

LUCKY'S DREAM

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A Novel by Butch Mandatta Ponzio

For Robert A. Clark, Jr.
(1943 — 1998)

On the night I turned 50 years old, I awoke from a startling dream, one that rocked me awake with its intensity, demanding my full attention. In the dream I was a criminal defense investigator once more, sitting in a Vermont courtroom at the defendant's table, beating out a rhythm to which my homicide client — who up to this point had been mute with fear — began rapping his story. As he wove his captivating tale, the courtroom was stunned into silence.

Lucky's Dream is that tale told as a crime novel in the tradition of Leonard Elmore. As such it entertains and titillates, yet unexpectedly moves to deeper levels for two reasons: first, because of a series of myths mysteriously woven into the story, and, second, because of the American Buddhist teachings of a principal character.

The story itself revolves around the flight from Vermont by Jimmy St. John, a public defense investigator whose fledgling love affair with his married boss has gone awry. Fleeing her house during the first snowstorm of the season, St. John rescues Lucky, his new homicide client, from a wrecked sheriff's car, discovering in the process that the police had tortured Lucky. Accompanying the fugitives is St. John's closest friend Odysea, who is traveling to the deathbed of her first woman lover. During their three-day journey to the Hill Country of Texas, these unusual characters share their secret pasts, providing insider looks into such diverse subcultures as sixties revolutionaries, nineties lap dancers, millennial lesbians. Their personal stories introduce a level of social awareness unusual in conventional mysteries or crime stories.

Because the novel contains adult themes, including eroticism and violence, it is not appropriate for young readers. Moreover, though I have drawn upon my own life experiences and those of family, friends,

and comrades, the characters and places you are about to encounter are fictitious or used fictitiously, being a product of my imagination and my dream.

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Coyote the Trickster

Coyote the Trickster yawned in perfect boredom, and out of his gaping mouth tumbled the blue Earth wrapped in an old black Blanket. When Coyote saw what he had done, he said aloud, "Good joke," then laughed uproariously at his own cleverness.

Coyote's words resounded like thunder beneath the Blanket and his laughter fell as rain upon the Earth, making slimy green puddles from which Everything-that-is grew.

Even the First People came from the puddles.

They crawled out of them on their bellies, then stood up beneath the old black Blanket and feared.

When he saw the People's dark confusion, Coyote chuckled for a moment, then snapped his white-tipped tail like a whip across the sky, leaving behind a Story that looked just like the Sun.

"Ahh!" the First People exclaimed, for now they could see their own shadows, which they studied in fascination.

Soon they forgot the Story that lit up the Earth and ended their confusion.

Coyote howled in dismay because the People were so foolish. His howl echoed in the Canyons many times over until the People thought the echoes were the First Story.

Coyote tried to laugh at their new foolishness, but nothing came out of him but dismay, which the People called Death.

Then Coyote couldn't stop laughing.

He grabbed his sides and rolled across the world in a fit of glee.

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Finally he reached the hills where Dog was curled up in a ball.

“You wouldn’t believe what I just did,” he bragged, then told her in great detail of his exploits. She listened attentively and nodded at all the right moments, for she knew it would be her turn when Coyote was done.

“You wouldn’t believe what I just did,” Dog announced, then held up each pup she had given birth to while Coyote was off playing.

Coyote gasped in amazement, then noticed that one of them had a white-tipped tail exactly like his own.

“You shall fly between worlds,” he told that pup. “The world of the foolish People with little memory shall be your home, while the world of the Story shall be your salvation.”

I was that pup.

This is that Story.

PART ONE: WAITING

"[A]ll the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come."

Job 14:14

1. The Dog

The first time I saw the Dog he was trussed in chains and locked behind two sets of steel bars. He stood rigidly in the holding cell, his pale hands crossed at the wrists, staring at something only he could see. I couldn't tell if he were a simpleton or a farm boy who'd had too much to drink and forgotten his own name. Then he stared straight at me through the bars, gave me a doleful look, threw back his head and howled, baying like a coon dog running in the night.

I cringed, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

It was after six p.m. and I should have been sucking down my first Catamount Amber Ale instead of watching a human dog perform behind steel bars; but at exactly 5:57, just as I had been leaving the office, the phone had rung. I don't know what it is about ringing phones, but I can't let sleeping dogs lie or ringing phones go unanswered.

"Public Defender Office," I had answered automatically, my mind already out the door and in the pub across the street.

"Jimmy?"

It was Diane, the public defender and my boss. I could tell by her voice that something big was going down. I could feel the tension that ran through the telephone lines directly from her to me. Was it then the warning

bells first sounded in the back of my mind? *Get ready, Jimmy, your life's about to change. . .*

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m at the courthouse. Judge Stone just appointed us to the Dog Case.”

The Dog Case is what the press had tagged a gruesome homicide of a six-month-old baby whose mother had left her asleep in a car seat while she ran inside the Mobil mini-mart to pay for her gas.

Why Dog?

