

The Stars Are Full of Souls



BOOK ONE

MATTHEW DELBERT GILLMORE

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LIMITED EDITION ADVANCED READER COPY

MATTHEW DELBERT GILLMORE

*Dedicated to my wife, Valérie,
with thanks to my brother and aunt,
and the editor.*

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Thank you for reading!

I

The stars are full of souls. Unfathomable cauldrons of fusion where space bends so heavily that there exist beings of light held in construct by such fancy as conscious thought. Their bodies of energy stream outward in infinite jets of life force, into the universe. Here, nothing material exists; no physical mortal could ever enter this realm, much less peer inside these boundless orbs of life.

In the beginning, the creator called light into existence and shown it against the darkness, for the darkness was. And the creator made the light to shine upon the Earth, to spring forth life, to give life, and to renew life. And the creator separated the lightness and the darkness and called the lightness Day and the darkness Night. And the creator saw that it was good.



Charlie stamped her feet and her white patent shoes clomped loudly on the sidewalk; this time, she was really pissed. Mom was gonna hear about it, Dad was gonna hear about it, Suzie was gonna hear about it, every-fucking-body was gonna hear about it before this was over. It was BULLSHIT. Kelly always skipped her day to take care of Grandma. Kelly, making out with her gross boyfriend, Todd, sitting on the bleachers with that smug, secure expression on her face, leaning back on her elbows with her tits in the air, and declaring she wasn't doing her grandma day, so Charlie might as well get over it. Charlie looked down at her own flat chest and wondered how big her own boobs would be. She really kinda hated Kelly's boobs, and she hoped hers would be smaller, more like Mom's. But she desperately wanted them, however big they would be—just not too small. And she hated Kelly when she stuck her tits out like that. And she hated her in her cheerleader getup and her smiling, smug-ass face, knowing she wouldn't get in trouble 'cuz nobody ever did anything about her bullshit, especially Dad. But this time, even if they did nothing, like usual, they were damn well going to hear about it.

Charlie became vaguely aware that she was stamping her feet so hard that the balls of them ached with a tingly sensation. She

stopped walking, let out a great sigh, and looked about. Charlie realized she hadn't walked this way from school to Grandmother's before. She hadn't been paying attention and walked too far. She'd stomped off in a rage from the track outside senior hall and walked all the way up East 11th, almost to Montgomery. *Shit*. She heard her mother's lilting voice in her head, "No good deed goes unpunished." Yeah. This was the third day this week she'd done someone else's grandma duty, and she was definitely getting punished.

On top of Kelly's bullshit today, Susan was "sick" on Monday and didn't leave the house. Susan was sick a lot, with the drapes closed and the covers over her head or watching TV like she always did. Susan left the house less than anybody Charlie knew. Charlie had overheard Mom and Dad talk about it when they thought no one was listening, and they talked like they didn't know what to do.

"Poor Suzie," and "She seems so distraught," and it was just more of the same old crap. Charlie knew if she stayed in bed and said she was sick and didn't go to school all day, Mom and Dad would not put up with it for one second. And they sure wouldn't let Charlie get out of her Grandma-day, even if she was bleeding out her eyeballs with her hair on fire. But there it was, Monday, the first day of the school week, Susie's Grandma-day, and there she was, sick. Too sick to go to school, too sick to walk, too sick to take care of Grandma.

Charlie mouthed angrily, "Too sick to watch TV all day? — Nooo!"

Charlie shook her head, rolled her eyes, and looked about, reorienting herself. She was almost to the corner of Montgomery, so it would be just as far to walk back to Preston now. Plus, Preston curved toward the left as you drove away from the school, and she almost always got turned around in that area. The last thing she wanted on top of all of this was to get lost on foot.

Charlie lived in terrible anxiety over getting lost. She almost never got lost, but it was a constant fear, and she typically planned against it. She almost always panicked when going somewhere new, and she always went by the same route to places she'd been before. So, she decided that since she was already this far, she would follow Montgomery north, all the way up to 17th, and then left, over to Elm, where she would turn left again, and eventually come out near Grandma's house. It was a fair bit longer, actually, and out of her way, but she was much more confident in those directions. She resigned herself to the extra distance then, and all at

once, her shoulders dropped. She looked about, up and down the street, and then, halfheartedly, and with a much milder step, she accepted her fate and sauntered off to the north toward the corner.

Montgomery runs parallel to Broadway, another city-block over, and these two major streets host a significant section of shops and businesses. Walking up Montgomery, Charlie lost focus on her anger and the aggravation of her family and passed time staring into the stores, gas stations, and offices she passed.

With each new building came new possibilities of plots and dramas for the people inside. The guy in the pharmacy was getting his blood pressure checked with the automatic tester. It was one of those sit-down jobs, where you're in the chair and you put your arm in the cuff surrounded by the fiberglass tube, and you push the button, and the thing tests your blood pressure. But what if this time, the machine went crazy and kept pumping air into that sleeve around his arm, cutting off his circulation, trapping him in the machine? Would he scream out for help? Or would he think fast and grab the umbrella from the display beside him and use it to reach around and hook the power cord and unplug the machine?

Charlie stood at the window, pantomiming the imaginary struggles of the man caught in an out-of-control machine, reaching for an umbrella, flailing with his one, bound arm.

Charlie surfaced from her imagination, interrupted by the distressed face of the man in the photo lab. She could see him talking animatedly on the pharmacy phone and pointing in her direction. In an overwhelming flush of embarrassment, Charlie realized how she must have looked, one arm flailing back, one arm rigid in its imaginary restraint, her eyes rolled back in the fantasy of her own concoction. She burst out in laughter and ran from the pharmacy, crossing the street without looking, and not slowing until she was passing the corner grocery store, then the Laundromat, and she was, at last, sure that no one was following her.

She brought her run to a rigid walk with her shoulders and arms stiff, looking ahead, avoiding detection. The busy street rushed past her, and still, she walked, face forward, feeling the world audience watching her. And even after getting so far away, she laughed out loud in embarrassment at her own actions.

Eventually, her pace slowed, and she assured herself that she wasn't being followed, with several long glances back behind her as she walked. Charlie relaxed a bit and hunched her shoulders. She drew her cardigan closely around herself and stared down at

the ground as she walked. Her patent white shoes had small black scuffs around the toes, and the sidewalk was gray, littered, and sandy. A beer can, broken glass, and faded paper lay in the gutter and passed quickly under her view as she strode.

Gradually, she came to stare at a spot on the sidewalk, where a curious ball of gray caught her attention. She couldn't quite make out what it was from a distance, and so she stared as it came closer, studying the shape and peering intently at the feathers coming into view.

Charlie recoiled abruptly, shaking her head. A dead bird lay on the curb, just at the edge of the sidewalk. And it was only upon close examination that she recognized the details, too late to dispel the image of the maggots pouring forth from the shoulder, devouring the wing feathers, and exposing pink, rotted flesh. She shook her head now, trying to lose the image from her mind, but it seemed to become even clearer the more she shut her eyes: the limp head, the twisted neck, the worms churning, feeding, exposing the carcass—which crossed morbidly over to thoughts of Granddad. The worms eating the pigeon were a disturbing sight, and she couldn't help but wonder if that was happening to Grandpa, lying in his coffin. Granddad Earl had died ten months ago. It was in February, so very close to Valentine's Day, and Charlie noticed that no one else mentioned it, but it broke her heart. If she were Grandma and she had lived so very long as Grandma and Grandpa, and her sweetheart and only husband had died just before Valentine's Day, Charlie knew she would have just cried herself to death. Mom had said that now that Grandpa had died, Grandma no longer had the will to live, and Dad had said, "That's just bullshit," and they'd go on and on, and Mom would get all lame, like, "Don't talk like that around the girls!" *Yeah, Mom, like we've never heard the word "bullshit" before. Get real.*

But Charlie wondered, if Granddad wasn't dead now, would Grandma be dying? Could someone truly just lose the will to live over the death of another? Could two people love each other *so* much that when one dies, the other simply can't go on? Charlie scrunched up her face in puzzlement and wasn't sure who she could ask to get a reliable answer. She feigned grief and raised her arm above her shoulder with the back of her wrist across her forehead.

"Whatever shall I do?" she said aloud, mimicking the dramatic voice of some black-and-white, silver-screen actress. She turned and discovered herself in front of Halford's Jeweler. The storefront's renovation in the nineties had removed the brick wall facade from the entire building to make way for huge pane-glass

windows. They were showcasing every manner and price-point of engagement bands, earrings, and necklaces. Halford's Jeweler has been this town's family jeweler since 1928, and the letters in gold paint and black outline proudly say so, right on the window. It was the perfect reflection and background scene for her one-woman show of mock-drama, love, and death.

"Oh, Grandmother," she said dramatically, watching her reflection in the glass to check for stance and posture, her hand held out in offering, enacting the role of her grandfather. "Take these diamonds, they are forever! And when I'm gone, don't just die! Stay alive forever, like the diamonds."

Charlie frowned and stared into the glass. It hadn't come out as poetically as she imagined, and she didn't know what to say next to make it romantic. Charlie slouched, feeling the moment pass, not sure what to say next. And so, she looked beyond the glass reflection and stared inside the jewelry store at the couple laughing and holding each other. The woman looked down at her hand, fingers splayed out to view the new ring. She was glowing, and so happy, and loving, and she looked at the man who laughed and nodded, and they embraced again so naturally. The woman, enraptured, looked up from his shoulder, stared out the window, and saw Charlie peering in, spying on their moment.

Charlie's knees buckled. The back of her legs tingled, her lips flushed to a prickle, and she's hot under her cardigan. Charlie's voice in her head didn't yet understand what her mind knows of what she's seeing. And even as she turned to flee, she was still looking. She's still trying to understand. Still trying to recognize the face of her mother in the arms of a man who is not her father. And she was already running.

She was running down the street with tears streaming from her eyes. She was running from trouble, knowing only now that she should not be this far east, on this side of town, in front of Halford's Jeweler. She was running from her mother, dragging her along at the wrist, angrily asking her, "Why? Why is she here? Why is she so far into town? Why is she not at school?" "Nobody else is getting in trouble now." "Nobody but you, Charlie, for being here, on the other side of the world, not minding your own business on Kelly's Grandma Day."

