecks of concrete sprayed Larry and his attackers. "Everyone! Hold it!" Larry looked up to see three infantry men standing before their jeep. Two had their rifles trained on the targets. A third was targetting with his floodlight. One of Larry's assailants broke from the pack and ran for safety. An infantrymen fired a burst of gunfire and put his man down. The other two thugs froze.

"Harris! Cuff 'em!" One of the troops shouldered his rifle and moved in. He cuffed both of the surviving thugs and pushed them to the jeep. Larry remained on the ground, his pants around his knees. Feeling it was safe, Larry got up and put his pants back on. The militia slapped around their captives. The commanding sergeant looked at Larry and said, "Hey! You okay?"

Larry was uncertain of how to answer so recently after being almost buggered. "Yeah, I guess so."

The seargent said, "You should head home, guy." He was about Larry's age, old enough to muster out but smart enough to stay-- nobody else had work. He was lean, with short hair and a trim moustache.

"I-- I, uh, was evicted from my place today. I don't have anywhere to go."

The sergeant snorted and dipped his head. He knew what the

best option was. But it wasn't the military's job to protect and benefit every last citizen. Even so, he felt sympathy for the miserable little figure of Larry, shaking so bad that he couldn't zip up his fly or button his pants. "Get in the jeep, guy. We can take you to a shelter."

Larry muttered an acceptance and climbed into the jeep. He stared at the floor of the jeep: muddy metal floor and the odd generic gum wrapper from their ration kits. The two toughs that attacked Larry were handcuffed and anklebound with cheap plastic cuffs-- almost impossible to break. They were lying on their stomachs, gagged so as to not raise the hackles of their captors. Larry was sickened by the sight of them. Though he could do anything to his tormentors and escape reprisal from the militiamen, Larry did nothing. Rather than feel hatred and anger, he felt fear allayed and panic quelled. He wanted nothing more than to crawl away from them and leave them and this night alone-- forgotten.

The soldiers talked amongst themselves. They didn't touch upon the subject of Larry or his attackers. Such events had become trivial distractions from their routines of carousing, drinking and womanizing.

The jeep came to a stop in front of an old building, next door to a derelict bank. Two years ago, this was the heart of the commercial sector. Now, most of shops were closed. They fell from being long established businesses to slap together organizations: emporiums, bulk food stores, factory outlets, soup kitchens. People skittered into the shadows on the jeep's approach. They

feared the well armed muscle of the military backed by martial law.

The sergeant checked his watch weighed out factors in his head. He still had a busy night ahead. He considered keeping Larry with him and dropping him off later. They couldn't afford the time and for Larry this meant only a few hour long wait. "The soup kitchen there can take you in and give you a breakfast. Stay by the doors and you'll be sure to get a place in line."

Larry nodded and got out of the jeep. Before they drove off, Larry uttered, "Thanks." The soldiers drove into the night. Larry ran for the steps of the soup kitchen. He clung to the door like a desperate barnacle.

Dawn took its time. Every thought crossed his mind in the night. He felt guilty for his poor actions against others, for the bad karma it created. He felt anger against all those who had abandoned him. He felt shame for falling to such depths. He felt happy and relieved to be alive, thankful to have survived this night's attack. He felt sadness for all the doors closed to him: never to have a family, money, a nice car, a good home, a comfortable love with a woman. Without hope, Larry felt that he was as good as dead.

People walked by him on the street. As they neared, his fear swelled. But they passed and left him untouched. By default, he was assumed to be dangerous, for who would be out on this night who was not.

A nice car rolled up the street. It pulled around the side of the shelter to let out a passenger, a woman in her forties. She

looked around herself like a defender finding refuge in a fortress. A figure let her in and hurriedly shut the door again.

Around Larry, a crowd gathered. A greasy young punk moved past Larry and stood in the front of the door. He didn't address Larry, he just assumed that Larry would yield his place or suffer. Larry yielded wordlessly. A few similar punks jostled Larry back until he was fourteenth in line.

A solemn, skinny man in an aging sportshirt and jeans opened the doors. He had a tired look on his face that told what weight this job put upon him.

The people walked through the conveyor belt system, getting two half pieces of toast, scrambled eggs that were half eggs and half onions; and pitchlike coffee. It was all slapped onto army surplus trays. The spoonful of eggs slapped down on the tray reminded Larry of a camp in a war movie; every gray, dull and flavorless.

Larry ate his meal and endured the company of his breakfast companions. It was irony that the ones he couldn't stand talked and talked while the ones he thought looked like alright people just ate and dashed. One old beggar gabbed a blue streak, occasionally reaching over to snatch parts of Larry's breakfast. After the second piece of toast disappeared, Larry said, "That's my toast."

The beggar said, "Sorry? Oh, where was I?"

Larry endured the disappearing meal and sad excuse for conversation and got up when his tray was empty. He took it over to the tray service. A stout woman in a flowered dress and a

filthy apron took the tray with a little surprise. Larry saw that most of the others simply let their trays sit on the tables.

His first full day on homelessness was underway. He walked the streets in the hopes of finding a familiar face. The occasional military transport buzzed by, loaded with soldiers in fatigues. Storefront after storefront was closed or burned out. The rioting at the start of the War Measures Act took out a few of the still clinging businesses. Larry stayed on main streets fearing what he might find on sidestreets and back alleys.

Larry had a wealth of time on his hands. He decided to investigate a long shot by walking out to James' and Geena's place. His feet ached as trodded into the suburbs; a trip that took over fifteen minutes by car took almost two hours by foot. Everything looked broken down. Out here too, stores were closed or delapidated. Cars now clogged garages rather than streets and intersections. Larry got to James' home. There were no familiar cars in the lot and a realtor's sign was pegged in the front lawn. Larry tried the door but was unanswered. As he recalled, Geena's family lived in town. He surmised that after James' and Geena's rift, Geena moved back home and put the house up for sale.

Larry trudged back into town. His feet were wet with sweat and blood from where his poor shoes had worn his feet raw. Another dull, bleary day was drawing to a close. Larry feared another night spent out of doors. Without money, he couldn't manage a hotel. Upon returning to town, he made the rounds to the shelters; seedy nests of addicts and psychotics-- their ranks bloated by the fallen commoners.

That afternoon, he went back to the shelter that tried to give him breakfast. The misbegotten lot that were there for breakfast milled around the front of soup kitchen. During daylight hours, they ran a food bank program. A big sign on the front of the food bank doors read, "Food bank closing Friday. Sorry for any inconvenience."

Larry wanted to talk to someone in charge. He saw the line up but knew he couldn't budge past all those people who had been waiting. When it came his turn, the woman said, "I'm sorry but I can only give you a hamper for a single, unless you come with your family."

"Oh, no. I-- I ah, don't want a hamper. I--" What did Larry want? Larry didn't know. He just blurted out, "I was hoping to find a place to stay. I-- uh--can do vlunteer work." The woman looked at Larry with some variant of confusion. He knew she was working up a way to turn him down.

A man came up from behind the volunteer worker. He was a spare. lean man, with a haggard look. He was same guy that opened the doors and helped out with breakfast.

The man asked, "What's you name?"

"Larry. Larry Davis."

"Well, Larry, I'm Mike. People here call me Pastor Mike. Come in here for a minute."

Larry was ushered around the counter. Pastor Mike led him down past the food bank and into the main hallway of the building. The food bank was a large room with cracked walls and a cement floor. A smattering of food was stored on sloppy wooden shelves.

As they toured the food shelter, they talked. Pastor Mike felt he had sized up Larry already. A few questions never hurt anyone. Pastor Mike asked, "Why're you here?"

"They condemned my building. And I got fired."

"You do drugs?"

"No."

"Drink?"

"No."

"Got any friends?"

"Not really." Then he thought about James' fiery departure and Eric. Poor Eric. Larry felt his heart close in on itself.

"What are hoping to do with yourself?"

Larry paused mute. What was he hoping to do with himself? The reality of his situation was a daily truth, he had to bear. Until now, he never had to talk about it. He fought back tears when he replied, "I'm not sure."

Pastor Mike felt for him. "Well. The work here is hard. It's not rewarding and all I can give you is food and shelter-- at least while there is food and shelter. Do want to stay here, Larry?"

Larry sputtered and gulped. He shed tears and answered, "Yes. I do."

"Welcome aboard, Larry."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"They are inheritors to the Nordic throne; dirty, uncouthed, hairy savages. A spare adaptable culture allowed the Vikings to take up residence in any of the lands they conquered. Their hunger for plunder gave them the justification. Their blindness to the blooshed left in their wake gave them solace-- even joy." -

O'Cork's "Heirs to the Viking Life"

Another day dawned. Pastor Mike lived, worked, read and slept within the safety and the confines of the soup kitchen. Down the hall, Larry had a room. He was new-- a good worker with few vices. Many volunteers stayed until they had stolen their fill; eluded the police or the soldiers; and/or were fed up by the job.