Because when they finally found the baby’s body in the hills five miles away, it had been shaken apart from the limbs the way some canines worry their prey.

My stomach turned over just thinking about it.

“Does that mean they’ve got the Dog?”

“The suspect is at the jail right now. I want you to go over there and stay with him until the sheriffs transport him to the courthouse. It shouldn’t be long.”

“What’s his name?”

“John Doe for now. Apparently he won’t talk to the cops.”

“Won’t or can’t?”

“That’s what I want you to find out.”

“No problem.” I was about to hang up when I heard her say something I didn’t catch. I yanked the receiver back to my ear. “What was that?”

“If he talks to you, make sure no one overhears the conversation.”

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“Give me a break, Diane.” My voice was brittle with scorn. I bristle whenever she plays lawyer with me. Every so often I’ve got to remind her that it was me who trained her, not the other way around.

A year ago when she had walked through the doors of this office for the first time, Diane was six months out of Vermont Law School. She had just passed the Bar exam and finished her clerkship at a small private firm that made its money on real estate. One Friday she’s doing title searches in Stowe, the next Monday she’s handling arraignments in St. Johnsbury.

The morning of those first arraignments I could hear her losing her breakfast behind the glass-paneled door of the Ladies Room. I didn’t mention it, but stayed close to her throughout the morning. I sat directly behind the defense table in the Caledonia County District Court and watched her knees shake uncontrollably every time she stood up to address the court. But her voice never even quavered, and that made me think she might actually make a decent public defender.

“And Jimmy . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful. There’s something very weird about this case.”

“There *usually* is,” I said in exaggeration, which broke the tension and made her laugh. Diane has this bubbly laugh that tickles me every time I hear it. “See you shortly,” I added, then gently put the receiver back into its blue plastic cradle.

I heard the church bells on Main Street strike six times. I could be at the jail in five minutes if I hurried.

The Dog was waiting.

2. Lucky

The Dog's name at birth was Donald Allen Hall, but he called himself Lucky. One side of his face was covered with a strawberry — a red wine-colored stain of skin that ran from above his left temple, across his forehead to the bridge of his nose, then nearly straight down the middle of his face into his shirt collar. When you glanced at him, it's all that you saw. Not the color of his eyes or the jut of his chin, just the strawberry that transformed his face into a harlequin's mask.

At the time of his arrest he was twenty-two years old and homeless. He had no family in Vermont, no friends, no job. In short, if bail were set in this capital case, the Dog would languish in jail for lack of it. Part of my job as a criminal defense investigator is making our clients look good to the court. I can't accomplish that if they're sitting behind bars. With Donald "Lucky" Hall, I'd need more than a little luck to make him look like anything other than a prime suspect of an act so heinous it shocked the conscience.

I didn't know any of this about the Dog when I first heard him howl. He was inside a large holding tank directly across from the tiny room where lawyers meet with their incarcerated clients. The Dog's howl resounded in the concrete vault of the empty cell, sending chills up and down my spine. I'd been working in the public defender system for ten years and had witnessed some strange behavior, but this was downright eerie.

"Did I make him do that?" I asked Rod, the shift supervisor who had escorted me through the jail to the attorney's room. I saw Rod nearly every day, and we had this unspoken agreement. If Rod knew something I needed

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to know, he let it slip. I returned the favor by keeping him posted on the anguish level of my clients. The last thing Rod wanted on his shift was a suicide.

“Naw, he’s been howlin’ like that since they brought him in an hour ago. Reminds me of my first coon dog. One night he’s so worked up he follows a smart old coon into an apple tree, just scrabbles right up after it. Soon as the dog’s into the crotch of that tree, the coon jumps off a high branch into the night, leavin’ the dog stuck behind, howlin’ in fear and frustration to be tricked that way — *treed by a coon!*”

I started to laugh out loud but was pulled up short when the Dog howled again, this time with such force that I flinched.

“Yeah, that dog was a lot like this fellow here,” Rod said, cutting me a look out of the corner of one eye.

I wondered if he were trying to tell me something he couldn’t come right out and say. I was about to ask when the Dog howled again.

Normally, Rod’s presence is enough to stifle anyone’s baser instincts. Though he stoops over as if gravity is dragging down his meaty shoulders, Rod standing tall is six feet six inches and 270 pounds. When Rod had come back from Vietnam, a personnel officer at the Vermont Department of Corrections had taken one look at him and hired him on the spot, assigning him to the Goon Squad at the old Windsor State Prison. Whenever a prisoner had started acting up, the Goon Squad had been sent in to “quiet things down.”

That was a long time ago, but Rod continued to have a chilling effect on most people.

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Rod unlocked the two sets of steel bars to the holding cell, then motioned for the Dog to follow him. The Dog was cuffed both at his wrists and ankles, and the cuffs were attached by heavy chains to a thick leather belt that was strapped around his waist.

He took one look at Big Rod and backed away.

“Gonna play that way, are we?” A grim smile spread across Rod’s face as he lumbered into the cell, wrapped a giant hand around the Dog’s skinny arm, then half led, half dragged him across the hall to the attorney’s room.