And far behind her, the bells hanging from the jewelry store door jingled. And tears streamed down her face as her mother screamed out behind her. And all the world streamed by in colors of blue sky, red brick, and grey asphalt as Charlie ran into the street without looking. A splitting horn rang out and shook the sky,

and split the ground, and Charlie fell and spun, and flew forever to the ground.

Like a feather, wafting downward, the world returned to its place around her.

Charlie lay still, staring up at the underside of the front of a truck and dreamily wondered how long she'd been there. Far away, people were standing over her, trying to get her attention, talking to her in words she could no longer understand. She knew she was about to die. Death is known, like some things in life, without conscious thought. You know you are about to sneeze. You know to take your next breath, or that you must pee urgently. Charlie lay on the ground and knew that her next moment was her last. And she thought she had already closed her eyes, but she could still see the people hovering over her. She could still see her mother crying and screaming at her to wake up. She could still see the sunlight shining all around her and filling up the sky. And Charlie, who, only moments before, was consumed with fear, and confusion, and loss, and uncertainty of all the trouble that life would bring, was puzzled to see her grandfather standing there smiling, waving her toward him, calling her into the light.

II

The stars are full of life energy, endless burning columns, gushing forth frothy light like freshly tapped wells of searing golden oil, shining brightly. Everywhere abounds entities of life energy, continually replenishing as would circulating fountains, shimmering constructs of conscious light. There is no physical sickness or pain. There is only knowledge and harmony.

The angels are soulless constructs of light. In a constant state of song, they glorify the creator, pouring forth his life energy, great webs of light cascading from their backs like iridescent wings of butterflies. The new light that shines into existence pours from every part of their being, spreading into the material plane and powering the consciousness of mortals, to return to the stars, spent, to be circulated and renewed and shine once more.



It was the slowest elevator he'd ever been on. As it crept to a halt, the elevator let out a muted tone to let him know he'd arrived. As he watched the doors open slowly, he realized, *Of course, it would have to be, as it was an elevator in a hospital after all. It had to be big enough to accommodate gurneys, and hospital beds on wheels, and wheelchairs, as well as move gently enough for the sick and nauseous people not feeling well enough to ride a fast elevator.*

As these thoughts wandered through his head while watching the doors creep open, he was interrupted by the sight of his aunt. She was standing there waiting for him, eyes cried out, and hair to show for it. He stepped up to her. They hugged cordially and then sat down by the benches in the entry hall, placed for just such an occasion.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's unresponsive. The doctors say he can understand us and hear us, but he doesn't speak and he doesn't move. At this point, his organs are shutting down. They took away the IV and the catheter last night. At this time, they say he doesn't need it anymore and we're all just waiting . . ."

“Okay, so I’m here just in time, then, or . . . ?”

“You know your uncle, he’s just . . . too damn stubborn to die,” she said with a gasping sob and a laugh. They held each other briefly again, for a moment of comfort.

“The doctors say we need to just talk to him, comfort him; let him know he’s not alone, and at some point, he’s going to . . . ” She paused as she held back another surge of grief. “Fade away,” she whispered, wiping a tear.

Seeing the grief of his aunt laid bare was overwhelming, and he felt a physical sensation like water rushing over him, pulling him down.

“Well, okay, where is he?” he asked, changing the focus of the moment.

“Right on the other side of this wall,” she said with a sobbing chuckle and a shrug toward the wall they were leaning against. “Just turn right at the hall here behind me, and the door’s right there at the corner.”

He stood and collected his coat and his carry bag as she stood and straightened his collar.

“Chin up now,” she said, more like her old self. “We’re here to give him a proper send-off and say goodbye. The doctors say he can understand everything we’re saying. And the last sound he hears,” she said, breaking into a Scottish Burr, “should not be that of a wailing woman!”

He gave a laugh and a nod and sucked up his courage.

“I’ve got to go get my sister,” she said quickly and sternly. “Now that you’re here—she’s waiting for me at the airport.”

“And my brother?” he asked.

“Got a hold of him in Colorado, of all places. He’ll be here tomorrow morning. Your sister arrived yesterday, and she’s been here and helped me with some arrangements.” She moved toward the elevator and pushed the call button. “It was the first time I’d been home to feed the dogs all week, but I slept here again last night.”

“I can take the watch tonight. You should go home and get some sleep in your own bed. How long have you been here?”

“Since Monday. They brought him up when the neighbor found him unresponsive. I met him here from work. The neighbor has been helping feed the dogs till yesterday.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m just glad your office was able to get through to you in the field. I would have hated it if you hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye . . .”

The elevator doors opened slowly.

“I’ve got to go! She’s already landed and by now, probably drunk half the airport and taken the other half hostage.”

“Yeah,” he agreed with a laugh. They waved softly and sadly to each other as the elevator doors closed.

The room was right around the corner. The door was open, and the bed was unceremoniously placed with immediate access to the entrance of the room. The headboard was against the wall where, on the other side, he had just sat with his aunt.

His uncle lay on his left side, curled up in a fetal position, covered with a thin white sheet and a blanket. All the hair from his head long gone from chemo; all of his skin stretched thin on a body days short of food or water, the skin pulled taut around the nose and mouth, the eyes, huge blue orbs beneath the lids. All at once, his uncle resembled a baby bird, hairless, flightless, freshly born, and vulnerable in the nest. A stark contrast to the man he knew.

He looked up quickly and stared around at the various monitors and machines on stands and wheels, cabled, and discreetly plugged into his uncle under the blanket.

His aunt had just said he was no longer responsive, but the doctor said he could understand everything and that they should carry on casual conversations to keep him comfortable and send him on his way. *How could they even know that? How could they know if he was responsive or understanding?* He looked at the heart monitor and the blood pressure monitor and some other contraption with squiggling lines and fluctuating numbers. He was a child of the seventies brought up on eighties TV and obsessed with the idea that a fluctuation in heart rate or a rapid rise in blood pressure would reveal that his uncle could hear him and was responding to his words in kind. Thousands of TV shows across his lifetime had convinced him with scenes of lie detector tests and movies like *My Left Foot* that this man could communicate from

his hospital bed through a blood pressure machine or an increase in heartbeats measured on a display. This was his mission: to make a confirmed and conclusive communication with his uncle.

He pivoted toward his uncle with his arm stretched out and a huge grin. “Did you hear the one about the man who sat up out of his hospital bed and picked a two-pound booger out of his nose?”

∞

“What?” he had asked.

“Did you hear the one,” his uncle repeated, “about the man who sat up out of his hospital bed and picked a two-pound booger out of his nose?”

He had heard his uncle correctly; he just hadn’t followed along. It had been seven minutes of a dissertation that his uncle had been giving him about coma patients, and he was wrestling with pulling the empty beer can out of the coozie while his uncle set the cruise control. He was just about to say “what” again when his uncle said,

“His head collapsed before he could eat it!”

With the punchline came the realization that his uncle had detoured from his impromptu lecture into a joke. They laughed so hard he could hear the echo of it against the exit ramp embankment as they drove under an overpass.

“Your grandfather calls me,”

“Your dad,” he corrected him.

His uncle gave him the side-eye and continued, “Calls me and I say, ‘Hey, Dad, how are you doing?’ and he says, immediately, ‘I’m dying.’ ” His uncle mimicked his grandfather’s flat, authoritative tone perfectly.

The two of them giggled.

“ ‘Yeah, I know, Dad, but, I mean, how are you doing today?’ And there’s this long silence, and I can hear the dog in the background fussing about, and he says, ‘Oh, your mother wants to talk to you.’ ”

They broke into laughter again.

He retrieved a can of Shiner Bock from the backseat cooler and pushed it into a coozie printed to look like a Pepsi can. He popped the tab and bent it back and forth to remove it with the ring intact and handed the beverage to his uncle.

His uncle checked the mirrors before taking a sip and shifting in his seat for the next leg of driving.

“I mean, you called me. Come up with something to say,” his uncle muttered. The scenery passed by for a while before his uncle made quick eye contact from the road. “He’s got your dad doing it now, too.”

He snorted. “Your brother,” he corrected with a callback.

“Your Dad,” his uncle reiterated, “answers the phone, and I say, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ And he’s all, ‘Death-and-dying, yada, yada.’ Same ol’ thing as Dad now, almost verbatim. And he says, ‘Haven’t you been listening?’ You know your dad.”

“Uh, yeah,” he said, down in his throat with a sharp, quick nod.

“So, I say, ‘Yeah, I’ve been listening. I just really like hearing about how you’re gonna die soon.’ And he hangs up!” His uncle ended on a mock note of surprise and shock.

They laughed uproariously.

“You know, they’ve got a bet going. Who’s gonna go first?”

His uncle looked over with a scrunched-up, questioning face. “What? Who?”

“My dad. Your dad. They’ve got a bet going on who’s going to die first.”

“My dad, bet?” His uncle said incredulously. “No way, hose B.”

“You know, Dad and Grandma bet on the March Madness games, nickel a game, they go in a jar. I don’t know how it works.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Dad’s talking to Grandma about the next round. Bracket. Whatever. And they’re talking about who’s going all the way, and Grandpa’s all, ‘It’s a pity I won’t be around to see how all this works out,’ and Dad’s all, ‘I’m gonna die before you, so I think you’ll see the end of this,’ and Grandpa’s like, ‘I bet all the nickels in that jar I’m dead before you,’ and Grandma gets mad.”

“Of course, she fucking should,” his uncle interjected.

“But Dad won’t let it go. So, he dumps all the nickels out to count them, but Grandpa keeps arguing with him about the amount of it, and so Grandpa just turns around and bets a dollar, and they shake on it, and Dad takes the empty jar, and leaves all pissed off.”

