

**Dedicated to my family, my friends,
the human brain, the Universe & the
glorious potential within each and
every one of us.**

This is an original work of fiction. Any similarities to actual persons or events are purely coincidental. But then again... so is life. Or so we've been told.

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Aperture

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One

The sky was cloudless but still mesmerizing. Much of the day's events had already started without me. I awoke late into the afternoon. The exact time is not important; not now. I had always thought of myself as a willing participant of life and I suppose for the most part I was. Every time I hear someone spouting their own fragmented philosophy on life I feel as though I have the right to punch them square in the jaw. Lord knows I've come pretty close more than once. When I say lord I believe I'm referring to my landlord. Mr. Joe Lord is his name and he actually enjoys being called Lord.

This might seem like some vain attempt at making myself appear as though I know what I am talking about. Perhaps it is and if it is then I shall let it be just that. I've always enjoyed letting my subconscious do most of the thinking for me. My subconscious has its own name too. I'm probably one of the very few people who have actually named their subconscious. Well, my subconscious goes by the name Jeffrey Juniper. Please don't ask me how or why I chose that name because even I don't know for certain. Though, I do have the sneaking suspicion that my subconscious named itself.

Sometimes Mr. Jeffrey Juniper forces me to lash out at other people when he doesn't agree with their own personal opinion and/or perspective. Most of the time I am able to control him but I am only human and because of that there are times when I cannot control him no matter how hard I try. Have you ever seen that movie *Psycho*? Well, whenever Jeffrey takes hold of me and refuses to release it is like a scene straight out of that movie. It's also kind of hilarious because Jeffrey has a rather feminine voice and when he yells at me or at other people he can hit some pretty high notes.

Before you go and make any assumptions I can tell you right now that Mr. Jeffrey Juniper is not homosexual in any way, shape or form. Nor am I. But usually people tend to label us right from the get go and it really pisses me off whenever they do. Jeffrey doesn't like it either and is far less understanding about it than I am.

For example, a few days ago I was walking around the local mall when some middle aged woman came up to me and asked me if I knew where the ladies restroom was located. Right when I was about to answer I

heard Jeffrey scream at the top of his lungs, “What the fuck! How the hell should I know! I’m no woman!” The middle aged woman was shocked by his/our reply and ran away as fast as her plump legs allowed her to. Over the years I’ve become immune to Jeffrey’s outlandish behavior so for the most part I usually just laugh at whatever he says.

You’re probably thinking that I’m a textbook case of schizophrenia or bipolar something or other. I can assure you that I am as average as can be by medical standards. I’ve undergone dozens and dozens of psycho analysis treatments and therapies since the age of eleven and no doctor has ever been able to pinpoint the exact cause of my subconscious personality merging with my conscious personality. Some doctors have even tried boasting about all of their credentials beforehand in an effort to intimidate Mr. Jeffrey Juniper. Jeffrey always responded with, “Who the fuck does this guy think he is?”

Jeffrey has always been a handful but like I said before... I’ve become immune to him.

Now that you know a little bit about Mr. Jeffrey Juniper I can continue with the rest of my tale. I believe I prefer the word tale over the word story. A tale sounds more whimsical than just a story. Now then, when I awoke on this particular afternoon I spent a solid ten minutes staring at the melon seeds in my kitchen sink. At first I thought they were pumpkin seeds but then realized that these were much smaller than pumpkin seeds.

So, after a good ten minutes of staring at them I decided to fix myself a tuna fish sandwich. Every time I eat tuna I am reminded of a dancing tuna fish with a top hat and cane. I don’t know why. Whenever I make a sandwich I always make sure to have the freshest ingredients possible. That’s just the way I was raised. I don’t purchase that canned tuna crap. It tastes too commercialized. I always eat freshly caught tuna from the local fish market. My Dad used to work there; he wasn’t a fisherman but he sure knew a whole lot about fish. Anyways, I guess you could say that he was the one that got me hooked on fresh tuna.

I recall one day when he came home after a long day at the fish market he was lugging a huge cloth sack filled with tuna fish over his shoulder. My mom and I were sitting at the dining room table talking about something stupid when all of a sudden a barrage of tuna fish landed right

in front of us. Dad stood over us and the lifeless tuna with a big smile on his face. He picked up one of the scaly fish and wiggled it back and forth, mimicking its swimming pattern. Mom stared at Dad with a worried look on her face and asked, “James, are you feeling all right?” Dad replied with, “I’m better than all right! I’ve been liberated from that soul sucking job and now I have liberated these tuna! Such glorious tuna they are!”

I was only eight years old at the time but I can still recall every detail of that moment. The look of shame and worry that Mom displayed sticks out more than Dad’s attempt at amphibious ventriloquism. At least Dad tried to do something that no one else had ever done before. Mom was the type of person that always felt obliged to conform. She also took it upon herself to commit Dad to a mental institution after thirteen years of marriage. I don’t know why she did it. I just know that she did.

Getting back to my sandwich, I don’t like to eat tuna raw like most people do. I prefer to slightly sear or charbroil my tuna. It does take up some extra time but I really don’t mind. I also like to forego the use of mayonnaise with my tuna fish sandwich. I’ve just never been a big fan of mayonnaise. My last girlfriend even left me because I refused to spread mayonnaise on my burger at some barbeque at her friend’s place. Okay, there are obviously some other factors that came into play but the mayonnaise issue served as a kind of catalyst. Don’t believe me? You can ask her yourself if you’d like. She has no problem with pointing out my faults to complete strangers.

As I bit into my delectable tuna sandwich I heard a loud ringing. At first, I thought the ringing was coming from the tuna but luckily I didn’t believe it for too long. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and saw it was my Mom calling me.

“Hello, Mom?”

“Hello, Benny! How are you doing? Have you found a job yet?”

“Um... no.”

“Didn’t you apply for that stockroom position at that department store?”

“No I didn’t. It’s a crappy job.”

“Well, crappy or not it at least pays something.”

“I know, Mom. I don’t feel like having the same conversation with you right now.”

“Don’t you want to be able to pay for your own food, clothing and shelter?”

Silence.

“Well?”

“Mom, I know what you’re getting at and I know you’re just trying to be a caring mother but there are other things that I find to be of more value than working at some mundane nine to five job.”

“Oh but I…”

The call drops. Not accidentally but that’s usually what I tell my Mom. Yes, I do hang up on my own Mother more often than not. And it’s not because I dislike her or anything of that nature. It’s just that I don’t really have much to talk about with her and she always likes to ramble on about something related to my ongoing unemployment status. I know I’m not the first person to be pressured by a parent to stay “employed.” I often find myself staring up at the starry night sky and shouting, “Damn this fucked up paradigm!”

I bite once more into my tuna sandwich; taking a bigger bite this time. I chew it thoroughly and begin to count the passing seconds until my Mom calls back. An hour goes by and still no call back from her. I finish the last piece of my sandwich then clean up whatever crumbs remain on the counter top.

After satisfying my hunger I pick up my aging acoustic guitar and begin to bang out a few chords. Power chords at first; then a couple of major chords followed by a brief one note guitar solo. I’ve been playing the guitar for about seventeen years off and on. I started when I was fifteen and wide eyed with rockstar dreams. I was pretty convinced that I would be the next big thing. Then I slowly settled for just making lots of money. Then I settled for just making enough money to live on. Then I settled for just making some money. Now I don’t give a damn about money. Well, not as much I used to or as much as society tells us to.

I spent a good part of my music career floundering between a dozen or so rock bands. It was pretty easy back then. I was a lot more enthusiastic about playing music and rocking out to my heart’s content. Eventually, I

stuck with one band. The one band that I felt really had the best blend of musical chemistry and light heartedness. The band name was Magnificence. I know, it sounds kind of corny but I swear after a while it grows on you and it grew on a lot of our fans as well. We never became full-fledged rock stars but we did come pretty close.

Unfortunately, things went to shit very fast. It was mostly due to our singer's innate appetite for self destruction. One night, after playing an awesome set, we were all hanging in our deluxe hotel suite and knocking back a couple of beers and shots of whiskey. Then our singer took it upon himself to get high as a kite; I'm not sure what he smoked but I know it was more than just plain old marijuana. He shouted at the top of his lungs, "I am an enigma! No one can outdo me!" He then ran out onto the balcony and climbed up the fire escape to the rooftop. I was pretty wasted myself and passed out before any of the other guys but when I woke up the following afternoon I was stunned to learn that our beloved singer, Dan, was dead. Our bassist, John, told me the whole story of how he and the other guys tried to calmly coax Dan away from the edge of the rooftop. Apparently they were able to distract Dan for an hour by singing out loud one of our songs. Then they all huddled together and had a good laugh over life's eccentricities. But then John said that as they were climbing back down the fire escape Dan stopped halfway and started to cry uncontrollably. Dan looked at John and said, "I can't do it anymore, John. I just can't do it anymore. What's the fuckin' point?"

Before John could reply he watched helplessly as Dan dove off the fire escape. He fell eighty feet head first into the asphalt below. Luckily, there wasn't much traffic in the streets at that hour and there weren't any pedestrians nearby to witness anything. The ambulance arrived in a matter of minutes and raced towards the hospital. But it was a futile race.

I didn't stick around for much longer after that. The other guys in the band argued a lot about who should have stopped Dan from jumping and who was responsible for giving him the drugs that fed his suicidal tendencies. The way I saw it... Dan clearly knew what he was doing. Nobody in particular forced him to take those drugs. Nobody pushed him off that fire escape. Yes, it's sad that he did what he did but there's no use blaming someone else for it.

To quote Dan: "What's the fuckin' point?"

Two

Ding dong! Ding dong! My doorbell rings. I set down my acoustic guitar and slowly open the door. I am quickly greeted by a dark skinned, dark haired Hispanic man.

“Hola, Benny! How you doing, Mang?”

He is clutching a brown paper bag in his right hand. Looks like it contains greasy food of some kind.

“I’m all right. What’s in the bag, Raul?”

“Oh it’s just some tacos from the restaurant. You want some?”

Raul works as a fry cook at a nearby Mexican restaurant called La Cochina. Translated to English it means dirty girl or filthy little girl. Both are interchangeable. Sometimes he comes by and gives me whatever left-over food is available. I never ask him for it; he just takes it upon himself to do so.

“Well, I already ate a tuna fish sandwich so I’ll probably just have one right now and save the rest for later.”

“Okay, Amigo. That is fine. Hey... so what are you doing right now?”

He strokes his mustache.

“Uh not much. Why?”

“I need some help cleaning out the grease traps in the kitchen and none of the other cooks want to help me out.”

“Oh? Well, I don’t know if...”

“I’ll pay you twenty bucks and give you a big tray full of tamales and taco shells.”

“All right then. Sounds fair. Just let me slip on my shoes.”

“Okay, my friend.”

I close the door and run to my closet. I grab the first pair of old sneakers that I see and slide them on. I also grab my lucky blue baseball cap and adjust it onto my head. The back part of my brownish hair sticks out from underneath.

A few minutes later, Raul and I are walking towards the restaurant.

“Hey, Mang. Are you still dating that beautiful girl?”

“What beautiful girl?”

“You know. The one with the very nice breasts and big smile.”

“Oh! You mean Cyndi?”

“Si, si.”

“She dumped me like two weeks ago. I thought I told you the same day it happened.”

“Oh? Oh yeah! I’m sorry I forgot about it, Amigo.”

He pats my shoulder.

“But why did she dump you?”

“Well, there were many reasons but I think in the end she just wanted to be with someone a lot more superficial. Women always seem to be attracted to superficiality.”

“Of course, Amigo! That is what they always want. They want a man to take care of them for always. At first they want to be with a good looking man but then they get tired of that and want to be with a good looking man with lots of money. And then if they can’t have that then they settle for being with a very ugly man with lots and lots of money.”

“Yeah. That is very true, Raul.”

I gaze up at the sun for a second then squint and look away. I wipe away one bead of sweat from my brow. We turn the corner and continue walking.

”I know what I am talking about, Benny. My first wife she was a lazy gold digger and I knew she was too but I convinced myself that she really did love me. Of course, I snapped out of it when I caught her in bed with my cousin Enrique.”

“Really? Wow.”

“Si. She didn’t even have the decency to get off my cousin Enrique when I caught her.”

“Oh?”

“I stood there watching her for a good five minutes before I finally pulled her off! And then she acted like nothing was wrong and said that I was overreacting!”

After walking about five blocks, we both finally walk through the back entrance of La Cochina restaurant. It is relatively quiet.

“Hey, Raul. Where is everyone?”

“Que? Oh they won’t be here for another hour. We don’t open until 5:00 pm today because a shipment of vegetables arrived late yesterday and there was not enough time to prepare them for the morning. The manager gave me the keys too because he asked me to empty out all of the grease traps before we open.”

“Oh I see. You mean no one was willing to help you?”

I spot an apron and start to tie around my neck and waist.

“Nope. None of the other cooks wanted to come in early today and the manager cannot force them. Okay now, Mang. Here are the grease traps.”

Raul points at a row of medium sized compartments underneath each stove and fryer. The entire kitchen smells like tacos and salsa. It was a pretty great smell.

“It smells pretty good in here, Raul.”

“Yeah but you’d get sick of it if you worked here. Sometimes I have nightmares about being chased by a tamale with fangs.”

Raul holds up his hand and tries to mimic the shape of fangs.

“Really? Seems like more of a funny dream than a nightmare.”

I crouch down and examine the first grease trap.

“Oh trust me, Amigo. It’s a nightmare.”

Raul crouches down beside me and proceeds to pull out the first tray of grease. As soon as he does so it splatters all over the floor and makes a loud smacking sound. I think when most people think of grease they usually imagine some kind of food dripping grease or covered in a clear viscous liquid but few have ever seen grease in its most natural accumulated form. And the amount of grease that accumulates in a restaurant grease trap is not something to take lightly.

One by one, Raul and I pull out each grease trap and carry them out to a large steel tub near the back of the restaurant. Both of us slip a couple of times but then quickly help each other back up. Once the last tray of grease is placed in the steel tub Raul brings out a long rubber hose and

vigorously sprays each tray. The gray tinged grease casually slides out of each tray and onto the bottom of the tub. Then Raul takes out a bottle of some industrial strength degreaser and pours it all in the tub. It has a rather pungent odor.

“Okay, Mang. Now we just wait five minutes for all the grease to dissolve off the trays.”

Raul walks over to the dumpster, slips off his plastic gloves and chucks them in. He smooths back his dark hair and pulls a cigarette out from his shirt pocket.

“Hey, Benny. You smoke?”

He offers me a cigarette.

“No I don’t smoke, Raul.”

“Oh. That’s okay. Do you smoke marijuana?”

He strikes a match on the dumpster and lights his cigarette.

“What? No I don’t. I’ve tried it but I don’t see the point in smoking it regularly. Besides, it’s too expensive.”

“That’s true. Yeah my brother, Fernando, used to sell marijuana to some of his friends and then his friends started selling it for him. But he eventually got caught and now he is in prison.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, Mang. My mother she was all upset when she found out he was arrested. She screamed and shouted nonstop for an entire day.”

“Oh. What about your father?”

Raul took a long drag off his cigarette before answering.

“My father didn’t give a shit. He was actually kind of glad that Fernando got caught. They never got along with each other and were always arguing.”

“Is Fernando older than you or younger than you?”

I whipped off my plastic gloves and stretched my fingers.

“He’s younger than me. Four years younger.”

“Ah I see. Well, at least he’s a little safer in prison than out here on the streets.”

Raul flicked some ashes into the dumpster and smiled.

“Yeah he is somewhat safer but I think he is still selling marijuana. Well, I mean his friends are still selling it for him and his share of the money is being put aside in a safe somewhere.”

“Oh.”

I kind of wish I had people selling stuff for me and accumulating some dough for me. It wouldn't matter what they sell; just as long as it's not drugs of any kind. Drugs or weapons.

I once tried to start up my own online business; a few years back. I borrowed like a thousand bucks from my uncle and immediately invested it in inventory and a professionally created website. I did all right for the first six months but then as my inventory ran low I found it harder and harder to promote my business. The most popular item that I sold was a glow in the dark plush panda bear. I don't know why it was so popular but I sold about three thousand of them in a matter of months. It was mostly people in other countries that placed orders and because of that I ended up spending more on shipping than I originally estimated.

“Okay, Benny. I think we can go ahead and start scrubbing the trays now.”

Raul flicked his cigarette butt to the asphalt and gently stepped on it with the tip of his boot.

“Oh, okay then.”

I slipped my plastic gloves back on and set to work with a spatula in one hand and a brillo pad in the other.

Believe it or not... that's the last thing I recall before my mind blacked out.

I awoke the next day with a searing headache. I sat up and rubbed my throbbing temples.

“What the hell happened? Where am I?”

I asked out loud.

“Don't you remember, sweetie? You're in my bed and we made passionate love last night.”

I turned around towards the person who answered and was surprised by the sight of a very beautiful, and naked, woman. Her skin was a light tan color and was glistening under the rays of light shining through the window. Her curves were quite well proportioned and so were her breasts. Her hair was shoulder length and died a dark red color; black roots peered out from under the red strands.

She moved closer to me and kissed me on my back.

“Are you okay? You look like you’re sick or something.”

She then sat up and stretched out her arms. Her magnificent breasts jiggled as she did so.

“I uh just don’t remember coming here or even meeting you.”

Even though I was in a confused state I still made sure to admire her radiance.

“What? What do you mean you don’t remember? How could you not remember?”

She looked offended.

“Please don’t take it personally. I have this condition. It’s a mental condition.”

“What like schizophrenia or something?”

She hopped out of bed, walked over to her purse which was sitting on a nightstand and yanked out a pill bottle. She then popped off the top and spilled out two pills into her palm.

“I kind of have a condition too but it’s more of a physical condition.”

She placed the pills in her mouth and washed them down with a glass of wine that already had lipstick marks on it.

“Really?”

My eyes bulged slightly.

“Yeah I have an aversion towards pregnancy and as long as I keep taking these pills after a night of passionate sex I’ll continue to have an aversion.”

She smiled then laughed a most joyous laugh.

“Oh. Well, I’m not kidding about *my* condition. Sometimes it causes me to forget long intervals of time.”

She looked rather dumbfounded.

“Cut the crap, Jeffrey! I know you’re just messing with me.”

Upon hearing the name Jeffrey I quickly stood up and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“What did you call me?”

“Let me go, Jeffrey! What’s wrong with you?”

She tried to wriggle free from my grip.

“My name is *not* Jeffrey!”

“What? Okay then what is your name?”

“Benny! My name is Benny!”

I didn’t realize how loudly I had shouted at her.

“But back at the bar you introduced yourself as Jeffrey.”

She looked me right in the eyes.

“At the bar? Which bar?”

I loosened my grip on her and she slowly pulled away.

“You know. The bar that’s right next door to La Cochina restaurant. Both you and Raul walked in last night and introduced yourselves to me and my friend.”

“We did?”

“Yes, Jeff oh I mean Benny. You really don’t remember?”

Now she grabbed *my* shoulders and gazed at me with pity.

“No I don’t remember. I told you I have a mental condition. Up until recently I had it under control but now I don’t...”

I could feel the tears welling up.

“Oh, you poor thing.”

She clutched my head to her bosom and stroked my hair. She smelled like lilacs and lavender.

“Listen, I’d really like to continue talking with you but I’m gonna’ be late for work if I don’t start getting ready right now.”

She kissed my forehead then looked into my eyes in an effort to gauge my response.

“Oh it’s all right. I understand.”

I slipped on my jeans and t-shirt.

“You can come stop by if you can.”

She gently rubbed lotion into her skin then adorned her body with a bright green dress.

“Oh? Where do you work?”

I asked.

“I work as a waitress at La Cochina. I thought I told you last night but oh I guess you don’t remember.”

“Well, now I’ll make sure to remember. And I’ll stop by later this afternoon.”

“Okay, great!”

She smiled at me while tying her hair back in a bun.

“Hey I just realized that I don’t know your name. I don’t know if I asked you last night or not but today is a new day and I guess I’m asking you again.”

She chuckles before answering.

“Actually you didn’t ask me last night. My name is Jacqueline. People call me Jackie or Jack.”

“Oh. Okay then. Nice to meet you, Jacqueline.”

We shake hands and laugh at the same time.

Upon exiting her apartment I am suddenly overwhelmed with a rather scary feeling. A familiar feeling but scary nonetheless. It feels almost like love but not entirely.

Hold it. Hold it. Hold it.

Hello, folks. This is Mr. Jeffrey Juniper narrating now. That’s right I’m the other half of Benny. I’m actually a larger part of him than he is of me.

From time to time I make a regularly scheduled appearance. By which of course I mean I regularly resume ownership over Benny's brain. He's got a lot more going on in his mind than he realizes and if it weren't for me he'd truly go insane. Okay, I must admit that I do tend to cause him to black out every time I make an appearance but it's just one of the side effects. The human brain can only handle one personality at a time and no matter how hard we try, believe me I've tried many times, we cannot change that fact. Besides, I'm not a bad guy most of the time. I just act that way when I know Benny is listening because I've found that in order to get Benny to stick up for himself he needs some kind of tough love motivator. I mean you've seen the way he acts when he wakes up next to a gorgeous nude woman! Most guys would be thrilled to wake up in bed next to some hot tamale like Jacqueline but nope not Benny. He always has to overanalyze the situation.

Yes, I was the one that initially first met Jacqueline and knocked back a few drinks with her. I was also the one that invited myself in to her apartment late at night but I wasn't the one that participated in the wild, kinky sex with her. I passed out way before that and just allowed Benny to take over. As soon as they were finished I slipped right back in until morning came.

I suppose it wasn't the first time such a scenario has played out for Benny and me. It is to be expected. During Benny's high school years I saved his ass plenty of times from various bully beat-downs and insecure, jealous jocks. Of course, he doesn't acknowledge my help. But I don't really expect him to. There have been some moments when I had to intervene more than usual but even those moments were crucial to acclimating Benny to his own sense of self worth.

Would you like an example? Yes? Okay.

Right around the time that Benny was fifteen he slipped into a deep "depression" of sorts. But he did have a valid reason for succumbing to such a state. You see, his parents were in the midst of a very messy divorce and poor Benny and his little sister were caught in the middle of their parents' unrelenting back and forth insults towards each other. A couple of times he did try to ask them to stop insulting each other but that just caused them to vent their anger even more.

One weekend, while Benny and his sis were visiting their Dad, a letter came in the mail. It was addressed to Benny's Mom and was sent by the

local school district. Apparently, some of Benny's teachers had noticed a significant drop in his grades and were concerned that he may not have enough time to make them up before graduation. Upon reading this, his Mom became infuriated by what she perceived as Benny's sheer lack of commitment to academics; which was mostly brought on by the fact that she dropped out of school at the age of fourteen.

Later that evening, Benny and his sis returned home to the sight of their Mom sitting on the staircase with a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and the letter clutched in the other. The bottle was nearly empty and she reeked to high heaven of it. When Benny approached her she slapped him hard across the right temple. He doubled back and knocked over a small red vase. His little sister stood by in shock.

"What was that for, Mom?"

He rubbed the fresh bruise.

"You know damn well what it was for!"

She held up the letter.

"Wh-What is that?"

"It's a letter from your school! They say you've been failing all of your classes! What the hell is the matter with you! You think you have the luxury to fail? We're not exactly millionaires, Benny!"

"I know we're not millionaires, Mom! You don't need to remind me."

"Hey! Don't talk back to me!"

She guzzled down the last few drops of Jack Daniels and stared at Benny viciously.

"You know... ever since your ass of a father left you've been acting all high and mighty around here! Just like him! You're just like him in every way!"

"Yeah? Well I'm glad I am 'cuz I sure as hell don't *ever* wanna' be like you!"

Benny turned around and opened the front door; hoping to make an abrupt exit.

"You, ungrateful piece of shit!"

His Mom hurled the empty liquor bottle at the back of his head.

The bottle smashed into a hundred pieces and Benny fell face first onto the front porch.

His little sister screamed and cried at the top of her lungs.

That is when I kicked into overdrive and forced Benny to pick himself up and stand up to his harpy of a mother for once!

He felt the back of his head. He could tell it was bleeding and a small shard of glass was lodged in there pretty good. He didn't care much; he jumped to his feet and walked right up to his Mom's face and said, "I'm leaving and I am NEVER coming back." Of course, his Mom shouted more profanities at him as he packed a small suitcase but he no longer concerned himself with anything she had to say. It was quite a major turning point for him because prior to that day he would always just sit and take his mother's verbal abuse. Even when his parents were still together she would always find something to yell at him about!

He moved in with his Dad after that scenario and had no contact with his Mom for a whole year. Eventually, his sister moved in with him and his Dad as well.

His Mom checked herself into a rehab facility and hasn't had a drop of alcohol in more than ten years. She still nags Benny, like most mothers do, but never on the same level as she used to.

Oh and that shard of glass that was lodged in his head was removed during a visit to the emergency room. The nurse that removed it tried to get Benny to press charges but he just kept telling her that it was an accident. He received thirteen stitches. He has a lovely scar where the stitches used to be but it's pretty hard to notice it unless you feel the back of his head.

You might be thinking that I have no right to divulge such a personal memory but you forget that Benny's memories are also *my* memories. There is no separation between us; only the illusion of separation.

Before I slip out once more I'd like to leave you with a joke: a doctor, a priest, a Boy Scout and George W. Bush are all on the same small plane. All of a sudden the plane starts having engine trouble and begins spinning wildly out of control. Luckily, the pilot is able to take control of it in time but then the plane becomes locked into a fast plummet towards a mountain range. The pilot quickly straps on his parachute and leaps out. Now there are only three parachutes left on the plane. The doctor grabs

the first one and exclaims, "I'm a doctor! I save lives so I must live!" He then jumps out and immediately pulls open his chute. George W. Bush grabs the second parachute and says, "I'm the president and the smartest man in the world! I have to live!" He leaps out of the plane as well. Now there is only one parachute left. The priest grabs it, hands it to the boy scout then says, "You take it, my son. I've lived a long life and you still have many years left to live." The boy scout then gives the parachute back to the priest and says, "That's okay, father. Don't worry about it. It looks like the "smartest man in the world" just jumped out of the plane with my backpack." They both smile and have a good laugh.

Now back to Benny.

A swirl of emotions, thoughts and images floods the malleable brain of Benny while he sleeps off a night of debauchery on his fold out futon. He cannot decipher anything that he dreams as of lately but one image does stick out for him the most. It is the image of the sweet and beautiful Jacqueline. He keeps replaying the image of her perfect naked body over and over. Her radiance dazzles his soul and leaves him almost breathless. It is a definite first for him. Until he met Jacqueline he had assumed that all women were life-draining succubi. But now a new perspective has formulated within the recesses of his subconscious. Jacqueline is more than a beautiful woman. She is an angel. She is heaven incarnate.

Ding dong! Ding dong!

My doorbell rings.

I open my eyes and look around the room cautiously. I suppose I was kind of expecting to wake up next to another naked beauty. No such luck.

Ding dong! Ding dong!

My doorbell rings again.

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

I quickly don my faded green flannel bathrobe and sprint to the door.

"Hey, Benny! How you doin'?"

It's my landlord Mr. Joe Lord. His bright red hair looks rather disheveled.

"Hey, Joe. I'm all right. What's up? You got this month's rent right?"

"Oh yes I did, Benny. I got it just fine."

He stares at me with a grin on his face.

"Okay. So... what's up?"

"Oh nothing much. Except for the fact that I just heard you've been dating my niece."

"What? Your niece?"

My brow furrows.

"That's right. My niece."

"Uh who's your niece? What's her name?"

I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I couldn't tell if Joe was upset or confused about who I was dating.

"Her name is Jacqueline. Jacqueline Lord."

"What! Jacqueline is your niece? But how?"

I nearly jumped out of my robe.

"Yes she is my niece. She's my brother's daughter so that makes her my niece. Genetically speaking of course."

"Your brother's daughter? Genetically? Oh."

I kind of sounded like a parrot.

"Calm down, Benny. I'm not here to beat you up or anything. I just wanted to make sure you have nothing but good intentions in mind while dating my niece. She did say that she had a lot of fun with you the other night."

He placed his huge chubby hand on my shoulder.

"Oh? She said she had fun?"

I guess you could call what we did fun. Even though I could tell it wasn't the first time that Jacqueline had "fun."

"Yes she also said that she finds you quite fascinating and hopes to see you again very soon."

Joe's smile grew even wider.

"Oh. Yeah I kind of like her too."

"And?"

Joe looked at me with anticipation. Perhaps a little too much anticipation.

"And uh I do plan on seeing her again."

"Uh huh and when exactly will that be?"

"Uh I guess later today?"

I don't know why Joe was placing such great emphasis on my dating his niece. But I guess in hindsight it does make a little sense.

"Good for you, Benny! Don't keep her waiting for too long. It's been a bit rough on her being out here on her own and away from her folks."

"You mean her family doesn't live here?"

"Oh goodness no. They live all the way up north in a small farming town."

"Oh."

"Yep. Jacqueline moved down here about two years ago. She said she got tired of all the cold weather up north."

"Oh I see. So I guess she plans on staying."

"She'd like to but she's having a really hard time paying rent and other living essentials. I do help her out when I can but even that is barely enough to sustain her."

Joe glanced down at his shoes. The left one was untied.

"Oh. Hmm."

"Anyways, it's good that you've been seeing her because she really deserves some kind of companionship at this point in her life. She's a beautiful girl with an enormous heart."

Joe gradually removed his hand from my shoulder and bent down to tie his left shoe.

"You have nothing to worry about, Joe. I'll treat your niece like the beautiful goddess that she is."

I smiled politely.

“Good! That’s what I like to hear. Oh before I go I also wanted to let you know about an upcoming party I’m throwing at my place.”

“Oh? What kind of party?”

“It’s a surprise party for Jacqueline.”

“A surprise party?”

I was starting to feel a little annoyed by Joe’s intentional loitering.

“That’s right. Next Friday is her birthday.”

“Oh wow. That’s nice. I’ll definitely be there.”

I fiddled with the lapel of my robe.

“Great! Here’s your invitation. It starts at precisely eight thirty.”

Joe handed me the pink enveloped invitation.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll see you later, Benny.”

Joe turned around and hightailed it back to the main office of the complex.

I tore open the envelope and pulled out the glittering invite.

It read: Happy 21st Birthday Jacqueline!