Cautiously, Pastor Mike opened the side door to let in the other volunteers. At this hour, only volunteers and thieves would greet him. More than once, the thieves. They broke in, stole the cash and roughed up Mike for good measure. There was nothing so humiliating as being robbed, berated and having his face held down to a countertop while his attackers discussed whether or not they should kill him.

It took days of rage and anger and prayer to recover from such attacks. For not only did they debase him, they also undid his work by their theft. But this morning, only three volunteers awaited him. One of them was Millie Evan, a woman in her fifties with a limp, a disability pension and a heart of gold; the pension was cut off two months ago but her heart remained. It was assumed that she lived off of savings or an inheritance or the good will

of others. The second in was Brad Curtis. He was in his thirties, skinny to the point of being sickly with poor skin, one bloodshot eye and one good one. Looking back, it seemed like his health had gone down in the last year or so. Without a doctor's ministrations, Brad could assume his state was temporary. The third was the pious Mrs. Abrams. Her husband's prosperity and wealth survived even this day and age untouched. Pastor MIke was certain that her work here was her sole way of buying a space in heaven: after all, she could buy everything else.

Larry greeted him in the kitchen. Larry was bleary eyed and unshaven. His routine was to shave and wash up after helping with breakfast. Nobody could fault him for not being a morning person for he arose nonetheless.

This morning continued as it always did. With a basic but nourishing breakfast prpapred, the cutlery (rewashed plastic) put out for use, everyone was ready. Pastor Mike opened the doors to the world outside. Few words were exchanged inside the kitchen. They were a lot doing their part but still growing unhappy and bitter because of the task. The hungry ranks grew and multiplied-- the young, never knowing any other life, were being hefted into the soup kicthen along with the rest. With full bellies everyday, the homeless remained thankless and sullen. They expected this charity as their due.

The punks filed in, cocky. They never spoke to Mike or the others; they looked upon their benefactors as servants or saps.

The old guard greeted MIke with smiling, obsequious faces. They learned long ago the salesmanship in begging.

The new ranks were a humbled, embarrassed lot. They would nod to Mike, maybe make a short quip before rushing in to get the whole thing over with.

It was increasing hard to feed everyone. A signal from Millie, behind the serving line told Pastor Mike that the food was gone. He stopped the line, got the usual protests and closed them out. He locked the door. The latecomers banged on the door for admission.

One of the punks finished his food and went up for more. Discovering that there was no more, he started to wander the tables.

A woman and her two kids were getting into their breakfast. Little hands were wrapped around warming, caffeine laced cups of coffee. At this moment, the children thought they were in a special clique-- drinking coffee like adults. Years later, they'd remember only the ignominy of their fate.

The wandering punk wore a torn jean jacket, torn black jeans and a tight t-shirt. His name was Jeff; people never recalled his last name. These were his best clothes a year or two back--the thing he'd don to go to bars and get laid. Gone were those easy days. His hair was long and straightened by greasiness. His moustache had grown bushy--his whiskers had grown into a thin beard.

He leaned over the shoulders of the children and picked up the bread from each of their plates. The kids looked up, confused. Their mother was too. She didn't know what to say. People who challenged these punks ended up with a punch in the face, broken

teeth, fat lips and black eyes. And it didn't stop with gender: she recalled woman who lacked a full set of teeth because of such tangles. Jeff cackled, smiled and stepped away.

Larry witnessed this. He shook with rage. One of the kids asked his mother, "Mommy, can I have another piece of bread?" The mother looked to the closed food service, to her own empty plate and then all around to solicit pity or aid. She cried out of guilt for eating her own food so fast and guilt for letting the punk walk away with her children's food.

Jeff headed back to his seat. His buddy, Keith, had held it free while he hunted. Before he could get there, Larry had intercepted him, blocking his way down the aisle. Jeff tried to budge past but there was no margin. He looked through his thatch of hair and said, "'cuse me." Larry didn't move. Jeff looked at Larry confirming that this was an act of confrontation and not stupidity. It was confrontation. "Hey, I wanna get by," he said to Larry. Larry held his shaking down to a minimum. Jeff asked, "What's your problem? Move it!"

Larry shoved the lean, little punk. It did little. Jeff swung at him, hooking Larry in the jaw, knocking him off balance.

Pastor Mike took notice of the situation. He grabbed something from beside the door and bolted for the melee. Jeff skirted Larry while he was down and directly encountered Mike. Pastor Mike produced a baseball bat and jammed the end of it into Jeff's stomach. Immobilized, the punk dropped to his knees-- one hand favored his injury and the other propped him up. Keith came up from behind from behind Mike. He jumped on Mike, bringing the

scuffle to the floor.

Larry grabbed Keith around his neck. He pincerd his arm around Keith's throat. Keith's face grew red. His attempts to free himself grew frantic and vain. Pastor Mike recovered and gave Jeff two more whacks for good measure: one to the shoulder, One to the back of the head. Then, he began to swat at Jeff's rear and his hips. It gave him incentive to continue his wounded soldier crawl towards the door. Jeff left a trail of blood along the route he took out.

Keith was a poor shade of crimson-purple; his lips were death blue; he was unconscious. No one offered him pity or came to his aid. The others kept their distance. Larry was a mess: panting, shaking, sweating. Pastor Mike, with Larry's aid, dragged Keith out to the street, leaving him on the sidewalk. Mrs. Abrams expressed extreme displeasure with their solution to the problem. Pastor Mike responded by going down the hall to his room to read from the Good Book and pray for forgiveness.

When Keith recovered, he was in no shape to fight. Instead, his first act was to vomit up breakfast and slink away, into the city scene.

The next morning, the world was different and made anew. The pecking order in the line up was gone: first come first serve. Gone too were yesterday's punks: Jeff and Keith and their ilk. One rumor was that they were beaten to a state near death. Another rumor said that they had gone to another food bank, swearing eventual revenge on Pastor Mike, Larry and the soup kitchen. Whatever their fate, it pleased Mike that there were long gone. As

an aside, Mrs. Abrams also chose not to show up.

#

Larry felt terror in the requiem that followed the chaos of weeks before. The din of traffic was all but gone: riots caused attrition through vandalism and theft; the militia presence remained, and with it, a curfew; gas rationing and shortages kept the remainder in locked garages.

Even with the death of the automobiles, elderly social structures fought the dying old-- spitting and wheezing, lapsing into madness and delusion. Vehicles lay spent like broken toys. City windows were broken, never to see a glazier again. People spent little time in the streets. They were burdened by their old memories of a place once so vibrant and seemingly healthy. Some feared the rumors of madmen, who molested and cannibalized their fallen prey.

By contrast, life in the shelter looked good. It was not without its little extra rewards. Larry felt enriched by the aid he gave others. But rewards came in other forms. One morning, Larry was serving up food when he saw a familiar face: Steele. He had a week's growth, scrubby clothes and messy hair. He recognized Larry and bowed his head in shame. Steele gulped down his breakfast and fled, never to return. Larry felt a degree of pleasure at seeing the result of Steele's idle years. Larry also felt guilt that Steele was yet another lost soul in need of help. One of the lost souls that Larry felt he could not restore but only bandage and prolong. Larry was without the solution and created a great emptiness inside of him.

#

The U.S.-Canadian forces in Peru had seen heady days indeed. The Columbian contingent had gone poorly and the Peru campaign fared far better. News crews broadcast the events from just a week earlier: a crack strike force repelled into the heavily armed command center of the Peruvian government. With lightning speed, they kidnapped Peru's strongman, Antonio Corvez. They held him captive holding out for concessions from the remaining junta. It was a severe blow to Peru's morale. From every TV beamed the image of the U.S. Commander of the Peru forces, General Perfidine, standing beside his arch-enemy, Corvez, shackled and humiliated. The strike force was able to take a video of Corvez's office, the locale where the lightning raid took place. It reinforced their claims of his depravity. His office was littered with drug paraphrenalia; obscene photos of little boys; totems and icons of black magic; a copy of Mein Kampf and Mau Tse Tung's Little Red Book. It was all proof to the world of this man's infamy. Only an astute few noticed that the same black magic totem and paperback copy of Mein Kampf were found in Noreiga's office and in Iende's stronghold.

The airport in Lima served as a temporary headquarters for the U.S. spearhead. Richard Miller was part of a platoon of Canadian infantry. He was conscripted into the service weeks before all hell broke loose at home. Despite all protests, he discovered there was little to be done to keep him out of the military. His mother cried when he was taken away. His father was long gone. His buddy, Keith, had gone underground to avoid the

draft.