His uncle thought about it for a long moment with his head cocked to the side. “He takes the jar? And just leaves all the nickels on the table? Or what?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there. I just remember when Grandma told me the story, she tells me this horrible story about Dad and Grandpa fighting, and all this horrible shit they said to each other, and at the end of the story, I’m kinda shocked that she’s just really, totally, pissed-off that Dad left with their betting jar, and she had to find something else to put all the nickels in.”

They laughed through tears at the hilarious horribleness of it all.

“My dad,” said his Uncle, “wants his death to be some kind of focus of everyone’s attention that somehow brings this family back together— like my brothers could have any reason to put their dysfunctional shit down long enough to come together as a family—and your dad just wants to do anything to spite our father; surprise, surprise, surprise!”

As his laughter subsided, he checked his passenger mirror and checked the oncoming traffic and overpass before sipping from his Dr. Pepper printed beer coozie.

“Uhhh, then why are we going again?”

His uncle let out a deep sigh. “Because you take care of your elders, nephew. Whether they’re half-mad with old-timers, or just too old, and drunk, pissing themselves. You take care of babies when they’re born, and you take care of babies when they die!”

He looked over at his uncle, fishing in the door arm compartment through music cassettes and only half watching the road.

“Is that an old saying?” he asked.

“Who fucking knows. I just said it.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Monarch White,” his uncle said, checking the side of a cassette while he drifted slowly off onto the shoulder.

“It’s in the glove box,” he said, popping the latch. “Which one?”

“*Sailing Away*. That’s me. I’m on a boat and sailing away from shitty family drama.”

“In an MVP minivan?”

His uncle grinned slyly and held up his beer wrapped in a coozie printed like a Pepsi can. “I am in disguise!”

∞

“His head collapsed before he could eat it!” he said dramatically.

Standing still in the hospital room, he gazed alertly at the machines for a bigger beep here, a quicker beep there, a jagged blood-pressure line of laughter.

Nothing.

✦

It was the largest hospital room he’d ever seen, with a seating area of upholstered chairs, and a coffee table at the foot of the bed, serving as the center of the large room with an ensuite bathroom at the far end.

He put down his carry bag on the long bench suspended from the west wall. It was taken up by a waist-to-ceiling row of windows, facing the western tower of the hospital complex with a view of the parking lot and the treed exit parkway, out to the freeway, and across from a large shopping area.

As he assessed the room, he realized his aunt had slept in the high-backed chair close to the bed. And so he fashioned a bit of a bed for himself on the bench along the wall with the windows, using the blankets in the cupboard from the ensuite, and the disposable airplane pillow he’d taken from some previous flight and now traveled with on the road. And finding himself weary from the long trip in and the run of emotions, he lay down on his new arrangement and fell immediately to sleep.



People came and went. He explained his uncle's condition, and each took their moment to share a few words, some news from the day, some passing thanks, and heartfelt goodbyes. Some moved him to tears, some hurt in the awkwardness of their aimless inability to find the words they needed to express. And in between moments, he stood over his uncle, reenacting favorite moments, recalling times from their past. All the while, watching the machines, counting the beeps, feeling the timing, measuring their rhythm. Nothing back. No response. His uncle lay there, motionless, and hadn't moved from his position, even through nurse check-ins and vitals. No reason to believe. No evidence to suggest he was hearing, receiving, or understanding any of it. No telling where he really was.



It was a huge, brand new housing development at the far end of Runner Road, where it dead-ends into Murray Road, which used to be "The Old Highway" out of Rylie. It's all urban sprawl now up to the lake. But back then, he didn't even know they were building stuff out that far, much less anything huge. But his uncle, as forward-thinking as ever, bought one of the very first models in the half mile-long development. They sat with their cars hanging open in his driveway, fold-out chairs, and a cooler with a portable table in his dirt-filled backyard, looking across the sixth-of-a-square-mile of brand-new roads, shaped into blocks, and neighborhoods that didn't exist yet. Streets with signposts with no names, brown dirt lots with no homes—or anything at all, for that matter.

"It's not the show model," his uncle corrected him, "it's the builders' model."

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"The show model is over there. It's all lit up. You passed by it when you turned off Runner, right at the entrance, across from the sales trailer. It's an exact makeup of their mid-range model, the Lexington, I think, with all the upgrades and different surfaces and options demoed in all the different rooms.

"This is the builders' model. Everything that the builder wants to try first, any problems the builder wants to work out, whatever

materials they want to test first, they put a mishmash of stuff together that they're the most unsure about, and they run through it with this first build."

"So, you know you're buying a lemon up front?" he grinned.

His uncle gave a consenting nod.

"But I got all the cool stuff that the builder wants to try before he bangs out the process. So, we got the three-car garage featured in the big model, and there's only thirteen of them, I think? We got the second bay window in the dining room and cathedral ceilings in the extended foyer. With the fancy tile! All kinds of shit. I got an extra powder room because they didn't know what else to do with the extra space off the side of the utility room, because of the extra length of the garage. It's not on any of the other model plans."

His uncle rummaged a beer out of the cooler, twisted the top off, and looked out into the night. A few streetlights were up, illuminating major intersections of empty junctions. In the distance, the lit-up water tower loomed over the town of Rylie from the south, and aside from the lit-up model house and construction office at the entrance at Runner, there was nothing but starless black night surrounding them. His uncle put a Jimmy Buffett cassette in the player and filled the empty neighborhood with *Stories We Could Tell*.

"Oh, sure, lead the serial killers straight to us," he said, gesturing out into the empty surrounding black of night with his beer.

"Or scare them away, with Jimmy Buffé "

"I'm scared," he admitted in agreement.

"They could be pedos."

"What?"

"Think zebras, not horses," his uncle instructed.

He paused to consider. "What?" he asked again, after a sufficient interval.

"It's a corporate buzzword bingo card phrase for changing the paradigm. Changing the way you look at something. If you close your eyes, and I use two coconuts to make hoofbeat noises, what do you think of?"

“Uh, men on horseback? The Renaissance festival? Jousting?”

“All of these are intrinsically linked to horses.”

“Well, yeah.”

“But if I hop on a plane and fly over to Africa and play my coconut hoofbeats, they close their eyes and naturally think of zebras. It’s a reminder that even our instincts could be the wrong assumption at the beginning of the problem.”

“So, how does that get us to petos?”

“Pedos. In America, the boogie man is the serial killer.” Putting up his hands, feyng like a valley girl, his uncle imitated his point, “He had serial killer vibes,” “He’s dressed like a serial killer,” “Have you seen Becky’s new boyfriend? He looks like a serial killer.”

“It’s always a ‘Becky,’ isn’t it?” he asked.

“Always a ‘Becky,” his uncle assured him. “And ‘Beckys’ are redheads, and redheads are bad.”

“Redheads are bad,” he repeated in solidarity, and they clanked longneck Shiner Bock bottles together and drank.

“Now, I watch a lot of that, international TV, what you call, ‘limey stuff.’ ”

“Yeah,” he said with a small laugh.

“BBC, Acorn . . . ”

“*Sad Norwegian Detective?*” he said, quoting some favorite late-night host.

“Ha ha. No, he’s Welsh, smart-ass.”

“Isn’t that that black-and-white stuff?”

“It’s not black-and-white, it’s filmed in Scandinavia.”

He thought about that, cocked his head, pointed his beer bottle, and began to speak, but his uncle got there first.

“Listen, the important bit is, I was watching the BBC stuff, and I noticed anytime they went in for one of those serial killer-looking

kinda characters, or insults, they always went in the pedo direction with it.”

“I still don’t know what peto . . . ”

“Pee-dough. Pedophile.”

“Oh! Peh-toe-file . . . ” he said, over-enunciating.

“Yeah,” his uncle agreed, “But the Brits call them pee-doughs for short.”

“Got it.”

“So, the Beckys over there are saying to each other, ‘He looks like a pedo,’ or ‘He’s dressed like a pedo.’ ‘That haircut makes you look like a pedo!’ While here in the states, the exact same guy, we would say, ‘looks like a serial killer.’ ”

“Right.” He paused and spelled it out slowly. “So, when you hear hoofbeats, think pedos, not serial killers?”

“Exactly,” his uncle said with exaggerated pride. “He can be taught! Now, the problem was, this was just my own observation. I did some searches online, but came up with nothing. Nowhere else could I confirm this observation or find anyone else talking about the same thing. Then I saw this miniseries. Martin Clunes—the *Doc Martin* guy?”

“The shoes?”

“No. Not the skinhead shit kickers. A British actor. Popular for playing a village doctor who is squeamish about blood. Not as slapstick as that sounds. In this other miniseries, he plays a British detective. He has to track down this guy killing girls.”

“Serial killer,” he sang as if introducing the devil’s advocate.

“Exactly! And part of the story is their struggle to go against their cautious nature and call this guy a serial killer. Too controversial! Not enough evidence! And the whole time I’m thinking, ‘Yeah, yeah, what are you Brits going to do when you have to bust out the old ‘serial killer’ label on this psychopath?’

“So, they finally have the evidence they need. They’ve linked the killer to these girls, a string of killings, in a timeframe, and they gotta call a spade a spade. They get all the police personnel working the case all together in a group, and they go, ‘We’ve got a serial killer.’ And their little police department is all huddled

together at this meeting, and the camera pans out to them, and they're all very sullen. And the camera closes in on these two lady police, and the one leans over and says, 'I bet he's a pedo, *too*.'

He laughed and took a pull from his beer.

"And that was my nod. That was my acknowledgement. Not a live conversation or an online post, but a deliberate line of dialogue written into a script where a writer and director acknowledged that in Britain, it's not enough to be a serial killer. The real boogie men are pedos."

"That's awesome," he said with a chortle. "I don't know how you keep all that shit in your brain."

"Well, I read, and I watch non-fiction television, and I don't smoke dope and strum a guitar and sing songs about peace and love all day."

"Nah, it's not that. Even before then, as a kid, I couldn't keep anything from school in my head. I don't remember anything I was taught. Hell, I don't remember last week. Life is just this thing going by in real time. It's like television. There isn't any retention there; it's just whatever's on."

"Jesus."

"I think it's a generational thing. I don't think our education's the same."

"Nah, it's not generational. My brothers are all dumb as dog shit."