Three

Why must women be such complex creatures? Is it just something that is deeply encoded in their D.N.A. or is it something that they are taught? I suppose it could be both. I truly believe it is both. It may not sound very logical but what *is* logical when it comes to understanding the workings of the female mind? Somebody please tell me!

I just had a phone conversation with Jacqueline and it went rather well at first. Then she started yelling and saying something about how I should not have allowed her uncle, my landlord, to tell me her entire life story. Of course, he didn't tell me her entire life story. She's just being dramatic. That's what I told her. I probably shouldn't have told her that because the next sound I heard was her hanging up on the other end.

So, I've been sitting here on my futon for the past hour waiting just in case she decides to call back after she's calmed down. I don't know for certain if she will but something tells me that she's just the type of girl that does call back.

I pick up my faithful acoustic guitar and bang out some major chords. I then try to use Jacqueline's name in an original song.

"Oh, Jacqueline. When will you call back? Oh, oh. Today or tomorrow. It makes no difference. Jacqueline!"

I sing the words out loud. I admit it doesn't sound great but it's not bad for a quick draft.

I then sing a bit more dramatically.

"Jacqueline! Where for art thou! Jac-que-line!"

I lie down on the floor and crawl across it on my back while strumming some power chords.

"Oh, Jacqueline! You must call back soon or else this Midnight Cowboy will no longer swoon!"

I jump up and twirl my guitar around in circular motions. It slips from my hands and almost smashes on the floor. Luckily, I catch it just in the nick of time.

Nick of time... I've always liked that phrase. I wonder if some guy named Nick came up with it or if it started as someone's nickname.

I give up on waiting for Jacqueline to call back and decide to do some painting. Abstract painting that is. That's right, I dabble a bit in paints and canvas. There was a brief period in my life when I tried to become the best damn artist of the twenty first century. Like most things I've pursued it never really panned out for me. But that doesn't mean that I've abandoned it entirely.

You see, when life hands you lemons you have to make lemon squares. And sometimes you have to make lemon squares and lemonade. Not necessarily in that particular order but you get the just of it. No matter what you got to strut!

I used to think such positive affirmations were a load of horse shit and sometimes they are. It depends on what state of mind you happen to be in when you hear them. It's a shame that positivity isn't regularly promoted within modern society. You'd think that in the age of the internet and iphone we'd see daily motivational commercials promoting the hell out of positive thinking. But no instead we are bombarded with images of sugar coated sugar puffs, scantily clad bikini models, lime flavored beer and greasy fast food. I mean it's gotten to the point where we can no longer tell if we're horny or hungry!

And our government just allows it to continue! They practically perpetuate this farce of a paradigm. They know it's bad for us! *We* know it's bad for us! Yet, we participate in its longevity every single fucking day.

Anyways... back to my painting. I pull out my brushes and paint from an old dresser drawer and sprawl them onto my wooden desk. I take out a medium sized canvas and place it onto a dusty easel that my grandfather left me just before he passed on.

My grandfather was a pretty hardcore painter. He didn't start painting until he retired at the age of sixty five but he quickly developed an aptitude for it. He even converted his old tool shed into a makeshift art studio and would sometimes lock himself in there for weeks at a time. Of course, my grandmother didn't like the fact that he'd spend so much time in there and tend to neglect her. But he could usually smooth things over by painting a portrait of her and presenting it to her along with a box of imported chocolates.

Maybe I should try painting a portrait of Jacqueline and presenting it to her with a bottle of wine. I'm not sure if it's too soon in our relationship for such a thing but I'll just paint her portrait anyway and maybe store it in my closet for a later date.

I set to work at once. I lay out everything I require and begin by coating the canvas with a base coat of white acrylic paint. It's a technique that I learned from my grandfather. He also told me that plenty of artists use the same technique. It's supposed to make the colors stand out more or something. Then I apply a thin wash of blue with fast but even brushstrokes. After that dries, I mix in some yellow ochre and light orange. I wait a minute or so before outlining the figure that is to become Jacqueline. With a very thin brush I gently paint the curves that make her a living masterpiece.

A few hours later I have finished my masterpiece and begin cleaning up when all of a sudden I see a fast blur pass by out of the corner of my eye. I naturally ignore it and continue washing my paint brushes. Then I see it pass by again; this time it zooms back and forth right in front of me. As I dry off the brushes it passes by once more so quickly that it nearly knocks me back.

I don't know what to make of it but it's almost as if some ghost or shadowy figure is trying to get my attention. I know it sounds crazy but you'd be thinking the same thing if you were in my shoes.

ZOOM! ZOOM! FLASH!

The blur rushes by at top speed then swirls around me like some kind of diaphanous vortex. Then I hear a voice whisper, "Go to sleep, Benny."

"No! I am not going to sleep! Leave me alone whoever you are!"

I am suddenly overcome by a severe thumping in my head. It feels like a thousand sticks are poking and prodding my brain!

"Ow! Stop it! Please!"

I drop to my knees and clutch my head to prevent it from exploding. It really feels like a bomb about to detonate.

"Ow!"

Silence. Nothing but darkness invades Benny's mind.

Poor, poor Benny. He's had one migraine too many in his lifetime. But all of that is about to change. When he wakes up he will be given a gift. A very special gift.

"Benny. Benny wake up now."

SLAP!

My eyes open slowly and I find myself lying on the kitchen floor. The tile feels nice and cool.

"Wh-What happened?"

I rub my forehead and sit up. I immediately come face to face with someone who looks remarkably like me.

"Wh-Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me, Benny?"

He smiles slightly.

"Well... you do look like me but I know you're not me."

I am more confused than scared by the sight of this clone.

"Come on now, Benny! Don't tell me you don't recognize your own subconscious when you see it."

"Huh? Jeffrey? You're not Jeffrey! You can't be Jeffrey!"

I stand up quickly yet cautiously. He does the same.

"Of course it's me. Who else do you know that looks exactly like you?"

I examine him closely and decide that he could very well be Jeffrey Juniper in physical form.

"But how can it be? How can you be here in front me?"

"How should I know? If anybody would know the answer to that it would be you, Benny."

He walks over to the couch and sits down.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean you're the one that allowed me to break away from your mind. I did what I could to prevent you from dying during the whole process."

He places his feet up on the coffee table and sinks back into the couch.

“So, that was you running around in a big blur?”

“Yep. You got it. I’m not at all used to being in physical form so I had to quickly assume the image of someone or something.”

“And that’s why you now look like me.”

“Yep. If I hadn’t copied your form I probably would have faded from existence.”

Jeffrey grabs the TV remote and starts flipping through the channels.

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why you’re here in physical form and not in my mind. Or are you just playing a trick on me? Am I officially going crazy?”

Jeffrey laughs for a full minute before responding.

“You’d like that wouldn’t you? To be crazy. Heck, most people secretly want to go crazy but most of them don’t. More than half of the people that wind up in a mental institution never “officially” go crazy.”

“Oh. Okay then. So if I’m not crazy then what is the whole point of this?”

“Point? I don’t know. I know about as much as you know. Like I said...”

“I know, I know. I’m the one who has the answer.”

“Yep. Precisely.”

Knock, knock, knock!

“Oh great! Who the hell could be visiting me now?”

I walk to the door and look through the peephole. Jacqueline is standing on the other side. She looks worried but still very beautiful.

“It’s Jacqueline! How am I going to explain to her who you are, Jeffrey?”

“Just tell her the truth, Benny. Women always like hearing the truth.”

Jeffrey stands up and tries to comb back his hair with the remote.

“That’s not gonna’ work! She already believes I lied to her about who I am just so I could sleep with her.”

“Oh. Well, plenty of men have done the same. I really don’t think one more makes that much of a difference.”

Knock, knock, knock!

“Benny? Are you there? I can hear whispering going on.”

Jacqueline puts her ear to the door.

“You’d better open the door before she gets pissed off, Benny.”

Jeffrey walks over to the left side of the door as I open it.

“Hey, Jacqueline! What’s up?”

I hug her gently and she kisses me on the cheek.

“I’m sorry I got upset over the phone, Benny. I didn’t mean what I said. I was just angry at my Uncle for not minding his own business.”

She smiles at me and pushes back one of her bangs.

“Oh that’s all right. I have nosy relatives too so I know how they can behave sometimes.”

I quickly look at Jeffrey then at Jacqueline to try to gauge if she can see him or not.

“Can I come in or are you busy?”

Her eyes try to scan inside my apartment.

I look towards Jeffrey but he is no longer there. I can only hope he doesn’t jump out and scare Jacqueline.

“Oh uh yeah come on in.”

I take a step back to allow her entry into my humble dwelling.

“You have a pretty cool place here, Benny.”

She says while walking around the living room.

“Who’s he?”

She points to a framed photo on the wall.

“Huh? Oh that’s my Dad. That picture of him was taken on a family camping trip.”

“Oh how fun! How long ago was that?”

“Uh about twelve years ago I think.”

I look underneath the coffee table, hoping to find Jeffrey, but no such luck.

“I never went on any family trips with my family. We’d mostly stay home and harvest as much as we could before winter.”

“Oh? What crops did you grow?”

“Corn and cabbage. We tried planting other things but corn and cabbage were the only vegetables that didn’t wither or rot.”

“That sounds interesting.”

I keep scanning the living room for even the slightest clue as to where Jeffrey might be hiding.

“No it’s not. Farming gets very boring very fast. That’s why I left home when I did.”

Jacqueline eloquently sits down on the couch and crosses her legs. The pink skirt she is wearing hugs her hips superbly.

“Sit here next to me, Benny.”

She motions to me by patting the cushion next to her.

I swiftly sit and move close to her.

“Benny, do you like me?”

She asks batting her eyelashes.

“Uh yeah of course I like you.”

“Really? Do you really like me or are you just saying that because we already had sex?”

“Uh well I’m not sure. It’s hard for me to say since we did indeed sleep together.”

“What? You’re mean!”

She pouts her lips.

“I’m just telling it like it is. But if we hadn’t slept together I’d still like you.”

I smile at her and she smiles back.

“Well that’s good to know. Hey uh you’re coming to my birthday party right?”

“Yes of course but how did you find out? I thought it was supposed to be a surprise party.”

Jacqueline giggles then answers.

“Well... now I know about it because you just told me.”

I laugh out loud in astonishment.

“Ha! You tricked me pretty good, Jacqueline.”

“I know. I’m a pretty good trickster; among other things.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

“What did you say?”

“I said I’m a pretty good trickster.”

“Oh okay.”

I lean forward a bit and grab her hand.

She kisses me on the neck then caresses my face.

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot, Benny. Have you been thinking about me?”

“Yes I have. It’s hard not to think about someone as beautiful as you, Jacqueline.”

“You really think I’m beautiful?”

“I don’t just think I *know* you’re beautiful.”

“Oh that is the most wonderful thing anyone has ever said to me.”

She pulls me to her and kisses me long and passionately. Then she pulls off her blouse and looks deep into my eyes.

“Let’s make love again, Benny!”

“Uh okay. Here?”

I glance around and around for any hint of the newly physical Jeffrey. For all I know he could be watching us from behind a vase.

“Yes right here!”

She stands up then slips off her pink skirt. She is wearing a matching pink thong; it really accentuates her well-toned ass. She then grabs a hold of my jeans and pulls them down to my ankles.

“Woah! You really know what you’re doing.”

I exclaim.

“Yes I do. Now just sit back and enjoy every second of it.”

An hour or so later, after Jacqueline has left my apartment with a big smile on her face, Jeffrey appears again.

“All right! Way to go, Benny! She really likes you, man. I can tell.”

Jeffrey high fives me. It’s weird to high five someone that looks like you.

“Yeah I know. Hey where were you? Were you hiding somewhere?”

“Nope I wasn’t hiding.”

Jeffrey picks up the pillow that Jacqueline laid her head on and sniffs it.

“I just love the way women’s perfume smells.”

“Uh okay but if you weren’t hiding then why couldn’t I see you or Jacqueline see you?”

“Oh uh well I don’t know for certain but I think it’s like one of those things where only you can see me but if other people are around then I pretty much become invisible.”

“Huh? Wait a minute... you mean you just saw everything that I did with Jacqueline?”

My mouth drops open.

“Yes I certainly did and I thoroughly enjoyed it.”

Jeffrey smiles brightly.

“But that’s not right! Haven’t you ever heard of privacy?”

“Oh don’t start spouting off bullshit, Benny. You and I are one in the same. Your privacy is my privacy. It doesn’t matter if I’m in your head or out of your head.”

“But I... I guess that makes sense.”

I scratch my head as if I understand what Jeffrey said.

“Of course it makes sense. There’s no other sense to make.”

“Ha! Touché, Jeffrey.”

I straighten up the couch cushions and retie my shoes.

“So what’s on the agenda for today, Benny?”

“Uh I don’t know. I thought maybe I’d go down to the mall and try to get a gift for Jacqueline’s birthday. I get the feeling she’s expecting something thoughtful.”

“Oh yeah probably. Women always make a big fuss over gifts.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m ready when you’re ready, Benny. Hey that kind of rhymes. Ready Benny. Ha!”

“Uh yes, Jeffrey.”

We both exit my apartment, walk down the staircase and hop into my ever-faithful 1990 Ford Taurus.

Four

Once we arrive at the mall Jeffrey starts eyeing all the scantily dressed teenage girls. His mouth is practically salivating.

“Oh my god! Check out that one over there in the super tight mini skirt! Wait... look at that one wearing the white see-through tank top! Doesn’t she know people can see her nipples?”

Jeffrey’s eyes look like they’ve been overloaded with sexual imagery.

“I’m pretty sure she knows, Jeffrey. Girls her age crave attention. It’s what keeps them going.”

“Oh. Well, I kind of knew that but it’s hard to process when you see it in person.”

As we walk past the food court Jeffrey notices a young blond girl bending over to pick up her spoon.

“Good lord! She picks up that spoon like it’s nobody’s business!”

“Why are you acting like you’ve never seen beautiful females before, Jeffrey? When you were still in my head I’m sure you saw all the same beauties that I did.”

We turn the corner and Jeffrey struggles to look away from a group of gothic girls.

“It’s like I said, Benny. It all looks different in person. When I was in your head I saw what you saw and interpreted each image in the same manner that *you* interpreted them. But now it’s as though I am able to see things in their true light.”

“Oh? So are you saying that I have a weird way of interpreting things?”

“Well... I suppose I am.”

Just then a busty brunette in short shorts cuts in front of us and Jeffrey watches her hips wiggle as she walks.

“You do tend to complain a lot, Benny. I mean how can you complain so much when there are fantastically gorgeous women everywhere you look!”

I laugh subtly before replying.

“That may be so, Jeffrey. But all of these gorgeous women would sooner hurl me off a bridge than have anything to do with me.”

“Nah! You’re wrong, Benny. These women are just ripe for the taking! All they need is the right kind of person to whisk them away.”

“Perhaps you’re right but I’m here to get Jacqueline a gift. I’m not looking to score with any other female right now.”

We step into a fragrance boutique. I pick up a pink bottle and sniff the top of it. It smells somewhat like Jacqueline’s perfume.

“Do you think I should get this for her?”

Jeffrey takes a long whiff of it then pushes it away.

“Holy hell! That stuff is strong! Is perfume supposed to smell like that?”

Jeffrey coughs and gags.

“Well yeah most of it smells pretty strong at first but then it eventually loses its potency when worn throughout the day.”

I take one last sniff of it then place the bottle back onto its silver shelf.

“I don’t think you should get that for Jacqueline. She probably already has gallons of perfume.”

Jeffrey sneezes out the impeccable stench of lilacs and lavender.

“Hey how about this?”

I hold up a basket filled with scented candles and bath salts.

Jeffrey doesn’t pay attention and becomes enchanted by a red headed, freckled girl who is spraying on the same perfume that made him gag.

“Psst! Hey, Benny! Get a load of her. She’s cute and sexy.”

I quickly glance at her then back to the basket.

“She *is* pretty cute. So?”

“What do you mean so? You should hit on her a little and see what comes of it.”

“No way! You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Why not? It’s not like you and Jacqueline are planning on getting married. Are you?”

“Well no but I…”

“There you go! You’re not obligated to stick with her or any other woman right now. So just go for it.”

“I’m not gonna’ do something just because you tell me to, Jeffrey!”

Just then the cute red headed girl hears me shout and looks back in my direction. She gives a curious look then goes back to admiring the shelf stocked with perfume bottles.

“You gotta’ do it now, Benny! You already got her attention. Come on, man.”

Jeffrey nudges me forward. I try to resist him but he is so connected to me that it is impossible to resist his provocations.

“Just do it!”

He shoves me hard and I nearly collide right into a poster of a famous pop singer. Just as I open my mouth to say hello the red headed girl smiles at me.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh yeah I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

I try to maintain a cool posture as she studies my face.

“It looks like you almost crashed into that poster of Britney Spears. She’s not a very good singer and probably would’ve deserved it anyway.”

The red headed girl giggles and waits for me to laugh with her.

I let out a short but sincere chuckle.

“Hi my name’s Benny.”

I extend my hand to her. She shakes it and smiles.

“Nice to meet you, Benny. My name’s Christine.”

“Christine? That’s a wonderful name.”

“Thanks. I like to think so. Are you shopping for anyone special?”

“Uh yeah I guess.”

Her voice sounds so angelic that I just want to listen to her talk for the rest of the day.

“Well?”

“Well? Well what?”

“Who are you shopping for?”

Her eyes glisten under the shop’s fluorescent lighting. They are a bright hazel color.

“Oh! I’m shopping for my... for my... for my Mom.”

I don’t know why I said Mom. It’s just the first thing that popped into my head. I knew that I couldn’t tell her I was shopping for some girl I’ve had sex with twice and have only known for a couple of days. Well, I guess I could have but it would not have been well received.

“Oh that’s nice. Your Mom is lucky to have a son like you. You must be really close.”

“Uh yeah... yes we are indeed close. Her birthday is coming up so I would like to get her something special.”

She walks closer to me and whispers something in my ear.

“What did you say?”

I ask.

“I said we should get together sometime over coffee and continue our conversation.”

She winks at me.

“Oh well sure. I see no reason why not.”

I cannot believe she has actually taken an interest in me.

“Here’s my number. Just call me up whenever you can.”

She hands me a torn piece of paper with her cell number scribbled on it along with a smiley face.

“I will definitely call you, Christine.”

“You’d better call me, Benny.”

She gives me a rather long hug then slowly walks out of the fragrance shop.

I feel guilty but still stuff the piece of paper into my back pocket.

After waving goodbye to Christine I proceed to look around the shop for Jeffrey. I call out his name a couple of times but he doesn’t answer. He’s a very child-like subconscious. I wonder if that’s where we get our innocence from... the subconscious mind.

I give up looking for Jeffrey and walk out of the shop and towards the escalators when I catch a glimpse of another familiar female. It’s my ex-girlfriend Cyndi. She looks as though she’s in a hurry to get somewhere. I decide not to say hello and just let her go. It’s probably best for both of us.

“Hey, Benny! Over here!”

Jeffrey flags me down then resumes watching a young college girl browsing through a bookstore. I run over to him and show him the piece of paper with Christine’s number on it.

“All right! I knew you had it in you, Benny! You are gonna’ call her right?”

He pats me on the back.

“No! I don’t know! I can’t.”

“You did promise her, Benny.”

“No I didn’t.”

I stuff the piece of paper back in my pocket and sit down on a white bench.

“Sure you did! I was right behind you during the whole conversation. Remember... I tend to disappear when other people are near you.”

Jeffrey sits down next to me.

“Oh yeah right. I forgot but then why didn’t you answer me when I called out your name in the fragrance shop?”

“Oh I left the shop once I saw Christine give you her number. I then saw this other cutie go into the bookstore and I’ve just been enamored by her every movement.”

Jeffrey looked a little love sick.

“Oh? What cutie? Which one?”

“She’s right in there, in the biography section. She’s wearing blue jeans and a blue t-shirt.”

Jeffrey tries to point her out but there is a large display case blocking her. I strain my neck trying to get a glimpse of her but all I can see is half of her arm.

“I can’t really see from here. I think I’ll just walk in there and get a better look.”

“Okay. I’ll be right behind you, Benny.”

We both walk into the bookstore and towards the biography section. We pass a bookcase or two filled with horrible vampire fiction then come upon a sign with the word BIOGRAPHY painted on it.

“I guess this is the biography section. Now, where’s that cutie in blue?”

“Benny? Benny is that you?”

I hear a voice from behind me but it’s not Jeffrey. I swiftly turn around and am confronted by the cutie in blue. The cutie in blue who also happens to be my ex-girlfriend... Cyndi.

“Oh uh hey there, Cyndi. How’s it goin’?”

I think Jeffrey intentionally set this up but it’s too late for me to do much about it now.

“It’s going good. I’m doing fine. How about yourself?”

She closes the paperback book she was reading and inserts it back in between the other copies.

“Oh that’s good to hear. I’m doing fine as well. I just came to the mall today to look for a gift. A gift for a friend’s birthday.”

“Oh really? That’s nice. Is it a friend I’ve met before?”

“Uh no I don’t think you’ve met them before.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Cyndi looks like she expects me to say more and under ordinary circumstances I probably would but right now doesn’t call for it.

“So tell me something, Benny. Are you involved with someone right now?”

She bats her eyelashes.

“How do you mean?”

I ask.

“You know what I mean. Are you involved with someone in a romantic manner?”

I stop to consider the question before answering her.

“Go ahead and tell her, Benny. Tell her you’re involved with that sexy Jacqueline.”

I can hear Jeffrey’s voice echo in my head.

“Um... no I’m not romantically involved with anyone right now.”

I’m not quite sure why I chose not to tell her about Jacqueline. Perhaps I still harbored some feelings towards Cyndi and wanted to spare her any emotional burden that might result from her knowing I have moved on.

“Oh? That’s a shame. I know how hard our breakup was on you but I figured you were resilient enough to bounce back.”

“Uh yeah. I suppose.”

“Well, I know it was hard on me too for a while but then I said to myself...”

I began to drift off while Cyndi bragged about how quickly she dove back into the dating scene after our breakup. Apparently she went on a dozen crappy dates but only slept with four of them. Though, I can guarantee that she probably wanted to sleep with *all* of them.

Just when I was about to tell her that I was pressed for time... I heard a loud metallic ring vibrate throughout my ears. It quickly grew louder and more painful. I grabbed my head in agony and fell to my knees.

“Aah! Not again!”

I exclaimed.

“Benny? Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Cyndi just stared at me in dismay.

“Tell her to go get help, Benny.”

Jeffrey’s voice sounded far away even though he was probably right next to me.

“Get help, Cyndi! Please!”

I shouted as loudly as I could. I really did feel helpless.

“Oh! Okay, Benny. I’ll see who I can find. I’ll be right back!”

Cyndi raced out of the bookstore; nearly knocking down an elderly woman who was tying her granddaughter’s shoes.

As soon as she was out of sight the metallic ringing dissipated and stopped.

“Good. Now that she’s gone let’s get out of here before she comes back.”

Jeffrey patted my head. I turned to face him.

“Huh? Was it you that caused that excruciating ringing?”

I asked with a sneer.

“Of course, Benny. I could tell that you were just gonna’ let her keep babbling on and on until she got tired or until the mall closed.”

“Well, the least you could have done was warn me beforehand.”

“Oh come on now, Benny. If I had warned you it wouldn’t have looked authentic enough. Plus, I know you would have objected to it either way.”

Jeffrey picks up a paperback romance novel and skims through it. He laughs then throws it on a nearby mahogany table.

“Well, I guess you have a point.”

I glance at the cover of the same novel he threw and silently read the title: *Madame Jenny's Sultry Hotel* by T.J. Hartley. The cover displays a picture of a man with his shirt off and a half naked woman eagerly awaiting him in bed. The woman somewhat resembles the red headed Christine.

“Come on, Benny! Let's go!”

Jeffrey tugs on my shirt as I look away from the sultriness of the romance novel.

“All right! I'm goin'.”

We ran out of the bookstore and onto the escalator which led to the front entrance of the mall. I did feel rather mean ducking out on Cyndi like that but Jeffrey was right when he said that she would have just babbled on and on. She is quite the chatter mouth. Usually the only way to deal with chatter mouths is to cut them off before they really get going.

As we got back into my 1990 Ford Taurus I realized that I didn't get a gift for Jacqueline. I suppose I could just give her that painting I did of her.

“Don't worry about Jacqueline's gift, Benny. You're better off just giving her that painting you painted.”

Jeffrey said a minute later. It was the first time that he didn't know what was on my mind.

The next couple of days flew by faster than I could imagine. The weather was also acting a bit more erratic than usual. When you live on the west coast you're not used to things like snow storms or tornadoes. But now I guess we'd better get used to them around here.

Just the other day a fluke storm brought a tornado with it. It wasn't a monstrous tornado like you see in the movies but it was big enough to tear the roofs off several businesses and restaurants. One of the restaurants that received a share of the damage was La Cochina. The entire roof caved in and half of it flew away. The back wall was also torn and scuffed up lots but nothing a little plaster can't fix. Luckily, no one was in the restaurant during the whole chaotic whirlwind.

"Hey, Mang. Can you help us fix up the restaurant?"

Raul asked me sincerely.

"Oh sure I can, Raul."

I grabbed my black Metallica hoodie and followed Raul down the stairs and towards the restaurant. As we walked I started to think about certain things from my childhood. Certain things that seem unimportant while they're happening always seem to creep up on you later in life. No one can escape them. It doesn't matter if you're the meanest bastard in the world. Everyone has at least a handful of great nostalgic memories.

The year was 1998 and I was an angst-ridden high school freshman. Like most rebellious teenagers I refused to play by the rules of the school. I made up my own as I went along and many teachers didn't like that fact. But I didn't care much for education then; at least not the kind of education that most public schools force feed to kids.

I remember the first time I blatantly defied the so called "dress code." I hadn't really planned on doing anything rebellious that day but most of my protestations ended up being spur of the moment types.

My crush at the time was a sweet girl named Wendy Hopper. She had gorgeous brunette hair that always smelled of honey and cinnamon. Her eyes were a light green and had the power to stare deep into your soul. Her face was round but not too round and her lips were always glossed with cherry lip smacker. Every once in a while she'd laugh at a joke of

mine and would display perhaps the brightest row of teeth that I've ever seen. Her body wasn't bad to look at either.

She had perfectly shaped breasts, not too small and not too big. They bounced ever so slowly when she'd walk down the halls. Her hips and butt always moved in sync with each other and usually caught the eye of anyone in their immediate vicinity. Then there were her legs... her magnificent legs! They looked like they were sculpted by Michelangelo himself. On the days that she wore shorts or skirts to school many teenage boys became men just by gazing at her angelic legs.

Anyways, one day Wendy was sent to the principal's office for violating the "dress code." Which didn't make sense because she had always made sure to wear only knee length shorts and skirts. She didn't return from the office until 2nd period and was wearing a pair of horrendously pink sweat pants. Apparently the school administration had taken it upon themselves to redress so called "dress code violators" in pink jogging attire. Wendy was in tears when she sat at her desk. In fact, she was never really the same after that day.

Luckily, I decided right then and there to shake up the system and stand up for every "dress code violator" who's only violation was expressing themselves through the clothes they wore. So, I quickly took out my plain white gym shirt from my backpack and scribbled on it with a sharpie: **THE SCHOOL IS THE REAL DRESS CODE VIOLATOR!** Then I slipped it on, jumped on top of my desk and chanted over and over, "You're the violator! We are not!"

Then the entire class joined in the chant and pretty soon the entire student body marched throughout the halls; chanting and carrying small signs with the words **YOU'RE THE VIOLATOR** written on them. We marched around the football field and around the track field. We marched through the gymnasium and through the library. We marched around the whole campus and finally into the main office. We demanded that the current dress code be thrown out so that students would no longer be humiliated and demeaned by the wearing of a pink track suit.

The principal eventually came out of his office to speak with us but he insisted that the dress code was for our safety. Then he told us to return to our classrooms or else he would suspend us all for two weeks. Most of the students were shocked by his threat but I just laughed and replied with, "Go ahead and suspend us! We're not afraid of a two week

suspension!” I looked around to see who agreed with me but very few did. The principal had a sly look on his face that made me want to punch him square in the mouth. It took every ounce of will power I had to hold back from doing so.

Then Wendy miraculously pushed through the crowd and stood by my side. She raised her dainty fist in the air and shouted, “You can’t suspend all of us! So go ahead and try!” The rest of the students raised their fists and shouted in unison, “Go ahead and try! Go ahead and try! Go ahead and try!”

Suffice it to say that the principal realized we were calling his bluff and decided to negotiate some kind of compromise. He agreed to do away with the pink sweat suits only if we agreed to never protest in his office again. We agreed to his deal for the remainder of the school year. The following year a new principal was instated and an entirely new dress code was enforced heavily. Instead of wearing pink sweat suits each “violator” was given after school detention and repeat “offenders” were suspended and/or expelled. I barely survived the last couple of years of high school with fifty detentions and ten suspensions under my belt. I guess I was able to escape expulsion because of my above average grades. I didn’t have much of a social life in high school so studying was never a problem for me.

Granted I did impress Wendy with my improvised protest but my only reward was a quick kiss on the cheek from her. I tried asking her out several times after that but she only replied with, “You’re cute and very charming but I just don’t think we’d make a good couple.” My heart was broken for a while but I pulled through it all right. I think.

Some years later I ran into Wendy after one of my band’s gigs in Los Angeles. I was walking around some local shopping center when I saw her step out of a clothing store along with her daughter. She immediately recognized me and greeted me with a big hug.

“Oh my god! Is it really you, Benny?”

She dropped her shopping bags on the floor and tried to straighten out her windblown hair. The passing years had not been very good to her. She had packed on some pounds and some of the glimmer in her eyes had faded. But her hair still smelled like honey and cinnamon and her legs looked just as marvelous as ever.

“Yes, it’s really me.”

I replied.

“How have you been? I’ve been listening to your band’s music on the radio for the past year! You must be having the time of your life right now.”

She smiled and winked.

“Oh uh yeah I suppose so. Thanks for listening. Is this your daughter?”

“Yes she is. Her name’s Justine and she’s seven years old.”

Justine looked down at her shoes and hummed the majority of three blind mice.

“Say hello to Benny, Justine.”

Wendy tried to coax Justine into saying hello but she was too shy.