His platoon awoke at the crack of dawn. They got their gear together under the stern supervision of their Sergeant Riggs. Private Richard Miller boarded a bell huey helicopter and took a seat on the painful, vestigial excuse for a bench. He and his dozen compatriots flew to the edge of the copter's range. Their mission was to cleanup drug traffickers held up in a farm house in the rural foothills. Severing their supply of money and drugs was to cut another string that supported the Peruvian regime. The traffickers dealt in pure cocaine, harvested and purified all in the same location.

The copters kept low to hug the trees and terrain. Too many of these choppers fell prey to camouflaged anti-aircraft units. Such enemies were easily concealed in the foliage. Everyone who boarded a copter had this thought in the backs of their mind.

This military action proved far more complex and labor intensive than the others in recent years. Iraq, Haiti, Panama, Korea, Jamaica-- none were quite like this one for its logistics and difficulties.

Despite the speed and the winds, Richard could still make out details of the jungle floor. More than once did his heart race when his eye caught sight of manmade intrusions in the jungle. They only turned out to be oil rigs. With the onset of the war, they were abandoned.

It was ironic that a place like this one gave Richard one of his first memorable highs. Stoned at a party, he first snorted some coke and put a small sum on his tongue and his lips. His lips

and tongue were made numb; he drooled and mumbled his words. The entire affair made him the life of the party.

Three copters made up the attack force. Two of them carried troops and the third was a heavily armed tank killer. The tank killer pulled ahead of the others. Richard's platoon was told to standby. Their turn was imminent.

A number of plastered huts and wooden houses were visible in a clearing. The tank killer fired volleys of small missiles and gunfire into the trafficking center. The setting erupted into smoke and fire. The troop carrying copters came in low and hovered a meter above the dirt road. Riggs gave the signal. In unison, two platoons deployed themselves. Richard had to squint to counteract the dust from the rotors and the smoke from the fires.

The choppers climbed into the sky. Richard could hear screams of all pitches and a smattering of gunfire from all settlement. They fanned out and closed on the buildings. People ran from the large structure: Inca-Peruvians, black haired, tanned skin and coarse weave clothing. They tried to make it into the jungle. Riggs ordered his platoon to open fire. Automatic rifle fire mowed down the escapees. They were no match for the soldiers. While the soldiers were dressed in flak jackets, helmets and armed with rifles, the Peruvians had cotton shirts and pants. Some had boots but a few were barefoot. Their weapons ranged from rifles to ancient pistols. These people were peasants, unprepared for an attack made with military precision.

Richard closed on one of the huts. He found an arm, its tendons and muscles strewn from it, blackened. The arm's owner was

dead pulp nearby; part of her brain was exposed. They spent overlong drilling into the infantry what they'd find on such raids. That training did little to cushion Richard or his stomach. Richard and Corporal Brandsen came to the door of the little hut.

Richard didn't know who was to take the point. After all, this was his first mission. Brandsen gestured to the door. "Take the point, Rich."

Richard nodded and kicked the door open. Its old hinges gave with the stress and the door collapsed with Hollywood finesse. Muzzle first, he burst into the front room. Nobody. Just as he was trained, he investigated the hut, kicking open those things concealed to him. Brandsen joined him in the room. They made short work of its order and tidiness.

Richard when into the bedroom and kicked the bed out of place to find nothing. He went to the closet. It was a coarse, black cloth strung over a recess in the wall. He opened it with the muzzle of his rifle. He saw a baby, tightly clutched by a Peruvian woman. She gasped at the sight of him and thrust her hand up. There was a shot. The baby screamed from the noise. Richard's head hit the wooden floor with a thud. His ears rang, his head felt like a bell. Something wet ran down the right side of his forehead. When felt the blood, the mess and the hole in head, he started to scream and panic.

Riggs looked down and went white with fear. He turned to the closet and emptied his clip into the closet. The mother and baby screamed until their cries grew hoarse, wet and labored. The medic for Richard's platoon was on the scene in moments. He gulped

before giving Richard first aid and a battlefield spray dressing. When his fellow soldiers came to carry him to the helicopter, they paused. Hearing Richard scream, flail about and shed tears of fear it was like watching a horror film; the zombie that refused to die.

Twenty minutes later, they had him in a surgical ward at the airport. Twenty minutes more, they called the time of death. Richard was twenty-one.

#

It was night. Dan Foster was now one of seven in his cell. When the prisoners complained that there weren't enough bunks to sleep them, the guard told them to take turns using the bunks. They also took turns using Dan Foster. On this night he was able to beg a sheet from one of the bunks and sleep on the dirty, urine covered floor. He was numbed by countless weeks in the cell. Nothing affected him. He ate dirt as readily as he ate food.

A week earlier, Dan went asked a prison guard when he could expect an arraignment. The guard replied, "Martial law. No trials 'til that's over."

Dan was ruined by the concept that he should be punished for what he did. In some parts of the world he'd be rewarded-- paid-- for doing such a service. Insetad, he was locked up with degenerates. This was a pit that Dan had to crawl out of. That thought was the only ember left in Dan Foster's ashes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Heimdall now stands up and sounds the... horn to assemble the gods and heroes for the contest." - Bullfinch's Mythology on Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods

The resources at the shelter grew scarce: government money left back in '97; donations dropped to a trickle; electrical power was gone but natural gas for cooking remained; only Larry, Pastor Mike and a new guy, Pierre, remained. Larry slept by day and kept vigil by night. There were constant break-in attempts. Only vigilance and swift reprisals with an iron pipe, kept the shelter safe and intact. Pastor Mike joined Larry in his night watches. But, unlike Larry, he did not sleep during the day. In fact, Larry doubted that Pastor Mike ever slept. The pastor's appearance and hygiene plummeted. He shaved less than twice a week; his hair was unwashed, unkempt and impenetrable by mere combs. He smelled; at times worse than the homeless he served.

Wednesday was the day that a local food distributor came around to donate their castoffs. On one particular Wednesday, they were tardy-- tardy to point of non-existence. Bad enough that on the week earlier, they gave out the poorest of handouts-- rotten potatoes; maggoty pieces of thawed, rotten meat; and fruits with the consistency of gelatin. Pastor Mike had to use a payphone to call the distributor. The food distributor's phone was disconnected. The distributor itself was out of business. Pastor Mike stole his way back into the soup kitchen and went straight to his room. Larry heard the slams-- the outer door and the one to Mike's room. Pierre was the one who let him in.

"What did he say?" Larry asked of Pierre.

"Nothing."

Larry knocked on Pastor Mike's door. To his surprise, the door was ajar. Through the crack, Larry saw Mike on the edge of his bed. He heard Mike snuffle and wrack in the quiet tears of a man. Larry eased the door open. Nowadays, such desperate times bred stark decorum. Pastor Mike heard him enter but did not respond.

Larry stood in front of the hunched over figure of his mentor. "I used to be a Catholic. I caused a lot of trouble and was forced into leaving. I joined a splinter group that let me marry. So, I married. When my wife left me, I thought that was the darkest day of my life. Seven months later, she was remarried and gave birth to a girl. I thought that was the darkest day of my life. I lost my faith in Christ and started drinking.

"In a shelter back east, I gave up drinking and returned to the Lord. I moved out here in the early eighties to set up this soup kitchen. When the need for it was gone, I was to go back east and get a job in administration. A pension by two- thousand and three. But I never got away... The lineups have just gotten uglier and longer. I've failed... My failure is so great that I cannot even feed them dinner tonight, Larry. It's over... It's over."

Larry looked within himself for a pep talk to offer this man. Nothing. Larry knew too well their state. He also knew Pastor Mike's devotion was so great that he would never walk away from this. And though foolhardy and stupid, Larry was resolved to stand

beside him.

Pastor Mike wiped his eyes, snuffled his nose along his sleeve and got up. He went over to his dresser and opened the top drawer. Pastor Mike kept his eyes averted from Larry as he spoke now, ashamed at the tears and the failure. "...A few years ago, I made friends with an old guy... I helped his son through a rough spot with drugs... then I helped the old guy when his son Oded. He's got a place on an island. As I understand it, the ferry terminal is about five hours north by car-- I don't know if it still runs people over..." He handed Larry a dogeared business card. It read H Bloom, Mechanical Engineer. It jogged a memory in Larry of a kindly old man from years back. He also gave Larry such a card. Larry asked himself if he was one of the treasured few to receive this invitation; or was he one of many to get this worthless card from a crazy old man. "He always said I could pass this invitation on to somebody I trusted and they could use it. Get your stuff together and go, Larry."

"But--"

"Go, Larry. Leave. We're all finished here. There's nothing more we can do."

"But, wht not Pierre? Or better yet, yourself?"

"Pierre's a survivor. He doesn't need help. And me?" Pastor Mike forced a smile onto his blotchy tear streaked face. "Don't you worry about me. I'm always being looked over."