"It reminds me of Grandma and Grandpa racing each other to answer questions while watching *Jeopardy*."

"What, your mom's folks?"

"No, Grandma and Grandpa. Your folks. 'Mom and Dad,'" he said hotly in a spot-on mimic of his uncle.

"Bite me," his uncle said with resolve. "My parents answering *Jeopardy* questions . . ." he muttered skeptically.

"I never told you that story? Oh man, when I went up to live with Dad before he died."

"Yeah?"

“On Thursdays, I would take him to physical therapy at the VA. He had a regular appointment at three. I had to get him there a bit early, drop him off, and head over to Grandma and Grandpa’s to mow the lawn. I’d get the garage opened up, the riding mower fired up, and by the time I’d done the front and started moving things into the backyard, Grandma would come out and say, ‘Well, I’ve put together some leftovers from lunch,’ or ‘I have a breakfast wrap from this morning, and *Jeopardy* is coming on, so come on in and have some lunch.’

“So, I’d go in, and she’d set up a little tray table for me in there, in the TV room outside the dining room with them, and I would eat lunch, and they’d watch *Jeopardy* at three-thirty.

“And the first time, I didn’t even notice. The second time I was like, *Oh yeah, they were answering a lot of the questions last time, too.* But by the third time, I’m really paying attention. And they’re not just answering questions, they’re racing each other to answer the question. They’re trying to beat each other to be first. Not just a few questions. Like, every question.”

“My mom and dad?” his uncle asked again, skeptically.

“Yeah, and it became a routine with me. I would make sure Dad was on time for physical therapy, get the front yard done, go in for lunch, and sit and watch them blow my mind. Grandpa was better at, you know, geography and government, history stuff. Grandma was better at arts and entertainment. But they were both there, every time, at least one of them knew the answer, and most of the time both of them, just on the edge of their seats, trying to beat the other one to the punch, getting the answer out as fast as they could.”

His uncle shook his head in disbelief, “I just don’t . . . ”

“And I would go out, and ride around on the mower, and think about how it was just such a statement on the education of my generation, and how people today can’t identify their own state on maps on late-night television. But my grandparents are in there, throwing down on the name of some ship sunk in some civil-war battle.”

“My mother answering *Jeopardy* questions,” his uncle mused.

He held up a finger. “So, it gets into fall, right? This is right before Dad died after the New Year. Colder temps, grayer skies, and I only have to mow their grass, like every other week. Dad gets an evaluation scheduled, and he says to me, ‘Oh, we got to go

in for an 11:50 appointment instead of the usual time slot; it's a different doctor.' I'm like, 'No problem.' I take him in and drop him off. It's my week for mowing, and I figure I'm just going to go over early and get it done. It's getting dark earlier anyway, and it will be good to get it done.

"I go over. Same drill. Get the garage open, move the cars, get the mower, and do the front. Grandma comes out, 'Let's have some lunch, *Jeopardy's* on'. I'm not even thinking about it.

"I go in and sit down. We're all at tray tables; they're eating too 'cuz it's early. I'm not even thinking about it. *Jeopardy* comes on, I'm chewing away, and the first thing I notice is the silence. I start looking back and forth at Grandpa and Grandma. They're not saying anything. They're both staring at the TV. Grandpa's mouthing the words to the answer. Grandma's writing another answer on a small notepad."

His uncle started to giggle.

"What the fuck is going on? I look at the TV. Why am I watching *Jeopardy* at lunch time? I look at the clock. It's twelve-thirty-seven. I look at Grandma. She's tensely focused on the TV. She's repeating the answers.

" 'What time is *Jeopardy* on?' I ask in this kind of daze. Grandma's glued to the TV. She starts to kind of, wave me away, and then looks over quickly between questions.

" 'What, honey?' she asks quickly.

" 'What time is *Jeopardy* on?' I ask.

" 'Twelve-thirty and three-thirty,' she says, her focus back on the TV."

His uncle was now howling, laughing, rolling towards his left and half-sliding out of his lawn chair.

"And all this time goes flooding away from me. All these minutes, riding around on the lawn mower, gob smacked that my grandparents could remember all this history, all these names, all this literature. Yeah, from like, two-and-a-half hours ago! Who watches *Jeopardy*, the exact same game, two-and-a-half hours later? Topeka, Kansas, that's who! All this time, I thought my grandparents had some sort of golden age of education! All this time I thought I was in the presence of true experience; the real, ancestral, generational knowledge kind of thing."

His uncle could barely contain his own guts as he hemorrhaged laughter up from his diaphragm in gasping fits.

He waited until his uncle calmed down enough to hear his call-back. “But all along, I should have been thinking, ‘Zebras.’ ”

“Or pedos,” his uncle finished, barely able to speak from exhausted laughter.

He nodded. It’s too cold for bugs to bother them across the flat, barren dirt that is hundreds of empty lots, but at the streetlight height, clouds of insects swarmed the lights. It’s quiet across the horizon, and the music from the portable stereo flowed away with the wind, failing to reflect from fences and houses that aren’t built yet. His uncle has got a fire ring going with a warm raging fire where a back alley will be someday. Tonight, no houses yet existed to be in danger, nor a single neighbor to complain about their safety or say that it’s illegal. It’s a singular place and time in a big open area where only he and his uncle exist, and he had a fleeting moment of wishing it could last forever. As a familiar song began, he leaned back in the lawn chair and asked, “Is this ‘*A Pirate Looks at Forty*?’ ”

“It is,” his uncle confirmed.

“And what’s ‘piratey’ about all of this?”

His uncle waved his bottle toward the empty darkness. “I sold off my company’s stock at its highs and then shorted it all the way down to buy this place. Do you know what that means?”

“You took all you could, profited from the fall of The Man, and gave nothing back?”

“That’s about it.”

“Sounds pretty ‘piratey’ to me.”

That night as he slept in his uncle’s new house, he couldn’t stop his head spinning from all the beers, and couldn’t stop the bleating melody of Jimmy Buffett’s pleading call to the ocean ringing in his ears.

He awoke to a man bent over his uncle, fondling his ass and rummaging under the sheets. He sat up suddenly, his finger in the air, his mouth ready to say, “Hey, what the fu . . .” when the man turned, and he saw he was a doctor, checking his connections, feeling his abdomen and organs, listening to his breathing.

He spun, gracefully, he hoped, putting his feet on the floor, turning his finger into a quick wave, turning his open mouth into a yawn, and looking about the room in the dark.

The doctor wrapped up his examination, recovered his uncle, realigned the cables, checked the machines, and made his notes. He walked over to his side and said warmly, “Hello,” and then flatly, “Who are you?”

“Nephew,” he said. “My father’s brother. Though he’s been more of a father to me since my dad died twenty years ago.”

“Indeed,” the doctor said warmly.

“How is he?”

“Relatively unchanged. Some expected progress, but I expect nothing different by morning. Your uncle is a resilient man.”

“Yeah,” he said over an arching chuckle in agreement.

“I have standing orders to call his wife, your aunt?”

“Yeah, she picked up her sister at the airport and came by on the way back. I’m giving her the night off.”

“Very kind. Yes, with nothing to report, I’m wondering if we shouldn’t just let her sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he repeated. “She’ll call me anyway, if she’s up or concerned.” He felt around the bench through the blanket and found his phone. A few new messages, but nothing from her. He rolled his head around his neck and said again, “She’ll call me, anyway. If not, she’s asleep, and let’s not wake her. If something changes, we’re going to know, right?”

“The nurses will continue their watch, and if anything changes, they’ll alert me immediately. If you’re here, you’ll know.”

He nodded. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here.”

“Right. So, you’ll know as well and one of us will let her know immediately. But for now, I don’t see any need to alert anyone

before morning.”

He nodded.

The doctor headed to the door and stopped to make notes in his chart.

He stood, rolled his head, and stretched his back. He walked around to the side of his uncle’s bed with his back to the door and looked over his uncle. The sleep had restored his sensitivity and the view of his uncle in such a depleted state sent shockwaves through his body. He breathed harshly and jaggedly as his body spasmed involuntarily. He slumped down into the high-backed chair and looked at the machines and counted their beeps and the time between them. Nothing has changed, nothing to indicate, nothing to know anything more than what you see is what you get.

“You know that doctor,” he said, breaking into an exaggerated British accent. “I bet he’s a pedo too.”

In the split second as he went to check the lights and beeps, he heard a pen falter and scratch down a clipboard chart, accompanied by a humph of an exhale as he realized it hadn’t been as much time as it felt like in these last few moments and turned to find the once kindly doctor glaring at him appallingly.

“Uh, no, it’s not,” he lifted his hands. “It’s a joke, an inside reference to a movie he likes, about, it’s, it’s actually about serial killers,”

The doctor’s face went from bewilderment to outrage.

“No, it’s not about that, now, it’s that there’s this reference to a thing that he realized about British—look, it’s an inside joke, and he would think it’s funny and it’s not anything to do with you, I don’t think you’re a pedo . . .” By this point he could tell he was getting nowhere and not changing his mind, “Unless that stands for pediatrician? Which . . . ?” he used his best comedic interrogative and gave his best “what if?” face.

The doctor murmured under his breath and finished scribbling across his uncle’s chart with a flourish and turned left with a stride.

He turned with a resigned and defeated sigh and scanned across the machines. The same lines, the same numbers, the same metronome-like caliber of steadily repeating beeps.

“Nothing?” he asked. “I make the perfect ass of myself with a classic callback and couldn’t fall any flatter than with a banana

peel onto my butt, and you've got nothing for me? Not even a blip? Not even a ninety-two over that seventy? Holding steady? Poker face? Baby Bird would be a great name for a celebrity poker player, am I right? Baby Bird? Ehn? Nothing?"

He took a big sigh and looked down at his uncle's face. No movement. No eye movement under the translucent lids. No mouth movement. Up at the machines. All the same.

"All right," he said with a tone of resignation. "I'm going to go find the cantina in this place; you make sure no one steals my stuff, and I'll bring you back a horse and two hookers." He stopped, looked toward his uncle intently, and asked, "What?" The machines beeped steadily.