“I’m sorry she’s just really shy. It’s so weird to bump into you today because just yesterday I was remembering that protest you started during our freshman year. Remember?”

“Oh yeah of course I remember.”

I studied Wendy’s hand gestures. They reminded me of the kind of hand gestures a frantic person makes when not knowing how to react in certain social situations.

I don’t recall the rest of what Wendy said to me that day but then again I don’t recall a lot from my time as a “rock star.” Though, I do remember the last sentence she uttered.

We both said our goodbyes and headed in opposite directions. I was halfway around the corner when I heard Justine ask her, “Mommy, who was that?”

Wendy replied with, “Oh he’s just someone I had a crush on in high school.”

“Oh. What’s a crush?”

Six

Have you ever wondered why it is we tend to remember the things we remember when we believe we've finished remembering them? I do. The human memory can be a very fickle thing. It can act totally independent and erratic. But then again so can humans.

There is still so much that we have yet to uncover about ourselves and the planet we live on. Not to mention the less than one percent of space in the universe we occupy. Human beings have always considered themselves to be the most important race throughout the entire cosmos. I don't believe that is true. I've never believed that to be of any truth.

We're always told to think logically and not believe in "foolish" things such as the paranormal or evolution. Seems like there has always been some kind of group or government forcing us to believe in whatever lies they tell us. And they have told some whoppers.

First and foremost, the general consensus that most scientists agree on is the big bang theory. You know what I'm talking about. The theory that essentially explains the birth of our universe. It's not a hard theory

to follow and has been widely accepted around the world. Now, according to this big bang theory our universe was created around 14 or 14.5 billion years ago. That's right... created. Who created it? That's something that modern science refuses to answer or give any kind of credence to. I prefer to believe that our universe was created for the reason that it could be created. Doesn't matter much to me who or what created it. The fact is that it was created because the possibility for its existence existed.

Just like when a painter paints a beautiful landscape or a musician plays a song they don't concern themselves with asking why it is they must create. They just create because the potential for creation always exists. This we cannot deny.

We do tend to deny a lot of knowledge within modern society. We're always distracted by too much bullshit. Every commercial on television is bullshit. Every billboard we see off the freeway is bullshit. Every promise that is made by a politician is bullshit. Why do we give in to all the bullshit we're surrounded by?

Probably just because it's the easiest thing to do. People prefer to swim with the current rather than against it and I don't blame them. I don't blame anyone really. Although, I sometimes try my best to blame someone... anyone! Just so my life will make sense for a fraction of a second. I try to blame the government; they do drop the ball on most issues. I try to blame the big corporations; they are responsible for making us buy their overpriced and overrated crap. I try to blame the banks; they are the greediest sons of bitches I've ever known.

I'm not necessarily making a case for any one particular avenue of disappointment. I prefer to cover all avenues. That's just the kind of person that I am. Most nights I lie awake staring up at the heavens and all the billions of stars and planets out there. I then think to myself... is this what we are? Does this have anything to do with what we may or may not be in the distant future? Sounds pretty lofty I know but if I don't think about such things then who will? You?

You really should give it a try at least a couple of times a week. Question everything! Question every piece of information you've ever been given! Does any of it resonate deeply with you? It shouldn't be hard to discern between falsified knowledge and true knowledge. I

understand in this day and age it can be rather difficult but only because we've allowed hypocrisy to rule us.

Those that are in positions of power really enjoy manipulating every aspect of our existence. They get a big kick out of it! It is what turns them on and feeds their maniacal ego. They are like drug addicts that are always focused on that next fix. So, of course they do not want us to be aware of this and do everything within their power to distract us from their actions. And for the past hundred years or so they've been quite successful at creating numerous diversions. And we've fallen for each and every one of them.

Do you understand what I speak of? Do you comprehend? Do you catch my drift? How does one catch a drift? I've always enjoyed employing phrases like that. They aren't often used in the correct context. But correctness is very subjective to begin with.

Sometimes I converse with Mother Nature. I ask her: "Mother Nature is mankind a plague?" Mother Nature responds: "No." Then I converse with the sky. I ask: "Brother Sky do you loathe mankind?" Brother Sky replies: "No." Then I converse with the ever-loving energy that is our Universe. I ask our Universe: "Blessed Universe will there always be a place within you for all mankind to exist?" Our Universe answers: "Yes. Always."

I do not mean to digress but these are the thoughts, ideas and sentiments that run through my brain daily and nightly. Some people have tried telling me not to think about such things but the minute they do is also the minute that I start to think about everything all over again. The only moments in which my mind is not flooded by eccentric philosophies is when I am playing my guitar or painting something or writing some kind of poetic verse.

Even if I could try to stop my mind from being wide open I don't think I would want to. Like I said... if I didn't think about these things who would? Would you?

Seven

“Hey, Benny. Are choo all right, Mang?”

Raul waves his hand in front of my face.

“Huh? Oh yeah I’m fine. Just thinking about things.”

The air is quite chilly and the breeze makes it feel even chillier than it actually is. I quickly pull the hood of my hoodie over my head and tie the drawstrings.

“Oh. Sometimes I think about things too. Sad things.”

Raul lowers his head and looks down at the pavement.

“Oh? Yeah I think about sad things too but also happy things.”

I smile slightly.

“Yes, of course you must always think about the happy things. It is the happy things that keep us going.”

Raul picks up his head takes a big whiff of the air.

“That is true. That is very true.”

We finally come upon the dilapidated restaurant and get right to work hauling out chunks of stone and wood. There are at least five other people helping us out. One of them is Raul’s youngest brother who goes by the name El Gato but his given name is Juan. Juan is full of energy and likes to talk really fast while he works.

“Hey, hey there I’m Juan. I’m Raul’s brother. All of my friends call me El Gato because when I was five years old I thought I was a cat.”

Juan moves his head from left to right then picks up one of the wheel barrows.

“Really? Cats are pretty cool.”

I reply.

“Yes they are definitely cool. Your name is Benny right?”

He extends his hand to shake it.

“Yep that’s me.”

I quickly shake his hand and toss the biggest piece of dry wall I can find in the dumpster. It makes a muffled sound then breaks into four smaller pieces.

“Cool, cool. Nice to meet you, Benny. Benny and the jets? Do you like that song, Benny?”

“No not really. I know a lot of other people that do like it.”

“Yeah I’ve never liked Elton John’s music either. I listen to a lot of rock music.”

“Oh? What kind of rock music?”

I proceed to load up another wheel barrow with wood fragments while Juan scratches his chin for a second.

“You know like stuff like Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden, Metallica, Megadeth, White Zombie. That kind of stuff.”

“Cool. Right on. I grew up listening to those bands. Even played some of their songs in the last band I was in.”

I wipe the sweat from my brow. Even during cold weather I can work up quite a sweat.

“Oh wow! Really? You played in a rock band? What did you play? What was the name of your band?”

Juan looked really enthusiastic about learning about my past music career.

“Uh I played lead guitar and we were called Magnificence. We only recorded one album but toured a lot.”

“Oh that’s awesome! Hey I think I’ve heard of your band before. Didn’t you guys have a song that was titled *Crazy Girl* or *Girl Crazy* or something like that?”

I searched my memory before answering.

“Uh yeah it was actually titled *You’re Girl Crazy*.”

“That’s it! Yeah I remember hearing that song on the radio at least a dozen times a week during my senior year of high school. That song was like the soundtrack to my life at that time, man. Holy shit... I can’t believe I’m actually talking to the lead guitarist of Magnificence!”

Juan patted me on the shoulders a couple of times then took out a pen and piece of paper from his pants pocket.

“Do you mind giving me your autograph, man?”

He smiled as I grabbed the pen and paper.

“It’s no problem. I haven’t signed an autograph in a while. Should I just make it out to Juan? Or El Gato?”

“Either name will do, man. Either one.”

I effortlessly sign my name then underneath it I write *To Juan a.k.a. El Gato, Keep on Rockin’!*

As I hand the pen and paper back to Juan he starts to literally hop up and down with joy.

“All right! Thanks, man! Thanks, Benny! You’re awesome!”

“No problem. I’m always glad to hear about how our music affected someone’s life.”

“It most definitely did. Most definitely. So... what happened with the band and everything?”

Juan holds up the autograph and admires it before placing it in his jacket pocket.

“Oh well just the same thing that happens with every band I guess.”

“Really? Like what?”

Now here was someone that truly admired me. Even though I could tell Juan only admired me for my musical prowess it still felt good to be admired. I was quite flattered. There was a time when I would have been a bit flabbergasted but that was quite some time ago.

The rest of the cleanup went by efficiently and Raul even treated us to tacos. They were day old tacos but still pretty tasty. I poured on loads of salsa and guacamole and sour cream. They were really quite good once you got past the staleness. I guess you can tell I’m not a picky eater.

I don’t know how some people can turn down perfectly good food just because they don’t like the way it smells or looks. I mean some people treat food like fashion. They want it to be visually stunning before they devour it. Those kinds of people can be very needlessly annoying.

I mean... there's millions of people in this world that go to bed hungry practically every single night and somewhere in Ohio or Brooklyn some asshole refuses to eat his spaghetti because it "looks gross." Really? Really? I'm no psychologist or anything but it sounds like these kinds of people need to stop complaining and be a hell of a lot more grateful for what they have!

In the beginnings of my band days I pretty much survived on nothing but ramen noodles and moldy bread. And there were plenty of days when I ate absolutely nothing. My band mates and I usually resorted to stealing and pawning stuff just so we could have enough cash to pay rent and buy a week's supply of ramen. It may seem harsh or "criminal" to those who have never had to do such a thing but it's all about survival nowadays. Come to think of it... it's *always* been about survival. The entire human race can be summed up with one simple word: SURVIVAL.

That is the utter and utmost truth. Doesn't matter if you believe in truth or not.

So then after we all scarfed down stale tacos we decided to top off the night with a night cap or two... or three. I'm not much of a drinker myself but Jeffrey certainly is. I've tried many times before to get him to stop but it always ends up being an exercise in futility. This time is a little different though. This time whatever he drinks only affects him and not me. Which doesn't make a whole lot of sense since he is the embodiment of my subconscious. But I guess him being in physical or semi-physical form has turned out to be some kind of saving grace. I don't know.

So then while Jeffrey sits in the darkened corner of the bar downing tequila shots and jagger bombs I manage to work up enough courage to be able to have a chat with the cocktail waitress. She looks way too young to be working in a bar or any place else for that matter but she assures me she is over twenty one. I look at her suspiciously as she talks up a storm. She kind of reminds me of Jacqueline or Christine but also Cyndi. She tells me her name but I am much more interested in staring at her chest; not because her breasts are huge but mostly because she has some adorable freckles scattered on her cleavage.

Jeffrey tries to talk to her as well but forgets that no one but I can see and hear him. He is disappointed but shrugs it off. Then he tries to force

me to get her phone number and/or have sex with her. I am convinced he has succumbed to alcohol poisoning but he takes it very much in stride.

There was a time when good old Jeffrey and me would stay up well into the early morning hours drinking beer, wine, jack daniels', tequila, jose cuervo and an assortment of other fine liquors. But that was one of the things that got me into serious trouble with my parents and the local law enforcement.

During one such scenario I threw off all of my clothes and ran all around the neighborhood in nothing but my birthday suit. I remember it was a rather chilly evening too. Just when I grew tired of running a police squad car pulled up from behind me and the next thing I knew I was tackled and hog tied on the pavement. I awoke the next morning with a dislocated shoulder and many scrapes on my legs, hands and forehead. Jeffrey didn't even try to help me out that night. He later told me he thought it was hilarious and was too busy laughing to be of any assistance.

That's my subconscious for you. I guess I deserved it though. I was not the best of friends with myself or anyone else back then. Of course, my parents did try to sue the police department but backed down due to not having the proper amount of funds for a ruthless lawyer. Most lawyers are generally expensive but a ruthless lawyer can demand a kingly sum.

Kings... hmm... that's one of those words that has a negative connotation attached to it. It's hard to believe that there was a time when the majority of humanity was presided over by a very selfish monarchy. Most people today have completely forgotten this fact. I've never been able to decide whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. I suppose people have forgotten it on some level but not entirely. To forget something entirely means to have a bout of amnesia.

Sigh. Humans have always been a strange species. We desire to learn more about ourselves but turn away from the limitless potential we carry within. Too often we settle for mediocrity and apathy. I do my best to always remain in a state of positive clarity but then there's always some kind of variable that gets thrown into the mix. I believe that is why I have this affliction of mine. It is no common "disease" or mental disorder. It's as if my own disappointment in mankind has grown out of my own conscious thoughts and manifested into a representation of my

subconscious perspective. Does that make much sense? Doesn't really matter if it doesn't.

It makes perfect sense to me because no "doctor" has ever been able to accurately diagnose my condition. And I've given up on the entire medical establishment. Don't get me wrong...I have no qualms with modern medicine. Really I don't. It is those who practice medicine that rub me the wrong way. The majority of them are ruled by their wallets and not by their desire to help people. But I guess this theory can be applied to any profession or individual.

But anyways... as I was just about to grab hold of the magnificent freckled cleavage that belonged to the waitress I began to hear a high pitched ringing in my ears. It was not at all painful but somewhat enjoyable. It lasted approximately seven minutes then slowly faded away. I glanced over at Jeffrey to see if maybe he heard it as well but he had already passed out on the floor; a puddle of beer and urine surrounded him.

I took one step forward then fell back against the bar. I looked around the room as it appeared to be spinning wildly out of control. For a second I thought an earthquake was the culprit but then realized it was only my vision that was spinning around like an angered badger.

"Hey, Benny are you all right? You don't look so good."

Someone asked me. I think it was Raul or Juan or possibly both of them simultaneously.

"Uh yeah I'm all right. Somewhat."

All of a sudden a flood of images and memories entered my train of thought. Old images and past memories. A ton of regrets and unfulfilled promises. Then I saw an image of my entire family flash before me like lightning. Bright white lightning!

"Hey Benny uh what are you doing man?"

Someone asked.

"Huh? What?"

I felt a tingling sensation travel from my head down to my toes. Again it was not painful but quite pleasing. As I opened my mouth to try to conjure up some words to describe the sensation a flash of light spouted from it. And I don't mean in a metaphorical sense either. I mean an

actual beam of bright light came shooting out of my mouth! Everyone in the bar panicked and ran around like chickens with their heads cut off.

I raised my hands to try to calm them down but as I did another beam of light shot out of my right palm. It traveled so fast that it knocked Raul right out of his boots!

“I’m sorry, Raul! I- I don’t know what’s going on! I can’t control this!”

I shouted as I ran out of the bar and into the dark, unforgiving night.

I ran and ran all night long. I was terrified. Absolutely terrified by what I had seen come out of me. Why did it happen? What caused it to happen? Was it all a dream or a simple figment of my imagination?

Yes! That's it! I just imagined it. It was the liquor that conjured up that image of a luminous light beam spouting forth from my mouth and right palm. But if it was just something I imagined then why did everyone in the bar run away from it? It had to be real.

“Slow down, Benny! It's hard for me to keep up with you right now!”

I heard Jeffrey calling out from a few paces behind me. But I kept running without any regard.

I ran down an alleyway and past several green dumpsters. The air was quite cold and smelled of freshly baked bread. As I ran past Pop's Bakery a little girl stared at me and giggled. She was wearing bright red overalls and blue converse sneakers. Her shoe laces were untied and dragging through some oil stains on the sidewalk. I tried to ignore her but then she eventually tripped and fell hard onto the asphalt. She cried out and screamed for help. I quickly turned around and picked her up. She smiled at me and went skipping on down the alleyway.

“Hey uh little girl! You shouldn't go into that alley by yourself!”

I chased after her down the alley but when I got to the front of it she had somehow managed to disappear.

“Um okay then.”

I said to myself and turned back around and started running at full speed. More images flew into my brain. I saw a photo of my ex-girlfriend, Cyndi, wearing a very small and very yellow bikini. She was posing next to a tall palm tree. I do recall that moment when that particular picture was taken.

We had spent the day at the beach and had lots of fun collecting shells and feeding popcorn to the seagulls. At one point a seagull swooped down towards Cyndi and yanked off her bikini top. She screamed and shouted at the seagull. The seagull seemed to take delight out of taunting Cyndi with her bikini top firmly grasped between its beak. It was most memorable not because of what the seagull had done but because of what he had revealed to me. It was the first time that I got to see the

marvelous splendor of her bare chest. Cyndi was always someone that liked to downplay her own beauty. She was always insulting herself and saying that she was fat and stupid and ugly.

I don't know why. I suppose it was the result of her parents always being so harsh over her physical appearance. From what she told me; they treated her like a blank slate that was created for their own enjoyment and amusement. They were always telling her to "look her best" and "watch what she eats." She really absorbed every vain proverb they fed her. I'd imagine it was very hard not to.

As soon as her sexy image subsided I found myself near the very same beach. It looked considerably different but still had plenty of sand. The ocean glistened under the moon light like some diaphanous wonderland. I plopped myself down onto a small sand dune and closed my eyes.

I listened to the waves for a spell. I quickly fell under their mesmerizing trance. I could hear some seagulls fly overhead and acknowledge my presence.

"Excuse me."

A voice interrupted.

"Huh?"

I opened my eyes to find an old, worn out looking beach bum standing over me. His hair was long and silvery and his face was quite sunburned. He was wearing nothing more than a leather jacket and a faded pair of khaki shorts.

"Do you happen to have some spare change on you?"

He asked.

"Oh uh I'm not exactly sure. I think I dropped my wallet while I was running."

I searched my pockets and really had no money on me.

"Oh I see. Well, running is great exercise. More people should take up recreational running."

He coughed then laughed.

"Yeah I suppose so. Except I wasn't running for recreational purposes."

"Is that right? Well then why were you running, young man?"

He squinted at me through the darkness. The moonlight shone down on his head and shoulders making him look like a holy man of sorts.

“Oh uh I was running because something strange happened at this bar I was in. That is something strange happened to me and I didn’t quite know how to react so I just ran out of there as quickly as humanly possible.”

The old beach bum plopped down next to me and scratched his forehead and chin.

“Well, it must have been quite frightening to make you run all the way to the beach.”

“Yeah it definitely was. I hope I never have to deal with something like that again.”

The old beach bum took out a plastic bag from inside his leather jacket and removed a half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich from it. He blew away some lint then took a small bite.

“Now why would you hope for something like that?”

“Huh? Why? Because it was scary and nerve wracking and...”

“Sounds to me like it was pretty exciting. And what would life be without excitement?”

He took two more small bites of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich then slipped the rest back into the plastic bag. He then slipped the plastic bag back into his leather jacket pocket.

“Oh uh I suppose you do have a point.”

I kind of stared in wonder at this man of the beach. He was truly someone that clearly represented a side of life that the rest of us don’t even consider.

“My friend... what is it that you want out of life?”

I couldn’t tell right away but I am certain that he expected my answer to be very profound.

“What do I want? I’m not sure really. I suppose I want what most people want but just not as much of the fluff and emptiness.”

“Ah yes! I know exactly what you mean.”

“You do?”

“Indeed I do. That is why I have made this beach my residence.”

He stands up and spreads his arms as wide as possible.

“You have a house here on the beach somewhere?”

“No, no. I mean the beach itself is my residence, my home, my dwelling.”

He chuckles.

“Oh! Yeah I kind of figured as much but what was it that initially prompted you to make the beach your residence?”

“It was not one particular influence but rather an amalgamation of everything that is conjured up in modern society. I was around your age and felt very much the same way you do now. I kept trying to shake off the feeling of enslavement but it just kept on persisting and persisting. Then, finally, an unfamiliar sensation engulfed me and shook me to my very core!”

He pointed to the midsection of his torso.

“Really? Could you describe this sensation?”

I became quite intrigued by what this beach bum had experienced.

“There is no accurate way to go about describing it but I suppose if I were to describe it I’d relate it to the feeling one gets right before achieving an orgasm. But no ordinary sexual orgasm. No, no. It is more of a biological and spiritual orgasm. Something which has the power to unite an entire global population within a universally divine dimension.”

I stood up and brushed the sand off my arms and legs.

“I believe I experienced something like that earlier tonight.”

“Oh?”

The old beach bum furrowed his brow.

“Please tell me about it.”

So I told the old beach bum about the whole thing. The beams of light that shot out of me and I even told him about my subconscious named Jeffrey Juniper. He seemed pretty receptive to everything I said. At one point he even nodded his head along as if truly sympathizing and understanding my plight.

“Well now... it would seem we have quite a lot in common.”

He said with a smile.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

I was stunned but not too stunned.

“Please allow me to show you.”

He raised his arms up over his head and opened his hands so that his palms became outlined in the moonlight.

“Wha-What are you doing?”

As soon as I asked that question I saw two bright beams of light begin to form and shoot out from both of his palms. No fooling! It was quite a sight to witness.

“What the-? How can you-? But I...”

I was tongue tied but kept watching as the beams grew brighter and brighter.

“Observe closely now, Benny.”

“Uh okay.”

At the time I had no idea how he knew my name but I didn’t really care.

He appeared to have a great deal of control over the light beams. They eventually grew so bright that they started to emit a sonic hum. It was similar to the feedback an electric guitar can produce but much more... harmonious.

Brighter and brighter they grew and closer and closer I watched. The light beams then changed a more blue color and looked like they shot all the way up past the Earth’s atmosphere and into the unknown of space.

I then began to feel the same sensation that I felt in the bar. I looked down at my palms and they were glowing simultaneously along with the bright blue beams that were emitting from the old beach bum’s palms.

“Hold up your palms, Benny!”

He shouted.

I figured it couldn’t hurt to attempt to do the same as he was. So, I raised my arms above my head and opened my hands as wide and as steady as I could. As soon as I did so huge beams of brilliant light shot out

of my palms! I was shocked for a few seconds but then looked at the face of the old beach bum. He looked at me as well and smiled.

“Is there some purpose for this?”

I asked; some sand kicked up from beneath me.

“You’ll see! It won’t be much longer now.”

He fixed his gaze on a particular star in the night sky and then aimed his palms towards it.

“Aim your palms toward the same star, Benny! Do as I do and we’ll be home in no time.”

“Home? What do you mean by home?”

I was perplexed by what he said but deep down I knew it made a lot of sense. So I gently moved my palms and allowed my light beams to travel towards the same target. Even though my light beams were considerably smaller than the old beach bum’s they still felt very strong and warm.

“That’s good, Benny. Now, here comes the best part. Don’t forget to do as I do.”

He quickly dropped his arms down to his side and crouched down. Then the bright blue light beams merged into one enormous beam and completely engulfed him. In a split second he was gone.

“Hey! Where did you go?”

I quickly remembered that he told me to do as he does so I looked up at the night sky one last time then dropped my arms down to my side and crouched down just as he did. I immediately felt a surge of warmth and something akin to love.

The next thing I knew I was on another beach; a brightly lit beach.

Nine

I looked in amazement at my new surroundings. The beach looked like a typical beach except for the fact that the sand had a luminous quality to it. I grabbed a handful of it and examined its texture. It looked a bit like Styrofoam but felt like a fine powder. I allowed it to spill out of my hand and was amazed that not one grain of it stuck to my skin. In fact, I believe it actually exfoliated my skin.

“Hello? Anyone here? Where am I?”

My voice echoed out and created some kind of harmonic resonance. I walked a little further up the beach and stopped when I came to a forest filled with purple pine trees and plant life.

“Where am I?”

I repeated.

“Don’t you recognize your home planet?”

A voice echoed from behind me. I turned around and saw the old beach bum walking towards me. Except... he no longer looked old at all and was wearing what looked like a purple jogging suit.

“My what? Home planet? What do you mean my home planet?”

“You really don’t remember, Benny?”

He looked disappointed.

“No I don’t know what you’re talking about! And how do you know my name? Where exactly am I?”

I felt overwhelmed with confusion.

“Oh, boy. I was hoping your Earth parents explained everything to you but I guess I was hoping for too much.”

He grabbed my shoulders and looked me straight in the eyes.

“Benny I am your...”

“My what?”

“I am your Father.”

“What? No! How is that possible?”

I pulled away from him and sat down on a purple log.

“It is true, Benny. I am your father. Darren is my name and this is your home planet. Your true home planet.”

He sat on the adjacent purple log.

I admired the lush, purple forest and watched as the purple tinged tide washed up some peculiar looking crab.

“Well okay then but you look too young to be my father.”

“Yes I know. Here on our glorious purple planet no one ages.”

“Really? That’s cool.”

“Yes it is.”

“But wait a minute now... you’re saying that I am an alien from another planet?”

“If you’d like to think of it that way then yes you are. You see, some time ago you were sent to Earth along with an entire research team from our planet. The scientists from the research team wanted to conduct a social experiment of sorts on a global scale. Many families volunteered their newborn offspring to be a part of such an experiment; this included your Mother and me. We willingly allowed you to play out a role in the experiment.”

“What? Are you serious?”

I got off the purple log and walked closer to the shore. A small purple insect flew by my face.

“Yes, Benny. I am quite serious.”

Darren scratched his head then picked up a seashell.

“Here, Benny. Hold this seashell. It will be able to show you that this is indeed your home planet.”

He walked over to me and handed me the seashell. It was a faded gray color; definitely the first non-purple thing I had seen since arriving on the purple planet.

“Oh? How is a seashell supposed to..”

In an instant the seashell turned from a faded gray to a bright fluorescent purple!

“Wow! I wasn’t expecting that to happen.”

I looked at the big smile on Darren’s face.

“You see... the shell knows who you are.”

“Oh? Uh yeah I guess.”

I stared blankly at the shell and then back at Darren.

“So then basically my entire life has been a lie or cover for some great big social experiment?”

“No, Benny. Not at all. You were always meant to live on Earth. You may have been born here but you were meant to be raised as an Earth human. The social experiment is only an experiment by name and in truth it encompasses so much more than just gathering data. The children of our planet are always sent to live on other planets because that is how we help other civilizations evolve towards a more harmonious state.”

“Huh? What? How are a bunch of children from another planet supposed to accomplish such a task?”

I placed the seashell onto the purple log. It immediately turned gray again.

“Just by living a human life and delving into all of the experiences that all Earth humans experience.”

“Really? That’s how? One would think there would be a hell of a lot more to it than that.”

“Yes one would think so. Or rather... it is human to think so. Very human to think so.”

“Touché, Darren. Or uh Dad.”

I glanced up at the sky. It too was a very bright purple color.

“This purple planet is really quite amazing and beautiful.”

“Yes she is indeed beautiful.”

“She?”

“Yes of course all planets are in fact living beings of never-ending love and light. Just like a mother is a being of never-ending love and light.”

“Oh.”

I walked closer to the tide and slipped off my shoes. I then gradually walked into the shallow part of the ocean water. I expected it to be cold but it was actually very pleasant and soothing.

“Wait a minute how do I know if this whole thing is real or merely a dream or figment of my subconscious projections?”

“You mean like Mr. Jeffrey Juniper?”

“Yeah. Hey you know about Jeffrey?”

“Of course I know about Jeffrey. I’m your father and know everything there is to know about you. Just because you were raised on Earth by different parents doesn’t mean I did not watch over you from time to time.”

Darren waded in the tide alongside me.

“So, does Jeffrey know about you and this whole place?”

“I am quite certain he does but it is very likely that he has forgotten just like you have. You see, Jeffrey is more than your subconscious. He serves as a kind of personal guardian.”

“What? Guardian? He’s gotten me into a lot of trouble over the years! Some guardian he is!”

I hadn’t realized I was shouting.

“Yes, I know all about that too. Somehow he has managed to override his role as your guardian and become more independent throughout your life. The research team is also aware of this and has been trying to think of a way to reverse this error.”

“Really? You mean the research team is still involved with the experiment?”

“Of course they are. It has been an ongoing experiment for millions and millions of years and will continue for another billion years.”

At that moment a flood of information surged through me and I suddenly understood that everything Darren had told me was the absolute truth. It was as if someone turned on a light inside my brain.

“So approximately how many children like me were sent to Earth?”

Darren looked at me and realized that my forgotten knowledge had returned.

“Oh I’m not sure about the exact total now but around the time you were sent it was a total of 20,000 children.”

“I see. So then what was the total at the last time you checked in with the research team?”

“I believe it was up to 500,000.”

“I see. It looks as though we now have a great chance at achieving our objective.”

“I should say so. You do realize that in another thirty Earth years you will be put in command of the entire research team, right?”

“Of course, Father. I do remember now. I will be ready.”

We both smiled at each other.

Ten

“Yoo-hoo, Benny. Do you want bacon or sausage with your pancakes?”

“Huh? Wha?”

I sat up and scratched my head. Where was I? Where had I been? I really had no recollection as to what happened to me the previous night. All I knew was that I was somewhere fantastic.

“Benny? Do you want bacon or sausage?”

A young girl’s voice asked.

“Uh I guess I’ll have bacon.”

I replied.

I hopped out of bed and slipped on my jeans and a semi-clean white t-shirt. I looked around my surroundings. I was in the bedroom of my apartment but a couple of things seemed quite different. Namely the décor. The sheets on my futon were now a dark purple and the curtains were a dark blue color. I walked into the breakfast nook and found Jacqueline setting the table. She looked just as beautiful as ever but there was definitely something different about her.

I watched her closely as she placed the silverware on the table. Her hair looked a bit longer but that wasn’t what made her look so sublime.

“Good morning, sleepy head.”

She greeted me with a quick kiss on the mouth. I took my place at the head of the table and commenced eating my scrambled eggs and bacon. She smiled as I chewed each bite thoroughly.

“Mmm these eggs are delicious! Thanks for cooking, Jacqueline. You really didn’t have to.”

“I know I didn’t have to but I figured I should get used to it since we’re gonna’ be living together from now on.”

She took a few sips of orange juice.

“Oh right I... WHAT?”

I nearly choked on my eggs.

“I said I don’t mind cooking now that we’ll be living together.”

She batted her eyelashes.

“What do you mean by “living together”?”

“I mean exactly that. Starting today we officially live together, Benny.”

She grabbed my hand and gently stroked it.

“But uh don’t you think it’s a bit soon for us to live together? I mean we’ve only known each other for about a week; *less* than a week really.”

“What do you mean by less than a week? You know very well that we’ve been dating one another for a full year and a half now!”

She pulled away from me and pouted.

“Huh? How can that much time have gone by already? Where was I?”

