

Aperture

Ryan Andrew Loera

Copyright 2012

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 came 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!