"And a bottle of firewater," he agreed, with a point of his finger in confirmation. "A horse, two hookers, and a bottle of firewater," he ticked through three fingers. He waited.

The machines beeped between silences. Nothing fluctuated, nothing changed.

"Well," he said, admittingly. "If I wasn't going to get a rise out of you by embarrassing myself calling your doctor a pedo, I'm probably not going to accomplish much with two hookers and a horse." He paused to consider. "Even with a bottle of firewater," he lamented as he walked out into the hallway.

♦

He woke in the dim, dawning morning with the first visitor. Old colleagues and friends stopped by early on their way to work for one last goodbye. Some asked a few questions about his status and about the next steps. Some came and went as though not wanting to disturb or be seen. Between visits, he made time to pee, organize his bench and blanket, and check his uncle's vitals and machines. But mostly, he continued to doze off and on and awoke with a start sometime later to a sunlit room and his aunt back in her chair, holding his uncle's hand, her head resting on her arm across the hospital bed's raised rail.

"Hi," he whispered. He realized he slept harder and later than he expected coming out of the morning.

"Hey, you," she said. "How are you?"

“Fine enough. No troubles.” He sat upright and cocked his head. “I haven’t had to kick anyone out,” he declared triumphantly. He screwed up his face in confusion. “What time is it?”

“Eleven-eighteen,” she answered quickly.

“Oh. I slept pretty hard, back after nine.”

“When’s the last time you’ve eaten?” a man asked from the doorway and he recognized his brother’s voice.

“Uhhh . . . last night, I went down to the cantina, and I couldn’t find anything not fried or dead or filled with bacon, so I got a Jell-O bowl, and when I was at the cashier, I noticed their beverage cooler at the end actually had bottled beer, and I was so disoriented from amazement that a hospital had bottled beer for sale in their cafeteria that I bought one.”

“A stunning display of reason. And before that?”

His eyes squinted together as he tried to recall. He was on call in the field. Where had he driven in from again? “What day is it?” he asked out loud.

“Friday,” his brother said slowly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

After what seemed like a much longer pause than necessary, he blurted, “Two days!”

His brother tilted his head. “In two days, you’ve had a Jell-O bowl and a beer?”

“*Pineapple* Jell-O,” he clarified, as if settling the argument. Despite his brother’s ever-present frustration with him, they both started giggling.

“Did you call the doctor a pedophile?!” his aunt’s voice blurted out in ascending shock. He turned to find her looking down at the clipboard of overnight updates in her lap.

He raised his finger, mouth open, inhaling to the last moment, and then with a slow descent of his hand and defeat on his face, he admitted in the resigned tone of a child, “Yes. But it’s not like it sounds,” he added quickly, “I was just trying to make him laugh,” he said on a downbeat with a wave to his uncle.

“Make him laugh?” she repeated incredulously.

“Well, I’ve just been,” he paused as he reluctantly found the right word, “obsessed with this idea that the doctors told you; he’s conscious, he hears everything, he just can’t respond. Well, how do they know if there’s not some kind of reactive heartbeat, or accelerated breathing, you know? Some kind of reaction to know he’s reacting.

“So, I’ve been trying to look for any kind of response, an extra beat on the heart machine, or some back and forth on the EKG, or some kind of extra beep or elevated blood pressure.”

“You’re trying to lie detector your uncle?”

There was a long pause as he succumbed to the ridiculousness of it all and felt childish. This was often the case, and it was a shame that burned deeply in him as the oldest sibling.

“Yeah,” he admitted, long and slowly drawn out.

With a perfect skip and a beat, his aunt chuckled back a sob at the same time and gasped, “Well, did it work?”

“No,” he said on a long exhale of resignation, and they all gave small chuckles through choked-back grief.

“Well, my sister is down in the cafeteria getting us breakfast, and she’s bound to be back at any moment, and she’s in no mood for your antics.” She turned her eyes to his brother. “Get him some food.”

“Come on,” his brother said. “There’s a new one of those taco shops you like across the street. Sunny Taco?”

“Taco Soleado? There ain’t one over there.”

“There is now. They took out that old Burger Street.”

“Oh, wow!”

“Yeah, you haven’t been back in a while.”

His aunt interjects, “I’ll text you if anything changes. Until then, while you’re over there, buy him a shirt,” she adds.

He pointed to his carry bag on the bench where he’d slept and then remembered he’d driven in from the field, not even stopping at his apartment, and only had his work maps, field notes, computer, hat, and gloves in his bag.

“And some socks and underwear,” he added as they headed down the hall. They walked in silence out of the hospital’s main exit, down the long parkway entrance sidewalk, across the divided eight-lane and into the shopping complex across from the hospital.

His brother was right. The old, abandoned Burger Street was gone, and a brand-new free-standing Taco Soleado stood in the center of the forward parking lot. He must have been really blown out and focused on getting to the hospital when he arrived to have missed that.

They wove between the cars parked near the shop and entered the fast-food restaurant. Most customers were already inside, sitting and waiting, or eating, and there was no line up to the counter for ordering. The brothers ordered independently, but at the last moment, his brother swiped a credit card for his payment. He made a bit of protest, pantomiming, shooing his brother’s hand and card away, but it was not very serious or sincere and he let his brother pay without real resistance.

They found a clean table in the center of the dining area and waited to be called back for their food. After only a short amount of time, they picked up their order and prepared their hot sauce and napkins at the condiments bar.

They sat at the table. He ate a French fry. His brother unwrapped a taco. Both of their phones chimed in unison. “911 COME BACK,” the text message read. They both quickly stood and gathered their things and picked up their trays.

They glanced at each other without a word between them. They both walked toward the same woman, obviously a mother sitting at two tables with five kids, fighting over a meager collection of food, the mother trying to keep the peace between them. A nearly identical scene of their own lives growing up, before their middle brother died, after Dad had left following the divorce. A mother holding on to every little bit to get by.

“Here’s our food, we’re being called back to the hospital,” his brother said as he set his tray on the first table with the mother, youngest, and the two girls.

“We didn’t even touch it,” he added as he placed his own tray on the second table between the two older boys. As if to contradict the point, or to illustrate its safety, his brother grabbed one of his French fries and popped it in his mouth. They walked off.

On the walk back to the hospital, he thought about the surprised look of amazed gratitude on the mother's face and used it to block out the reason for their hurried return.

The brothers hadn't spoken to each other the whole time out.



The slowest elevator in the universe finally gave up its hold on them and opened its doors. As the brothers stepped out their aunt's sister came running toward them, eyes crying, face distorted in grief, arms up. And in the moment that he thought they would hug and he would console her she ran right straight past them and into the elevator and began frantically hitting the buttons, which she continued to do while the brothers stood there, mouths open, and watched as the doors slowly closed again.

They turned to each other and then dashed around the corner and into their uncle's room.

Their aunt kneeled at the side of the bed, reassuring his uncle, telling him not to be afraid, that they were all with him, that the boys were here now.

"He's leaving us, but he can still hear us," she said to them, not looking away from her husband. It's everything she can do to keep from falling apart.

He can feel his brother standing behind him, but he can't take his eyes away from the bedside. The now-empty wall across the bed—all the machines had been taken away in his absence.

He's shocked. It's a total surprise to him that they're gone. Now he has nothing. Not even the beeps of a heartbeat. Not even numbers on a screen showing blood pressure or zig-zaggy brainwaves. And all this time he has spent listening to other people's deathbed goodbyes. Not taking seriously the things he had to say, until now, when it's too late, and he can't even think straight, and the fucking machines are gone, and there's nothing. Nothing!

And the grief is balled up into his chest, pressing out, about to explode. And he doesn't know what to say or do, but he knows these are the last seconds his uncle is with him. But it hurts too much to speak. His chest is about to explode, and he throws back

his head and does the only thing he can think of at this moment,
and he sings an ascending scale of notes in a minor key of sorrow.

His brother dropped his head and closed his eyes, shook his head, turned, and walked out of the room. Was he wrong? Was that a bad thing to do? It's not about him. He can't, he doesn't know what to do, what to think. He feels like it can only come out, in . . . he looks at his uncle's face. He knows what to do. He reaches out his arm and begins to sing,

*Sailing away, the look on your face as we're waving goodbye,
Ropes to the sail, pointing my eye to the star in the sky . . .*

His air was choked up in his chest, and he was barely getting the last of the lyrics out. Has he done the wrong thing? Will they be mad? His aunt stood and with her theater experience and the voice of an angel, she joined him:

And nothing to do,

*But hang off the foredeck and drink beers with you, And
nothin' to prove,*

I don't have a convenient excuse.

He jabs his finger toward his uncle and rises to the bridge,

I've been on the water far too long it seems,

To listen to reason.

He sings out the bass notes in between as she comes down from the harmony,

*I've been sailing blind into the face of God too long, To not
believe him,*

Nothing I could say for right or wrong,

Could keep the peace here,

But everything I've tried to find

Along the way,

could be discovered,

If you and I

could find each other

*In sky-high weeds and daily scenes
Of slate blue skies and broken dreams,
And cry at night
when life ain't what it seems . . .*

He faded out softly and let her voice ring like a bell across a silent room,

*We'll go sailing away,
Sailing away...*

He repeated with her softly, and they faded out,

*We'll go sailing away-hey-hey,
Sailing away...*

By now he was spent. All the volume left his chest, and he felt weak and shaking. His aunt walked to the head of the bed, put her hand on his uncle's bald head, and began whispering her sweet goodbyes. He looked down at his uncle's face and his closed eyes. He paused with a chill. He couldn't believe what his eyes were telling him, and he bent slowly and crept forward and peered intently.

There, on his uncle's face, from the tear duct of his upturned eye, a wet trail kicked back a small gleam of reflected light. A trail of wet across and down the bridge to the tip of his nose where he saw the tear, bulging with each droop as time seemed to slow, and as the moment pulled into focus, he could feel his uncle's voice in his mind, "Here's your proof of coms, my boy! This is your nod, your acknowledgment. Not a blip on a machine or a beep you'll second-guess for the rest of your life. But a grateful tear for a fitting sendoff from the hardest man you ever knew."