I stood up quickly and grabbed my cell phone in order to check the calendar function on it. Jacqueline thought I was trying to worm my way out of the whole living together thing but I *really* did not know that a whole year and a half had gone by since we met.

“If you don’t want me to live with you then just say so, Benny! You don’t have to pretend like you don’t know what year it is!”

She threw the skillet and spatula in the sink and started crying loudly.

“No, Jacqueline. It’s not like that I promise. I do want you to live with me I just seem to have had a lapse in time or something.”

“Well don’t you go changing your mind now, Benny! I’ve already unpacked all of my belongings and everything!”

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

I didn’t even know there was anything to change my mind about. I finally accessed my phone’s calendar function and looked at the exact month and year. It displayed December 1st, 2011. I smacked the back of my phone just in case there was some kind of glitch it had contracted. Again it displayed December 1st, 2011.

“But how can it already be 2011? I- I don’t understand.”

I furrowed my brow and scratched my head.

“You see! There you go again! Trying to wriggle out of living with me! I knew it! All men are the same! I should have listened to my uncle when he told me you were no good for me!”

Jacqueline scrubbed the skillet vigorously with a scouring pad. She scrubbed it so hard that she practically made a hole in it.

“Calm down. Calm down. You know better than to listen to your uncle. I was just mixed up about today’s date; that’s all. Nothing to get all worked up about.”

I hid it well but I was actually very worried over exactly where I had been for the past year and a half. Obviously, Jacqueline seemed convinced that I had maintained a relationship with her during that time but I wasn’t so sure about her assurance.

“Oh I’m sorry, Benny. I didn’t mean to get so worked up. I guess it’s just these damn pregnancy hormones kicking in again.”

She grabbed my hand and kissed it.

“That’s all right it’s...”

I paused for a good minute or two. Did she just say pregnancy hormones? No she couldn’t have. It’s probably just her idea of a joke.

“I’m anxious and excited about becoming a mother. Aren’t you excited about becoming a father, Benny?”

She asked sincerely.

“Huh? Oh uh yeah... quite excited.”

I didn't want to upset her even more but I had to do something to keep from freaking out in front of her.

"Excuse me for a minute while I go to the bathroom."

I quickly ran into the bathroom and locked the door. I then turned on the faucet and shower head. And for good measure I flushed the toilet. Then I screamed: "WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!!!"

"Calm down, Benny."

I heard a familiar voice speak. I looked into the mirror and saw Jeffrey staring back at me.

"You! You did this! Didn't you? It's all *your* doing, Jeffrey!"

I wanted to punch him square in the face but stopped when I realized that would mean having to punch myself as well.

"Calm down. Don't yell, Benny. You don't want to upset Jacqueline any further do you?"

Jeffrey smirked. I couldn't tell if it was an evil smirk or a satisfied smirk.

"This is all your fault, Jeffrey."

I clenched my teeth and whispered at the same time.

"It's not fair to place all the blame on me. After all, you're the one that went missing for a year and a half."

"Huh? I was missing? Where did I go?"

"How should I know? The last time I saw you was that night at the bar. You were severely wasted and ran all the way to the beach like a madman chasing his own shadow."

"So, if I was missing then why is Jacqueline convinced that we've been dating for the past year and a half?"

"Probably because I filled in for you while you were away."

Jeffrey's smirk became more somber.

"You? You! But how could you if no one but me can see and hear you?"

I got the feeling that Jeffrey really missed me but I decided not to mention it.

“I don’t know, Benny. That’s the weird part. When you left... everyone was suddenly able to see me and interact with me. And because I look just like you they just naturally assumed I was you. I was the only one that knew you were gone. I had actually made peace with the possibility that you might never return.”

Jeffrey sounded very sincere and downright relieved that he was wrong about my never returning.

“Okay then. So I guess that explains why Jacqueline is convinced we’ve been dating this whole time and why she’s just moved in. But I still do not know where I’ve been for the past year and a half.”

“Beats me, Benny. But wherever you went it was far enough to leave your own subconscious behind.”

KNOCK! KNOCK!

“Benny? Are you okay in there? I thought I heard you shouting.”

Jacqueline knocked on the bathroom door.

“Oh yeah I’m okay! I just uh cut myself while shaving.”

“Nice cover.”

Jeffrey said.

“Thanks. I think.”

“Okay then.”

Jacqueline slowly stepped away from the bathroom door and gradually walked back into the kitchen.

I turned back towards the mirror and stared into Jeffrey’s eyes; which mimicked my own eyes.

“So Jacqueline is really pregnant?”

I asked.

“Uh yeah I guess so.”

Jeffrey replied.

“What do you mean you guess so?”

“I mean... uh yes she is. But to be fair I just found out about it a few days ago. She kept it a secret for the past two months before finally saying something to me.”

I wished with all my might that Jeffrey was lying to me about Jacqueline's pregnancy but I could tell he was being as honest as ever.

"So you had sex with Jacqueline while I was gone?"

I tried to mask my jealousy but did a poor job of it.

"Well uh yeah. I mean I had to otherwise she would've known that something was up and probably would have started asking a bunch of deep, probing questions. You know how women can be, Benny."

"Yeah I know. I know. Well, is there anything else I should know about?"

"Like what?"

"Anything else important that occurred while I was missing?"

"Uh well yeah there are a lot of things you should know about that happened while you were gone."

"Yes I bet but just tell me about the really important stuff."

I sprayed some shaving cream into my hand and spread it on my chin while Jeffrey searched his memory for any and all matters of great significance. I really was in need of a good shave.

"Let's see now... the restaurant that Raul and Jacqueline worked at went out of business during the summer."

"Really? La Cochina went out of business? Why?"

"Yes. I'm not sure why exactly but something to do with the owner defaulting on some business loans and having to file for bankruptcy."

"Wow that sucks. So what is Raul doing now?"

"Oh he's working at another restaurant now. It's located just a block away from where he used to work."

"Oh? Is it another Mexican restaurant?"

"No it's a Chinese restaurant."

"Chinese? Wow I can't picture Raul cooking up some Chinese food."

I laughed a bit.

"Well, from what I've seen he appears to really like his new job. They even made him an assistant manager."

“Oh really? Wow that’s awesome.”

“Yes it is but he still does a lot of cooking in the kitchen because the other cooks are very slow learners.”

“Ha, ha. Poor Raul.”

I picked up my razorblade and began to slide it gently across my left cheek. Some of the shaving cream dropped down into the sink and created an interesting abstract pattern.

“Oh and uh his little brother Juan got arrested for breaking and entering.”

“What? Are you serious? When did that happen?”

“Oh it was about three months after you had mysteriously vanished.”

“Oh. Did he break into someone’s home? How much time is he serving?”

“He actually broke into that Mexican restaurant that Raul worked at and he got caught the next day. They sentenced him to 10 years but he might get out in 5 years.”

“Wow. Why did he break into La Cochina? Was there some kind of ulterior motive behind it?”

I shaved away the last patch of stubble on my face and patted it down with a small hand towel.

“I’m not sure.”

“Poor, poor Juan. I bet Raul must be pretty disappointed.”

“Yeah he was for a while but now he won’t even acknowledge that Juan exists.”

“Oh? Yeah that does sound like a classic Raul reaction.”

“Oh and there is something else rather important that you should know, Benny.”

Jeffrey paused then cleared his throat.

“What is it?”

I could sense it was something serious.

“I... uh I mean... not intentionally but... I...”

Jeffrey practically slurred his words.

“Yes?”

I stared into the mirror intently.

“I killed someone.”

He whispered.

“Huh?”

“I killed someone!”

Eleven

All things are not often what they originally appear to be. There are many constructs that we've all fallen victim to. It happens quite often. Some might say it happens when it needs to happen but I don't necessarily subscribe to their philosophy.

If we take for example an ordinary tree; not some three hundred year old redwood but just an everyday run of the mill tree. Now, if we cut open that tree what are some of the things we are most likely to see? We'll probably immediately see some dark discoloration of the bark, maybe a termite or two and possibly some kind of sap. But what is it exactly that allows this tree and any other tree to remain a tree? Do any of us know the answer? Will we ever find an answer?

There is much to be said about unanswerable questions. You may feel they have no use or true purpose and you might be right. But you

wouldn't be completely right. For you see no one person or thing can ever be completely right or completely wrong. It all depends on perspective. And of course no one perspective can ever truly be a perspective.

When you take a sip of coffee you taste coffee. When you take a sip of tea you taste tea. When you take a sip of water you taste water; or at least what you believe to be water. For all we know water could actually taste like horse shit. But there is always something to tell us that it doesn't taste like horse shit.

You can disagree with me. You can agree with me. You can shout at the top of your lungs until you are blue in the face with nowhere else to go. What difference would it make to me? None. Is there some kind of joy to be derived from continual debate? Perhaps there is.

I once came upon two gentlemen having a disagreement in the park. The disagreement was over which one of them should remind the other to wake up early the next day. I guess they never came to an agreement because the next day I spotted them again in the same park having a similar disagreement over who was responsible for their tardiness.

It's all a tragic comedy; life. Always tends to work out that way. There's never a dull moment. There's never a moment in which absolutely nothing occurs. People like to throw around the word "nothing" far too often. There's never nothing, there has never been nothing and there will *never* be nothing. It is simple logic.

If there truly were such a thing as nothing then none of us would be here. There would be no parks, no trees, no buses, no people, no cities, no earth, no sky, no stars, no planets, no galaxies, no universe(s). There can never be "nothing." That is a fact.

There is however the illusion of nothing. That does exist. Just like the illusion of separation. Everyone and everything is composed of millions and millions and millions of atoms of energy. This is an undeniable fact that many people have done a good job of denying. But it does not matter how much they deny it because they too cannot escape it. Interconnectedness is so much a part of who we are! It is engrained within us all.

All things are impermanent and it is their impermanency that we try so desperately to avoid but always end up succumbing to. Even as you read

this you are inching ever closer to the same realization that I came upon many years ago.

I used to be just like you. Not a bad person but not quite so good either. I experienced my share of strife and self-inflicted suffering like most of us do. I attended public school, went off to college then out into the working world. For the most part, I did as I was told. I paid my taxes, I voted during each election year, I obeyed the laws, I never drove while under the influence of any illegal substance and I would even donate a small sum of money each year to the same charitable organization. One would think I was freakin' Mahatma Gandhi. And maybe I was... for a while.

Then I slowly became disenchanted over the way society operates. I suppose it wasn't any one particular thing that caused me to become disenchanted but if I had to pinpoint something I guess I'd say the culprit was the modern office environment.

One day I looked up from my cubicle and saw a veritable sea of cubicles that stretched as far as the eye could see. Then something inside me just told me to get out of there and run away from it all as fast as I could! I had no explanation at the time or words to put to my experience. I just knew that I had to get away from that soul sucking environment.

Of course my spouse at the time was not too pleased to find out about me quitting my job. But not because of any financial rut we were in but solely because it meant that she could no longer fool around with other men while I was at work. Deep down I knew she was cheating on me so it came as no surprise when she finally admitted to having sex with every man on the block.

She even fornicated with old Mr. Johnson who uses a respirator and has a bad case of shingles. So, I really had no problem with saying goodbye to her. Hell, I even gave her enough cash to stay at a hotel for a week. I think I was just as happy to see her leave as she was; possibly even happier.

After I got rid of every scrap of clothing and every piece of furniture she left behind I gave the entire house a good scrubbing. I suppose it was kind of like my way of washing away the memories we created together. I didn't do it in a fit of anger or anything like that. I was really quite happy throughout the entire process.

I am reminded of a conversation I once had with a good friend of mine. He was in the middle of a nasty divorce and just about every word that came out of his mouth was some kind of insult directed towards his spouse.

“But didn’t you *ever* love her?”

I asked.

“Well sure I did and I guess I kind of still do. I don’t believe anyone ever truly hates someone.”

He replied with a tear in his eye.

He is undoubtedly right. Hate is another one of those words that get tossed around too often. Nobody ever really “hates” anyone or anything. That’s just the human way of trying to cope with any emotional or physical scarring.

If you burn yourself with a lit match you are usually left with a burn or scar of some kind. We all know this. The scar serves as a reminder of something we probably wish had never happened in the first place. But it did and there is proof of its occurrence. One mustn’t constantly run and hide from “bad” things because there is literally nowhere to run or hide from the inevitable.

Yes, we all wish life were much easier and whatnot but the plain and honest truth is that it is not. It is a constant struggle. A never ending race. A great big novel that is constantly being edited and rewritten.

Why do we even bother to put up with it? Because it is what we were meant to do. I speak not of destiny but purpose. But if you prefer to think of it as destiny then so be it. For what other grand purpose could there be for our existence? Isn’t existence itself enough of a purpose? I know many people say it isn’t but you see they are the same people that are constantly running and hiding and denying the fact of interconnectedness.

You don’t truly believe that the reason for our existence is to go to work at some god awful nine to five job everyday and work our asses off for just the bare minimum of necessities do you? Come on now... *I know* that is not what you believe. The reason I know is because that is not what I believe. Nor is it what any other human being believes.

There is something deep within us all that begs to be paid attention to but somewhere along the way we were taught not to pay attention to it. We most likely paid the most attention to it while we were still young and naïve. You do remember what it felt like to experience something for the first time during your childhood right? Of course you do! That feeling of anxious wonderment is the cornerstone of every childhood.

This is something that no one can disagree with. Well, I guess they can disagree with it if they so choose to but it would be rather futile.

I speak mostly of human potential; its capacity for greatness and harmonious unity. All of our lives we've been told that things are the way they are because that's how they are supposed to be. But I am here to tell you that that is a load of bullshit!

We do not need any one group or government having full authoritative control over our daily lives. *We* have the ability to make our own choices and think for ourselves and for future generations. We are not slaves whose will was made to be broken! We know what it takes to guarantee the continuity of our species and it does *not* involve greed, war, hunger or poverty.

What we humans need is a daily affirmation mantra. Something to keep our minds off of superficial materialistic gains. It could be something like: "We are Human! Gloriously Human!" Yes, that will do nicely.

**"WE ARE HUMAN! GLORIOUSLY HUMAN! WE ARE HUMAN!
GLORIOUSLY HUMAN! WE ARE HUMAN! GLORIOUSLY
HUMAN!"**

Twelve

Over the course of the next several days I tried to grapple with what Jeffrey had admitted to me. Yes, he killed someone. He had done so out of sheer accident and not malicious intent. He explained it thoroughly to me more than once.

Apparently, a week after I had disappeared, Jeffrey took it upon himself to start learning how to drive. Even though he had seen me drive plenty of times he still had no idea how it was actually done. He told me that he began by practicing in the parking lot of the mall. He would just drive around the entire lot until he got used to it.

He said he took to it a lot faster than he thought but the one aspect of it he struggled with the most was stopping at a stop sign. He said there was just something about it that did not make sense. He knew what the purpose of the stop sign was originally intended to be but he would constantly see other drivers completely disregard the stop sign. So, he figured that stop didn't mean to literally stop but rather to just take notice of what may lie ahead.

So, while he was coming upon such a stop sign he noticed some pedestrians crossing his path but figured they also knew that most drivers do not stop when coming upon a stop sign. And so in his false presumption he drove onward and through the group of pedestrians. Luckily, most of them jumped out of the way but there was one that lagged and was hit dead on by the hood.

Jeffrey said he did not panic right away because he was certain that none of the pedestrians were harmed. It wasn't until he heard some screaming and shouting throughout the mall parking lot that he realized he had fatally injured someone. That is when he panicked and took off at high speed out of the parking lot and onto the highway. He said that at some point he thought some police squad cars were following him but it turned out they were chasing someone else.

He then stopped at the nearest self-service car wash and hosed off any and all signs that he had hit another living being. I asked him if he saw any blood marks on the hood or anywhere else on the car but he said that he didn't even look at the hood before washing it. I then told him that it could be that he didn't run over any person and maybe he just went over a speed bump too fast. But he seemed pretty convinced that he had without a doubt run over a person.

So I agreed to examine the car first before coming to any conclusions. And I did examine it quite thoroughly. I mean my Ford Taurus and I have made it through some serious scrapes before so I was familiar with just about every square inch of its body.

I thoroughly examined the hood first and only found a couple of scratches and dents which were barely visible to the naked eye. Of course, Jeffrey also told me that he hired some guy to buff out most of the original dents sustained from the accident. So, there really wasn't a lot for me to look at.

Since it was obvious that nothing else was obvious I did my best to shrug it off and take a quick nap. The resulting dream was a bit daunting at first but very interesting.

Thirteen

I was running down a shadowy hallway towards a dark and foreboding room. All around me I heard the chants and screams of children. Some sounded happy but others sounded confused and frightened. As I looked down at my hands they appeared to be covered in some kind of pale looking peanut butter. I took a taste but it definitely did not taste like peanut butter. It had more of a citrus fruit taste to it.

So I ran down the shadowy hallway a little further and stopped when I came upon a masked man in a white robe. He was laughing maniacally for some reason. I asked him why he was laughing but he never replied and just kept pointing at me.

I then stumbled upon what looked like a moldy Twinkie of some kind. The Twinkie appeared to be crying profusely over some pressing matter. I bent down to pick it up but it then morphed into a jet plane full of gold coins and diamonds. As I watched it fly away the masked man in white approached me and removed his mask. But he had no visibly defining

facial features. I could not tell which was his mouth and which was his nose.

He struggled to speak for a second then declared loudly.

“You must help defeat the white rainbow! You must!”

“Huh? What? What are you talking about? What white rainbow?”

I asked.

He gazed up at a purple sky then vanished. I tried to close my eyes in an effort to remind myself that I was stuck in a dream but it did not help at all. The second I opened my eyes I was back in the studio with my band recording our debut album.

I had my trusty guitar in hand and was ready to start recording some overdubs. All the familiar smells and feelings came rushing back to me.

“Are you ready, Benny?”

The producer in the glass booth asked me.

“Huh? Oh uh yeah I’m ready.”

I struggled to remember exactly what it was that I was about to play. The audio track played through a pair of black leather headphones I had on. Upon hearing the opening drumbeat I realized it was our first hit song... *You’re Girl Crazy*. Suddenly every note poured out of me through my guitar. My fingers felt like they were possessed by some rock and roll demon. I had forgotten how much I missed that feeling.

As soon as I finished recording my track I was sucked up out of the studio by some strange purple vortex. Through the vortex I flew and flew. Many unknown objects passed by my face. Many known objects passed by my face. Most of them had a purple tinge to them. I grabbed onto a purple-ish banana; it seemed to hold me in place for a while. Then it grew fangs and attempted to chomp on my ear. I quickly let go of it and resumed flying through the vortex.

A big, fat gorilla came from behind me and ate the banana. Next thing I knew I was in an old dusty room. It looked familiar but I couldn’t quite recall when I was there last. I then heard some coughing sounds coming from behind me. I turned around and was greeted by my uncle Mortimer. The last time I had seen him was when I was five years old. Later that year he was killed in a severe car wreck. He was mostly to

blame; he had been drinking heavily that night. In fact, he drank heavily throughout most of his adult life. I don't remember much about him other than he was a boozer and liked listening to the same Led Zeppelin album over and over and over.

I also kind of remember the last conversation I had with him; if you can call it that. I had asked him for a dollar so I could go to the corner store and purchase a Popsicle but instead he felt it necessary to speak to me on the subject of women.

“Let me tell you a little something about women! Most of them are particular about the men that they date. It doesn't matter how lonely they are and it sure as hell doesn't matter if they feel lonelier than you!”

He coughed and then hacked up something fierce.

“I don't know what you're saying, Uncle Mort. I just want a dollar.”

I replied in a typical five year old manner.

“I know you don't understand but you will. Oh believe me you will! You see, women are like a hunk of aged cheese. You can't just take one bite and then put the rest back in the fridge. Nope. If you do that the rest of it will harden and eventually become moldy and spoiled.”

“Eeew! That's gross. Can I have my dollar now, Uncle Mort?”

I extended my little hand.

“Fine, fine. Here you go you little whipper snapper.”

I clutched the dollar and skipped away down the street.

So now here in my dream state was the same Uncle Mortimer. He didn't look much different than how I remembered him. His black hair was still as messy as ever and was barely concealed by his worn out Raiders cap. His eyes held a certain amount of earned wisdom within them and his skin was dark and patchy.

“Hello there, Benny. It's good to see you've grown into a good looking man.”

I was taken aback a bit when he spoke directly to me.

“Uh yeah good to see you too, Uncle Mort. Where am I? Is this really a dream?”

“Don’t be frightened. You are in the dream world but there is nothing that can harm you here. Even if you were to be harmed any side effects from such harm would not last.”

“Oh ok. Am I dreaming about you or are you visiting me in my dream?”

“Such a question would be hard to answer succinctly within the dream world.”

“Ok then what *can* you answer?”

“Many things.”

“Such as?”

“Anything related to sports, weather, politics, religion and marsupials.”

“Huh? Marsupials?”

“Yes marsupials. You know such as koala bears and kangaroos.”

“Oh ok then. Can a kangaroo hop through snow?”

“Hmm... I don’t believe so.”

“Do koala bears ever munch on themselves?”

“Once in a while yes.”

“Is democracy the only way for human beings to live?”

“Of course not! Democracy is nothing more than a label on a can of beets.”

“Is there really only one true religion?”

“Nope. Religion itself is not a true religion.”

“Interesting. Which team will win the world series?”

“Whichever team has the right amount of cooperation.”

“Are you telling me the truth, Uncle Mort?”

I asked.

“Yes I am. I’ve never had a reason to lie to you or anyone else.”

He smiled genuinely.

“Ok. When will I wake up from this dream state?”

“In about a minute or so, Benny.”

“Really? But I’d like to ask you so many things.”

“You may try to ask them before your minute is up.”

He gently scratched his head.

“Well... I guess I should just ask one really good question.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

“When we die... is there really a place we go to?”

“Yes there is but it cannot be thought of as a “place” because it is not confined to one particular space. It is everywhere! It is within everyone and everything at all times!”

He pointed up then down and all around.

“Oh. I’m not sure I understand, Uncle Mort.”

“I know you don’t but you will. Trust me you will.”

He took off his Raiders cap and hurled it at me. A flash of orange light engulfed him and within seconds he was gone.

I slipped out of the dream state and back into the illusion of reality.

Fourteen

“Honey, what do you think would be a good name for our baby?”

Jacqueline asked me from across the breakfast table the following morning. Her entire face was glowing.

“Oh I don’t know. Whatever name you choose will be fine with me.”

I stuffed some scrambled eggs into my mouth.

“Well I don’t want our child to have some weird name like Hortence or Thackery. The weirder the name the more he/she will be teased by other kids.”

“Kids are always teasing other kids, Jacqueline. It doesn’t matter what name they’re given.”

I took a big gulp of coffee. I had never been much of a coffee person but for some reason I felt like having a cup that particular morning.

“I know kids can be cruel but I just really hope that our son or daughter won’t have to put up with as much of the teasing as we did.”

She rubbed her stomach and smiled. She wasn’t showing very much but there was a nice little bump beginning to form.

“Well, you and I both know that there is no way to guarantee such a thing. All we can do is learn to be there for her/him whenever he/she may need us.”

“I know.”

She let out a big sigh.

“Well I’m off.”

I stood up, kissed Jacqueline on the forehead and proceeded to slip on my overcoat.

“Where are you going?”

She asked.

“Oh I was gonna’ go see about applying at that Chinese restaurant that Raul works at. Didn’t I tell you about it?”

“No you didn’t tell me but good luck.”

She smiled and began clearing the table.

Too many things floated around in my head as I walked out of my apartment and down the street. I no longer worried much about Jacqueline being pregnant. Whether it was truly my baby or Jeffrey’s didn’t matter because we’re essentially the same person. The biggest thing on my mind was where I had been for the past year and a half. Every time I would try to think real hard about some clue that might divulge just a little bit of info on my whereabouts I’d inevitably draw a blank.

Sometimes I'd get a killer migraine just from thinking about it; that would be the point at which I'd stop thinking about it.

I came to an intersection and crossed via the crosswalk. Upon turning the corner I saw the big red sign with white lettering that read: *Uncle Chow's Chinese Eatery*. The restaurant itself was shaped like a giant take out box and had two giant chopsticks sticking out of the roof. As I entered I was immediately bombarded by all kinds of delicious smells.

The place looked empty so I sat at the first clean booth I spotted. I glanced at the menu while waiting for someone to appear. There was a big red Buddha on the front cover holding an hourglass in one hand and a chalice in the other. He looked considerably happy and content but I doubt very much his state of being had anything to do with Chinese food. Besides, the actual Buddha wasn't Chinese but Indian. From India the country not Native American Indian.

"Hey, Benny! Good to see you, mang!"

Raul finally walked out of the kitchen. He was wearing an apron over a suit and tie. The apron had one big soy sauce stain on it.

"Hey, Raul. How's it going?"

"Oh it's going very good, very good. I might become the new manager of this place."

"Really? That's cool."

"Yes it is very cool. I was just in the back room taking inventory and a bottle of soy sauce fell off the shelf and smashed on the counter. It's a good thing I always make sure to wear this apron. So what brings you here, Benny?"

Raul sat down at the same booth with me.

"Oh well I'm looking for a job and I thought I'd start by asking you if you guys are hiring here."

I nervously brushed back my hair.

"Sure we are hiring, Benny! We need all the help we can get right now because five cooks just quit yesterday."

He smiled a cheesy but genuine smile.

"Oh really? Why did they quit?"

I asked.

“I’m not sure exactly why but they were all brothers and said something about having to go back home to Mexico to help take care of their sick mother or something like that.”

Raul carefully untied his apron and straightened his tie. He looked like he had put on a few pounds since the last time I saw him.

“Oh. Seems like a good enough reason. So then you’re looking for cooks? Well, I’m not much of a cook.”

“Oh that’s ok because neither were they. Ha! It’s real easy to do, Benny. Most of the food is precooked anyways.”

“Oh?”

“Come on back and I’ll show you.”

We walked into the kitchen area and Raul showed me how to prepare twelve of the twenty dishes they serve there. But the only thing I paid the most attention to was how to operate the fryers. Raul dropped in a couple of chicken wings and I watched them sizzle for a good three minutes before he dumped them out of the basket and onto a decorative plate. He then showed me how to fry up some noodles and rice in a large oval shaped skillet.

I chowed down while Raul explained to me how to clean up certain areas of the kitchen. It all seemed very meticulous and tedious to me but I guess that’s how most restaurants operate.

“So what do you think, Benny? When can you start?”

Raul looked at me with a glint in his eye.

“Uh... tomorrow I guess.”

Later that afternoon I found some old poetry of mine that I had scribbled in a couple of notebooks during my high school days. I had completely forgotten that I placed the notebooks in a box and buried it underneath other boxes and miscellaneous clothing. It was interesting to read through them; particularly since I hadn’t looked through them for a while.

Here’s some of what I wrote:

Insane

Logic

Logical dreams

In heartfelt minds

Unstable

Fever

Morose observer

Romance

Controls life

Controls living

Dividend

Divide it

In halves

Divide your eyes

Multiply romance

Blue, black

Red runs

Into now

Into how

Always wow

Black in fact

Turns blue

When why

Is present

Emotional

Ark
Solitude and farce
Distant remarks
Keep steady
Hands a part
Then we badger
Like weasels
With closure

Give
Yourself
A dollar
And thank the ink
For it can
Wink out
Blink out
And mention your hunger
Is it secular
Loneliness
That succumbs
To style

See
The democrat
Eating his hand
Denying
The land
And voting applause
They fly

With sticks
And canes
Then taste it
With hummus
And fries

Reaction
Solution
Contemplation
There is no orientation
Take back
Initiative
Morose dysentery
A descent
Decent with age
Laid to rest
Pretended refrain
Reform

Deflection
Trumps consummation
Listening to deafness
Blinded in tents
To define it
To strangle
Is divine
Giving laughs
Taking baths
Mutating truth

Refined

Normalcy

Inadequate

Add up your

Bruises

Reproduce

Contusions

Forlorned

Amusements

Signaling

The weight

Of

Exposure

Sentience

Sacred

Inaugural libation

Dysfunction molds

On toast

With jam

On a roasted lamb

Discrepancies

Myopic

Abyss

Blissful benediction

The addict conforms

His own addiction

Reborn

Replaced

Requisite

Shelf

On a clatter

Backwards

Waiting room

Stains with roses

Liquid Moses

Can't speak

For the majority

With a lit match

Sparking inspiration

Foam insulation

Notes

Reverberate

Left

Left to right

Again

Left wing

Left

Common sense

In the gutter

In the portable

Receptacle

It is wrong

To feel

Right

Left

The music

A sham

The cause

Too bold

Treating color

With post analysis

Righteous

Grievance

Unkept

Unbalanced

Nuance

Behind

Offended

Lines

Take resiliency

Rely on all

But fair

Retry it all

But stare

Distance a friend

Amusement

With pen

Visual discrepancy

The fall out

Contorts

Many rhetorics

With hopes

For floats

Diets for riots

Parting gifts

Morph into

Paternal fits

Distinct

Focus your

Focused annihilation

Fascist melodrama

Forborne vigilance

Mentioning members

Of another

Century

Mozart's math

Was the only

Fate

Controlling

Emotional sustenance

Visual occupancy

Stir

Reflect

Choose your ignorance

Sand and suffer

Consume you

Deny functionality

Remember holy holes

Based on torment

Like a girl

Live in hurt

Pleasure is bad

Excuse

Excuses

Remain tolerable

For now

But no

Not clear

The clearing

Doesn't dance

Dances and danger

Forgetful loneliness

Drowsy drunk

Universal inkling

Substantial brain

Sanity devours love

Creation creates crap

Park it

In a lap

Of selfless luxury

Torrent

Torrential rain

Weather is true

Turn my face

Phase of a liar

Phase of the maniac

Outlined

Attack

Consumerism

Capital

Reboot

Senses with chemicals

Drugs

Dissolve

This consciousness

The only one

In existence

Our vitality

Is pure

If you insist

Alcoholic images

Will represent

Uselessness

Fortunate to remind

The blind

Aggressors

My tedious lane

Defense

Less

Wait

In a dugout

Damage
Our social continuity
Quite exotic
Quite quixotic
Head
Bashes
Elation is false
We run over
Everything
Like this

Still they
Fly with coins
Change
Pursue robbers
Pursue righteousness
Indignant
Toil
Relationships dismantle
Pursed into pandemonium
Actuality replaces
Nothing
Current currency
Beguiles

Fifteen

This beguiling mind of mine has come upon a blank. Not a literal blank perhaps but more of an unjustifiable blank. Although, it has been met with some matter of forced coersion numerous times before; this time seems to be of utmost indifference.