Larry didn't know what to say. He got up wordlessly and left to collect his things. He had so little that he was ready in minutes. He left by the back door slipped towards a side street.

He ventured a look back. A crowd gathered in front of the shelter. Such a crowd was common before meal time. On this night, however, no food was to come.

Pierre's conversation with Pastor Mike was short and to the point. He too collected his belongings and disappeared into the cityscape.

The clock said four-thirty. On any other day, Pastor Mike was putting the finishing touches on the night's supper: a little spice, an extra stir, a cleaned plate. Instead, he was preparing to put another finish to something. He went to the utility closet and picked out a length of rope that, until now, served no purpose. Back in his room, he threw one end of the rope over a water pipe that ran along the ceiling. With the aid of a chair, he tied off one end around the pipe. Then came the difficult part: He tied the other end of the rope around his neck. He didn't know how to make a hangman's noose-- he never had the opportunity to practice, nor the need. He worked on it and made the best knot possible. He was an empty spent husk. Had he feeling left in his soul, he may have stopped somewhere along the way. He may have paused or questioned his decision. But now, he was only an automaton bent on dulling the pains of failure and defeat. He knew too that this was one of greatest of sins he could commit but yearned for pain to stop-- the futility. The Catholic priests drilled into him that this was a ticket to hell. But, no: he felt this was right. He was one of a flock; he felt he was being called home. He stepped off the chair. The rope went taut. He came ominously close to the floor, yet still did not touch. A primal

sense of self preservation set in. He kicked for a foothold but knocked the chair away. He swung like a pendulum beneath the pipe. Death by hanging always asphyxiated and strangulated its victim. If the fall was great enough or the jolt of impact severe, the victim would also break their neck. The former alone invited a terror that saved those few who were determined to fight free of their lynching rope. The latter paralyzed them, numbing their sensations of encroaching death. No such relief was visited upon Pastor Mike's end. His vision grew spotty, his muscles ached, a deathly flush rushed over him. All his pains drew distant and the remainder of his life stretched within his mind. With a submission given only in dream states did Mike grow peaceful and calm in his heart. He knew it was over and he was already dead.

Outside, the hungry crowd became discordant. One, then a handful, came to the door to thunder for admission. They grew angry. Their attempts to break down the front door failed. The leaders of the derelicts went around to the sides of the shelter. They found vulnerable windows and used them to gain entry to the soup kitchen.

Wary at first, they grew bold. They ran through the halls and storerooms, ripping open cupboards and doors. They discovered little food. those who found the food ate it themselves.

A number of punks burst into Pastor Mike's room. They discovered him, dangling from the pipe above. They joked and pushed the body like a side of beef in a slaughterhouse.

One of the oldtimers passed the door and saw what they were doing. "Hey! Get away from him!" The old man rushed into the room

and the hoodlums abandoned Pastor Mike's body. He looked for a way to cut the man from the rope but could find none. He grabbed the pastor around the waist and tugged. The strained knot came free. The old man was thrown off balance by the weight. The corpse slammed to the ground.

One of the punks pushed the man out of the way. "He's dead, old man!" They dragged Pastor Mike's body into the street. There, people rummaged through his pockets for valuables, his person for adequate clothes-- even his mouth for gold fillings.

A handful inside were so bored, so discontented that they set fire to the papers in the office. The fire took hold of the building and quickly engulfed it. The riff-raff fled the building after the smoke and the flames filled the halls and rooms.

Firefighters worked with furious speed to douse the flame. This was an all too familiar scene. Once too often had such blazes swallowed up whole city blocks. On this night, the damage stopped with the soup kitchen. They taped the site off limits and posted the notices fully aware that many of the homeless would take refuge within its abandoned walls. When the overworked fire inspector had time, he came around to investigate. His paycheque was three weeks late; his supervisor and assistants were long gone, leaving his office to himself; and the city had broken into a fever of flames. He continued his job for want of a better course for his life. At the time of the fire inspector's visit, they discovered the bodies in the debris. In the anarchy that replaced the government they had no easy time identifying the bodies. The case was shelved for another day. The bodies were put

in a freezer truck outside of the morgue to away a pauper's funeral as John Does.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"'For this,' said Frigga, 'shall he have who will ride to Hel and offer Hela a ransom if she will let Baldur return to Asgard.'"

- Bullfinch's Mthology on The Death of Baldur

Once Larry was past the city center, he felt a weight lift within himself. Darkness closed and the curfew loomed before him. The highway north stretched into the horizon. Just a year or two prior, it was jammed with cars and trucks. On this evening, only abandoned, pillaged cars dotted the side of the road. A spell of naivete led Larry to expect he could hitch a ride. He trekked on down the highway. In his youth it took an hour and a half in a car to get up island, by foot it would be fifty or sixty hours. And during the trek to come, Larry would still have to find shelter; food; sleep; and safety from human predation and militia enforcing the curfew. Because his journey came nearer to completion with every footstep, Larry pressed on.

The dark was unfamiliar to him. In the city, there was always some light-- from streetlights, from buildings, from fires. Out this rural patch of the highway. there was no light, save that given by the stars. The asphalt was just a feeling beneath his feet. Late in the night, Larry grew too tired to continue. He traipsed off the highway into the trees. He dressed in extra layers of his clothes and rested beneath a tree. A few moments after sitting, pain. His feet stung from the trek. It was a miserable, unforgiving pain. He awoke after dawn. His back was sore and limbs were numb. He felt like the dead. Such was life in the great outdoors.

He took off his excess layers of clothes and went back up to the highway. His stomach groaned like an empty shack. He had no idea of how to secure food. There were no shops within sight-- forward or back. And even if there were, he doubted they would have stock or be willing to do business. Money didn't mean what it used to when it couldn't be banked or spent, only pillaged by the bold and the desperate. He was already committed to this trek. He wasn't going to let even something like hunger turn him back.

He came to a small excuse for a business center: gas station and a corner store. All the structures bore the scars of looting. A number of the gas pumps were torn free of their braces and lay derelict on the asphalt. Larry considered raiding one of the gas stations for food, but they looked cleared out. He moved on.

He felt decidedly unwell by mid-afternoon. The slow incline up the Malahat forced greater effort on Larry's part to keep moving. And though he had to battle times without proper food, he at least could fill his stomach with a handful of filched popcorn or a pop. He walked past a driveway that led to a rural home nestled in amongst the wood. He heard, "Hey!" A stark thunderclap of human contact.

He stopped in his tracks and looked up the driveway. A man in a plaid quilted jacket and ripped jeans beckoned him. The sides of the dirt drive were dotted with stumps. "Hey! Where you from?"

"Victoria." Larry walked up the driveway to the man.

He was stacking logs from a wheel barrel. "How'd you get up here?"

"I walked."

"Walked? Alone?"

"Yeah. I'm heading up island." The blank look from the man beckoned Larry to volunteer more. "I've got people I can stay with."

Larry came within arm's reach of the man. He extended a sap covered hand to Larry. "The name's Ken." Ken was maybe ten years older than Larry; strong features and piercing blue eyes, augmented by a thirtysomething paunch of weight.

"Larry. Larry Davis."

Maybe this man Ken noticed Larry stance, like a sapling in a gale; or maybe he just had extra food. Whatever the reason, he asked, "Have you eaten, Larry, Larry Davis?"

"No." Then a candid addition. "To be honest not since breakfast yesterday."

"Well, you can have dinner with us, if you want."

Larry was thankful but surprised that people who lived a world such as this, could offer generosity to a complete stranger. But then, Larry took stock of himself. He was still dressed acceptably, only two days' growth and his presented himself like a sheepish, but sane person. If anyone could solicit aid, it would be someone like Larry Davis. Larry was hoping for such an offer but long learned to expect disappointment over the fulfillment of hope. He said, "Thanks." He thought next that he should earn his keep. He dropped his backpack and asked, "Can I help?" Ken accepted Larry's offer and they made short work of the task.

As they worked, they talked, "So what's it like down there? I haven't been down in a year."

Larry couldn't understand someone living in isolation for so long. "A year?"

"Yeah, I lost my job about a year and a half ago. I came up here with the wife. She had a job in a craft store at Mill Bay until last month. Now, we're just living off the land. The land and the cupboards. I'll start to do some hunting in the next few months. We'll just stay up here until times get better and I can get work again."

Larry envied Ken's optimism. He couldn't imagine a return to the old world-- to the comforts and security that it offered. Answering Ken's earlier question, he said. "It's pretty bad down there. I never thought it could get so bad. It's like looking at those pictures of Africa or after the war in Vietnam."

"People bounce back. My great-grandfather was a banker during the Depression. He had a nervous breakdown but the rest of the family survived."