And as the swollen tear hung too far and let go and fell and splashed upon the pillow, it echoed "goodbye" across his being. His facial muscles buckled and shook, holding back the tears he refused to release. And as the tears pooled into his eyes they magnified the sunlight flooding the room until it became so bright he had to close his eyes, squeezing them tightly, pressing his tears like waterfalls down his face, bursting through his resistance with a sob. He turned and stumbled toward the door where he crashed into his returning brother and fell to his knees as his brother held him, and he cried and cried and cried and cried.

III

The stars are full of souls. Countless millions of your world could fit inside a solitary cauldron of the infinite red dwarfs that serve as the colder planes of hell. These that shine less bright. These that rend and tear mass from spirit in an ever-flowing lake of fire. These that preserve the souls of the damned.

Across the bend from Hell to Heaven he called to him and begged him to dip his finger into water—to allow a single drop of relief to fall upon his tongue. Were it for pity alone, he would, but he could not. Nothing such as water could exist here, neither in the House of the Creator nor the Hades of the Fallen.



“It is a story,” Tom’s editor says slowly, with the tone with which one addresses an imbecile. “You are a reporter,” he follows, emphasizing the word *you*. “I am your editor,” he continues with similar emphasis.

Tom can see where this is going and cuts him off with an interjection. “This is bullshit,” Tom says and lights his third cigarette. Even though Tom’s editor, Sam, didn’t smoke, he had put in four air returns and two vents in his office so old-school journalists like Tom could sit and smoke in Sam’s office while Sam squeezed their nuts in a vise. It was also as cold as a morgue in there.

“It’s Mount Pida,” Sam continues, “in the Andes, in some no-man’s-land area between Peru and Bolivia. Four kids sitting on a mountain, sitting on this rock,” Sam says, with his arms spread out as if to present the rock, “staring at the sun.” He stops and gazes at Tom with an inviting stance. “How can you not ask about children staring into the sun?”

Tom takes a large drag off his cigarette and blows out a billowing plume of smoke that flows quickly up to the ceiling return vents and disappears.

“These children stare at the sun all day, their eyelids blister up and burn, but every night their eyes work, and they can see just

fine, and by day, they swear,” he pauses and leans over his desk, “They swear they can see the Virgin Mother, Mary, in the Sun.” Sam tries to restrain from crossing himself, but in the end can’t resist and flicks his wrist through a quick and discreet crucifix.

“It’s bullshit,” Tom repeats as he stands and crushes out his cigarette.

“You’re going,” Sam says sternly.

Tom flips him the bird as he walks out the door.

“You’re going!” Sam screams, striding around to the front of his desk to better see Tom retreat down the hall. He reaches out and pushes the plunger on the self-cleaning ashtray, watching Tom’s cigarette butts fall out of sight and into the ashes in the container below.



The bus slides as the driver’s side rear wheel tire loses grip and the massive vehicle staggers ever-closer to the cliff’s edge. The winding mountain side road has brought them almost a thousand feet above sea level, and the valley seems even farther below as the motley collection of world-scattered passengers scream again just as they have done dozens of times before.

Tom’s grip fails for a moment as his fingers give way and his fist slides across and then tightens again on the seat back in front of him. The straining engine of the old, overburdened bus howls as the gangly driver stomps the accelerator. Loose gravel and rock spray loudly against the underside of the bus as the wheels spin and stutter to gain traction. Suddenly, the bus lurches forward and up into the passenger side of the sheared mountain stone. The suspension rises and falls with a sudden bang and Tom’s ass catches air and then slams back into his seat. His considerable gut and bones jar with the impact and the passengers scream again, just as they have done dozens of times before.

After several more jarring bumps, slides, and sessions of screaming, the bus comes to a sudden halt behind a throng of men in the road, working and straining away at the back end of the bus in front of them. The bus driver stands and leans out the window and yells at those blocking the way, who yell back. This carries on for some time until the driver withdraws back onto the bus and turns to face the passengers.

The driver shouts angrily in some variety of Spanish with his hands in the air and a pushing back motion. He points to the ground and screams some more, emphatically, and then waves a finger in the air. Shaking his head, he walks back slowly, facing the passengers, pointing to their seats, stabbing his finger in the air for them to stay put. Then quickly he turns down the stairs and off the bus.

That guy really wants us to stay on this bus, Tom thinks dryly, and as the driver's head dips out of view several occupants jump from their seats and scramble off after him. The first honest smile in the last few days creeps across Tom's face and it catches him by surprise with a deep chuckle. Slowly he turns to face the woman in the seat across the aisle from him and she smiles back with a face full of dirty, broken teeth. He looks down quickly to escape the view, only to see that the chicken in the improvised wooden cage in her lap has shit all over her dress and down onto the floor. He winces now as he's suddenly aware of the stench and the filth of passengers on the bus and he thinks, *Yeah, fuck this.*

Tom gathers himself up and follows the disobediently disembarked off the bus in search of fresh air. Immediately outside, Tom pads through his shirt pocket, fishes out a cigarette from the crumpled pack and lights up. His black, peeling messenger bag hangs from his right shoulder and under his left arm, and in his left hand he carries his plaid overnight bags. With his right hand he puts his cigarette in and out of his mouth and pushes his glasses up his nose as he surveys the line of pilgrimage as far as his eyes can see down the thin winding mountain road: buses, trucks, motorcycles, and all manner of people on foot—pulling wagons, carrying children, helping the elderly, and pushing wheelchairs.

It feels good to be off the bus. He's been on this bus since he arrived by plane in the middle of the night. He's watched the light of day appear from the crowded confines of the bus. At this moment, it feels like all of his lifetime has been flying on the plane from New York and riding in this squalid third-world bus. Now, here in the fresh air, feeling very much the part of a lone American in an alien place, he remembers he is on assignment and has written nothing since leaving the airport.

Tom finds a clear space on a large slab of rock placed as a retaining wall along the inside turn and sits himself and his belongings down. He removes his pen and pad from his bag and takes notes. Many of the buses and trucks are brightly painted, obviously by hand, and often with exterior building paint. Many of the carts and bicycles are heavily modified contraptions of spare parts and necessity. And most are simply people with nothing left.

Dressed in ill-fitting clothes with little to no shoes, they trudge on foot past the stopped caravan of buses, hugging the inside wall, or they stop and wait with the rest of the convoy, sitting on their improvised vehicles.

Using the finished cigarette to light a next one, Tom crushes out the butt and turns his attention to the work on the bus in front of them. A large wedge of asphalt has fallen away, leaving a chasm considerably larger than any they've faced so far. The view through the space where the road should be is both terrifying and beautiful in drop and depth into the jagged valley below. The gape in the road comes too far in toward the center, and the bus before it has its back drivers' side tire spinning freely in the air with the under frame of the bus resting on the pavement on either side of the chasm.

Men have brought down a fallen tree from the mountainside just above them and are attempting to use a large rock as a fulcrum to leverage the tree trunk under the tire, lifting the bus and forming a makeshift bridge for the tire and providing just enough traction to rock the bus forward. Tom watches them for a while until he figures their situation is hopeless and then returns to his writing:

"Like the pilgrimage to Mecca or the trek to Jerusalem, an uncountable stream of souls push onward through dangerous and dire conditions to reach what is now being called 'The Vigil of the Four.' And for what? Allegedly, four children from a local mountain village northeast of Mejava have spent the last five weeks staring at the sun. Reportedly, the children sit, entranced and staring, unblinking, into the sun during the day. By night, their vision is unmarred; they eat and they pray with the pilgrims. The children say they can see a vision of the Catholic Mother Mary in the face of the sun. They sleep in the early morning and are the first to wake before sunrise and take their place on their plateau before the sun. Many dozens of pilgrims are now reportedly blind from attempting to duplicate the experience, and the local government has sent armed militia to prevent further injuries and maintain the safety of the crowds and the four children."

At this point, Tom still doesn't even know if any of it is true. This is as much as he's been able to put together from the few English-speaking people that he's met along the way. Tom still doesn't believe that there are four little brats actually staring into the sun and still expects to find some low-brow bullshit primitive explanation at the top of the mountain. Despite this skepticism, he is astounded at what he's witnessed of the pilgrimage thus far and begrudgingly observes that there is no one to be seen coming back down the mountain, aside from messengers and runners for

supplies. Whatever it is at the end of all this is not sending back detractors and continues to draw the largest mass of people he's seen since Woodstock.

Tom is pulled from his thoughts by the roaring groan of many straining men and the thundering crackle of splitting timber as the grounded bus blocking their way finds resistance in the makeshift leverage and lurches itself up out of the chasm of missing asphalt. The working men cheer and the spectators applaud and hug in delight. Quickly, the first bus reloads as a second round of fresh men began fashioning a new log into a makeshift bridge lined up with Tom's approaching bus.

Just watching the strain of the heaving men laboring with the log beneath the bus makes Tom's chest ache. He realizes he hasn't had a pill in a while and checks his watch. Tom reset his watch after landing and deplaning, but his body is still on New York City time and his heart is three hours late for a pill. His chest thumps and tightens again, triggering his senses with the memory of the subway-tiled doctor's office where his most recent stress test drove him to the brink of cardiac arrest. Instinctively, Tom reaches for his shirt pocket and fishes out his bottle of pills between two fingers. As he twists off the lid and pours the bottle into his hand, he realizes that there are not nearly as many pills remaining as he expected. As he dry swallows a pill and sets the rest of the bottle on the rock slab beside him, he tries to do the math on the number of tablets remaining versus how much longer until his return.

While Tom calculates, he watches his bus driver rounding up passengers with spastic waves of his arm and angry, demanding screams. Tom realizes with a sickening sink in his stomach that it is their turn to try to get across the fallen-tree bridge. He sets his pen and pad on his makeshift stone bench beside his pill bottle and other belongings as the bus driver approaches like a scrambling crab.