If I were to admit to being a failure in the eyes of society then that would be the same as admitting to not being a true everlasting being. Let's face it... that is not the case here. You might think it is and you might shrug it off for whatever reason but it would not make it so. I am here because I wanted to be here. Without a doubt we are all here for the exact same undeniable reason/purpose.

We deny and deny and deny because it feels good to do so. Yes, as human beings we are afforded the opportunity to deny everyone and everything on a daily basis! Yes! How grand that is! To be able to deny existence along with all of its fallacies. Quite unrepenting!

We often walk the fine line between righteousness and fallacy. Why? Because we can and do! There's no great wondrous answer for me to give other than the one answer we all carry within us at all times. You do know of what I speak/write. Yet, you continue to go on denying it and blocking it out of your individual consciousness. But haven't you ever stopped to consider that that may be the very thing that has been

plaguing you for all these years? It is the very thing that has been plaguing all of mankind for centuries and centuries.

I say the age of denial has outlived its welcome! We must leave it behind and tally forth, on horseback if need be, and demand more from ourselves!

We are divine incarnations of every super charged atom and molecule that this universe has to offer. Believe it and believe in yourself. We are better than we know. We are *so* much better than what we've been told!

I am here because of me and you are here because of you. Do not fight it. Do not live amongst the angst for longer than you can stand it. Do not paint yourself red and fuchsia and jump into a vat of unanimated structures; unless you truly want to.

The point? The point is staring you in the face and poking at your bones. You know it is. Look into the mirror and apologize to yourself for every negative thought/idea you've ever given in to! Then go outside and look up at the sky and all of its wonder and magnificence. Watch the clouds as they float by overhead and change into a multitude of shapes. They are like us lonely watchers. They must constantly change form in order to survive the evolution of everything else!

Come on now and drag your indignant ass out of bed and take a stand for your own sovereign right to be forever limitless! You know what I speak/type. I'm not just whistling Dixie here. You may think I am if that aids in your own personal growth but otherwise just don't pay it any mind.

Each one of us inevitably dies young. We live and then cease to live in the physical whether we're "prepared" for it or not. It doesn't matter much to the cosmic vibration we're all a part of. Whenever it needs that little bit of extra something that is when it calls upon us for assistance. You see? I am pretty sure you do but again you refuse to acknowledge your own wisdom.

You do not need me or anyone else to remind you of your own excellence. No priest, guru, sage, shaman, yogi, president, or politician can ever take away your excellence or tell you you have none! Nope, never. Those that do try to take it away are only missing out on their own excellence and refuse to search for it. Why? Because they can and choose to do so.

Of course it happens to be a factor that plays a major role in our existence. You know this. I am simply attempting to reawaken you all to your universal truth. It is up to you to decide what truth is *your* truth.

I am here because of me and you are here because of you! We are all here because of WE!

Sixteen

Have you ever tried to cook chicken chow mein before? It is not as hard as it looks but does require some kind of forethought and resiliency. Just take two pounds of mushrooms and artichokes and dice them up as finely as possible. Then shred and chop one pound of teriyaki chicken into small cube-like shapes. Then chop up some carrots, celery, potatoes, onion, garlic and lettuce; toss it all into a large skillet or frying pan. Add loads of olive oil or vegetable oil and keep mixing and stirring everything until it turns a nice brownish color.

“That’s not how you make chow mein, Benny! You forgot to add the noodles!”

Jeffrey shouted at me from across the kitchen.

“Well it’s how *I* make it so there! And I was gonna’ get the noodles out as soon as the fryers warmed up.”

I had already been working as a cook at *Uncle Chow’s* for two and a half weeks. It took that long to get used to the pace and come up with some of my own cooking maneuvers. It was hard work but I did like the fact that I was able to support myself and Jacqueline. She had pretty much been taking it easy since getting pregnant and all. She said she was interested in enrolling in some online business classes but she wanted to wait until she got her old computer fixed. I told her I’d flip the cost to get it fixed for her. She was so grateful that she did a little strip tease for me which was followed by an intense night of pleasure.

A lot of interesting characters came into the restaurant on a daily basis. Most of them didn’t come for the food but for the drinks and the quiet atmosphere. There was an old man that came in at least three times a week wearing a soiled cowboy hat and flannel shirt. Sometimes he wore denim shorts and other times he wore khaki shorts; always with a pair of green socks and yellow sandals. His name was Herbert but he preferred to be called Bert. He was a retired military general of some kind and didn’t like sitting out his days at home because it made him feel inferior.

He would regale me with tales of the time he spent in battle. He’d always start his story the same way, “Now, I’ve never liked killin’! But if it comes down to me or the other guy... you better believe it’s gonna’ be the other guy!” His preferred drink was a bottle of Schlecter Ale.

When I first started working there I had no idea that *Uncle Chow’s* had become a popular hangout for the bored and restless. One would not expect a Chinese place to be such an attractant for the downtrodden. Luckily, Raul explained it to me after my first day. He said that the restaurant used to be adjacent to a small bar that was eventually shut down and demolished by the city because they had found lots of mice and cockroaches living underneath the floorboards.

All the loyal patrons of the bar were devastated but soon began congregating at *Uncle Chow’s* instead. The restaurant ended up benefitting tremendously from it and immediately started offering a wider selection

of alcoholic beverages. Hence the reason for people such as Bert to frequent a Chinese eatery.

Miss Lucy Granger was another patron of *Uncle Chow's* with a similar reason as Bert's for seeking the comfort of Chinese ambience. Even though she was just under retirement age she was no longer required to manage her chain of beauty salons. She sold them all to some major conglomerate the year before and was able to retire early.

"Hello, Benny. How's life treating you?"

She'd always ask me when placing her order for beef and broccoli. She always dressed her best and smelled of a tropical mist. Her hair color usually varied between light brunette and dark brunette. Her eyes and smile would lighten up just about any drab mood. Which is probably why she was the most popular person at *Uncle Chow's*; aside from all the money she spent there.

"I'm doing fine, Lucy. Still trying to get the hang of things around here."

"Oh well I'm sure you will. I just *know* you will."

The way she spoke reminded me of some old black and white movie from the 1940's. Somewhat dramatic but right to the point.

"Is Bert here today?"

She'd often inquire about Bert. I think she had a thing for him but didn't like to admit it.

"He was here about twenty minutes ago. You just missed him."

"Oh. That's fine. I'm sure we'll see each other before the week's end."

She always looked disappointed when learning of Bert's absence.

"Just the usual beef and broccoli today, right?"

I asked.

"Yes. The usual."

As I handed her the takeout box I couldn't help but feel a certain amount of sympathy for her.

"Hey, Benny! Hand me another bag of frozen chicken wings."

Jeffrey said while running around in the kitchen.

“What happened to the last bag I gave you? Did you fry them all up already?”

“Nah, man. I dropped the bag and they tumbled out and rolled everywhere.”

He laughed a little.

“That’s not funny, Jeffrey! You could get me fired if you’re not careful! And you know that me and Jacqueline really need all the money we can get right now.”

I huffed and puffed at Jeffrey.

“Chill out, Benny. I didn’t drop the bag on purpose. It was an honest accident. Just give me another bag of wings please.”

He wiped the sweat from his brow and slowly washed his hands. That was the first time I had clearly seen my own subconscious sweat.

“Actually I don’t think there are any more bags of frozen chicken wings. Raul said that a new shipment should arrive tomorrow. Are you sure *all* of the wings fell out?”

“Yeah I’m pretty sure. Well, all except thirty of them. Wait a minute now! I got an idea!”

I watched as Jeffrey reached into the trash can and pulled out the majority of soiled wings.

“No way, Jeffrey! We can’t serve people chicken wings that have fallen on the floor! That would be a serious health code violation.”

I tried to scold him even though I knew it would be the only way to ensure that there was no shortage of chicken wings for the rest of the day.

“Well unless you’re willing to take the blame for dropping them I see no other way out of this predicament.”

Jeffrey was quite right.

“Don’t worry now, Benny. I’m going to rinse them all thoroughly in the sink before dropping them in the fryers.”

“Okay but let’s work quickly before Raul comes back here.”

It took us about thirty minutes to sift through the trash can, yank out every chicken wing and rinse them off. It was a total of eighty chicken wings. Just as I was rinsing the last one Raul walked into the kitchen.

“Okay, Benny. There’s a big group of people that just came in and they look pretty hungry. They already placed an order for fifty chicken wings. So... get to it!”

Raul left the order slip on the counter and ran back into the dining area.

“Okay. Here goes nothing.”

I dropped fifty of the recently rinsed chicken wings into the fryers and watched as they sizzled and crackled in the oil. After two minutes had passed I swiftly lifted them up and plopped them down onto one big plate. Then I covered them in the usual wing sauce, which consisted of regular barbecue sauce mixed with a few Chinese spices, and topped off the dish with twelve sticks of celery.

Raul then came back into the kitchen, picked up the plate and served it to the group of hungry people. I took a quick glance and they appeared to really like them because they devoured all fifty chicken wings within five minutes.

“Hey, Benny! They really like your chicken wings and have ordered twenty more! I don’t know what new spice you have added to the sauce but keep it up, my friend. No one has ever liked our chicken wings *this* much!”

“Oh uh yeah okay. Thanks.”

I looked over at Jeffrey standing next to the sink. He was laughing his ass off.

“Okay I guess it is kind of funny, Jeffrey.”

Seventeen

Later that evening, I stepped through the front door only to find Jacqueline waiting for me in all her nude glory on the couch. She was clutching a bottle of oil and had just begun drizzling it onto her breasts.

“Oh hi, honey. I didn’t hear you come in.”

She stared at me but proceeded to rub oil on herself.

“Huh? You really didn’t hear me come in?”

I asked a bit perplexed.

“I’m just kidding. Of course I heard you come in! I’ve been waiting for you practically all day!”

She giggled and displayed her most popular come hither look.

I sat down next to her wondrous radiant hips.

“Can you please rub some on my back and butt? This oil is supposed to be good for stretch marks.”

She quickly got on her hands and knees; taking extra care for the precious cargo she held.

I grabbed the bottle of oil and applied a generous portion on her back and buttocks.

“I don’t see any stretch marks on you at all.”

I said while spreading some oil in and around her spine.

“Of course you don’t. As long as I keep applying this oil I shouldn’t have any permanent stretch marks. And it’s also good for other things.”

She sounded sultry and comedic at the same time.

“Other things? What kind of other things?”

I asked while slowly making my way down to her left cheek.

“You know what kind, Benny! I sure hope I don’t have to spell it out for you.”

I knew exactly what other things she was moaning about but I preferred to tease her a little bit first. She swiftly grabbed my hand and guided it in between her anal splendor.

“Please massage me right there, Benny. It’s been a while since you’ve touched me there.”

She sounded like she wanted to say the word anus but I could tell she held back so as not to spoil the mood. I proceeded to manipulate my fingers in a circular motion. I imagined myself drawing an invisible circle of pleasure around her entire zone. She moaned in exaltation.

“Yes! Keep doing that. Keep doing that, Benny.”

The rest of her body gyrated in unison with the rapidity of my invisible circle of pleasure. She began to groan and squeal with more frequency. I then moved my fingers closer to her softness and massaged it with great fervor. Around and around and around. She moaned and gyrated; moaned and gyrated.

“Oh my god, Benny! That feels so incredible! Please don’t stop.”

She then turned around and laid on her back in order to give me better access to her womanly wiles. I lodged my thumb and index finger into her and made strong, passionate strokes. I imagined I was painting a great masterpiece and had all that I needed in front of me. Each ecstatic moan she uttered was like a new color I had created by coaxing its parent colors into submission.

“Oh! Oh! Yes! Oh, Benny! I need you inside me!”

She reached for my pants and fiddled with the zipper. She tried more than once to pull them off but kept resisting with each new stroke I made. Finally, I decided to pull them off myself and in a fit of passion I did just that.

“I really adore you, Jacqueline.”

I whispered as I pulled off my Chinese food stained shirt.

“I adore you too, Benny! I truly do.”

She assisted me with the removal of my boxers and flung them clear across the living room.

“Are you ready for my entrance?”

I asked in a dramatic tone. It sounded somewhat cheesy but she seemed to enjoy it.

“Yes, Benny! I’m ready. I want you. I desire you!”

With that I plunged myself into her so deeply that I could feel her entire being convulse and fluctuate. I don’t know why this particular moment felt much more infused with vigor than any other moment. It was as if there was something in the air or in the stars that was guiding us and pushing us beyond our normal limits. For me... it was the first time that everything felt good and right.

“Oh, Benny! Harder! Harder! Faster! More! Yes!”

Beads of sweat took form on her brow and neck. It was a unique sight for me to see a woman sweating. It was even more unique to see a woman sweat while I engaged in intercourse with her.

“Oh please don’t stop!”

She exclaimed and wrapped her legs around me as tight as a boa constrictor.

With each thrust forward I made she literally shouted out my name.

“Benny! Benny! Benny! Benny! Benny! Oh!”

“You are beautiful, Jacqueline. A true masterpiece.”

I mustered up just a little more energy and plunged as deep as any man could ever hope to plunge. I could feel almost everything she was feeling. Her fingernails met my back and scratched up and down in rhythmic patterns.

“I love you, Benny!”

Her magnificent breasts swayed to and fro before me. I absolutely loved the way they held their shape even while jiggling.

“I feel it coming on now!”

“Oh! I feel it too, Benny!”

“Hang on tight!”

“Oh I don’t want it to end but I know it will eventually!”

I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that statement but I just chalked it up to a purely passion filled state.

“Oh my god, Benny!”

“Oh wow, Jacqueline!”

We both exclaimed at precisely the same time. I swear I saw a bright ray of light enter through the walls and illuminate the melding of our souls. I felt many beads of sweat make their way down my back and onto my calves. I gently kissed Jacqueline’s glistening cleavage. Then all of a sudden something remarkable occurred. We were both struck by a strong pulse of even more exuberance. This time Jacqueline pushed me down on my back and rode me like an expert bull rider.

“I don’t know what’s going on here, Benny! But I’m not going to bother questioning it!”

She looked only mildly scared before shifting into overdrive and giving everything she could conjure up. I kept staring at her breasts and her eyes. They both glistened like rare diamonds under the moonlight. She kept up the same quickening pace for another five minutes until we both felt what could only be described as a surge of electricity.

“Oh! Here it comes again, Benny!”

“Yes I feel it! I feel it!”

An electric charge surged throughout our very essence! Jacqueline had to hold on to my shoulders to keep from falling off. It felt extremely hot and extremely cold. We were quite dumbfounded but nevertheless elated.

“I always knew we were meant to be together.”

She looked into my eyes and kissed my upper lip.

“Me too, Jacqueline. Me too.”

Eighteen

“Ho, ho, ho! Hello there! What would *you* like for Christmas, little boy?”

The jovial red suited man at the mall asked me. I didn't buy his act before and I wasn't about to buy it this year. It was December 10th, 1988 and I was a rambunctious eight years old. My parents had taken me to see the same lame Santa Clause at the same stupid mall. I guess you could say that I never really believed in the whole myth but I did appreciate it. I still appreciate it to this day.

“Well? What would you like for Christmas, little boy?”

He asked me once more. I didn't feel like answering him because I knew that whatever answer I gave would only be an exercise in futility. Yes, I knew of futility at the age of eight.

“Don't be afraid to tell dear old Santa what you want for Christmas this year. Ho, ho!”

He attempted to make me laugh with his own infectious laughter but all I could think about at that moment was how many children he would end up disappointing this year. How many of them would wake up on Christmas morning only to find that Santa Clause had once again broken his promise? How many? The same amount as last year? Maybe a little more than last year? Who knows for certain?

All I knew was that he could not be allowed to get away with this farce any longer. I had no idea if a real Santa Clause ever existed but I did know that this man was no Santa Clause. I tried to grab his faux gray beard but he kept brushing my hand aside with each attempt. Finally, I looked him in the eyes and said something that I probably should not have said amongst a crowd of impressionable children.

“You’re not Santa Clause!”

The words just rolled off my tongue.

“Ho, ho, ho! Of course I am. Now, could you please just let me know what you want for Christmas so that the other boys and girls have time to visit with me?”

A look of annoyance entered his eyes.

“Why should I tell you? You’re not going to keep your promise to me or to any other kid.”

“Ho, ho! Don’t be silly now. Santa never breaks a promise.”

“Okay then if you are the real Santa Clause... name all of your reindeer for me.”

“Ho, ho! You really want me to say the names of each of my reindeer?”

His eyebrows furrowed downward and I could tell he was eager to see me leave.

“Yes I want you to say the names of your reindeer. If you name them all then I’ll leave and won’t bug you anymore.”

“Ho, ho! You can never bug Santa but I will name them so that the other boys and girls can have their turn. Now then let’s see... there’s Rudolph, Comet, Cupid, Prancer, Dancer, Vixen, uh Nixon and Randolph.”

He knew he was wrong but tried to play it off.

“No! That’s wrong! You’re not the real Santa! You’re not the real Santa!”

I shouted at the top of my eight year old lungs. Some of the other kids who were waiting in line heard me and started crying. That’s when two of his “elves” escorted me off his lap and plopped me down onto a bench overlooking the plastic Christmas village. I stewed in my own anger and

dissatisfaction for some time before my parents showed up and asked me how my meeting with Santa went.

“Santa Clause is stupid.”

That was all I told them.

Now that I look back on it I probably shouldn't have been so harsh on that mall Santa who was probably just barely getting by on a very meager hourly wage. But what the hell did I know? I was just a kid. Albeit a rebellious kid but a kid nonetheless. I guess it has a lot to do with the fact that I come from a long line of rebellious people. I remember my Dad once told me about a relative who fought in the civil war and died because of his rebelliousness.

His name was Charles James Montague and was drafted into the army on his eighteenth birthday. The following month he was right smack dab in the center of one of the most gruesome battles ever fought at that time. He fought well and long into the evening dusk. But he eventually grew tired and was captured by the other side. While he was a prisoner he was subjected to numerous forms of torture over a period of forty days. On the last day he was finally rescued by some fellow soldiers and they pillaged the entire camp of the enemy. Just before they left they searched around the area one last time and found a wounded enemy soldier lying in a pile of leaves and brush.

Charles James Montague was handed a rifle and ordered by his sergeant to kill the enemy soldier. But Charles knew right away that he could not kill an already wounded man; enemy or no enemy. His sergeant abruptly reminded him to do it or else face considerable punishment.

“I shall not kill a wounded man!”

Charles shouted and then fired upon his fellow soldiers. They were all grazed by bullets and received no serious injuries except for the sergeant who was hit by a bullet square in the forehead. Charles then turned the rifle on himself and fired.

I don't know if that's the whole story or not but that's the way my Dad used to tell it to me. I'm pretty sure he left out some important details too. But it's a pretty old family story and like most family stories it's probably lost a lot of its truth with each generation.

As soon as I was able to I looked into my family tree and tried to find any records or documentation pertaining to a Charles James Montague who fought in the civil war. I browsed through several Montagues before finding one that fit the same description. I was confused at first because when I came upon the one photograph of him I really thought I was looking at a photo of myself. He looked just like me or rather I guess I look just like he did. Of course, I couldn't find much else on him other than one archived newspaper article which briefly divulged the details of his death.

The article stated in bold type: **Private Charles James Montague Executed by Reason of Treason.**

Upon returning home from my disappointing meeting with "Santa Clause" I locked myself in my room and contemplated the state of things. I sat in pitch darkness for a good hour before emerging once again. When I did I was startled by the acute sounds of my parents arguing. They were both in the kitchen and both sounded furious over something. They fought a lot back in those days. It was usually over money or some other trivial matter. One could say that I cultivated an immunity to domestic squabbles thanks to my parents. Though I don't exactly go around promoting it.

I walked into the living room and turned on the television; my favorite cartoon show was on. As I sat on the sofa I heard the sound of pots and pans being tossed around. It was soon followed by Dad shouting, "You're a horrible cook! You're no good for anyone!" There was a hint of malice in his voice.

He then stormed out of the kitchen and into the living room. He sat back in his favorite armchair; a glass of scotch in one hand and a peanut butter sandwich in the other. He smiled with each bite he took. I've always enjoyed watching my Dad eat. He didn't just eat to stave off hunger like most people. Whenever he ate he always immersed himself in the entire process. He made sure to pay strict attention to each morsel he consumed. It doesn't matter whether he ate a cracker or a pot roast with all the trimmings. To him food deserved to be appreciated in the same manner as any other artistic masterpiece. I've tried many times to replicate this epicurean perspective of his but it turns out it is pretty much the one thing I did not inherit from him.

I do tend to overanalyze my self.

Nineteen

I often try to imagine what I will be like when I am an old man. Will I be married? Will I be wise? Will I be industrious? Will my life have some great significance attached to it? I suppose I am not the only one who struggles to look into their own future.

When I was a kid I could not imagine myself as a teenager. When I was a teenager I could not imagine myself as a twenty something college student. Now that I am in my late twenties I still cannot see whatever future self awaits me. But I guess it is meant to be that way.

Still I do wish I could see every incarnation of myself. If I could only have a chat with one of my future selves then maybe I'd be able to keep more of a watchful eye on everything.

"Hello, Old Benny."

I'd say.

"Hello, Young Benny."

He'd say.

"How are things in the future?"

"Good enough, Benny. Good enough."

"Is there anything that I should be aware of?"

I'd ask.

"Yes of course. You should be aware of everything and nothing."

I'd imagine that's how my older self would reply.

"Yes but anything especially specific to be alert for?"

"Whatever you deem especially specific will undoubtedly be especially specific."

"Oh uh okay. So how's the weather in the future?"

"The weather is as weather should be. It is neither calm nor turbulent."

"That sounds interesting. Have there been any great significant changes made to society as a whole?"

"Yes."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Such as many things."

I'd scratch my head in frustration.

"If you can't tell me anything about the future I understand but I would like to know at least one detail."

"Detail?"

“Yes. You know what details are!”

“I’m afraid all details have been done away with in the future.”

I’d stare at the smirk on the older me.

FLASH! BOOM! POP!

“Oh, my god! What’s going on? Benny, wake up!”

Jacqueline aroused me from my slumber. She was startled by some distant noise.

FLASH! BOOM! BOOM! POP!

“There it is again! It sounded louder that time! Benny, go see what it is!”

She nudged my shoulder.

“Huh? I’m too tired right now. I’ll find out in the morning, Cupcake.”

I yawned and turned on my side.

BOOM! BOOM! FLASH! POP! POP!

That one really woke me up. I lurched out of bed and slipped on my brown flannel slippers. I made my way to the living room window and peered out from under the curtains.

“What’s going on out there, Benny?”

Jacqueline called to me; her voice slightly trembled.

POP! FLASH! POP!

From what I could make out it looked like some building was on fire. But there were short colorful bursts of sparks shooting out from the building. The building was some kind of abandoned warehouse that the local teens liked to hangout in.

“Well what is it, Benny?”

Jacqueline came up behind me and crouched just below the window.

“I’m not sure but it looks like that old warehouse is on fire and some fireworks have begun shooting out of it.”

“Oh my! I bet it was those stupid teenagers that started it. They shouldn’t be playing with fire to begin with.”

She briskly peaked from under the curtains then crouched back down.

“Well it wasn’t too long ago that we were both stupid teenagers.”

I knelt down and kissed her nose.

“Wow! Look at all of those beautiful colors shooting out!”

I was duly impressed by the rapidity of each multi-colored spark.

“I’ve never really liked fireworks. I almost got burned by one.”

Jacqueline stood up and hugged me.

“Really? I’ve never actually known anyone who doesn’t like fireworks.”

“Well I guess I’m that someone now.”

She fiddled with her pink robe.

“What happened?”

“It’s kind of a long story but I guess I can tell you.”

Jacqueline took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. She really looked deeply affected.

“Life is different when you’re raised on a farm. There aren’t many people around to converse with or just have fun with. So, when someone new comes along you pretty much become friends with them out of desperation. One summer, when I had just turned fourteen, some boy and his family had just moved into the farmhouse across the creek. It was the first time we had neighbors that didn’t live a hundred miles away. Naturally, I was pretty anxious and excited to meet them. As soon as I finished my chores for the day I walked the five miles down the creek and over the small bridge to greet our new neighbors. I walked up to their front gate and was about to ring the bell when out came Joey Trigger from behind an elm tree. I can honestly say that he was the first boy I instantly fell in love with.”

Jacqueline’s eyes lit up almost as bright as the fireworks display we were observing.

“Fascinating.”

I ruminated over her emotional affectation.

“But of course Joey Trigger was two years older than me and did not feel the same way about me as I did about him. But that didn’t stop me from hanging around him like a little lost puppy dog. I followed him just

about everywhere. Now that I look back on it I really was pretty pathetic but I couldn't help myself. I was a lonely farm girl and he was my savior; my alternate route out of boredom."

"Sounds more like creepy desperation to me."

I interjected.

"Shhh! *I'm* telling the story here. So... one day me and Joey Trigger were playing tag out in the fields and having a great time. The hours flew by and before we knew it the sun had started to set. We said our usual 'bye' and 'c'ya later.' Then out of nowhere Joey turned around and said, 'Hey, Jacqueline! That sunset is almost as pretty as you!' I just melted when he said those words. Absolutely melted. Up until then I had no idea he even thought of me as a female. You know?"

Jacqueline paused to make sure I was paying attention to her story. Unfortunately, my eyelids were closed tight.

"Benny! You're not listening!"

She scolded.

"Huh? Wha? Yes I am. I'm listening with my eyes closed."

"Okay. Just listen now because I'm getting to the important part."

"Okay, Jacqueline. Okay."

I stretched across the sofa and tried to keep my eyes open. They closed as soon as Jacqueline continued with her story.

"Later that year, we were all preparing for the annual harvest festival. I was pretty excited because it was the first year that I had a dance partner closer to my age. Just before I left to the festival with my folks I met up with Joey in the old barn that nobody used; it used to belong to an elderly farmer but after he passed away it was abandoned along with the rest of his property. I showed off my new dress to Joey but he just didn't seem very interested in anything. When I asked him what was bugging him he turned away from me and began to cry. I tried to hug him but he pushed me away. Then he said something about how he was really starting to have feelings for me but that his parents told him to stay away from me because they didn't want him to become a father before he graduated from high school. I was slightly hurt but I definitely understood where his parents were coming from. The town I grew up in is pretty infamous for teenage pregnancy. So, I told Joey not to worry

and that we didn't have to become serious or anything like that. We had a pretty good time at the harvest festival. We danced a lot and ate plenty of cookies, cakes and pie. It turned out that Joey's father was put in charge of the fireworks display that year; it was due to the fact that he had a friend who managed a fireworks store and could get a serious discount. So, Joey showed me all of the fireworks his father was gonna' set off that night. He showed me something called a Screaming Meanie which was supposed to be known for the high-pitched squeal it gives off. Then Joey did something really stupid... he took out a lighter and lit the fuse. I don't know why he did it; maybe he was just trying to show off. He then handed me the Screaming Meanie and told me to throw it. But I was so freaked out that I couldn't think clearly while I held it. I had never held anything with a fuse before; let alone something that could seriously injure someone. I stared at the sparked fuse and for a few seconds hoped that it would not ignite the powder within. Then Joey quickly grabbed it from me and threw it high up into the air. At that exact moment a white dove flew overhead and collided with the Screaming Meanie. Less than a second later... white feathers stained with blood rained down on us. The Screaming Meanie shot out a bright green fireball and lived up to its name. Its scream was so high-pitched that I swear I saw a couple of coke bottles crack."

"Interesting. Indeed a very interesting story. So then you were traumatized by the sight of a white dove exploding with the aid of a Screaming Meanie?"

I opened my eyes and tried to gauge whether Jacqueline had noticed them close.

"Well yeah but there were other times that freaked me out too. I've never had good luck around fireworks. We just don't mesh well."

She sighed then hugged me.

"Oh? Maybe you can tell me about those 'other times' sometime soon. For now, let us get back to slumber."

I kissed her ear then led the way back to our bed.

"Yes, Benny. I'll tell you about them sometime soon."

Twenty

So there I was on stage in front of millions of adoring fans and music lovers. The sweat just poured off me and created a small puddle not more than six inches from my feet. My guitar felt heavy and my fingers were so numb that they no longer felt like fingers. But I didn't care because this was where I belonged. It is what I was born to do. It is my destiny. Or so I thought at the time.

We were playing in Japan that week; it was the start of our first international tour. The youth of Japan are really keen on just about everything from the states. And for a solid three weeks our debut album was number five on the Japanese charts. None of us knew why exactly but we thought it was best not to question it.

As I strummed the last chord of our last song Dan expressed thanks to the energetic crowd of music hungry concert goers.

“Thank you so very much, Tokyo! We love your enthusiasm and appreciate your support!”

He displayed the appropriate hand gestures and bowed. The rest of us joined him at the front of the stage and bowed simultaneously. The crowd continued to cheer and chant our name.

“Magnificence! Magnificence! Magnificence!”

The whole experience was quite surreal. I didn't even feel like myself. It felt as though the old, shy me had been kidnapped and replaced by some immensely self-confident superstar. Most days I had to remind myself not to get too cocky.

After the show we were rushed backstage by our manager and six bodyguards. We crammed into the dressing room and quickly began our after show ritual of drinking and eating.

“That was an amazing performance, guys! Simply phenomenal!”

Artie Smythe, our manager, blurted out while randomly texting someone on his smart phone. He looked like the typical band manager.

You know like the kind you see in movies and stuff. He wore a knock-off Armani suit with painstakingly polished shoes that never quite matched. Sometimes he wore a tie and sometimes a bowtie but the most distinguishing thing about him was his bright orange hair. I kid you not! He had bright orange hair! We weren't sure if he died it that color or if it was his natural hair color. His facial features were pretty ordinary; especially since his orange hair got more attention than anything else about him. Me and the other guys had decided he looked like a cross between Carrot Top and Bill Gates.

"Really, Artie? You really believe so?"

Mike, our drummer, asked sarcastically.

"I believe we were more than phenomenal! We were absolutely incendiary tonight!"