Rather than argue over an uncast future, Larry nodded, conceding the argument to his benefactor.

Several loads later, they were done and with it, one side of the modest house was stacked with firewood. Ken looked to his watch and said, "Probably time for dinner."

Until now, Ken's wife was an abstract concept, a faceless somebody inside of the house. Deanna was a woman of roughly Ken's age, dark brown hair and slightly overweight. She wore a weak prescription of eyeglasses and a basic denim skirt. Ken performed the introductions and explained Larry's origin. He then went to wash up. "So where are you going?" She

asked.

"Hornby Island?"

"What's on Hornby Island for you?"

"A place to stay. I've been invited to stay up there. I have nowhere at home so I thought it'd be a good choice."

She finished preparing dinner as she talked. "What did you do down in Victoria?"

"I used to be a theater usher then, after that job folded, I uh-- I worked in a food bank."

She took an interest in the latter, "What made you leave? The food bank, I mean."

"The food bank had to be abandoned. Our old supplier went out of business and we couldn't get a new one. And with the donations were-- without a supplier, we just didn't have food." Without prodding he added, "That was two days ago."

"So what's to become of the food bank?"

"To be honest, I don't know... It was really a band-aid solution. So, I can't think of what's to happen with it." Larry didn't want to consider its future-- or Pastor Mike's future. Both looked far too grim to contemplate.

"Did you like working there? I have to think it was a labor of love."

"It was. I couldn't find a job. So, I worked there-- well, volunteered there."

"Did you like it?"

"I guess so. I felt useful there. In some ways. The job was futile but still I was doing something."

"So what sort of work do they have for you up there on Hornby Island?"

Larry began to see holes in his plan. "Uh, they don't have any work for me. I'll just be staying with them. I guess I'll be helping out."

"Where do you know these people from?"

Larry was reminded of conversations with his mother. The discussion would begin with everything accounted for and in place and close with Larry's stance in shambles. "A mutual friend arranged this for me."

She shook her head as if she judged that Larry's plan was founded in sand rather than stone. "If all this doesn't go as planned, Larry, what were your alternate plans?"

He had no plans. He also had no other options. In the past, in a corner like this-- with someone like Riga or his mother opposing him-- Larry stormed away from the discussion, frustrated and defeated. Now, "I have no other plans. I really don't have a lot of options. I can't live on the streets in town, I certainly can't find a job, not nowadays.

I had no money and no place to stay. My only last option is to go up island to this place."

"This place you've never seen. Where you know nobody."

Larry offered, "I was told they were nice people..."

"When? When was the last time you heard about these people? The times we're in have forced people to change. The Dennis' worked in town and lived up here, about two miles down the road. Jeff Dennis bought the place back in the early eighties, certain

that the world was coming to an end. Then it didn't and he grew back into being one of the nicest guys you would ever meet. Then, when they brought in marshal law he went right back to his old ways. A great big iron gate, an electric fence that runs off of a wind generator. Their kitchen was full of canned food-- shelf after shelf. He had two different gun racks. One upstairs by the balcony door. And one downstairs, by the front door. Each rack is full of rifles and ammunition. I asked him why he needed all of this stuff once and he said it was a holdover from his survivalist days... Eight weeks ago, Ken went by the house-- just to visit-- and Jeff Dennis, someone we've known for years, fired a warning shot at him. That's what I mean about people changing."

Larry did feel the fool. Rather than break down or concede, he said. "I've been told these people are very nice people. They've set up their place years ago to get away from it all."

"Years ago? How do you know it still exists? How do you know it ever existed?"

Larry didn't want to bite the hand that feeds him; he didn't want to snap at someone just because they raised valid points. He also knew that silence offered an open door to the forces that lay seige to his future. "Faith. I'm working on hope and faith. I don't have anything else."

Whether she had given up or whether she actually believed him, Larry did not know. Deanne had a look about her like she had just given up. She said, "Faith works sometimes."

By divine intervention, Ken returned to the kitchen. "All washed up."

"Good. Let's eat."

Dinner was simple. Rabbit stew and homemade bread. The vegetables in the stew were from the garden and the rabbit was from a trap Ken used to snare rabbits and other small prey. They ate in the dining room, warmed by the fireplace. Ken and Deanna had moved their bedroom into the adjoining living room; it was littered with a bed and the other trappings of a bedroom. As Ken explained it, "We don't get much warmth in the rest of the house-- and heck-- we don't get a lot of visitors." Over dinner, Larry did notice one thing: "Lights. How do you have lights?"

Deanna said, "My uncle." Larry didn't follow. Deanna smiled at his polite look of confusion. She added, "He was an environmental nut back in the eighties. So much so that he worked as a commission salesman for this company that sold wind generators. He wasn't getting many sales so we took pity on him and bought one. It's not good for much power but it at least gives us lights and the odd appliance."

Deanna said, "So Larry is heading up to Hornby Island."

"He mentioned it while we were working. What's up there for you Larry? Family?"

"Not really. My mum actually lived in New Zealand. She moved there with her husband. No, I've been promised the chance to live with some people up there."

"Friends of yours?"

"Friends of friends. They have something like a-- like a commune up there."

"Didn't all those disappear in the sixties?"

"That's why I can't quite call it a commune. From what I understand, it's a group of people living together in a house on a patch of land." Larry was now starting to embellish the facts, at the risk of another repeat of the incident with Deanna. "I know it's a long shot. I know it's a long trek to find something-- maybe nothing. But right now, everything has dropped out from underneath me. It's my last best hope."

"Whatever you think you have to do is fine by me, Larry. But you've made it this far by foot. The rest of the route is another five times this sort of trek. Putting in time for sleep-- time to get food-- you're looking at a hard trek. Buses aren't running and even if you could find someone driving upisland, chances are slim that they'd pick up a hitchhiker. You know that the stores and restaurants are closed. With so many banks closed, money doesn't have a great deal of meaning. Shopkeepers have bartered their stock away and closed their doors to wait for better days."

"I know, it's the same down there."

"Then how have you planned to survive?"

Larry felt like an empty shell cracking within a clenched fist. He laid his head in his hands and fought back tears and that gulping sound he'd make as a distraught child.

"I don't have a plan. I don't have a way to do what I must do."

Ken put on this look that Larry didn't know to interpret as admiration or as exasperation. He said, "Well, it won't be easy. I have to say that you have your work cut out for you."

The remainder of the dinner was filled with idle chit- chat to pass the meal in a civil manner.

When it came time for bed, Deanna showed Larry the way to her and Ken's old room. They swapped the hide-a-bed for their own bed, making their former room look more like a den. With some effort, Larry's hostess pulled the mattress from the frame.

"It isn't much, but it's better than a ditch."

"I'll say," Larry replied. He rolled down the musty sheets and bid a good night to his hostess. She put out the lights. Larry undressed in the dark and slipped under the sheets by touch. He heard Ken and Deanna talking as they prepared for bed. He couldn't make out what they said but had to guess they talked about him. Their conversation petered out and trailed into giggles. Before long, Larry heard their moans and cries. It troubled him and excited him at the same time. The voyeur wanted to hear to experience sex even at a distance. The lonely man was reminded that he didn't have a mate, or someone to care for.

As with every night, Larry had nightmares that bled into each other and blurred. Alleyways with hoods. Riga lying broken like a doll stories below him. Then, the bloody, broken Riga coming to his door to demand answers. He woke up mentally exhausted.

Deanna brought him a cup of tea as he dressed. He drank it, thanked them both and went on his way. He knew that if this requiem went on too long, he would never want to get back on the road.

The Malahat was the crest of the island. The highway north winded its way over the mountain and off to Larry's goal. As a child with his family-- and later, as a free man with his friends-- Larry could zip over this mountain inside of half an

hour. Half an hour into this trek, Larry had only covered a fraction of the rise. In the past, this road would be thick with traffic in both directions. Now, nothing ventured north or south: not a truck, a car, a bicycle or even another hiker. So scarce was a capable car or a tank of gas that this sort of voyage was never seen. An hour into it and Larry began to understand the dimensions of Hell. This mountain continued to ascend before him: a constant, growing incline like this would never end. Two hours into this climb, he began to doubt the logic of the journey. His legs started to ache. His ears hurt from the growing altitude; they always did and this time was no exception. He wished he had begged a lunch from his Ken and Deanne before setting out. His stomach multiplied all of his other complaints. Now, hours after the hike, hours more out of town and hours to come to clear the Malahat, he began to question all this. The logic of all this was compounded against the unlikely prospect of food or shelter in his future. Deanne's questions and arguments posed themselves again and again. 'How do you know this place still exists?' 'The times we're in have forced people to change.' 'When was the last time you heard about these people?' He cursed himself. Larry cursed the path his mind had wandered up. Now, with a mountain side to his left and the strait below and to his right, why question his decisions? Why continue on? Instinctively, Larry unfastened his shirt pocket and reached into his pocket to pull out the gnarled business card. What promise did he have that the old man from years back was honest to him and, later, honest to Mike. Back in town, there was no chance of survival. Up island, there was a slim chance. Given

the option between a slim chance and none, he'd take slim anyday.