The bus driver screams frantically as he waves his hands in unison from his hips up toward his head in an uplifting motion. He sweeps them across Tom's possessions placed around him on the ground and stone slab and carries that motion back toward the bus. Tom looks past him to the line of passengers shuffling steadily toward the bus entrance and then trails his gaze over to the fallen tree, now wedged across the chasm in the road.

"Shouldn't you try to cross empty?" Tom asks, looking back at the driver with what he hopes is a helpful expression. "The bus is very heavy, even more so loaded, and it's dangerous to cross with everyone on board."

The gaunt-faced driver looks incredulously at Tom and lets loose an incomprehensible rant followed by more sweeping motions of his arms directing Tom onto the bus. Tom sighs heavily and gathers his things and prepares for what he is certain will be his doom.



The bus crosses the make-shift bridge without incident.

Highway 44 out of Tacupaca runs northeasterly in a winding sprawl along the border of Peru and Chile, thumb-screwing its way up ancient volcanoes and a haphazard assortment of forestry and national parks, cut like huge jigsaw pieces between borders of desert vegetation and mountains and thermal springs. The scene is both the most majestic and downright desolate thing that Tom has ever seen as he stands above the makeshift parking area at the top of the plateau, where all the buses have come to rest and sit in large haphazard clumps like logjams in lakes of people.

“Standing from the southernmost side of Talaca Mesa and looking to the south, I can see the river-like path of buses trailing far back, deep into the depth of the incline, and up the dozens of miles here to the plateau, a half-mile strip of abandoned structures and decrepit shops and stations that most recently served as a way station and border-crossing town of little note and even less activity. Today and for the last few weeks in a steady stream, pilgrims have arrived by the thousands, undeterred as they depart from buses, caravans, makeshift wagons and vehicles, weary from one leg of their journey and onto the next, as each of us making this trip now must walk the three-hour trek up steep volcanic rock and cliff-faced mountains to arrive at the Vigil of the Four.

“Many travelers carry others too infirm to walk themselves, or pull them in makeshift carts and sleds, but none seem deterred or discouraged in their toll; everyone marches forward, resolute in their destination.”

Tom stops writing and looks up from his small spiral pad of paper and surveys the mass of humanity pushing forward. He turns to his right and surveys the long craggy line of pilgrims marching ahead, higher in elevation. Their jagged, stepped line that they form reminds him of a recent rock song all the young journalists are raving about, called *Stairway to Heaven*. While he had never presumed or tried to understand what the title meant, he thinks of it now as he sees the long ascending trail of people, staggering higher and higher along the mountainside, up into the sky.

Seventeen-hundred feet above sea level and climbing they are, and driven by what? No reported miracles, no promise of healing or divine intervention. Where were the people claiming to be healed? Where was the evidence for motivation to press forward? What is driving these people?

Tom had asked anyone he could engage in conversation, “Why are you coming? What brought you here? Why do you make the journey?” and always the answer was some variety of the same: “To see the children.” Not “To be healed,” or “To see a miracle,” or “To know my future.” None of the motivations that Tom expected to find at the heart of a supernatural pretense were evident. Time and again Tom was struck by the sense that people had no real satisfactory explanation for why they were drawn to come and witness four children staring at the sun. Time and again the reasons rang of sense and afterthought. Not quite excuses but certainly held in last priority. Reason was not the driving force behind the motivation. The miracle of the four was not expected to be defined by gain.

Tom noticed two soldiers carrying automatic rifles, slung casually over their shoulders, and making their way down the path toward him. They were headed back down from the mountain, patrolling and watching over the pilgrimage. Tom moved quickly, putting away his pad and pen, situating his bag, and finishing up with a long drag on his cigarette. He pushed ahead of the lumbering line by skirting to the right of it and waving his press identification at anyone who glared at him for moving outside the large mass of the queue.

“Excuse me,” he said as he caught up to them, breathing heavily and holding his press badge up at head-height. “English?” he asked hopefully. “Do you speak English? Can I ask you some questions?”

The soldier to his left was already looking away, focused on the people in the massive path, ignoring Tom and his inquiries.

His partner, however, strode deliberately up to Tom, chest to chest, and asked loudly, “ShhJess?”

“I’m with the press,” Tom explained helpfully. “Is there a check-in station? Or facilities for the press? Or dignitaries? Or . . . VIP?” his voice trailed off with lack of hope as each inquiry was met with the same stone-faced expression of detachment. “Is there a Western Saloon?” Tom asked, testing the comprehension.

“Go up mountain,” the MP said finally in a thick accent, waving his rifle toward the massive line of people. Nobody in the huge swath of pedestrians gasped or dodged out of the way from the waving end of the rifle. No one seemed to notice but Tom.

“In line. Go.” says the MP.

The end of the barrel comes to rest unquestionably pointed at Tom’s chest and provides him with a surge of adrenaline and the motivation he needs to merge into the flow of pilgrims trudging higher into the unknown.



The plateau does not appear suddenly but creeps into his consciousness with small smatterings of tents and makeshift structures that approach sparsely at first and then become more frequent in number and bigger in size. There isn’t a singular moment of arrival, just an awareness of people slowly coming to a halt, an increase in encampments, and the beginnings of a makeshift village. Greeters holding improvised signs in different languages appear, speaking with those in need, directing them toward areas that will most suit their needs.

The first of these seem to target more of the local populace and Tom presses onward looking and hoping for something with more of a facade of civilization—a press area, an American Army tent, anything more suited to accommodating a westerner. But as nothing presents itself he pushes on, past people stopping and gathering in clusters, past people holding signs with languages he doesn’t comprehend, past peddlers with unrecognizable bits of meat on sticks and dead rodents and root vegetables hanging from strings and nets draped from their shoulders. Tom pushes on, past people lying on the ground, sickly and distraught, spent from their journey, dropped to the earth and encamped in whatever small bit of space they could find and claim for themselves, until almost at once and unexpectedly he comes over a rise and stares into a basin, an overwhelming sea of people, a landmass of humanity sprawled out before him like nothing he has seen. Not since Woodstock, not since Pope Paul the Sixth came to New York, has he witnessed such an unending sight of mass populace.

Tom’s head swims as he is filled with vertigo and an overwhelming wash of restrained panic fills his entire body at the sheer magnitude of souls before him. His chest tightens and his heart thumps. As he moves his hand toward his breast pocket and

fishes and pats at the empty place where his pill bottle should be, the final lightning bolt of fear strikes and courses through his body from the top of his head to the soles of his feet as he realizes—he forgot his small bottle of heart pills on the huge retaining wall stone that he used as a bench by the side of the road where his bus crossed over the felled-tree bridge.

Somehow, driven by instinct and a will to survive, on a horizon of people, Tom's brain picks out a singular beige tent with a large red cross adorning its roof. And with each thumping beat of his heart, he wills his feet to move toward it until, within yards of the tent, he reaches out to a short brownish man in a white medical jacket, falls to his knees and blacks out.



The chaos and noise and agony of the medical tent rises like a huge air bubble to the surface of his consciousness and Tom awakens to the bitter smell of ammonia thrust in gauze under his nose. The doctor standing before him is a short, diminutive man, with gentle eyes and a curious gaze.

“Hello?” he says. “Are you present?” he asks, with a thick accent Tom can't yet identify.

Tom nods wearily and tries to stand, but the doctor holds his shoulder down to keep him in place. Tom realizes he's wearing only his undershirt and briefs. An antique-looking IV and drip carafe have been administered. His immediate thought goes to the sterility of the circumstances, but he sees the purple stain of iodine on his arm around the gauze holding the needle in place with white tape, and then his head goes swimmy again and he gives in to the moment and simply sits and observes. The doctor is studying his ID and press pass.

“Mister Kezz-air-skee?” The doctor attempts his last name. “Tomas?” he says, elongating the oh and putting too much emphasis on the second syllable.

“It's Tom, just Tom,” Tom answers.

“You are with the press, yes? A newspaper man?”

Tom nods and reaches for his credentials which the doctor hands back to him. “I'm a reporter for the *New York Daily*,” Tom says, “Sixth largest in the world, and second only to *The Times*.” It's far

from accurate, but it's his editor's favorite line. He gives a small grin now, thinking of Sam.

"I've seen this newspaper," the doctor assures him. "When I've come to New York for a conference. I'm with the Vatican, sent here by my Cardinal Richaud, on behalf of his Holiness and to monitor the claims and minister to the children."

"The children," Tom says abruptly, remembering why he has come all this way and suddenly panicking that perhaps he has missed his opportunity.

"They are fine, they are fine," the doctor assures him. He takes his stethoscope and puts the buds in his ears and listens to Tom's chest. "How are you feeling?"

Tom considers and realizes he's feeling much better. He looks at the large glass bulb of the IV drip and wonders again what exactly is going into him. "I'm feeling pretty good, all things considered. How long was I out?"

"Ah, less than an hour, no trouble, no troubles," the doctor assures him. "Your heart was like a cannon in your chest, eh? Boom, boom, boom! Quite erratic, your pulse. Very high blood pressure. You are aware of this? Your condition?"

Tom nods. "I . . . lost my pills on the trip up the mountain; I must have dropped them," he says. He doesn't know if it's because the doctor is from the Vatican or if he's just feeling vulnerable in his state, but it seems like an outrageous lie, and he feels ashamed. But he just can't bring himself to explain that he put them down and simply forgot to pick them up again.

But the doctor is turned away from him at this point, barking in Italian to an attendant, who brings him a sphygmomanometer and then hurries off. The doctor wraps the cuff around Tom's arm and inflates it with the bulb while listening to his pulse.

"What medicine are you using? These are assigned by your doctor?"

"Yes, propranolol," Tom answers.

"Of course, of course. I should think this is so," the doctor says. He deflates the cuff and removes it from Tom's arm. "Well, I do not have propranolol, but I suspected as much with your symptoms, and so I have put, eh, into your veins," the doctor gestures to the IV, "some magnesium, some potassium, and a

serum from, eh, the tree, the skin, I don't know the name in English, is good for health. You know this?"

Tom shakes his head.