Dan raised his beer bottle in acknowledgement then chugged its contents in less than ten seconds.

"I'll drink to that!"

John, our bassist, nodded then chugged his beer half way and spilled the rest on the red sofa we were sitting on.

"Watch it, John! You almost got beer on my guitar, man!"

I hadn't quite slipped off my guitar yet. I usually didn't put it down until after I had a few minutes to sit comfortably and reflect.

"Whatever, Benny! We're rock stars now! You can buy as many guitars as you want, man!"

John chugged another beer and back flipped onto an armchair.

"Right. Whatever you say, John."

I never knew the right words to say to John when he was acting like an ass so I'd just say the same line as many times as I needed to.

"Okay, guys. You have one more performance tomorrow night and then we're off to Sweden!"

Artie gave us a big thumbs up and stepped out into the hallway to make a call.

"Oh, man I sure hope I get to score with some hot Swedish chick! Maybe two or three hot Swedish chicks!"

John had a big, goofy smile on his face. He casually sipped his third beer and leaned back in the armchair.

“Yeah I hear those Swedish girls are well versed in the erotic arts.”

Mike chimed in.

“You think everyone is well versed in the erotic arts, Mike!”

Dan could always sniff out Mike’s bullshit.

“Well... I know there’s gotta’ be at least one girl in every city or town who is well versed. That’s just plain mathematical deduction.”

Mike pulled off his sweat drenched shirt and pulled on a dry one.

“If you’re talking about sluts then yes I do believe you’re right.”

I got in my two cents while placing my guitar back in its case.

“Right on, Benny! Right on, Mike! I think I’ll go scare up some Japanese sluts now.”

John leapt out of the armchair, tried to slick back his sweaty hair and ran out of the dressing room chanting: “Sluts! Sluts! Sluts! Sluts!”

“I hope he doesn’t get too wild tonight.”

Dan poked his head into the hallway and watched John run out of sight.

“I’m pretty sure he will. He always does.”

Me, Dan and Mike had the same look of disappointment in our eyes.

A few hours later we were back at the hotel and each in our respective rooms. We had decided to meet up downstairs in the hotel’s karaoke bar. Normally I would have passed on going to a karaoke bar but a Japanese karaoke bar is significantly different than an American one. I took a very quick shower and changed into suitable attire; which was nothing more than sneakers, blue jeans, a black sweater and a black baseball cap.

As I walked towards the elevator I could hear a couple arguing loudly in one of the rooms. I had no idea what they were saying because they were arguing in Japanese. I shrugged it off and pressed the appropriate button to summon the elevator. The doors slid open much quicker than I anticipated and I strolled right in. Just as the doors were closing I heard a woman shout something in Japanese. She sounded like she was running

down the hallway towards the elevator. I guessed that she wanted to get on the elevator and so I quickly paused it for her.

She literally jumped in and grabbed onto me to prevent herself from falling. We both fell backwards as the doors slid closed. I helped her up and asked her if she was all right. I wasn't sure if she understood English at all. Luckily, she did.

“Oh yes I'm fine. Very fine. Thank you for asking and for holding the elevator for me.”

She sounded out of breath and looked a little tired. The red cocktail dress she was wearing sparkled under the fluorescent lights of the elevator; without the aid of sequins. She slipped off her red high heels and rubbed the soles of her feet individually.

“I'll never run in heels again. I don't think my feet are meant for heels.”

She looked up at me and smiled.

I tried to think of something to say but was blindsided by her sheer beauty.

Twenty One

“Are you one of those strong silent types?”

She asked while slipping her heels back on. She had a very interesting accent. It sounded slightly British but I wasn't sure. I do know she definitely wasn't Japanese. Her long blond hair and tanned skin stood out more than I did.

“I'd say I'm silent but not very strong.”

I managed to choke out an answer. It wasn't a very good answer but good enough I suppose.

“Oh I beg to differ. You were strong enough to hold the elevator for me and catch me when I jumped in. I know plenty of men who would never have done what you did.”

She smoothed down some wrinkles in her dress and ran her hands through her golden locks.

“Really? Wow.”

“I'm Teresa by the way.”

She extended me her right hand. I gently shook it and tried my best not to stare at her too long.

“I'm Benny. Nice to meet you, Teresa. So uh who were you running from? If you don't mind me asking.”

“Oh I don’t mind. I was running from my ass of a boyfriend. He just gets out of control every time he drinks and does coke.”

“Coke? As in cocaine or coca-cola?”

“Cocaine. Yes, my boyfriend is a coke head. At least by most standards he is. I mean I’ve tried to get him to stop but he swears that he needs it to get through the day. I guess I’ve kind of gotten used to him doing it but I still wish he’d stop.”

Ding! The elevator reached the first floor lobby and the doors gracefully slid open. Teresa stepped out first then looked back at me.

“Hey, Benny! Would you like to have a drink with me in the hotel bar?”

“Well... I’m not sure.”

I hesitated mostly because I didn’t want to anger her coked-up boyfriend.

“Please? Just one drink. I don’t have anywhere to go right now and I really don’t want to wander around a city that I’m not familiar with.”

She batted her eyelashes. I couldn’t tell if she was being manipulative or sincere. Now that I look back I believe she was manipulatively sincere.

“Well... okay I guess. I’m meeting my friends there anyway.”

“Okay, good. I can tell them about how you helped me and all that. And I’ll buy the first round.”

She grabbed my hand and led the way to the Happy Samurai bar.

As we walked in I scanned around for any sign of Mike or Dan but they hadn’t arrived yet. Teresa and I sat in the first empty booth we spotted. The place looked pretty full.

“The Japanese take their karaoke pretty seriously. I hear they even have annual competitions that last for a whole month.”

Teresa saw by the look on my face that I had no clue about Japanese karaoke.

The waitress finally approached our booth and spoke to us in Japanese at first then in broken English. Teresa ordered some kind of mixed drink with a weird name and I ordered a Budweiser. Both the waitress and Teresa immediately laughed.

“What? What’s so funny?”

I asked.

“They only serve Japanese beer in this bar. I’m sorry I should have told you.”

“Oh okay then I’ll have whatever Japanese beer is the most popular.”

Teresa smiled at me then turned to the waitress and said something to her in Japanese. The waitress giggled then fled to the bar area.

“What did you say to her?”

“Oh nothing much. I just told her to bring you one of my personal favorite beers.”

“Oh? Then why did she giggle?”

“You’ll see why when she brings it.”

Some loud Japanese pop music began to play throughout the bar while we waited for our drinks.

“I assume this is your first time in Japan. Correct?”

Teresa moved closer to me in order to be heard over the music.

“Yes. Yes it is. How about you? It’s obvious it’s not your first time.”

“Definitely not my first time in Japan. But it is my first time in this particular city.”

I tried to say something witty but the loud pop song drowned me out. I don’t even remember what I said but I do recall it wasn’t very witty. It was probably best that Teresa didn’t hear it. I already felt like a dumb tourist at that point.

“So what brings you to Japan, Benny?”

Teresa began fiddling with a bowl of peanuts in the center of the table.

“Uh business mostly.”

I grabbed a handful of peanuts then chucked them into my mouth.

“Oh? What kind of business are you in?”

She really looked interested if not semi-interested in learning more about me.

“Oh uh I’m a writer and I’m doing research for a book.”

I don't know why I didn't tell her the truth. For some reason the truth was not in my vernacular that night.

"Really? That sounds awesome! I've always wanted to meet a real live writer."

Teresa smiled then popped a peanut in her mouth.

"Yeah... thanks. We're a weird bunch."

"Who?"

"Us writers. Most of us are pretty weird."

"I don't think so. Writers are very observant individuals who always see every underlining detail of reality. Sometimes I like to believe that everything in existence was at one point written into existence. You know what I mean?"

I knew exactly what she meant and I was stupefied by the manner in which she explained herself.

"I know exactly what you mean."

I responded with a fervent nod.

"Oh good! Look here comes the waitress with our drinks!"

She waved at the waitress as she approached us. The waitress looked somewhat different; I could not tell if she was our original waitress or not. She placed Teresa's tropical looking drink in front of her and then placed a silver and red capsule down in front of me. Teresa paid the waitress and bade her farewell.

"Uh... what is this thing?"

I stared dumbfounded at the capsule before me. It looked like something out of a really bad futuristic science fiction movie.

"That's your beer, Benny. Pop the top by pressing the little red button on the side of it."

Teresa guided my finger along the side of it and I immediately pushed the red button. The next thing I knew some red confetti shot out and a red plastic face stuck out its tongue at me!

"What the-!"

I jumped underneath the table. I was really freaked out. I wish I hadn't ducked under the table like some five year old but it was an involuntary response. Teresa had a good laugh over the whole thing.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh that was so great! That makes me laugh hysterically every time!"

She held her sides. I wasn't at all mad at her for playing a little practical joke on me. Her intoxicating laughter more than made up for it.

"Uh yeah that was pretty great. So what is this thing?"

"Ha, ha, ha! It's a Japanese beer called *Happy Surprise!* Every time you open one there's some new surprise that pops out. I mostly like watching the reactions of people who have never opened one before! Ha, ha!"

"Heh. Yeah I must admit it was quite entertaining."

I brushed some confetti off my head and shoulders then picked up the remaining brown beer bottle and took a big swig.

"Wow not only is this beer funny but it tastes pretty good too!"

"Of course. The Japanese also take their brewing pretty seriously."

Upon drinking half of my beer I became I bit more talkative and wanted to know more about Teresa.

"So, what country are you from?"

I asked.

"I was born in Sydney, Australia but moved to London with my family at the age of eight."

"Really? That sounds pretty cool. I figured you were British but your accent does sound a lot more Australian than British."

I tried to speak in a much more smooth tone. I still don't know if I pulled it off or not.

"Yeah my mum is from Australia but my dad is British. When I was a little girl he forced us to move to London."

Teresa removed a chunk of pineapple from her drink and bit into half of it.

"He forced you? How did he do that?"

“Well, he owed money to a lot of people in Australia. Mostly relatives. I guess he just didn’t feel safe anymore.”

“Ah. That must have been hard on you as a kid.”

I gulped down the last few drops of my beer.

“Yeah it was at first but I soon made lots of new friends in London. I still keep in touch with all of my friends from high school.”

Teresa turned her head towards one of the waitresses and signaled something to her.

“Would you like another beer, Benny?”

She asked me while gingerly touching my arm.

“Uh yeah sure.”

Another waitress approached us and nodded at everything Teresa told her. She then scurried off to put in our second round order.

“So, how did you get involved with that coke head boyfriend of yours?”

I asked.

“Oh... he wasn’t always into drugs. I think the very first time he did coke was the day after his parents died in an awful car wreck.”

“Oh I’m sorry to hear that. So it was depression that drove him to use coke?”

“Yeah... among other things but that was one of the main contributing factors.”

Three drinks later, Teresa became much more affectionate towards me. She proceeded to stroke my arm and rub my shoulders.

“Wow! You have a ton of tension in your shoulders, Benny. Are you sure you’re just a writer?”

She asked.

“Uh... yeah. Hey look I think they’re starting the karaoke!”

I pointed at a group of Japanese businessmen walking on stage. They all looked sufficiently drunk. One of them even slipped and fell off to the side. It was pretty hilarious.

“Oh that poor little man. I hope he’s all right.”

Teresa looked concernedly towards the stage.

“I’m pretty sure he’s fine. Besides, he didn’t spill one drop of his drink.”

“Oh my goodness! Now that takes talent.”

We both paid attention as the sloshed group slurred out a rendition of a Michael Jackson song. A couple of them even mimicked some of Michael’s infamous dance moves. Needless to say, they did not pull them off successfully. But it was still fun to watch them try.

I glanced at my wristwatch and realized I had been in the bar for an hour and had yet to see any sign of Dan or Mike. For a minute I thought I was in the wrong bar but then I immediately noticed Mike run in and scan around quickly for me.

“Benny! There you are!”

He shouted then ran up to our booth. He looked surprised when he saw me seated next to Teresa.

“Hey, Mike. What’s up? Were you in the wrong bar? I’ve been waiting for you guys for an hour. Where’s Dan?”

I slid down to allow Mike to join us in the booth. He quickly smiled at Teresa and introduced himself.

“Hey there. I’m Mike.”

“Hello, Mike! My name’s Teresa. Nice to meet you.”

Teresa extended her hand to him but he was too busy catching his breath to shake it. He looked like he had been running all around Japan. I grabbed a pitcher of water from the empty table behind us and handed it to Mike. He took six big gulps then spoke again.

“Dan... is in trouble. John is... gone.”

He gasped in between his words.

“Huh? What do you mean? What happened?”

I was intrigued by Mike’s hasty summary but not really worried. He and Dan were always playing practical jokes on me so it eventually became difficult for me to decipher whether they were being honest at all times while we were on tour.

“Excuse me, boys. I need to use the powder room. You know what they say about drinks... you don't buy them you rent them. Ha, ha! I'll be right back.”

Teresa got up from the booth and walked away. Mike briefly admired her backside.

“Nice. She's smokin' hot, Benny! Where'd you meet her? Is she Australian?”

He seemed to have regained his normal speech pattern.

“Yes, she is Australian but that's not important right now. What exactly happened to Dan?”

“Dan was caught shoplifting some kind of miniature TV thing.”

Mike spotted the bowl of peanuts in front of him and shoved a few in his mouth.

“What? Why would he shoplift at all? He wasn't being a cheap bastard again was he?”

“Nah, man. You know how much Dan likes the adrenaline rush he gets from stealing things. He said he wanted to know what it felt like to shoplift in another country.”

“He's an idiot. He's a cool guy but very much an idiot.”

I remarked.

Mike nodded his head in agreement then continued his explanation.

“I really didn't think he was gonna' steal anything so I was surprised when we stepped out of the gift shop and ended up being chased by ten security guards.”

“They chased you guys? Where?”

“Just around the hotel parking lot mostly but then Dan made a break for it and ran across the street and several blocks down towards the beach. Then they swarmed around Dan and tackled him in the sand.”

“What about? Did they tackle you?”

“Nah, man. They stopped chasing me when Dan taunted them with the thing he stole.”

Mike grabbed one of my empty beer bottles and tried to coax out a drop or two but had no luck in doing so.

“So where is Dan now?”

“Probably in jail. I don’t know which jail though.”

“Great. That’s just great.”

My disappointment was interrupted by the sound of some high pitched screaming coming from the stage. It was a woman in a red dress shrieking out a Mariah Carey song. It was Teresa! She was definitely not at all musically inclined. But the crowd began clapping and cheering her on anyway. Though, their cheers were mostly due to her suggestive dance moves.

“Damn, man! She really knows how to shake it!”

Mike commented after confusedly placing his drink order with an affable waitress.

Upon completing her motley rendition, Teresa tried to dry hump the stage then gave up and fell asleep next to the teleprompter. She still had the microphone firmly clutched in her left hand.

Twenty Two

Not much else happened after that. Mike and I helped Teresa get back to her hotel room. She was drunk but still strong enough to resist for a good couple of minutes. When we got inside her room there was no sign of her coked-up boyfriend but he did leave her a note on the mini-fridge.

He only wrote one sentence: *I'm leaving*. Then signed it with his initials and a disfigured smiley face.

“Stay with me, Benny. Please. I’m not used to sleeping alone.”

Teresa muttered as I helped her get into bed. Mike had already left to go see about bailing out Dan from jail. Dan had actually called Mike from the Japanese police headquarters and left him a voicemail stating where he was and how much his bail would be.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Teresa. You’re drunk and need to sleep it off.”

I pulled the covers over her then sat at the foot of the bed.

“I’m not asking you to have *sex* with me, Benny! I just want you to stay and sleep with me. You do know the difference between *sex* and *sleep* don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

I walked around to the other side of the bed and slowly climbed in.

“Don’t be shy. Get closer to me.”

Teresa grabbed my shirt and I moved closer to her. She then wrapped her arms around me and let out a big sigh of relief.

“You’re a really great guy, Benny. I know you’re not really a writer but you are a great guy.”

She sank into a deep slumber.

I awoke early the following morning so as not to disturb Teresa from her alcohol induced coma. Plus... I did not want to stick around there any longer than was necessary in case her coked-up boyfriend decided to come groveling back. I made a mad dash down the hallway and into my room. I then grabbed my unpacked luggage and guitar case and got the hell out of there.

Of course on my way down to the lobby Jeffrey felt it prudent enough to give me a little lecture of sorts.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Benny?”

“What? Oh don’t bother me now, Jeffrey.”

“Hey, I’ve been good so far about keeping my opinions to myself on this tour. I’d say I’ve done a very good job at keeping up my end of the bargain. Wouldn’t you say so?”

“Uh... yeah I suppose so.”

The elevator felt like it was slowing down somewhat.

“Damn straight, Benny! Now then the way I see it is you’re about to pass up an awesome opportunity! Possibly a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about that fine piece of Australian ass!”

“Teresa? Yeah she’s hot but I’m pretty sure she was just using me as protection from her insane boyfriend.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. If you just play your hand right you should still stand a chance. The odds are pretty much in your favor, Benny.”

The elevator doors opened and I stepped out into the lobby. The smell of cheap coffee wafted past me.

“Come on now, Benny. What’s the use of being a rock star if you’re not going to have sex with at least one sexy girl while on tour?”

I don’t know why exactly but Jeffrey made a lot of sense at that precise moment. I stepped back onto the elevator and returned to the fourteenth floor. I approached Teresa’s room and knocked on the door. She opened the door and instantly knew why I had returned.

Twenty Three

For the majority of my life I let my ego do most of the work for me. Until I eventually had to reign it in and think of more promising endeavors. Most of us choose to believe in very limiting concepts and ideals. I too once believed in such nonsense. It eventually got to me. I mean it *really* got to me.

As I write this my essence is as pure as it ever was. I suppose it has been my own personal mission to make sure I do not lose it. There is no greater injustice in this world than when a man loses his soul. If anyone tries to coax you into being complacent I'd recommend punching them in the face or groin. It is usually the one action that they respond to the most.

I am not preaching violence; nor do I like the concept of preaching. I am stating my own fact. I say fact and not opinion because I have decided that I am through with opinions. They no longer serve much purpose anyway. Perhaps, at some point they did play an integral role during the formative years of mankind but now they grow stale.

Okay, okay. So I am not purposefully ranting or raving here; but if it helps you to better understand yourself then I see no downside to such a thing. To each his own.

A couple of weeks ago an old friend of mine was in town for the holiday weekend. His name is Louis and he works as a recruiter for the army so he's always being moved around the country by Uncle Sam. We've been pals since about seventh grade. Well, we first met each other in fifth grade but didn't officially start hanging out until seventh grade. I guess you could say I kind of saved his life.

The middle school we attended was pretty well known for being overpopulated with bullies. I suppose it had a lot to do with the surrounding crime and pollution. It was a veritable breeding ground for all sorts of negative beings. But that's a whole other story altogether.

One day Louis was sitting outside on a bench. He wasn't bothering anyone. He was just enjoying his usual peanut butter and jelly sandwich that his Mom always made for him. He pretty much kept to himself back then and so did I. But on this particular day I happened to look up from my own dismal lunch and notice Louis being picked on by one of the school's most notorious bullies... Paul Luther.

Paul had Louis in a headlock and did not look like he planned on letting go of poor, struggling Louis. At first, I tried to ignore the matter because that was pretty much what everyone did when they saw someone being tormented by a bully. And a bully like Paul Luther commanded a huge amount of fear and intimidation. I mean even the teachers and administrative staff quivered at the mere mention of his name.

Now, I'm not exactly sure what prompted me to ignore the usual etiquette on that day but I do know that as soon as I saw Paul punch Louis square in the nose I felt a fire ignite within me. For a split second I thought it was my bean burrito kicking in but quickly dismissed that notion because it didn't feel like that kind of fire. Then Paul punched Louis in the jaw and right eye. Louis fell back and landed face down in a patch of wet grass. Paul just pointed and laughed at his recent victim.

That is when I charged head on into Paul's back. He fell forward but stuck his hands out and pushed himself back up in no time at all. A crowd began to form as soon as someone had noticed me head-butt Paul. Paul stared deep into my eyes and curled his upper lip. He opened his mouth to utter some kind of insult but stopped and turned towards where Louis was laying. We both gasped as soon as we saw no sign of Louis within the same area. The crowd was now significantly larger and each student in the crowd also gasped.

Except their reason for gasping was the sight of Louis pointing a gun at the back of Paul's head. Of course it wasn't a real gun but it sure looked like a real gun to the rest of us. Louis's uncle had a very extensive toy gun collection and Louis just happened to have brought one with him to school that day for a paper he had written about the history of toy guns.

Louis uttered a couple of threatening words and Paul ran away at break-neck speed. The entire student body had a good laugh once Louis admitted the gun was a toy replica of a World War II pistol. He graciously thanked me for coming to his aid and we immediately struck up a friendship. From then on we spent most of our time hiding and running from Paul Luther and his minion. It wasn't until our freshman year of high school that Paul was finally sent to a school for juvenile delinquents after being arrested for stealing and wrecking the principal's Mercedes.

Anyway... we had a fairly good conversation during his visit.

“How’s it goin’, Benny?”

Louis asked while lining up his shot. He practically stared straight into the heart of the cue ball.

“All right. Everything is all right. So far.”

I fiddled with a bottle cap I had found on the floor.

“That’s cool. You working on any interesting projects lately?”

Louis struck the cue ball and watched it ricochet off a striped ball then come to a halt towards the center of the billiards table.

“Yeah... I guess. I’ve just been doing a ton of painting and writing.”

“Oh? What kind of painting? What kind of writing?”

“Mostly abstract painting and been writing short stories, poems and I’m also working on a novel.”

“A novel? Sounds cool. What’s it about?”

He set down his cue stick and readjusted his Yankees baseball cap.

“It’s about many different things... there’s no exact central plot to it.”

“Oh? So is it fiction or non-fiction?”

I took a shot at an orange solid ball but the cue ball narrowly missed it.

“I haven’t decided yet. I suppose it could be considered semi-fiction but that might be stretching it.”

Louis stared at me blankly before uttering a response.

“Hmmm... sounds great, Benny. I’d like to read it as soon as it’s finished.”

“Yeah definitely. So how’s life in Colorado been treating you?”

“It’s... all right. Kind of boring but very peaceful.”

He looked back down at the table and eyed his next shot.

“Well there’s nothing wrong with peace.”

“Yeah I suppose. I’ve just been finding it difficult to sit around the house for days at a time. I mean I go out for hikes as much as possible but I still find the majority of time being divided between my career and my family.”

He struck the cue ball with a good amount of force and two striped balls fell into two corner pockets simultaneously.

“Ah. Yeah that does sound difficult.”

“I do love my wife and son dearly but I just... I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to adjust to the quiet family life.”

“I hear ya. I truly understand. Your priorities are different now. They are not different in a good way or in a bad way. They’re just different.”

“Yes. Exactly. It’s like... I wish I could just take a magic pill that will instantly make me adapt to being a family man. But I know that such a pill obviously doesn’t exist.”

“Yeah. The closest thing to a pill like that is booze.”

I replied while holding up my bottle of Budweiser. It gleamed a little underneath the dimmed fluorescent lights of the pool hall.

“Ha, ha! That is *very* true! Booze, booze and more booze!”

I beat Louis at billiards that night but he beat me in life and love.

Twenty Four

“Happy Birthday, Jacqueline!”

A large group of people cheered and shouted simultaneously. I looked around the room I was now in and was surprised to see a birthday banner hanging overhead. I tapped the shoulder of some guy with an afro standing in front of me.

“Hey uh whose birthday party is this?”

“Huh? It’s Jacqueline’s. She’s the hot girl who’s just about to blow out the candles on the birthday cake.”

“Jacqueline’s birthday? But how can that be?”

The afro guy looked at me like I had lobsters crawling out of my ears then swiftly made his way towards the far right corner of the room.

I studied the decorations a bit more closely and noticed the majority of balloons were emblazoned with the words HAPPY 21ST BIRTHDAY JACQUELINE!

“But how can this be? I thought I missed Jacqueline’s birthday party but yet here I am.”

I observed closely as Jacqueline blew out the candles on a rather big, rather pink birthday cake. She then looked over at me and winked. I don’t know if she was trying to signal to me or if she was partially drunk. I walked up to her as she made the first incision into the cake.

“Happy birthday, Jacqueline.”

I whispered into her left ear. She smiled and hugged me.

“Thank you, Benny. Thanks for helping my uncle with the party. Oh and thank you for the gift.”

I paused a second. I wasn't quite sure what she had just said but I did vaguely remember something about her uncle, who was also my landlord, throwing her a surprise party. And as for the gift she spoke of...

"Oh uh you're welcome. But what gift are you talking about?"

"You know what gift. The painting you gave me. I know I don't know much about art but I think it's very pretty."

"Painting? You don't mean the painting I did of you?"

"Yes, the very same one."

I had pretty much forgotten about that painting. I certainly did not seriously consider giving it to Jacqueline as a gift. But I suppose during my absence it seemed like the most logical gift choice.

"Oh. Excuse me for a minute."

I pushed past a group of drunken acquaintances and made my way into the bathroom. I noticed some of Jacqueline's feminine things flung over the side of the bath tub. I splashed some cold water on my face and stared deep into the mirror.

"All right, Jeffrey. I need some answers here. What's going on?"

"Huh? What do you mean what's going on? You're at Jacqueline's birthday party."

Jeffrey's voice echoed around me.

"Well that's obvious! I know where I am but what I don't know is how I got here. I mean... less than a day ago I was a year and a half into the future."

"Whatever, Benny. You did not travel into the future."

"Yes I did! Jacqueline and I live together and she's pregnant."

"She's pregnant?!"

"A year and a half from now she will be."

"Oh? Well as far as I can tell you haven't been anywhere else but in the present, Benny."

Somehow, at that point, I found it hard to believe anything that Jeffrey told me. Even though he was my own subconscious... it was getting harder to trust him.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

“Hey, Benny! Mang, are choo still in the bathroom?”

Raul pounded on the bathroom door.

“Huh? Uh yeah I’m in here, Raul.”

“Oh okay. I don’t mean to hurry you or anything, Benny. But I uh really have to go number two.”

“Huh? Number two? Really?”

“Yes! Number two! I really have to go!”

Raul pounded on the door again but this time much more rapidly.

“All right. All right. I’ll be out in a second.”

I briefly analyzed the residual soap scum left around the drain in the sink before exiting the bathroom.

“Bathroom’s all yours, Raul.”

“Thanks, Benny.”

Raul pushed past an overweight woman and sped headlong into the bathroom. I walked over to the refreshments table and fixed myself a rum and coke. I glanced at some of the other party goers. There was a middle aged couple sitting on the couch laughing and smiling for some reason. A man in a purple suit stood next to the entertainment center and seemed to be hitting on a rather exotic looking female in a dark red dress. She looked desperate to get away from him. I turned away from the refreshments table and noticed the guy with the afro whom I had met earlier. He was standing on his head and attempting to perform a break dance routine but there wasn’t enough room for him to maneuver properly. Everyone else cheered him on then laughed hysterically when he banged his ankle against a small bronze chair.

“He is actually a very good break dancer but I think he is too drunk right now. Ha, ha.”

Raul crept up behind me and slapped me on the back.

“Huh? Oh really?”

I asked semi-startled.

“Yeah, Mang. He has won a lot of competitions too.”

Raul reached into a blue cooler and pulled out a bottle of some kind of imported beer.

“Cool. What’s his name?”

“Oh uh I think Ralph or Randy or something.”

Raul twisted off the top of the beer bottle and took a long swig from it. I got a better look at the label on the bottle. It was a Japanese brand of beer. The very same beer I drank while touring in Japan. I was suddenly reminded of the night I spent with Teresa.

“Where’d you get that beer, Raul?”

“From the blue cooler over there. You want one?”

“No. What I meant to say was where was that beer purchased?”

“Oh uh I don’t know, Mang. Someone else brought it. I think it tastes pretty good though. You should try it.”

“Well I have tried it before.”

“Oh yeah? When?”

“When I was touring with my band in Japan.”

“Oh really? You have been to Japan? I did not know that. I bet it is a pretty interesting country.”

“Um yeah it is quite fascinating. The Japanese definitely know how to appreciate good music.”

“Oh yeah I bet. So did you meet any beautiful girls over there?”

Raul took another swig of the Japanese beer and grabbed a handful of pretzels from a large ceramic bowl.

“Yes I did. But she wasn’t really my type.”

As soon as I uttered the last word of that sentence Jacqueline walked over to me and flung her arms around me.

“Thanks for coming to my birthday party, Benny. I know... I know that you know that I know I like all kinds of parties.”

Clearly she was smashed. Her breath smelled like vodka and generic cranberry juice.

“Yes, yes. I know, Jacqueline.”

I patted her head gently.

Twenty Five

“Hey, Benny. Benny, wake up.”

A sultry voice whispered to me. I groggily opened my eyes and found myself surrounded by darkness.

“Huh? What? Where am I? Why is it so dark?”

I sat up and felt around for whoever was lying next to me. I rubbed my eyes.

“It’s dark because the shades are drawn and you’re still wearing that eye mask, Silly Benny.”

Only one person ever called me Silly Benny.

“Cyndi? Is that you?”

I pulled off the eye mask and felt a sharp pain on my right cheek. I touched the affected area and was surprised by a large swelled bump.

“Ow! What the hell? Why do I have this contusion? And what are you doing here, Cyndi?”

“We live together, Silly Benny. I guess that guy punched you harder than I thought. Let me kiss it for you.”

Cyndi leaned in and kissed the bump on my face. It stung but felt all right at the same time.

“Huh? What guy? Who would punch me?”

The pain of the shiner was beginning to give me a migraine. I got up out of bed; Cyndi's bed. I was quickly assaulted by bright vivid colors. Cyndi liked the kind of colors that invaded one's senses.

"That guy at the club last night that was hitting on me. Remember? He tried to get rough with me but then you stood up to him and he knocked you out with one punch."

I tried very hard to comprehend what Cyndi was saying to me. After five minutes or so... I was finally flooded with the exact memory of which she spoke. It seems I had somehow traveled further back in time to when my relationship, admittedly my first real relationship, with Cyndi was still pretty fresh.

I had actually specifically traveled back to the morning after I had been assaulted by a rather large and angry ex-football player. I was always getting into scrapes while out on the town with Cyndi. Well... they were much more than scrapes. I don't know why but there was just something about Cyndi that just seemed to bring out the primitive urge to fight in all men.