A good chunk of the day had passed before Larry had brokeb the spine of the mountain highway. The long walk down was a requiem.

Larry continued his trek north. The highway stretched forward for miles. A gas station here, an industrial yard there; all bleak empty spectacles of a former era. A walk from dawn to dusk took Larry as far was the town of Duncan. Life continued here in a strange way. All of the familiar signposts and billboards were gone. Larry recalled a TV story from the year before: the poor in the area tore them down for firewood. Cars sat derelict by the side of the road. A shopkeeper was closing down his produce market. Larry's stomach made a miserable groan to remind him of a forgotten priority.

Larry went to the market and crept around the back. The shopkeeper had left by car, Larry wasn't considering anything as bold as breaking into the store full of foodstuffs. No, he hoped that this place was like any other: a loading dock strewn with bits of dropped vegetables and crushed fruit. Even in the worst days of the food bank, the receiving doors would be a hazardous minefield of lost food. Back then, the people were too proud to scavenge for food, but found standing in line not too bitter a pill to take.

In the dark of night, Larry spied a morsel of food on the dirty pavement. Larry went for it but a hand darted out of the shadows. A figure stood up with Larry's dinner in his hand: a grubby local, one of the Indians that had more knowledge and street-wisdom than poor Larry. To make matters worse, the Indian

examined the fruit and said, "I guess I can make room for one more thing." He stood there in front of the sickly figure of Larry and ate the apple in front of him, core and all. He gave a contented belch and said, "You get moving now, I sleeps here at night."

Larry saw no point in arguing the fact. He skulked away from the gluttonous figure in the night. Larry took refuge in the tool shed of a foreclosed hardware business and abandoned consciousness amid a hail of nagging pangs.

Dawn came as a dumb pain in his feet, frozen from exposure. He tried to work feeling back into his toes without daring to take off his shoes. The chugging of an old Ford truck was the first sound he heard as he greeted the day. The broken down old truck was loaded up with baskets of potatoes and onions. It swung a left and went around back of the market. Larry followed the truckload of food as if his stomach had hijacked his body.

The market owner and the truck driver emptied their load as Larry rounded the corner. The market owner, a tubby man in no need of food, took note of Larry-- Larry the stranger, Larry the potential thief. "Hey, we're not open for another hour. You can't be here."

"I'm sorry. I-- I was looking for something to eat. I've been traveling and haven't eaten."

"You got money?" The driver looked down from the truck. He had greasy, wet hair; a drawn face; and eyes that glowed out of the shadows cast by his baseball cap.

"Not much." In truth, he had less than a dollar in change.

"Well, how about Donnie fix you up with some fruit and you

help me do deliveries today. Hell, I'll even through in ten bucks."

"Sure."

"Well, get up here," the driver said. The driver jumped down and took a basket of onions into the warehouse. Larry obeyed his benefactor and started handing down the vegetables to 'Donnie' and the driver. When the truck was empty, Donnie brought out a ratty plastic bag containing apples and plums for Larry. He gratefully accepted the reward and ate the fruits with haste-- bruises, dents, dirt and all.

The driver, Gary, came out from the warehouse folding up a wad of money. He said to Larry, "Hop in, guy. We gotta pick up another load and get it up to Ladysmith." Larry hopped into the truck, throwing his pack into the back.

The truck plodded away from the sleepy little town of Duncan to the rural lands of the Cowichan Valley. There, not much had changed. The fields grew the same patches of vegetables. The roads were still traveled by rusted jalopies on errands.

Gary's conversations were, at best, surreal. Larry described his life in Victoria and the circumstances that forced him to quest for a new life up island. Gary said he liked life better since the recession deepened, since marshall law was put in place. Marshall law was put in place where needed, usually in larger centers. Sure Gary had seen military police and transports loaded with troops. Even arrests and seizures of cars, businesses, homes. But all these were rare. Gary was happy for the retraction of the RCMP; it meant that Gary could drive his truck without insurance

and drive drunk whenever it suited him.

Larry asked, "Who can you afford liquor-- I mean where can even find it,"

Gary replied, "Well, some kids looted the 'store in Duncan. I helped myself to a shitload of booze. By the way, that was one of the times I saw marshall law in action." Gary took on an extra fiendish look. "Hey, open the glove compartment." Larry complied and found a pistol-- a semi- automatic military issue pistol. Gary cackled, "Man, the pongo that belonged to sure didn't wanna give it up. He took a bottle to the face before he lost the fight." Larry remembered the words of his mother, "Never take a ride from strangers." Larry now knew why.

Gary's farm was a dirty little patch of land; a broken down house with peeling paint; and a barn that housed workers in stalls made for barnyard animals. Ethnics with dark skin, dressed in grubby, baggy clothes, worked the fields.

Gary parked the truck by the field and jumped to the task of loading up the back with still more potatoes and still more onions.

Gary looked down from the truck to one of the workers-- by appearance, a relative. He called out, "Hey is Karim still locked up?"

"Yeah," the relative replied. "We'll get the fight out of him." Both Gary and his relative cast a sideward glance to a metal shed in the middle of the field.

Larry wanted out but he knew better. In a pool of sharks, those who splash around and make a scene get eaten alive. "What

can I do to help?" Gary told Larry to load the boxes of produce into his truck. He complied, all the while trying not to look over to the ominous metal shed. But the shed was as easy to ignore as a lighthouse beacon. Within half an hour, they were ready to go.

The trip went painlessly. Larry lugged heavy loads and Gary doled out redneck philosophies. They saw the odd truck and car on the road. Gary said that some more resourceful types were using alcohol to fuel their cars. Gary saw no logic in the application, saying it was a, "Damn waste of good booze."

In the late afternoon, their deliveries took them to Ladysmith. It was a pathetic little town a block away from the highway. But it was north and Larry needed to move north whether it be in little or in big jumps.

Before Gary drove off Larry reminded him, "Hey what about the ten bucks you promised me?"

"Oh yeah." Gary chuckled to himself before leaving and handed Larry a five dollar bill. He shut the door and waved good-bye as drove back down the highway.

He was sure that Gary got some perverse pleasure in the gesture but for Larry, it meant little.

Larry kept moving north, not stopping to look in the little town. With food in his stomach and a couple of hours left to the daylight, he kept moving.

A short while after nightfall Larry happened upon a camp of travelers. They pitched tents by the side of the highway around a camp fire. As Larry closed on the site he saw the people: skinny, long hair, straggly beards, gross tatters of clothes.

Larry thought he could slip past them and be gone. One of them saw Larry and called, "Hey! Hey, you!" Larry didn't know whether to run or to just ignore them. The same guy called again. "Hey! Come down! It's alright! Really! Come down!" Larry decided to trust them against his better interest.

The group consisted of a half dozen men and three women-- all around twenty years old. They introduced themselves but Larry forgot the names as quickly as he heard them. They offered Larry a seat near the fire.

The one that beckoned him down asked, "You goin' somewhere?"

"North. Quadra Island."

"You walking?"

"Yeah."

"Got a place to stay tonight?"

"No."

"You might as well come down and sleep here. You won't get far and you're certain not to get a good night's sleep."

They were finishing dinner but offered Larry. One of them said, "We don't have a lot to spare. I'm sorry we-- ah-- can't share any."

"That's alright. I understand."

His reply was, "Cool. Cool."

That night they talked. Larry told them his life story. He found out they were a group of friends from Duncan who were looking for a better life in Nanaimo. Like Larry they had only a skeleton of a plan. Unlike Larry they were able to plan before they set out for their trek.

During a lapse in the conversation, one of them said, "Fuck I wish we had drugs."

Another said, "I got so desperate for a buzz, I tried smoking a ground up horse chestnut. A fuck of a lot of good that did."

"Who would've known?" Another said. "The war on Peru would've become the war on drugs."

"Well if you can't afford it, you can't get it. Right? Dealers, growers-- all those selfish fucks-- only hand out so many freebies. Hey, uh, Larry: do you do drugs?"

"No." Larry realized: It was the first time he had said that to a drug user. He felt something inside of him that at first felt like dread or shame but jogged right and became pride. If he wanted to do drugs he could. But if he didn't why lie about it?

The response: "That's cool." The subject quickly changed to other matters and Larry was not chastised or scorned.

People started to tire. One by one, they retired to their tents. One guy offered Larry to share his tent. Larry accepted. When his head hit his rolled up jacket, he was asleep. He didn't awaken until he was prodded back into consciousness by his tent mate. "Wake up, buddy. We're tearing down the camp and goin'!"