"It's good, it's good for your condition," the doctor assures him. "And of course, the fluids will help hydrate you. I can have the soldiers' radio down to my runners, who will bring up supplies in the morning. Perhaps they can find propranolol in the city, yes? Or we shall see what they can find as a substitute for you."

"Thank you," Tom says, and a great relief washes over him. It's not a phrase Tom is prone to use and he fights back tears that feel overwhelming and are uncharacteristic for him and his usual gruff facade of a seasoned reporter.

The doctor reaches out and pats Tom's shoulder. "All is good, is good," the doctor repeats, soothingly. He listens again to Tom's chest and then pauses with consideration. "The sun will set soon," he says, and Tom looks to the tent flaps and recognizes that the light of day has waned into evening. "I'll have to go and examine the children before the soldiers will allow them to come back to the people. You could come with me, if you like. If you are feeling well enough to ride along. You would not have to walk. It is the only vehicle here in the camp; the soldiers drive me there or I would not make it through the crowds. I could show them your press identification. I could insist on your presence. What do you say, eh? Are you feeling well enough for it?"

The offer takes Tom by surprise and for just a second he's stunned in silence. Then his reporter's instinct kicks in. "Yes, yes, absolutely," he says, and he hands his lanyard back to the doctor.

"Good," the doctor smiles and nods. "I must check on a few more here, and Louis will remove your needle. Your things are there, behind you. I will come for you when it is time. For now, continue to rest."

♦

The two soldiers require some convincing, but the doctor is firm and resolute and eventually all four of them are riding in the Jeep, creeping through the sea of people. Tom and the doctor sit in the back as the soldiers push people off the front and the sides as the masses throng to the Jeep, begging, pleading, seeking any comfort they can find from the occupants.

The doctor has donned a ceremonial hat and wears brightly varnished beads around his neck with a large wooden cross at their center. He blesses and prays and chants in what Tom discerns to be a mix of Latin and Italian as the people press against the Jeep and reach out to touch him. Tom had taken out his pad and pen to make notes along the way but could only manage to scribble out “doctor pope” to serve as a reminder of the chaos before being forced to put them away and simply hang on.

After a trip made longer by the slow, cautious pace, the Jeep arrived at the perimeter of the masses where barbed wire had been strung on poles mounted in the ground across the face of a rocky incline. As the escorting soldiers remained in the Jeep, the doctor must convince the soldiers at the entrance of the climb up to the vigil of the children to allow Tom to accompany him. Eventually the soldiers relented, but not without the favor of a blessing, and the doctor took time to pray and bless the guards that stood at the ready. As he finished the doctor turns and waves to Tom to follow and single file they ascend the treacherous steps up the rocky embankment.

The steps are shallow and unevenly carved into the ancient volcanic layers of rock. Most are remnants of man-made footholds; others are natural holes that resulted from pockets of air that formed as the rock cooled. They have obviously existed for generations, and some have worn away into little more than rounded dimples. Tom wonders why anyone would wish to venture up this rock face anyway? Couldn't the children see the sun just as well from the plateau, now occupied by thousands of pilgrims? Was all of this some elaborate scheme to heighten the grandeur of an anticlimactic end? And what the hell was he, a fat, greying, fiftyish reporter from New York City doing climbing a cliff face of volcanic rock in no man's land between Bolivia and Peru? Was this Sam's way of getting rid of him for good? Was this a deliberate plot to force him into early retirement by way of death?

Interrupting his inner monologue, he arrived at the last plateau. It was a small, open area where the men could stand and collect their breath, and then they ascended another dozen or so easier steps up a more rounded formation that took them to the top. A squat, cylindrical stone formation like a large round table occupied the center. It was adorned with flowers, candles, and baskets of food, pictures of unknown people and offerings that had been left over the last few weeks by pilgrims for the four children. That was before the area had been cordoned off and contained by the militia sent to protect the children and to keep the chaos of the crowds back.

Tom stood at the edge of the crest and gasped for air, his heart again banging loudly in the base of his throat. Whatever hydration he had gained from the IV was now sweated into his clothes as he labored for breath in the thin, arid air.

But there they were, the four children. They sat across from him on the other side of the table, their backs to him as they faced the setting sun to the west. The gifts and offerings occupied the southern side of the table, as the northern side had remained clear for the children to shift their seating all through the day, their backs to the makeshift table to remain facing the sun.

To Tom's right was a boy who was the tallest of the four. It was this child whom the doctor approached first, having circumvented the table-like rock to Tom's right. To the left of this boy, the shorter of the two girls, then her taller sister, and then the last in line to the left was the youngest, a small, chubbier boy. Each of them rocking and swaying in song, some chant-like drone in the regional dialect.

None of them appeared to take notice of the doctor who squatted before them and out of line of sight from Tom. Tom wasn't sure if it was exhaustion from the climb, or the thinness of the air, or the heat of the setting sun, but all of existence seemed to settle upon him like a heavy blanket. His steps felt heavy and his chest pushed back with each heartbeat as he rounded the rock and looked, for the first time, onto the faces of the children, orange in the basking light, their eyelids pink and blistered as they stared unblinking into the setting sun.

Tom turned to the west and faced the sun. Even as it hung low and large and orange in the setting sky it was too much to look upon for more than a fraction of a second without burning large black discs onto his sight. Yet here the children were, staring wide-eyed and serene, singing and swaying, hypnotic and trance-like into the light.

His heartbeat rang in his ears like large rawhide drums. As he fell to his knees beside the fourth boy his chest seemed to explode with hot lava flowing within. The boy turned his face ever so slowly to meet his gaze. The boy smiled, pointed to the sun, reached out his hand and touched Tom's arm.

Tom could hear the soldiers behind him yelling but only as if they were miles away. He had descended from his knees onto his backside and crumpled back against the rock, facing the sun. The boy was touching his shoulder with one hand and pointing into the sun with an outstretched arm. And Tom could not close his eyes to the large orange disc. Could not close his eyes to the face that he

saw there. Could not close his eyes to the eyes that shone back—a beautiful woman, sculpted from flame and light of red and yellow and white. A woman who smiled with all the love of every mother who had ever given life. A woman whose eyes burned with all the knowledge of every sin committed by every child. A woman who radiated with a perfect beauty that could not be lusted after. And as Tom's heart slowed to a stop, he was only distantly aware of the doctor, hovering over him frantically. Tom could barely perceive the boy's hand squeezing ever tighter. There was only her. Her face in the sun, her warmth on his body, as the brow of her forehead furrowed and her eyes enraged and grew brighter, and her malice burned until it consumed all his consciousness, and her scream stretched like a flare of light that tore across the cosmos.

✦

Tom awoke but only for a moment. Only long enough to realize he had tubes down his throat. Only long enough to recognize that she was there in the room with him, holding his hand.

✦

For the next several days, Tom drifted in and out of consciousness, with only fragments of understanding at his grasp. He was in a hospital bed. His estranged wife, Niki, was there, which confused him. He could only recall at first that she had left him over a dozen years ago, gone to Connecticut to live alone.

"You left me," he had reminded her, several years later. He had abandoned her for the job, she had replied softly over the phone. It was the last time they had spoken. And yet, here she was, a wedding ring on her finger.

How could she have remarried, he wondered in panic? They had never divorced!

It was only after several bouts of consciousness later that he recognized it as the ring he had given her, and he fell back asleep, smiling.

In and out, people talking, doctors examining. The Vatican doctor from the vigil was there, dressed in white with his ceremonial beads. He was praying with Niki, eating with Niki,

keeping her company, giving her breaks, speaking with important-sounding people, men in uniforms, men in suits, shaking his head, and pushing them back out of his room.

Over time, the tubes came out. Over time he could sit upright, and she could feed him: pudding, mashed peas, gelatin. When he could speak again, the Vatican doctor took his account of the event. Yes, he had seen the face of the woman in the sun. No, he couldn't say for certain that she was, in fact, Mother Mary. No, she hadn't spoken. He couldn't say for sure that she was benevolent. He could only remember her tempest, her scream. A scream that seemed to push him back, back across the universe, back from oblivion, back into his body, back into this flesh.

The doctor recorded every word in a book bound with purple leather embossed with gold etching. After he was finished the doctor prayed one last time with Niki, blessed Tom with oil on his forehead, and leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "You are a miracle, Tomas." And then he was gone. It was only that evening after he departed that Tom realized he did not know the doctor's name.

Finally, the catheter came out. At long last Tom could stand and shuffle a few steps again. That night, he found himself in the hospital room's bathroom, standing for the first time in front of a mirror. Niki heard him cry out and she ran to him expecting to find him fallen, but instead, standing there gazing at himself in wonder, his gray, fine hair fully restored to the color of his youth, a fiery reddish orange, the color of the face in the sun, vengeful but not yet ready to receive. Niki held him as they stared into the mirror and wept.

Eventually, the hospital discharged him, and they left Peru and flew back to New York City. Sam threw him a gallant welcome home party, a hero's return with governors and men of power and the idle rich, the curious, eager to hear the tale of the man who had seen the face in the sun and returned from the dead.

All the newspaper staff were on hand for his return to work and gave him a standing ovation. They ran his story on page four, right behind the index, and directly opposite the Letter from the Editor, with a headline on the front page. But as quickly as his novelty faded, he retired from the newspaper, sold the brownstone, and moved to Connecticut to be with Niki.

He taught journalism part-time at the local college. He played crossword puzzles and raised tropical fish in aquariums. He never

again feared death, or dreaded deadlines, or found urgency in anything.

And all the rest of his life, he never left her side.



The stars are full of souls. Shining cauldrons burning bright with life and bringing light against the darkest dawn. And just as angels fell, and men are free to choose, stars will say who may come, and who may not, and who is ready to be received into the halls of eternity.

Thank you for reading!

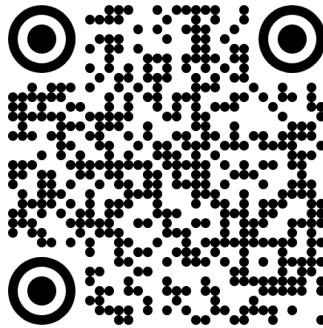
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