Sure her looks played some part in the whole process but there was always something else at work. She would use her feminine wiles to her advantage and then some. It was the 'then some' that always drove men to destructive tendencies. Very rarely did she consciously influence men; she's really never had to. Like I already stated, there was just something about her that would revert men back to a very primal state.

"If you don't feel like going to the beach today I can go by myself." Cyndi went into the walk-in closet to change into her bikini.

"Beach? What beach? We don't live anywhere near the beach."

I flung open the dark blue shades of Cyndi's bedroom window only to find that the coast line was a mere half mile from our neighborhood. I was immediately perplexed by the state of things.

"How? I could've sworn we never lived this close to any beach."

My head was throbbing. I rubbed my temples then Cyndi walked out of the closet sporting a purple and black bikini. She kissed me directly on the lips then rubbed my shoulders in a fluid motion.

"We've always lived near the beach, Benny. Well, ever since you asked me to marry you after graduation."

“Since I what? What the hell are you talking about?”

I pulled away from her and ran out into the living room. I examined the furniture; none of it was familiar. I glanced at some photos hanging over the mantel and they were all photos of some older couple and their daughter.

“Are you okay, Benny? Why are you acting so weird?”

Cyndi admired her hair in a hallway mirror then stepped into the living room. But something was off. I didn’t know exactly what until she finally stepped out of the shadows and into the sunlight. She was not Cyndi! She was an impostor! A damn good impostor but an impostor nonetheless.

“Who... who are you? I... I don’t know you!”

I shouted then made my way towards the front door.

“What do you mean you don’t know me, Benny? Of course you know me! I’m Cyndi! We’re married. We’ve been married for the past twenty five years.”

The impostor Cyndi had a very sincere look about her but I decided not to read too much into it.

“Now I know you’re lying! There’s no way I could be married to someone for so long and still be in my mid-twenties. You’re lying to me! You’re an impostor!”

I grabbed the doorknob of the front door and slowly turned it. The impostor Cyndi stopped me and escorted me over to a large mirror which was hanging in the den area.

“Look at yourself in the mirror, Benny! Look! I am no impostor!”

She pushed me and pinched me until I looked at my own reflection. But all I saw was a gray haired, out of shape man who looked worn out and beaten down by time’s remorseless hand.

“Who... who is that man?”

My whole body trembled and the reflection of the old man trembled in unison.

“That’s you, Benny. That’s you.”

The impostor Cyndi was now starting to sound much more like the real Cyndi. I stared down at her feet then slowly up her legs then up her torso and held my gaze on her breasts. I could tell now that she was no longer in her twenties either but time had been much kinder to her than to me. She then grabbed my face and looked deep into my eyes. She still had some of that ‘then some’ quality left in her face.

“Cyndi? Is it really you? Is it really me?”

“Yes, Benny. It’s really me. It’s really you.”

Cyndi hugged me tight.

“It *is* you! I missed you, Cyndi.”

“I never left you, Benny.”

“I know that now but it feels like you did. It must’ve been a dream. I dreamt it all up.”

I kissed Cyndi’s face and embraced her tighter.

All of a sudden the front door swung violently open and a mysterious figure emerged.

“Don’t believe anything she tells you, Benny! She’s a fraud and this entire place is an illusion!”

Twenty Six

“All of mankind will turn its back on you. All of society will bury you six feet under. Humanity will crawl deep, deep down inside you and lay its fertilized eggs in your subconscious. It will not matter if you want it to happen or not, no. The odds are stacked against you; always. I say this not just to be negative but to warn you and possibly prepare you. Though, you and I both know that there is no way to prepare for such a cataclysm. Still... there’s no harm in exercising futility. You may not believe me whole heartedly now but such is your right to not believe whatever I tell you. I do not wish to tell you what to do or think. I do

not wish to control you. Some people enjoy some level of control but even they are not meant to be controlled forever. People are not quite as complex as they want to be but it is usually best to let them think they are. The ego can either be a strong villain or a powerful hero. And yes... the ego is most definitely real. It is not real by human standards of real but it is still very much alive in every individual. It will always have a place to reside. There's no sense in denying this, no sense at all. You might be thinking to yourself right now that you can overcome this impediment. But I am here to tell you that you cannot. And it is not an impediment but rather more of a teacher. That would be the best way to describe it to you humans. Throughout time and space it has been known by many names and archetypes but they all inevitably lead right back to the same word... teacher. This is not mere speculation. I do not speculate. The entirety of existence does not speculate. It is incapable of such fallibility. Sure, the majority likes to believe in imperfection and surprises because that is what the majority has been raised on. Again, I do not wish to tell you what to think but I must tell you that this form of thinking is quite close to extinction. If it were entirely up to me I would have erased this form of thinking from the mainstream of human consciousness millions of years ago. But it has never been entirely up to me. The limitations that surround you are there for a very real purpose. Yes, you can deny and deny until you are blue in the face or red in the face. But denial can only take you so far, so fast until you run out of steam and have no other option but to embrace everything you once denied. You see... the human race has been locked into a state of perpetual learning for way longer than what is written about in the history books. And just like the bell that rings at the end of each class so too will mankind's own internal bell ring. You may ponder this however you wish; it won't diminish the inevitable metamorphosis."

"I see. And it is all just *that* certain?"

Smoke billowed around the dark room we were now occupying. I now knew not where I was but I did not care.

"Yes. It is all *that* certain. It is actually *more* certain than what you are currently capable of comprehending."

The majority of the smoke traversed around the figure's head.

"How is it that you know all of this?"

“How could I *not* know all of this? I too was once like you and your entire race. I wallowed around in limited consciousness for many centuries. Then one day I decided that enough was enough and just like that I transcended all the barriers that most third dimensional beings put up with.”

“Really? But... how?”

“The how is not important. It is different for every individual. No two people can transcend in the same manner.”

“I see. So, why are you telling me this? I don’t think I’m the one whom you should be telling this to. I mean shouldn’t you tell this to the president or somebody like that?”

“Ha! The president doesn’t give a crap about such things! Besides, he is well aware of what I speak of. He is well aware and yet chooses to ignore it all; just like every president before him.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You are exactly the kind of person who I *should* be conversing with.”

“Oh? And what kind of person would that be?”

“Why... the very kind that you are, Benny.”

The billowing smoke now appeared to be forming different shapes. A medium sized rectangle appeared and drifted past us.

“Well what kind of person am I?”

“You should know the answer to that. But if you don’t then it’s time you start finding out for yourself.”

A large circle formed around the figure’s head then gracefully evaporated. I stared at it in silent awe.

“Fair enough. So then where the hell am I right now?”

“I cannot answer that.”

“Oh come on now I’m sure you can.”

“No I cannot. Where we are right now has no lasting dimension or space.”

“Huh? How is that possible?”

“It’s possible. It is more possible than most possible ideals.”

I cracked my knuckles and tried to stare past the mystifying smoke.

“So is it safe to assume that we are in the space between space?”

“It would not be safe to assume anything but if it makes it easier for you to grasp then yes that would be all right.”

Neither of us spoke a word for the next few minutes. But those few minutes seemed to stretch to unthinkable limits. Then the next question popped into my head. Some might say the ‘mother-load’ of questions.

“So then are you saying that there is a reason for everything? A meaning to it all?”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“What’s so funny?”

“Your questioning! It is easy for me to forget that you humans have been cut off from true knowledge for millions and millions of years.”

“Oh uh yeah I guess we have been taught to believe in many foolish ideals.”

“Yes, very foolish ideals.”

“So then...”

“Then?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Oh I’m sorry. In a roundabout sort of way... yes there is a reason for everything. But it is not quite what you’ve been led to believe.”

Now the smoke began to take on irregular shapes and mimicked some of my own hand gestures. I found it quite intriguing.

“I see. Well what is with this whole duality business?”

“Duality?”

“Yeah duality. You know up, down, black, white, right, left. Opposites.”

“Ah yes! It has been eons since I have personally dealt with duality but I do have some residual memory of it.”

“Eons? Wow it must be cool to have existed for that long.”

“Cool? Well I suppose so. Eventually the entire human race will evolve to the point where duality will be nothing more than a distant memory.”

“Yeah that does seem pretty logical. That’s pretty much the way I’ve always viewed things.”

“Yes I know. That is one of the qualities which makes you the kind of person who would take to heart what I have to share.”

“But how do you know? Have you been stalking me or something?”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha! I have no reason to do such a thing. The entire human race has had a watchful eye overhead for... well since the first homosapien was able to vocalize his needs and wants.”

“Oh. You mean there are other beings like yourself who keep watch over us?”

“Sure. You bet. But not just beings like myself. There are plenty of interplanetary and interdimensional peoples keeping watch over you.”

“Really? Then why can’t we see any of them?”

“They do not make themselves visible to you. They are not allowed to interfere with your evolutionary path. But rest assured, they are all around you and your beautiful Mother Earth.”

“So they can’t help us in any physical manner?”

“No not at all. But that doesn’t mean they don’t help you in other ways.”

“Oh? In what other ways *do* they help us?”

“You would not believe me even if I wanted to tell you.”

The strange figure was right. I had a hard enough time trying to swallow most of what he had initially divulged to me.

Buzzzzz! Buzzzzz!

The dark room vibrated and buzzed in unison. An intense flurry of colors exploded out of nothingness and enveloped my whole essence. It felt warm and a bit tingly at first but then it felt like... like someone had flipped some great cosmic switch and the resulting energy was now wrapping around the entirety of existence.

Twenty Seven

Sunlight invaded my perspective. It felt good on my cheeks. There was an air of elation floating about and I felt as though I had been awoken from a deep, deep slumber. I whipped open my eyes and stared at the ceiling for a solid while. My arms and hands were tingling; almost numb. The first thought that entered my stream of consciousness was ‘I’m hungry’. I then attempted to sit up and search for some scrap of food. Unfortunately, my search was abruptly halted by some form of restraints around my arms and wrists. For one brief second I thought I could tear them off like *The Hulk* tears through his clothes. But it was no use. My restraints were cloth-like but still very intricately constructed and tied in a dozen or so knots.

“Hello? Can anyone help me?” My voice quivered. I almost didn’t recognize it.

I suddenly heard the sound of footsteps approaching. The footsteps were soon followed by a waft of cheap perfume. It reminded me of a watered down kind of floral scent. Not at all appealing. A woman dressed in white appeared at my bedside.

“Well now good morning, sunshine! We were all wondering when you were going to wake up.”

She briskly opened the blinds and more sunlight shot through the entire room. She wasn’t too old looking but also not quite young looking. If I had to guess I would she was no more than forty years of age.

“Huh? We? What do you mean by we?” I blinked rather rapidly.

“Why your family and friends, sweetie. Who else?”

She bowed down part ways to gauge my pulse.

“Oh. So who are you?”

“My name’s Jacqueline, sweetie! I’m not a relative but I have become pretty close friends with your family over the past couple of months.”

“Huh? I’m sorry... it sounded like you just said your name is Jacqueline and implied that I’ve been in these restraints for the past couple of months.”

“No, no, no.” She shook her head while scribbling something on a chart.

“Oh ok good. I guess something is wrong with my hearing right now.”

I grabbed my ears and shook them vigorously. I probably shouldn't have done so but it at least proved to me that I could still hear *something* correctly.

“You've only been in those restraints for the past 48 hours. But yes my name is in fact Jacqueline.”

A huge rush of confusion washed over me. I swear I was nearly knocked back by what she had confirmed.

“But-but. How? Why? I mean my girlfriend's name is also Jacqueline. At least I think it is. Is it? Yeah it is I am sure of it.” My tone sounded confident but my mind was back stepping.

“Oh really? Well, your mother never mentioned you have a girlfriend. Neither did your Father.”

She stared at a small blue monitor which sat on a small nightstand next to my bed. I had no idea what its purpose was but it periodically flashed a bunch of random numbers and squiggly lines.

“My Father? You met my Father? So does that mean he's been released from the mental institution?”

“Oh um... I should really let your parents explain things to you. I'm just here to monitor your vitals and make sure you're fed and all that.”

Her voice sounded elegant yet robust. Her natural tone was like Jacqueline, Cyndi and Teresa rolled up in one sweet configuration.

“Your son is awake Mister and Misses...”

Her words trailed off as she jogged out of the room and down the hallway. The scent of watered down flower essence lingered upon her departure.

“Hello, Benny. How are you feeling, son?”

It was my Dad's voice. I hadn't heard it in so long that I thought I had forgotten what it sounded like but I was overjoyed when I realized I hadn't forgotten at all.

“Dad! Is it really you? How... what am I doing here?”

I wanted to jump up and give him a big hug but my restraints were quite insistent that I remain in my bed.

“Everything will be all right. Don’t worry about anything right now, Benny. The doctors feel you just need a lot of rest.” He placed his hand on my forehead. I don’t know why but I guess he felt like it was the only thing that he could do.

“Oh, Benny! I’m so sorry you have to go through this! I didn’t want them to restrain you but the doctors kept saying it was the only way they could stop you from... from...” My Mom entered the room bawling her eyes out. Her makeup had smeared so much that she looked like some out of work circus performer.

My Dad quickly embraced her and stroked her hair a few times.

“Mom! I’m fine... I think. I don’t know what I’m doing here or why everyone is acting so strange but I’m pretty sure I’m fine. I just wish I could take these restraints off. I think I’m starting to forget the purpose of arms and hands.”

“Ha, ha! Well it’s good to see you still have your sense of humor intact, Benny.”

My Dad let out a rather forced chuckle. I could tell he was just as worried as my Mom was.

“Can someone please take these restraints off?”

“We’ll have to wait and see what the doctor says, son.”

“But I don’t want to wait. I really don’t feel comfortable like this.” I squirmed and wriggled like a worm on a hook. It was all I could do to maintain a steady blood flow in my arms and hands.

“Please try not to move around so much, Benny.”

“Who said that?” I whipped my head up and looked past my Dad’s shoulders.

“It’s me... Jeffrey. Your big brother.” Jeffrey had a slight grin on his face.

“What? You are not my brother! I have no brother!”

“Benny. Jeffrey is your brother. Don’t you remember your own brother?” My Dad walked over to Jeffrey and patted him on the back. I was stunned but not too stunned.

“Wha-? But how can you see him? He’s not a real person!”

“Benny! Don’t you dare talk that way about your brother!” My Mom scolded me.

“But I really mean it! He’s just my subconscious! He has always been my subconscious! I know I’ve never told you guys before but that was because I didn’t want to worry you.” I wriggled and wriggled.

“What? What is it you need to tell us, Benny?” Jeffrey kept staring straight at me.

“You are not my brother! And you know you’re not! I don’t know what cruel joke you’re playing on me here but I swear that YOU, Jeffrey, are not my brother!” I could feel my temperature rising. Adrenaline rushed through my veins so fast that I felt I had enough strength to pick up a tank and throw it sky high.

“Doctor! He’s beginning to tear through his restraints! Come quickly!” One of the nurses shouted then raced down the hall. I thought she was speaking nonsense, or possibly drunk on the job, until I looked down at my restraints and actually saw them tearing apart. It was quite a sight. I had no clue as to how I was doing it but I decided not to question it.

“Calm down, son. You just need to calm down. Don’t make things any worse for yourself.” My Dad was never quite good at consoling me.

“Yeah, Benny. Just calm down, Bro.” Jeffrey reached out towards me in an effort to keep me down.

“No! Don’t touch me! Get away from me!”

And just like that I ripped through my restraints, grabbed Jeffrey by his neck and threw him clear across the room. He landed pretty hard and hit his head on some unused heart monitor. He lay unconscious on the floor.

“Why did you go and do that, Benny? Look what you’ve done!” Dad now sounded perplexed and frightened.

“I don’t care! I don’t care anymore! You may think he’s your son but I know he’s not! He has somehow tricked you or brainwashed you!”

Just then three really big security guards rushed into the room and proceeded to tackle me to the floor. But they could barely nudge me. I punched one of them in the mouth; he fell back into the other two. They looked dazed but still willing to stick to their task. They got up slowly

then came at me once more. But it took no more than a swift kick to knock them back down for good.

“Benny? Wha... what’s happening to you?” Mom asked in amazement then abruptly fainted into Dad’s arms.

“I... don’t know.”

Twenty Eight

Sometimes it can all seem quite unreasonable and illogical. That is of course if you happen to find time enough to pry yourself away from whatever inane television show is popular at the moment. I make no false accusations; none at all. In fact, I do like to fall into the traps of society as often as possible. Well, just as much as the next guy. But the thing with that is... the next guy usually doesn’t know he’s the next guy.

Some time ago, before all this madness occurred, I used to enjoy taking leisurely strolls around my neighborhood. I had no destination in mind beforehand nor did I mind. I would walk by many places of business and many institutions of higher learning. They all seemed valid in their own right. But it was the people inside these places that caught my attention right away. I’m not sure why but I do know that I felt a certain amount of sympathy for them; and still do. But I was not sorry for them as much as I was upset. That’s right, upset.

Here were two very big branches of the established order or “machine” sticking out in broad daylight for all to see. And I appeared to be the only one who was visibly disgusted by it. Maybe it was fated for me to be right there staring at each man-made institution in disgust. I know plenty

of people who do not believe in fate. They consider it to be “supernatural” or some hocus pocus nonsense. I won’t go deep into my own perspective here so all I’ll say on this is... who the hell decided what is natural and what is supernatural?

So then getting back to my short tale here, as I was standing there under the Sun’s warm rays I noticed two men hop out of a pickup truck and run up to the entrance of one of the buildings. They both wore blue blazers and dark brown pants. They stopped right in front of the entrance; neither looked like they planned on stepping foot inside. They very discreetly whispered to each other for a solid four minutes then reached into their blazers and pulled out some small objects. I was too far away to identify what they had pulled from their blazers.

Upon seeing some people move towards the entrance they each flung open the doors and tossed their small objects into the front lobby. Both men then ran off in different directions and several blocks away from the building. The next sound I heard was that of people screaming and panicking from inside. I figured they must have thrown some firecrackers inside or smoke bombs or something like that. But I was wrong.

As I ran towards the entrance I saw several people run outside and roll around on the lawn. None of them appeared to be on fire or injured. Most of them looked irate and confused. I got a little closer to the entrance and saw even more frantic people. I opened the door and watched in amazement as an entire hive of bees buzzed right past me and down the street to the nearest park. It was an interesting sight, to say the least.

I looked down at the floor of the lobby and discovered some oddly shaped paper tubes. They were already torn up and had been stepped on numerous times but I was able to recognize them. They were the same small objects that I saw the two men pull out of their blazers. Somehow, they had managed to transport an entire hive of bees in no more than a dozen or so customized paper tubes. Each tube looked to be about five inches long and three inches wide. I don’t know how they crammed each bee in there but they obviously knew what they were doing. Perhaps they purposefully made each tube so small so that the bees would be good and angry by the time they busted out. Many people went home with big welts on their arms, hands and faces that day.

The event got me thinking even more. If those same people had not been there in that building at that particular moment on that particular day then they would not have been stung. But then I thought even further. If the society we lived in was a society of true social equality and understanding then those people would not have had a reason to be in that building in the first place. Nor would those two men have succumbed to boredom so quickly and decide to use bees as lethal airborne agents. Maybe or maybe not. I realize there are too many variables to take into consideration but there's not enough time in the world to consider them all.

Time itself is a very fickle concept. One minute you're young and the next you're old; or at least considered to be old. For instance, when I was around sixteen years of age, I had a deeply profound crush on a particular girl. I know you might be thinking 'Oh, wow. Another story about a teenage boy and his crush on an equally insecure teenage girl. So what's new?' And you would be right to think so if it weren't for one minor detail. She was a prostitute. Not the kind that you usually see in movies or on those hidden camera police shows. Yes, she was around the same age as me and attended the same high school and all that jazz. But she was very much a prostitute; especially amongst her peers.

Her name was Scarlet and the only way I found out about her profession was when I walked in on her and some football player going at it in the boy's restroom. She looked more surprised than me but was able to finish her job without so much as a pause. The football player looked both satisfied and ashamed. He zipped up and ran out of there faster than he ever did during any championship game. Even though I never told anyone I had caught him getting friendly with Scarlet in the bathroom it still ended up being to my advantage. The very next day, he and the other jocks ceased with their name calling and hallway pushing of me and my friends. I didn't bother to analyze the reason but I pretty much knew the why.

I had bumped into Scarlet on several occasions before but never really took notice of her until that day in the bathroom. The fact that she was servicing a running back at the time had very little to do with my sudden infatuation with her. It was as though, during that one awkward moment, I saw her for the marvelous beauty that she always was.

“Are you all right, Benny? You look kind of pale?” She asked me one rainy afternoon. It was lunch time and we were both seated across from each other.

“Yes.” I answered.

“Does that mean yes you’re fine or yes you’re pale?” She stared down at her tray of questionable spaghetti then cringed.

“I suppose a little of both.” My mind was preoccupied with other things but I mostly imagined what it would be like to have sex with her.

A group of cheerleaders flocked past us then gathered around the table to our left. Each one of them looked very comely and drenched with rain water. Apparently, they had been practicing the typical cheerleading routine out on the football field when Mother Nature decided to break up their monotonous routine.

I’ve never really had an affinity for cheerleaders. Sure, I’ve fantasized about them from time to time but it never goes further than that. I don’t know how anyone can tolerate being in a serious relationship with a cheerleader. Especially a high school cheerleader.

“Look at those sluts over there!”

Scarlet spoke with a mouthful of unsavory pasta and tomato sauce. I turned my head around to see if any of the cheerleaders heard her critique of them. They did not. They seemed far too occupied by straining the rain water out of their hair.

“Ha. Yeah, sluts they are.” I agreed with Scarlet because I figured she could easily identify other promiscuous girls.

“Don’t you just hate how fake most cheerleaders act? I mean it’s as if they’ve given up on cultivating any kind of individual personality.” Scarlet appeared bothered by the sight of them. Them and their pom-poms.

“True. Yes. But it’s not just cheerleaders that act that way. That’s pretty much how the majority behave.” I shoveled some mashed potatoes in my mouth; they were much more edible than the spaghetti.

“You may have a point there, Benny. I believe high school is like the brainwashing Mecca of modern society. Grammar school and junior high play some part in it as well but the *real* brainwashing doesn’t begin until high school.”

“And then as soon as we reach adulthood we’re tricked into numbing ourselves with alcohol, drugs, food, television, and shopping.”

“Yes! Exactly!”

Scarlet abruptly spat out chunks of spaghetti then mimicked gagging sounds. I tried my best to hide my infatuation with her; not just at that moment but for the remainder of the school year. Even though I thoroughly enjoyed our long, paradoxical conversations I still envisioned us as something more than friends. Maybe even something more than a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.

Her essence drove me crazy. Now, I had had crushes and infatuations on other girls way before Scarlet came into the fold. But none were quite as passionate or of the same magnitude as the infatuation I had developed for her.

One afternoon, after school had just let out, I followed her outside and observed stealthily as she waited for her older brother to pick her up. She sat on one of the decaying green benches near the main school entrance and began to hum a tune. It sounded familiar but I could not place an exact name or title to it. So, I slowly walked up to Scarlet and proceeded to ask her.

“Hey, Scarlet. What’s the name of that-?”

“Oh it’s that new pop song that’s been playing on all the radio stations lately. I think it’s called *Fifteen Minutes a Day*. I do know the band is *The Funky Funks*. It’s a stupid song and a stupid band but it’s been stuck in my head all day.” She gagged and pretended to throw up in an effort to exorcise the song from her body.

“Oh yeah. That is a *very* stupid song... and band. I don’t know how most people can stand listening to that crap.”

I abruptly sat down on the bench next to her then cautiously slid closer to her.

“Most people are stupid and like stupid things. I could expand on that statement but it would just lead right back to the same conclusion... people are stupid.” She smiled at me then removed a stick of spearmint gum from her pocket, unraveled its foil and popped it into her lovely mouth.

A cool gust of wind brushed past us and almost caught me off guard. Scarlet's hair blew into her face. As she brushed it back she reminded me of some sort of Greek goddess.

"Can I ask you something, Benny?" She smiled then grabbed my arm.

"Sure. You can ask me anything."

"Is there anyone in school you have a crush on?"

"Uh yeah." I could feel my heart beat become more rapid.

"Really? That's cool because I have a crush on someone too but I don't know if I should tell you." She squeezed my arm and batted her eyelashes.

"Oh? Well is he someone you know personally?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes. You could say I know him pretty well." She closed her eyes for two seconds and took a deep breath. It was as if she was more anxious to tell me about her crush than I was to hear her tell me.

"Well, you can tell me if you really want to. I promise I won't tell anyone."

"Oh I don't know. It's just 'cuz he's not the kind of guy you'd expect me to have a crush on. But I guess that's why I find him so appealing."

She continued to hold onto my arm for another minute before attempting to reveal the identity of her crush.

"Ok I'll tell you. I have a crush on... oh look! I see my brother's car pulling up."

"What? Huh?"

I watched as she gathered her textbooks and ran towards her brother's blue Mustang.

"Wait! Who is your crush?" I called out to her just as she opened the passenger side door.

"Come on now, Benny! You know who!"

And with that she hopped in the car, slammed the door and sped away. I was left stupefied and staring at my shoes. My sad, lonely shoes.

Twenty Nine

“Why do you torture yourself like that, Benny?”

“Huh? Torture? I don’t torture myself!”

“Yes you do. You are constantly torturing yourself with those memories of yours. Are you a glutton for punishment? You must be.”

Jeffrey’s face flashed before me then abruptly vanished.

“A glutton? Well... I don’t know. Maybe I am. Is that such a bad thing?”

“I don’t know if it’s bad or good. I just know that it is a perfect title for you.”

“Ha! I guess. To be honest I don’t really know why I often analyze these memories of mine. It might have to do with my being a glutton for punishment but I believe there is a deeper reason for it.”

“Yes, yes. A deeper reason. Just like there is a deeper reason for everything else.”

Jeffrey’s face flashed again; a slight smile stood out.

“Well, there has to be a deeper meaning. There just has to be.”

“For everything?”

“Yes! For everything and nothing!”

I shouted but did not really mean to shout.

“Let’s suppose there isn’t a reason. Would it change the way you perceive everything?”

“Huh? Uh... yes it would. It would *drastically* change my perspective.”

“Are you certain, Benny?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m about as certain as I can be right now.”

“Right. And how certain is that?”

“I don’t know!”

I tried to ignore his voice but I could not no matter how hard I willed it.

“Ah but I believe you do know. If anyone were to know surely it would be you.”

“Hmm. Yes, yes. I know what you’re trying to do, Jeffrey.”

“Oh? What am I trying to do?”

“You’re trying to do that whole influential mind technique thing.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“You know what! It’s like mind control except it’s not really mind control because you’re already too much a part of my mind.”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“Are you laughing? Why are you laughing?”

The atmosphere around us grew weary.

“I’m just laughing for the sake of laughing. You should try it, Benny. It really helps boost your mood.”

“Whose mood? My mood?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Just try it. Come on!”

“All right then.”

I stretched my arms and back then opened my mouth wide. I opened it so wide that I heard a couple of nerves pop.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

I laughed and laughed. I felt my insides and outsides shake. I felt weird but oddly better. Well, slightly better.

“Feel better, Benny?”

“Um slightly better.”

I scratched my head. It felt tingly for some reason.

“That’s good ‘cuz I have something very important to tell you.”

“Important? Really?”

I tried to sound sarcastic but didn’t pull it off.

“Yes, really.”

“All right then. What?”

“You’re not real.”

I waited for him to continue his sentence but he said nothing else for a whole ten seconds.

“What do you mean I’m not real? Of course I’m real!”

“No you are not.”

His silhouette gradually came into focus.

“I am real! How can you say that I’m not? You’re just trying to trick me! Aren’t you?”

“No, Benny. I’m not tricking you or playing a joke on you or anything of the sort.”

“Yes you are! I know you, Jeffrey! Hell, you’re my subconscious. How could I not know you?”

He moved a little closer. I could see his facial structure a bit clearer. I expected to just see my own reflection but instead his face exhibited more unique qualities.

“Well, that’s another thing I should tell you, Benny. I am not really your subconscious. I never have been.”

“What are you saying? I don’t like what you’re saying! I don’t like what you’re insinuating!”

“But it’s true, Benny. What I’m saying is true.”

Suddenly his entire figure and identity became recognizable and familiar. Very familiar.

“Who... who are you?”

A vast wave of astonishment quickly enveloped me.

“I am.... your Father.”

Thirty

“It’s time for your piano lesson, Benny. Come here and sit next to Mommy.” My Mom motioned for me to join her on the wooden bench in front of the large black piano that occupied our living room.

“I don’t really feel like playing piano today, Mom.” I was seven years old and preferred to spend my time playing with other seven year olds. But she insisted I learn an instrument. At that time the only instrument that ever caught my eye was the piano. So, for my seventh birthday she purchased a very old and very large piano from some local jazz pianist that really needed the extra cash to pay down his gambling debts.

When she first brought it home she had to shove it through the front door with great fervor. Half of the door frame was scratched and broken as a result. That was the very first time I heard my Mom utter a dozen swear words in a row.

“Come on, Benny. You have to practice every day if you want to be a really good piano player.” She patted the bench. I reluctantly sat down and placed my stubby fingers on the keys.

“Now don’t forget to sit straight and tall. Just like a soldier.” She corrected my posture then took out a blue folder filled with sheet music.

“Okay, now then. Let’s start with Yankee Doodle.”

I pounded away at the appropriate keys but the resulting sound was something akin to a porcupine being tortured with a very rusty rake.

“It sounds bad, Mom! I’ll never be good at piano!” I folded my arms and pouted.

“That’s okay. Don’t worry about how it sounds. Just concentrate on each note.” She smiled then turned the page.

“We’ll come back to Yankee Doodle. Now, let’s work on Camp Town Races.”

“Noo! I hate Camp Town Races. It doesn’t even make sense.”

“You just think it doesn’t make sense because you’re too young to understand it.”

“I guess. But I still don’t want to play it.” I shook my head diligently.

“Oh, come on now. I know you’d rather go outside and play with all of your little friends but someday you will thank me for making sure you stuck with your piano lessons.”

Just then a noise emanated from the den. It was my Dad. He was watching a football game and cheering a little louder than usual. We both ignored it until we heard him smash something.