Larry helped them break camp. They traipsed up to the highway and trekked north. Larry came to know the band by names by the middle of the day: Geoff, Tina, Brad, Ellen, Scott, Alex, Dave, Keri and Will. By late afternoon, they reached the signs and markers of Nanaimo. The first sign of civilization was a looted supermarket. Larry saw all the signs: broken windows, cartons strewn about the parking lot, scraps of paper and the trappings of

impromptu camp sites. In the parking lot were the hulks of two burnt out cars, frozen in mid-collision. Closer to the store was an RCMP cruiser, laying on its side, also burnt out.

The gang of kids that traveled with Larry took this find as a bonanza. "Hey, c'mon! Let's load up!" They took off for the supermarket and Larry found himself following without thought. Two of the girls got into the supermarket well before the remainder even got as far as the burnt out cars. One of the girls screamed; then came two gunshots. The group stopped-- riveted by the sound. They heard a moan from inside followed by yet another shot. Larry's heart pounded. The group of kids fell into chaos. Geoff, the youngest one, ran for the highway. Brad held back Dave. Keri and Will screamed and ran for the broken windows of the supermarket. The remainder were in various states of panic. A man came to one of the broken windows. He shouldered a shotgun and he wore a grimy RCMP uniform. He looked out of the window like a homeowner bothered by rats or crows. Larry thought this was it. A crazy man with enough bullets to snuff out every dream Larry and his traveling mates ever had. For some reason, Larry didn't turn and run. It wasn't bravery. It wasn't fear. Maybe it was that Larry didn't didn't want to be shot in the back-- his last moment brought on by surprise. Larry stood there and did nothing. Two of the group panicked and ran.

The RCMP officer called out, "You punks get out of here!"

Dave screamed back, "What the fuck about Tina?! About Ellen?!"

"Don't you worry 'bout them unless you want some too!"

The kids didn't retreat. The RCMP officer took his shotgun from his shoulder and aimed in the general direction of the travelers. "Get the fuck out of here! Now!"

They argued amongst themselves for a few tense seconds, but the travelers turned tail and ran. They knew they left friends behind but they didn't want to leave anymore. Larry backed away and ran for the highway when at a discreet distance.

At the highway, they were a discreet distance from the supermarket. Dave stopped and looked at his friends. He said, "What? Aren't we going back?"

"And what? All of us get shot?" Will replied.

"Fuck, man! Ellen was your girlfriend! What? Don't you care?!" Will was shaken enough and with this comment to jolt his sensitivities, he weakened.

Larry added his sage advice. "There's no way we can do anything in there without even so much as a knife, let alone a gun. Go an--"

"Fuck you! Fuck you! She might not even be dead! That sick fuck might be doing something to them right now!"

Ellen broke down crying, she fell to her knees. Will started pacing the asphalt. The others were in various states of angst.

Dave looked at Larry and screamed, "Just fuck off!" He gave Larry a shove, almost knocking him balance. Larry took the hint and headed off.

By the time Larry stopped shaking, he was in the downtown core. As usual it seemed, Larry came to a town just under the veil of night. Businesses operated in a guarded fashion. The streets

were empty but for a few people and two cars. By this time of night, the shops were closing. Army troops manned every intersection. They looked bored: shifting their weight where they stood, smoking, talking amongst themselves.

With the fall of night, two concerns reared their ugly heads inside of Larry's mind: food and shelter. Larry found a corner store. A trooper was standing at the door. Larry tried to go in, but the soldier stopped him. "You got money?" Larry reached into his pocket and dug out the grubby five dollar bill. The soldier nodded; "Alright, go on it."

Larry shopped around. A bag of chips was four dollars and there wasn't such a thing as fruit or vegetables in this store's stocks these days.

Larry went to the register under the guarded eyes of the shopkeeper. He put down the bag of chips. The shopkeeper looked at the price and said, "Five."

"Five? It says four."

"Price go up." Larry shot him a resentful, angry look. The shop owner added, "You cause trouble, I call army." Larry snarled his lip, put down the five dollar bill and took his potato chips out. He left behind a shopkeeper, closely examining the five dollar bill he just received.

Outside of the store, Larry wolfed down his chips. The grease coated his fingers, the salt opened up his gums and parched his throat. But it was food.

The next task: shelter. Larry hadn't been to this town for years. He didn't have a clue of the layout. He didn't have a clue

where he could find shelter. He walked the streets but found no sign of a public shelter. Larry found a quiet corner in an alley and took shelter there. The fatigue and the shock of this day left him no defense against the onslaught of sleep.

Larry was jarred from a deep sleep by a healthy kick to hip from a steel toed boot. He opened his eyes to the glare of flashlights and a "C'mon, buddy. Get up! Get up!"

The soldier gave Larry a moment to stand before he 'ushered' him out of the alley.

A sergeant awaited him. He asked, "What part of town do you live in?"

Larry was still asleep. "I, ah, I'm not from here."

"Where are you from then?"

Then Larry's chutzpah took the forefront. "Campbell River. I'm from Campbell River."

"North. Put him on a truck north-- Tagged for Campbell."

"Yessir." Replied an eager private. He too ushered Larry, but this time for a jeep. A short jeep ride found Larry in a shopping mall parking lot. The same private pulled Larry out and took him to a n army personnel truck. Larry joined the company of three others after being wrist banded with a bracelet that read: 'Campbell River.'

Larry fell asleep in the truck as did the other in the motley assortment of derelicts. When he awoke, it was late morning. The soldiers were rousing them and checking their wrists. When they came to Larry and one other, a soldier said, "Campbell River. Get off."

Larry obeyed. With their work done, the army truck set off to dump its other charges. Larry was one step away from Quadra Island; one step away from refuge.

It was easy work to find the ferry terminal. The east side of the community was bordered by the strait. The government wharf was so dumpy looking that no amount of urban decay could worsen it's state. The ferry dock was in the same poor condition. The ticket offices were closed. There were locks on the gates. The remnants of a posting was glued in the window wicket. It said that due to budget cutbacks, the ferry would not be in operation Tuesday or Wednesday. The notice didn't explain why the ferry was dormant on this day, a Monday.

Larry saw some people heading for a diner a block or so from the ferry terminal. He knew that the locals would know what was going on.

There was a man in a dingy boat down the wharf. His boat hadn't seen paint in twenty years. The wood was a grey, rotten shade. He had crab traps and milk cartons scattered across the deck. The man matched his boat in looks and grooming. He had a beard that saw a razor every few weeks. He looked Larry up and down then went back to his work with the lines and the netting.

When Larry closed within ten feet of the man, he was knocked back by a reek of booze and strong cigarettes. "What can I do you for?"

"I was hoping to get a ferry to Quadra Island. Do you happen to know when they run?"

"They don't." The man went back to his lines.

"What are they shut down?"

"Yep."

"How do people get back and forth to Quadra Island?"

"They don't."

The old Larry would have let this die here. But that Larry didn't so through Hell to be stopped so close to his goal. "Do any boats run over there?"

"Yeah sometimes."

"I need to get over there. Do you know of any boats that are heading over there soon?"

"Yeah." The boat man let Larry dangle on a line for a moment before saying, "I'm heading over there in about half an hour. Just as soon as I get my gear together." He undid a knot and said, "You can come with me-- if you want."

"I do."

"Good." The boat man gestured to the tieline, attached to the edges of the wharf. "Haul up those traps and throw all the crabs into the crates."

Larry obeyed. He reefed up the traps. He hauled out the big crabs and threw them into the cartons. He threw a small one back into the water. The boat man noticed that and said, "What're you doing?"

"That one's too small."

"Fuck that. I keep the small ones for bait. Do what I said. Keep 'em all."

Larry complied. He made short work of the traps, throwing in crabs, both small and large. The boat man, named Gene, beckoned

Larry aboard. He started the motor with a gust of black smoke and they were off.

They stopped at everyone of the makeshift buoys that Gene had laid across the body of water that separated Campbell River from Quadra Island. The buoys were quartets of bleach bottles tied together. Gene hauled up the traps and culled from them all that was there before moving on.

During a lull, Gene observed, "Hey, I'm running low on bait. Gimme your fingers." The boat man grabbed one of Larry's hands and hefted a knife in his other hand. He cackled and bared yellow, knobbly teeth. Larry fought his hand free. The momentum almost sent him over the edge of the boat. Larry was angry and a little scared. The old man was laughing, putting away his knife.

"Hah, hah. I'm just pulling your crank, you little fuck. Loosen up."

Larry was not impressed. He did as little as he had to during the balance of the boat trip. The boat saddled up to its wharf on the Quadra Island side, Larry hopped off. He said a curt, "Thank you." and set on his way. It was a little past one in the afternoon.