“What in the world?” My Mom mumbled then raced to the den. I stayed seated on the piano bench.

“Oh, my goodness! Dear, what has gotten into you?” She gasped.

“Nothing has gotten into me! In fact, everything has just come *out* of me!” My Dad replied.

At that point I became far too curious to remain in my state of self doubt. So, I hopped off the bench and walked cautiously into the den. I was immediately greeted by my Dad.

“Benny! So nice of you to join us! Come sit down next to me and watch a little football.”

He pointed at the television set. Well... what remained of the television set. Apparently, he had felt the need to smash it against the fire place. I studied the shards of glass and metal that were consumed by an all-cleansing fire. They glistened brightly then melted into a thin vaporous liquid.

“Why’d you smash the television?” Both I and my Mom asked.

“Television? What television? There is no television.” He replied almost sarcastically.

“Well not anymore now that you’ve smashed the only one in the house!” My Mom exclaimed. She sounded more confused than angry.

I didn’t know what to make of such a situation. I looked at my Dad sincerely and tried to draw a conclusion, *any* conclusion, from his blank stare. There was none to be found.

“You won’t miss the television. Trust me. You won’t miss it. You won’t... miss it.” He then hugged my Mom tighter than he ever had before. A few tears ran down his face and onto the cheap shag carpeting. My Mom kissed him on the forehead and hugged him back; tighter.

“Dad? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” I asked.

“It’s okay, Benny. I’m okay. Everyone will be okay.”

He patted my head and gave me a big hug. Not as big as the one he gave my Mom but still pretty big.

“I’m just gonna’ go for a walk around the neighborhood. That’ll clear my head.” And with that he slipped on his hat and coat, opened the front door, waved at us and walked into the evening’s glow.

Thirty One

I have a tendency to stop and think about many things that seem unimportant to most but are very important to me. Things such as action figures, rocks, cacti, cheap plastic sunglasses, staplers, dried up permanent markers, holistic cold remedies and the like. Why? I cannot say. Not because I don’t know the reason but because many of my own childhood memories seem to be intertwined with such seemingly random paraphernalia.

But in all honesty I believe that when I do take time out of my day to ruminate over these things it somehow makes existence feel all right. The way most sunglasses reflect sunlight just fascinates me so much that I wonder if the person that invented them knew how popular they would become. The unique shape of each individual cactus and how much

water it can retain has always astounded me. Some Native American tribes have been known to cook and eat cacti. I wonder if it tastes really tender and moist like a juicy t-bone steak.

When I was in the fourth grade I accidentally stole my English teacher's permanent markers. You see she let us use them for some project which involved writing out whole paragraphs on some huge white poster boards. Most of the students only used one color marker; they didn't give a damn about presentation. So I decided to use three different colored markers. Blue, red and yellow. Anyway, when we were all done writing our paragraphs, the teacher asked us to return her markers by the end of class. We then moved on to our regular daily assignment and I pretty much put the thought out of my mind. Class ended and instead of returning her markers, which I had stuffed in my backpack, I swiftly exited the classroom and ran home as fast as I could in order to catch the beginning of my favorite cartoon.

The next day, she went on and on about how disappointed she was that one of her students had stolen her personal property and how it made her feel violated. Can you believe that? Violated. She was a natural born drama queen. Then she stood up from her desk and pounded it with great fury and shouted, "Whoever took my markers please return them now and you will only receive the minimum amount of punishment! If you don't return them then I will have no choice but to give the entire class detention! You better believe it!" Her nostrils flared and for a split second I swear I saw fire shoot out.

You'd think I'd have remembered that I was the marker thief but back then I had such a short attention span that I don't even know how I was able to dress myself in the morning. Of course, the entire class got after school detention and all the students complained about it for the rest of the year, including me.

Then, once the new school year started, I reached into my backpack in order to dispose of the previous year's contents and I felt something hard and dry. I emptied everything out onto the floor and low and behold there were the infamous stolen markers. Their caps were missing and all three had become extremely dry and hardened. "Oh, yeah! I forgot that I was the one who took them!" I laughed hysterically. The entire student body saw me pointing at some dried up permanent markers and laughing

my ass off. Naturally, they assumed I was one of the special needs students.

I used to have such an incredible action figure collection that it made just about every one of my friends envious and jealous. I had an assortment of super heroes, villains, super villains, monsters, aliens, insectoids, robots, mutants and even a couple of political figures that my Uncle had given me one Christmas. I believe my collection totaled between one hundred to two hundred action figures. Back then that was more than most kids could fathom.

In fact, there were a few kids who felt so strongly about taking away my collection that they hatched numerous plans and schemes behind closed doors. But very few of them actually tried. Billy Murphy was one such kid. One day, during recess, he saw me playing with one of my action figures and decided to just snatch it right out of my hand. He then ran away from me at break neck speed. I didn't chase after him because I knew that's what he wanted. I just played it cool for the rest of recess and pretended it didn't bother me.

After school that day, I saw Billy being yelled at by his Mom in the parking lot. He had a sad look on his face and wiped away some tears. His Mom then slowly approached me, reached into Billy's backpack and pulled out the action figure he had taken from me. She then said, "I'm so sorry he took your toy. He's been acting out a lot lately. Here you go." I grasped the figure and thanked her. I watched as she walked back over to Billy and scolded him some more. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

The only other kid that succeeded in stealing my entire collection was my cousin, Molly. Yes, that's right. My *cousin* Molly. She may have looked like a sweet little girl to everyone else but to me she was one of the most vicious people I knew. She knew exactly how to work a group of adults. She was a master of throwing fake temper tantrums. But her tantrums always looked so real that sometimes people would come for miles around just to watch her in action.

Her biggest and most genius tantrum occurred during my birthday party. My Mom organized the whole party and invited our entire family. It was actually the first time that every single living relative was under the same roof. Molly wore a pink dress and a pink beret that day. She kept to herself for the first half of the party. I was mostly occupied with

all of the awesomely wrapped gifts displayed on a long picnic table. Some of the bows glistened like incandescent wonders.

And *that* is when Molly seized the opportunity. Apparently she quietly entered my room, stuffed all of my action figures into two giant plastic bags, tossed each bag into her Mom's sedan then rejoined the party just in time to receive a piece of birthday cake. A few minutes later, I walked back into my room and immediately noticed someone had taken my entire collection!

I accused Molly right away because I knew she was just the type of person who could pull off such a daring heist. But she played it cool and acted all sweet and innocent. I felt like crying my eyes out but instead turned my grief into rage.

When it came time to blow out the candles on my cake I could hardly pay attention to anything but that smug look of satisfaction on her face. She purposefully sat across from me just so she could taunt me. As soon as everyone finished singing *Happy Birthday* I lunged forward and pushed her stupid face deep into the cake. A couple of the candles were still lit and spread their flame onto her hair.

She ran around screaming and shouting while her Mother doused her with a glass of fruit punch. But the punch must have been spiked because it actually made the flames on her hair bigger and brighter. She then dropped to the floor and rolled around furiously until one of my Uncles grabbed her by the waist and threw her outside. He then turned on the water hose and sprayed her quite thoroughly. Molly's hair and dress were burned to a crisp.

That is when she began her biggest tantrum to date. It started with a couple of tears then some shouting and wall punching. Most of the adults ignored her and most of the kids stared at her with blank expressions on their faces. She dropped to the floor once more and kicked the air violently. This went on for about twenty minutes or so.

She kicked some pretty powerful kicks. So powerful in fact that when another one of my Uncles tried to maneuver around her in order to get more cake he was kicked hard in the groin. He clutched himself and fell back against the wall. Molly stopped kicking only long enough to see his face turn red. She resumed but was quickly interrupted by a sandal hitting her square in the nose. The sandal belonged to my Grandmother.

“Stop this foolishness right now, Molly!” Grandmother yelled while clutching her other sandal; it was bright yellow with a small sunflower in the middle. “But Grandma it’s all Benny’s fault! He thinks I took his toys and that’s why he pushed my head into the cake! It’s his fault my hair and pretty dress are burned!” Molly tried to pour it on thick with the tears but everyone knew that there was no fooling Grandmother.

“You’re lying! You did take my action figures! I know you did!” That was all I could utter at that moment.

“All right. I have the solution here. The two of you can bare knuckle box each other in the garage.” Grandmother was no feminist that’s for sure.

“What? Huh?” We both said.

Before we knew it Grandmother had raised her right hand and prepared to....

“Blah! Blah! Blah! Oh come on now, Benny! We all know what happens next!” Jeffrey interjected.

“Huh? Who is this ‘we’ you speak of?” I asked.

“Look, Benny. The fact of the matter is you keep on avoiding the facts!”

“What? Could you *please* stop being so god damn cryptic, Jeffrey!”

I heard his laughter echo within my head.

“I’m not being cryptic so much as I am being truthful with you. Most guys like me wouldn’t even bother explaining themselves to their self. Or any other self for that matter.”

“Okay. I don’t know why but that actually makes a great amount of sense to me.” I scratched my chin.

“Of course it does! We’re one in the same! We are each other!”

I felt some kind of translucent hand touch my shoulder. I just assumed it was Jeffrey.

“Didn’t you say you were my Father or something?”

“Yes. I am and I’m not. But in all seriousness... I was just messing with ya’.”

Jeffrey’s vague silhouette danced back and forth. Back and forth.

“Oh. Yeah I figured as much.”

“Benny. You and I have had our fun and whatnot but now the time approaches. I’m afraid we must go our separate ways.”

“Oh, right.” I said sarcastically.

“No. I’m quite serious. I mean- I don’t want to be serious but right now I have no choice. And neither do you. We must act quickly before both of us lose ourselves and fade into infinity.” The tone of Jeffrey’s voice was unlike his usual tone.

“Uh... so what are you saying exactly?”

“It is time for us... to save... the world.”

Thirty Two

A deep dark haze suddenly enveloped me. I felt my insides light up and become incandescent. Almost luminous. Every molecule that composed my being shifted rapidly and thoroughly. I felt... alive. I mean *really* alive. More alive than I had ever felt before and probably will never feel again. It was awesome; to say the least.

I closed my eyes for a second then opened them. All around me I saw nothing but a dark purple sky and numerous lightning bolts flashing in rapid succession. I began to hear loud screams echo throughout the upper ionosphere.

“What’s going on?” I spoke out loud.

“Hey, Benny! How are you doing, Mang?” Raul suddenly appeared before me.

“Raul? What are *you* doing here?” He appeared to be hovering. In fact, he *was* hovering. And so was I!

“What the-? Why are we hovering? Raul, what the hell is going on?” I flailed my arms and legs wildly. I thought I could grab onto something, anything, and pull myself to safety but there was literally nothing to grab onto.

“Calm down, Benny. There’s no reason to be afraid. Not right here. Not right now.” Raul reached out towards me and patted my right shoulder.

CRACK! An enormous lightning bolt flashed just inches behind Raul! He didn’t seem to notice it.

“I don’t believe I am afraid so much as inquisitive. Please, just tell me where I am and what is happening!”

“You’re here, Benny! You’re right where you need to be. That is all that matters right now. You understand... right?” Raul winked at me.

“Huh? No I don’t. Hey, you’re acting very much like Jeffrey.”

“Jeffrey? Who is this Jeffrey you are always talking about? Is he your brother or something?” Raul looked somewhat stupefied.

“No! He’s not my brother! I don’t have a brother!” I shouted over the crackling thunder.

“Okay, Benny. Okay. Just calm down and follow me.” He took my hand and began leading me somewhere.

We both floated and flew over many mountain ranges, towns, rivers, buildings and bridges. Finally, we came upon an immense cave and sat down just outside its entrance.

“Everything you need to know about yourself is right inside that cave, Benny.” He picked his nose then pointed into the cave.

“Really? How could a cave possibly know anything about me?”

“I’m not sure, Mang. But I do know that that is no ordinary cave. Many others before you have gone inside and experienced a great transformation.” His gaze was now transfixed on the mouth of the cave.

“So what is it magical or something?” I remained skeptical.

“I guess you could say it is ‘magical’ but I think there is more to it than that.” He stood up and pushed back his greased hair.

“Well, all right then. I suppose I might as well see for myself.” I stood up and slowly moved towards the cave.

CRACK! CRACK! ZAP!

A bolt of lightning struck down right between me and the cave entrance. A purple vortex then instantly manifested before me and

swirled around and around. It actually made me feel dizzy for a few seconds. Then a figure stepped forward from the other side of the vortex. First his arm appeared then his head. He looked directly at me. It was Jeffrey!

“Benny! Don’t go in the cave! It’s a trap! It’s a trap! Raul is not who you think he is!”

Thirty Three

Jeffrey jumped out of the vortex and pushed me away from the cave. I fell on some rocks but was unscathed. When I got up Jeffrey and Raul began arguing with one another.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing, Raul?” Jeffrey tapped Raul on the shoulder. Raul spun around and jumped back.

“Woah! Where did *you* come from? Choo must be Jeffrey. Yes?” Raul moved his eyebrows up and down.

“Yes! I’m Jeffrey! I’m Benny’s friend and protector! And I know what *you* are!” Jeffrey stood in a power stance.

“Yeah that’s cool. I knew you... what? What do you mean you know who I am?” Raul’s face suddenly turned red.

“No, no. That’s not what I said, Raul.” Jeffrey slowly shook his head but kept his stance.

“Oh, okay. Because for a moment there I thought you were maybe threatening me.” Raul looked pretty relieved.

“What I said was I know *what* you are! And what you are is pure evil.”

“Oh really? Evil? You think I’m evil? Well, you don’t really know me. Benny knows me better than you and he knows I’m not evil. Right, Benny? Tell him!” Raul glanced over at me.

I didn’t quite know what was going on in front of me but I answered anyway.

“Um... yeah. I know Raul. He’s a good guy. He’s a good guy, Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey acknowledged my answer but didn’t budge.

“I know he’s been a good guy every time he’s been around you, Benny. But just trust me when I tell you that he is no good. And not just in a superficial way but in a very deeply profound way.”

They both began to stare each other down. Raul’s face turned red then redder. Jeffrey fixed his gaze on something behind Raul then dug his heels deep into the earth. I remained confused but then suddenly felt what was about to happen.

“Benny, you have to choose the weapon!” Jeffrey shouted at me.

“Huh? What? Choose what weapon?”

“You have to choose the weapon that I and Raul will wield!”

“What? You mean you’re going to fight each other? Why?”

“It’s just something that needs to be done, Benny. Just think of something and that will become the weapon that we wield.”

I was suddenly reminded of a book I once read on the middle ages. I suppose it was Jeffrey’s stance that reminded me of one of the illustrations of the Knights of the Round Table. I felt a slight jolt then watched as both Jeffrey and Raul were instantly covered head to toe in shiny steel armor.

“Oh, wow! This was a good choice, Benny!” Raul exclaimed while unsheathing his sword. His armor was a dark red color and was embedded with long winding serpents.

“Stay as far back as you can, Benny. This could get ugly.” Jeffrey said as he whipped out his sword and began moving around Raul. Jeffrey’s

armor was a light blue color and spotted with circular symbols that almost looked like planets.

Even though I was intrigued by what was about to unfold before me I still made sure to follow Jeffrey's suggestion and hid behind a grouping of boulders.

"You know you are making a big mistake, Mang!" Raul shouted at Jeffrey.

"Oh I don't think so. I know when someone is lying! Most of the lies people tell each other stem from the subconscious mind!" Jeffrey shouted at Raul.

"How do you know that? Huh?" Raul gripped his sword tightly. It glistened and reflected some sunlight.

"Because I've lived in Benny's subconscious mind my entire life!" And with that Jeffrey and Raul jumped several feet in the air and charged at each other. Their swords clanged together loudly and brightly.

I tried to follow their every maneuver but the sunlight kept blocking my view. I heard Raul shouting something in Spanish; probably an insult of some kind. Jeffrey responded by letting out a pretty loud war cry. CLANK! CLANK! CLANK! The sound of their dueling swords was all I could hear for the next ten minutes. It echoed and resounded all around me.

I eventually grew tired of paying attention and sat down on a patch of cool grass. I had never meditated before then but for some odd reason I felt like meditating. I thought about what little information I had read on the subject of transcendental meditation and assumed a cross legged position. My arms and hands faced upward on my lap. I closed my eyes and took one deep breath in and slowly let it out. I remembered to count. Inhale... 1... exhale... 2... inhale 3... exhale... 4. I could still hear Jeffrey and Raul dueling but now they sounded much further away. I continued counting my breaths; Jacqueline then entered my mind. She smiled and laughed. She looked quite sultry. I actually tried to grab her but she kept slipping away. I then thought about the baby she was carrying; *our* baby. How could I have forgotten about something so monumental?

I wondered if she was okay. I wondered if she understood what I was experiencing. What *was* I experiencing? And *why* was I experiencing it?

What and why. What and why. What and why. I whispered to myself. I focused on my breathing a little more and moved past the whats and whys. A purple orb manifested then split into a million smaller orbs. They swirled around each other then stopped and vibrated. It actually looked like something out of a Saturday morning cartoon.

The orbs kept vibrating faster and faster. I figured I was the one in control so I tried to slow them down but they didn't stop. Faster and faster and faster they vibrated. I then heard a big clap of thunder. CRACK!!!

“Benny, look out!!” Jeffrey lunged towards me just as a bolt of lightning struck me right in the head.

I fell back a few feet and was knocked out cold.

Thirty Four

When I was a little boy my mother was my best friend. I'm sure the same goes for most little boys. She wasn't always a reactionary drunk. Somehow the relationship she had with my father turned her from a sweet, kind, generous woman into a violent self destructive sad sack. I don't remember when it all started but I do have memories of some very pivotal moments.

I recall one evening, when I was about five or six; we were all sitting around the dining room table playing a game of chutes and ladders. Both of my parents looked quite happy. I rolled the dice and moved my plastic piece up one ladder and down one chute. It was now my Dad's turn to roll but before he could the phone rang and he raced to pick it up. I didn't pay attention to what he said over the phone, I was much more focused on avoiding another chute. My Mom seemed pretty interested in his phone conversation. So much so that she threw the dice on the floor and walked over to him.

"Okay then, sir. Yes, thank you very much." He hung up the receiver with a look of disappointment on his face.

"Well? What did he say? Did you get the job?" My Mom sounded very anxious and worried.

"I did and I didn't." Dad replied.

"What does that mean?" Mom scrunched up her face.

"It would seem that he wants me to start off by working on the assembly line and then after a year or so see if I'll be a good fit for upper management." I had no clue what my Dad was talking about then but I could tell he despised the words 'assembly line' and 'upper management'.

"Oh okay. So then what's the problem? You told him you accept right?" Mom now looked unsure of how to react.

"Well, I told him I'd think about it."

"What?! You told him you'd think about it?! What the hell's the matter with you! We're about to starve our asses off here and you tell the one guy willing to give you a job that you'll think about it!" That wasn't the first time I heard Mom yell at Dad but I think it was the first time she yelled so loudly. It didn't scare me; just made me wonder why she felt it necessary to yell.

"But, Dear... I just recently got my Master's in Psychology. I'm shooting for some kind of university position. A minimum wage job is not going to pay me enough to even put a dent in my student loans!" Dad stuttered somewhat.

"Whatever! That's your excuse for everything! I'm not gonna' have this same argument with you!" Mom opened the freezer, pulled out a bottle

of vodka and locked herself in the master bathroom. Dad and I finished the game of chutes and ladders and ate some microwave chicken nuggets.

My friendship with my mother wasn't really forged until a few years later when she discovered that my Dad had been cheating on her with various women he met at the airport lounge. They didn't divorce right away; mainly because they did not like the thought of involving lawyers in such a matter. They were probably the first couple in the neighborhood to undergo a trial separation. I was still too young to understand all the specifics but I dealt with it as best as I could.

It was during their separation that my Mom and I became close and went on daily excursions to the local zoo, park, library and art museum. My little impressionable mind absorbed so much information that I didn't know how to process it all. It doesn't seem right to admit this but that was definitely the best period of my childhood.

I recall one afternoon at the beach, I got pretty involved building a sand castle. I had nearly perfected my own concoction of sand, shells and sea water when out crawled a jaundiced looking crab. It crawled up onto my sand castle and moved its pincers up and down. It almost looked like it was trying to intimidate me.

Just as I was about to run away Mom swooped in and smacked the crab off my sand castle with her sandal. "Get away! Get away!" She scolded the crab as it quickly ran back into the sea. I threw my pail and shovel after it.

The sea was quite active that day. I watched as the waves pounded against the shoreline and returned to infinity.

Mom scooped me up into her arms and hugged me tight. "Oh my little Benny Bear! Benny, Benny Bear." She repeated as she hugged me.

"Benny Bear. Benny Bear. Benny Bear."

Thirty Five

“Benny! Benny, snap out of it! Are you okay?” Jeffrey smacked my face with the back of his armored hand.

I snapped out of my lightning induced trance just in time to see Raul stick his sword into Jeffrey’s back.

“Nooo! Jeffrey!” I jumped up and caught Jeffrey just before he fell to the ground. His armor was not as heavy as it looked.

“It’s... it’s okay, Benny. This was supposed to happen.” Jeffrey choked out as he stared into my eyes.

“What? No! How can you say that? I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention.” I felt tears swell up and stream down my face.

“You don’t have to apologize for anything anymore, Benny. You’ve been a good friend to me.” His pupils dilated and resembled tiny black holes.

“What am I supposed to do without you, Jeffrey? You’ve always been a part of me.” My hands shook with grief.

“You’ll be fine, Benny. You’ll be fine.” Jeffrey coughed then closed his eyes. I didn’t believe he was really dead until I heard his last breath escape through his mouth.

“Hey, Mang! It was his own fault!” Raul shouted at me from behind a tree.

“No it wasn’t! You stabbed him, Raul! *You* killed him!” I shouted back at him.

“Oh come on now, Benny! He knew what he was getting into! I mean it’s not like we were having a water balloon fight or something!”

“Jeffrey was right about you! I can’t believe you’ve been posing as my friend all these years!”

I clenched my fists.

“Hey! I never once said I was your friend, Benny. You just assumed but it is good you know the truth now.” He slowly walked out from behind the tree.

“I don’t know what is true or not true anymore. But I do know that I won’t let you get away with killing Jeffrey!” I felt myself begin to grow stronger from the inside out. It felt strange but good.

“You can’t hurt me, Benny.” Raul displayed an air of confidence.

“Oh I am definitely going to hurt you!” I responded.

I was suddenly cloaked in a purple aura as my thirst for vengeance consumed my being.

“So then I guess you really don’t know the truth. Hmm.” Raul stroked his chin.

“I don’t care about that right now!” I shouted.

I picked up Jeffrey’s sword and flung it towards Raul’s face. To my surprise it flew right past him and planted itself in the ground. I then picked up a good sized stone and hurled it at him. I watched it lightly tap his head then bounce right off.

“What’s going on? How are you doing that?” I asked.

“I’m not doing anything. You can’t hurt me, Benny. I told you.” Raul moved closer to me then removed his armor and threw down his sword.

“There’s something important you need to know, Benny.”

“What now? I’m tired of being told that ‘I need to know something!’”

“Well you definitely need to know that without Jeffrey there’s just no possible way for you to exist.”

I don’t know how but I knew he wasn’t lying.

Raul extended me his hand in an effort to comfort me but I pushed it away. He then let loose his true personality.

“Alright then, Benny! You don’t have to listen to me any longer! Because now I’m going to show you everything you need to know! I’m going to show you by killing you!” With that he jumped high into the air and torpedoed down onto my back.

For some reason I didn’t feel the brunt of it until after my face sunk seven inches into the ground. It was a sharp, piercing pain. Nevertheless, I was able to ignore the pain long enough to drag myself out of the dirt bed my body created.

“Ow! Please... don’t kill me.” I clutched my torso and whimpered.

“I don’t want to kill you but you’ve left me no choice!” Raul dug his feet into the ground and raised his arms above his head. He mumbled something in Spanish as tiny sparks emitted from his palms. The sparks suddenly reminded me of something.

“I remember now! I remember it all!” I exclaimed out loud.

“Ha! You don’t remember anything, Mang!” Raul replied. More sparks emitted from his palms; they went from light red to dark red.

“Yes, I do! I had no clue before but now I do! Seeing those sparks come out of your hands has jolted my memory! I now know who I am and who *you* really are!” I stood up tall and straight.

“Oh, really? Okay then tell me, Benny. Tell me what you remember.”

“I’m not from this planet and neither are you! But I’m here to help the human race and you’re here to destroy them!”

“Destroy? Ha, ha, ha! These people don’t need much help with that. They’ve always been pretty good at destroying themselves. But I guess you could say that I’m here to expedite the process.” Balls of energy gradually shaped themselves from the energy that Raul’s palms emitted.

“Well you may be right but I...” Before I could finish my sentence Raul threw two balls of energy straight at my torso. They felt super hot and super painful. I stumbled back but did not fall.

“I know I’m right! *You* know I’m right! So now all that needs to be done is for *you* to die!” He hurled four more energy balls at me. Two more at my torso and another two at my face. My torso was already becoming numb to the pain but the two that hit my face really packed a punch.

I felt nothing but red hot energy enter my brain through my eye sockets. The energy that Raul shot at me felt as if it was desperate to possess my entire being. I did my best to resist it but it proved itself stronger than me. I began to feel it enter my veins and traverse them much like a super charged muscle car engaging in multiple drag races. It wasn’t until it made its way towards my heart that I truly felt as though I were losing myself entirely.

Luckily, that is precisely the exact moment when I summoned up just enough strength to turn the tables.

Thirty Six

“You can do it, Benny!” Jacqueline’s voice echoed from somewhere deep within.

“I believe in you, Son!” I heard my Dad’s voice echo out right after Jacqueline’s.

“You’ve always been special in my eyes, Benny Bear.” My Mom’s voice also echoed out after my Dad’s.

I then heard a varied mix of billions of other voices. Some of them were crying out in pain and others were cheering ecstatically. I didn’t understand it initially but as soon as I zeroed in on one of them I quickly understood what they were sharing with me.

They were the subconscious thoughts of nearly every single human being on planet Earth. I had somehow tapped into the collective stream of consciousness that every individual feeds into. Strike that, it would actually be the collective stream of subconsciousness of every individual. As I listened intently I felt my strength return and grow drastically.

“I know what I must do!” I shouted these words in such a way that I never knew was possible before.

As soon as I felt healed enough I stuck out my fist and charged at Raul at the speed of light. My entire arm went right through his chest and remained lodged there. Raul felt no pain whatsoever.

“So, you still believe you can actually hurt me? Ha! Pay attention as I remove your pathetic arm from my masculine chest.” Raul grabbed my arm confidently and tugged on it as hard as he possibly could but was unsuccessful.

“What the-? How are you doing this? How?” He asked.

“I know what I must do! I know what needs to be done! This is why I am here! I know I can’t hurt you but I can destroy myself and take you with me!” I felt a massive surge of power and strength envelope my body, my mind and my soul.

“Oh come on now, Benny! You’re really going to sacrifice your own life for the lives of all these ignorant, uncaring, undeserving humans? Have you even thought this through?” Raul now looked worried.

“I don’t need to think this through! This is what I was meant to do! You cannot stop it! Nobody can stop it!” An orange and yellow aura suddenly surrounded us as we were both assaulted by tiny sparks of effervescent energy.

“All right then, Benny! I guess you’ve bested me! But you do know that this planet and these people won’t be safe forever! Sooner or later someone or something is going to bring about their demise!” Raul began twitching and flailing his arms around in an effort to dodge the energy sparks that were now consuming him.

“Yes, I know! But I also know that there will always be more people like me defending the Earth and the human race from the likes of you! Now, stop talking and just accept your fate!” The energy sparks now began consuming me as well. They didn’t feel too painful. In fact, they didn’t feel too much like anything.

I felt somewhat anxious but also quite relieved. I was relieved that I was finally able to do something worthwhile. All the pain and suffering I had experienced throughout my life had never made much sense to me until that very moment when I saw and felt both Raul and I disintegrate out of existence.

The last thing I felt was nothingness. Sweet, blissful nothingness.

Thirty Seven

“Well now... that sounds like a mighty good dream you had.” Dr. Stein remarked while scribbling away in his purple notebook.

I watched and waited for him to stop scribbling before saying anything else. His office smelled of cigar smoke and disinfectant spray. The bright orange and yellow sweater he wore reminded me of something that Bill Cosby would wear.

“Does it? But I’m pretty sure it was more than a dream. I mean... I can still remember all these things happening to each character and no matter how hard I try I can’t shake the feeling that it really happened.”

“Oh? Which part?”

“All of it!”

“I see. Well, there’s no doubt that you have a very active imagination; especially for someone your age. Many people will often retreat into a fantasy world when they have no other means to cope with the harshness of reality. And in your case, growing up without a Father and being raised by an alcoholic Mother, I can certainly see why you’d want to retreat into your own world.” Dr. Stein scratched his bearded chin and grinned.

“Yeah I guess you’re right.” I replied and stared down at my untied shoes.

“Now, it appears our time is almost up but I’d like to wish you a happy birthday in advance since I won’t be seeing you tomorrow. Happy Birthday, Benjamin Jr.! How old will you be? 22? 25?”

“No! Not that old! You know I’m gonna’ be 13, Dr. Stein.” I laughed as Dr. Stein handed me a lollipop and patted me on the back.

“Thirteen is a marvelous age! You should consider yourself lucky to still be so young. Sometimes I have a hard enough time just brushing my teeth without bruising a rib. Heh.”

I laughed some more then nodded and prepared to make my way for the exit.

“Who is going to pick you up today? Your Grandma?” He asked.

“Yeah, like always. Oh! There was something else I wanted to mention to you but I don’t know if I should since our session is over for today.”

“That’s fine. Just tell me and we can discuss it further next week.” Dr. Stein got his pen and notebook ready.

“Okay. Well... I’ve been hearing this voice lately.”

“A voice?” He looked up from his notebook and directly at me.

“Yeah a voice.”

“What does this voice tell you to do?”

“Oh nothing bad really. He’s just kind of annoying and likes to insult people.”

“He? The voice is a male voice?” Dr. Stein adjusted his thick rimmed glasses and raised his eyebrows.

“Yes. He told me his name is Jeffrey Juniper and that he was really good friends with my Dad. I didn’t believe him at first but now I’m starting to think he’s telling the truth.”