On Quadra Island, martial law seemed to have little effect. There were no cars or trucks on the road, but the stores and a restaurant were still open. Larry went to a grocery store. He hoped that he could draw from the knowledge of the locals. He was relieved to see a friendly clerk manning the till and no guard at the door. The shelves were an inconstant display of canned goods and jars. The shelves took on the look of a bake sale with much of

the space taken up by homemade bread and home canned preserves. The middle aged woman behind the counter sized up Larry and took him to be no local.

"Where you from?"

"From down in Victoria."

"Things doin' better over there."

"No. Worse."

The merchant cut to the chase. "So what can I do for you today?"

"I'm looking for a place here on the island-- an address." Larry dug into his pocket for that hidden treasure: Bloom's card. He showed her the card and its address.

She nodded and handed the card back. "Yep. It's on the far side of the island. If you take the road out front and head right-- south. You should get there in a hour or so.

Following that one tip, he went down road away from the comercial buildings and into the wwoods. It was the wooded road that led to the house. Just as the clerk said, an hour or so of walking brought him to his destination. The trees broke into a clearing; a stretch of farmland that winded up a hill. At the crest of the hill was a house, a dark silhouette against the grey sky. Larry ran up the dirt path. He lost speed when he fought against the incline. He neared the house and saw dark, blackened walls. The house was a burnt out husk; broken windows, a crumbled wall. Furniture sat in ashes within the ruins. The sight left Larry in ruins. Tears came in a rush; a torrent of heartbreak. This was the end for Larry. To come so far and try so hard to find

refuge-- to play every last card in his hand-- all to find nothing. He sat on the scorched earth, in the ashen mud, crying his eyes out. He wanted to die. Larry had no idea how much time had passed when he arose from his stupor. He looked around. The sun was low in the sky. He had to find shelter before night fell. The house looked so crushed, it was no doubt an unsafe shelter. He recalled that Bloom said this was a farm and farms have barns, or at the very least, chicken coops.

The barn was a pathetic old structure; a dirt floor beneath sagging arches. Small pieces of farm machinery sat like rusted sculptures-- Larry could only guess at their function. Larry nestled in a corner in practiced fashion. Night fell. He could hear his stomach groan. Despite days of malnutrition, his stomach always managed the atrength to growl with discontent.

Larry couldn't think ahead of the moment he was in. As every second ticked by the second before seemed to be a better time. The ferry over to the island filled him with hope. The long walk tired him by brought him closer to discovery. The house was found a burnt out ruin. Now, Larry was hungry and cold. He felt madness and dementia eating away at him. Somewhere in the back of his head, music played. A guitar played a folk melody. Larry perked up. It wasn't his imagination, someone was playing music. Larry walked out of the barn to the crest of the hill. Several acres away, there sat a modest two storey home. People sat on the porch. Someone on the step. strummed the guitar.

Larry walked the distance to the house. One of the people on the steps took notice of Larry and hailed him with a, "Hello!"

Larry returned a cautious, "Hi."

The guitar player stopped his music. He was a bearded man, scruffy in the kindest of ways. He wore a beaten up pair of jeans and a thick cotton sweater. "What can we do for you?"

"I was just over a the Bloom house, on the other side of the hill. How long since it burned down?"

The guitar player looked honestly confused, "Harold Bloom?"

"Y-Yes."

"This is Harold Bloom's house. The house over the hill has been burned down for a few years. Longer than I've been here."

Larry thought he madness was complete and now hallucinations preyed upon him. "This is his house?"

Another of entourage on the steps broke in. "Why? What's so important?"

Larry's hands shook as he dug into a zippered pocket on his jacket. He pulled out Bloom's card. Then he tried to bring out the words to accompany the card. "Uh-- Years back-- Years ago, Bloom told me about this place. He-- ah-- offered to give me the chance to-- uh, stay up here. Well, I know it's a long shot, but I decided to make the trip here." Larry couldn't come any closer to asking for shelter. If they didn't offer it to him after that painful explanation, they never would.

The man put his guitar to one side and stood. He extended his hand to Larry and said, "We'll be happy to have you Larry. Any friend of old Bloom, is a friend of ours."

Larry felt himself shudder with joy. Larry and the people gathered on the porch performed introductions. The bearded man

called himself Marc McDonald. Marc said, "C'mon in. We'll get you fixed up with something to eat and a place to sleep. You don't mind sharing a room, do you?"

"No. No, not at all." Given that Larry slept in wretched holes for the last several days, he was grateful for the confines of walls, the warmth of blankets and the night sky seen from behind a window.

The front door opened on to a long hall, bordered on one side by a flight of stairs. Down at the end of the hall was a kitchen a lone girl sat in front of a lantern reading. She didn't notice their presence until Marc called to her. "Kathy? Meet Larry Davis. You two have something in common: Larry came up here from Victoria, too."

Kathy was attractive, in a basic sort of way; no feature was stunning and none were faulted. She wore a baggy sweater and a worn pair of jeans. She was mildly intrigued by the connection. "Oh yeah. When did you get up here?"

"I got on the island last night."

"I've been here a few months. I hitched a ride up when the martial law started to get hairy."

"Yeah, I stayed too long. There's not too much left of the place."

"You're probably tired from the trip up. I won't keep you any longer." She turned back to her book.

Larry was escorted up to a room. It had two single beds. One was a mess and the other was neat, untouched. Larry was invited to use the latter and allowed to put his things in a dresser beside

the bed. Marc bid him a good night and left Larry to fall into a deep, sleep. A sleep that came from satisfaction and from solitude.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"After this, Alfadur will cause a new heaven and a new earth to rise out of the sea.... Wickedness and misery will no more be known, but the gods and men will live happily together." -

Bullfinch's Mythology on Ragnarok, The Twilight of the Gods

The farm was basic: a small two storey home; a nearby barn; an ocean of grains growing in the field; and the sound of chickens coming from an occluded coop.

The last months had been calm, serene. Larry was given chores. Every afternoon, he was to go down to the riverbank and switch on the pump to provide the household with water for that day. The was to help the others, some skilled in specific tasks, other were just laborers in a general sense. The work was hard but honest. The rewards were simple but earned and not recieved by credit or by debt. The food they ate was grown from the land. The bread came from the grain in the fields. Fish and seafood were snatched from the ocean that the farm overlooked. The chickens provided eggs and some of the fowl found their way to the dinner table.

Larry shared a room with Dave, a friendly, unassuming guy that had grown his hair to waist length because, "you can't find a good barber these days." His world shrank from a community of thousands-- people who milled past him in a theatre lobby, in a grocery store, in a looting spree-- to just the few people on the farm and a few others in nearby properties. The farm sheltered twelve people. Nine of them had lived there for years, Kathy came a few months before Larry, having worked as a caregiver in the

same hospital that Bloom volunteered at. Jerry was one of Bloom's other recruits. He was Bloom's son's best friend.

When Vancouver became a city divided by crime and unemployment a year prior, he took up the offer to move to the sleepy little island where Bloom had once bought a farm in receivership when he came home from the War. This farm was a far smaller world, but a world that anyone's perceptions could grasp and comprehend.

After dinner one night, Larry sat on the porch. The view overlooked the fields and past the stands of fruit trees to the strait in the distance. The old storm door clattered open and shut again. Kathy sat down beside Larry and looked out to the water.

"This place is beautiful around Christmas, I hear. It usually snows."

Larry acknowledged the comment with a nod. "And a big new years this year, too."

"Mhm. End of a decade. And next year, the end of a millenium."

"End of an era, maybe."

She looked at him, a little amazed. "You sound like you want it all to end-- Everything you grew up with. Weren't you ever happy, Larry?"

Larry was about to blurt out an answer but paused to give thought to his reply. "I was happy as a child. I didn't know better. But even now I can look back and miss the times with my family. I miss those times I had with my friends. But throughout all of my past, I've felt something was wrong."

Kathy said, "Inside each of we have something sleeping. Something special-- a quality or a talent. In the lucky ones, this part of themselves awakens. I imagine this never happens in the bitter, unhappy people you find.

"Why, you're not a lazy or stupid person, Larry. I've listened to you. I've seen you do your chores. I think that you were never cut out for your life in the city in a meaningless, empty job."

Larry nodded. "Here, I feel I have a sense of purpose. It feels like I'm doing some good. For the first time in my life, I'm at peace. For the first time in my life, I'm really happy." Kathy took Larry's hand and shared her warmth and admiration. They watched the sunset and Larry felt contentment well in his heart.

An ancient memory came to him of something taught back in high school: people were once solely rural folk. They gathered to trade. The trade developed merchants, shops and then cities. It had come full circle. The cities were dead, the shops were closed and the merchants were gone. The people again lived close to the land they drew life from.

END