We were deep in the heart of the jail beyond the reach of any natural light. There was just one bulb recessed in the steel-plated ceiling. It cast a pale orange glow on the sweating concrete walls, making everything indistinct and almost smoky, reminding me of the hellish scenes painted by Hieronymus Bosch.

The Dog howled in misery the whole way across the hall, his harlequin’s mask a study in torture. Since I could see that Rod wasn’t physically hurting him, I wondered what was behind the anguish so evident on the Dog’s face.

As they passed by I reached out a reassuring hand, but the Dog pulled back in fear and snarled at me, his chains rattling like Jacob Marley’s in *A Christmas Carol*.

Rod chuckled and, as he shoved the Dog into the attorney’s room, said, “I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone so you can get better acquainted.” Even through the thick smudged lenses of his glasses, I could see Rod’s eyes twinkling at the prospect of my being stuck alone with the Dog. While we had a solid trust relationship, it clearly was within the confines of our

adversarial roles, which meant we both took pleasure in the other's professional tribulations.

"Before you disappear, I'd appreciate it if you'd remove all the hardware from my client."

"You just might regret that, good buddy. Trooper Smalley is at the emergency room right now gettin' stitched up from bites your client inflicted before they could get him lashed down."

"If that cretin Smalley ever tried to bust me, I'd bite him, too."

"I guess I can't argue that one." Rod laughed and unlocked the cuffs. "But remember, this is your idea and I'm not responsible for any harm you may incur in the performance of your dubious duties."

"Big Man Rod, you're simply the most eloquent screw I've ever known."

Rod bellowed at my sarcastic use of the old epithet for a jailer, then added as he left the room, "From the looks of it, I'm 'bout the best screw you're gonna see tonight."

I grimaced in distaste at the sexual entendre. Though I'd unwittingly opened the door to it, I don't play the sex-talk game, which I consider crude and counterproductive.

If the Dog had any clue about what we'd been saying, he didn't let on. He simply stared warily at me from the corner where he'd retreated when freed from his chains. When I didn't react, he crouched down and drew into himself, panting slightly.

Sitting in one of the folding chairs at a gray metal table that filled most of the small room, I studied the Dog. What I saw at first glance was a

young man who, except for the remarkable wine-colored blotch covering the left side of his face, looked like any number of other street people in the Northeast Kingdom — a region comprised of Vermont's three northeastern counties.

He was nearly six feet and very bony, his pale skin stretched tightly across sharp features — a pointy chin, high cheekbones, a prominent forehead. He had a shadow of a mustache and goatee, and his hollow cheeks were pitted with a purplish hue from an old case of acne. It was mid-October, and he wore a ragged wool coat. On his sockless feet was a worn pair of blue Nikes, one without any laces. His black jeans were faded gray and torn at both knees, his red flannel shirt frayed at the cuffs where his wrist bones stuck out. The Dog's shoulder-length brown hair, very thin and lank, was cut in bangs over golden eyes that darted around the room as I stared at him.

In the mounting silence I could hear the clanging of cell doors, the groans and shouts of inmates and guards echoing down the concrete hallway outside the attorney's room. Then I could hear one thing more: the Dog was snuffling. His head was cocked to one side, his nostrils flaring open and closed, and I suddenly realized he was sniffing me. His eyes were downcast, and I wondered how long the Dog would wait until he finally looked directly at me.

No sooner had I thought this than his hooded eyes flashed open and locked in on mine.

I was startled by his golden stare, which somehow was both intense and vacuous. The look confused me, for I couldn't tell what was behind his eyes, which were large and set far apart, giving his face an open and

innocent look. I'd seen that look before, though it took me a moment to remember who it was that shared this same wary, wide-eyed innocence. Odysea. She had that open-eyed look that had made me trust her from the start.

"My name's Jimmy St. John," I said, my voice sounding brittle and false as it broke the silence. Even to me my name sounded like a lie, which it was, but there was no way that the Dog could have known that. No one in Vermont knew, not even Odysea. Yet his blank stare seemed to say that he did know, that he was challenging me to stop the lies and utter one true word for the first time in my life.

I ignored the challenge and continued. "I work for the public defender who's been assigned to represent you. Her name is Diane Ashley-Warner, and she asked me to stay with you until the sheriffs transport you to the courthouse where you'll be arraigned."

The Dog's head quivered slightly as if he suffered a minor tremor.

I couldn't tell whether anything I'd said had penetrated the thick wall of his golden stare.

"Do you know why you're here?"

The Dog just stared.

"You're accused of kidnapping and killing a six-month-old baby."

The Dog's eyes blinked once, hard. It was as if I had struck him in the face.

"What's your name?" I asked in a softer tone.

Silence.

"Do you know where you are?"

No reply.

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Sometimes I wonder why I do this work, but I never wonder at moments like this. It's the challenge that keeps me totally focused, the challenge of getting through to someone who's so completely lost they don't even know their own name.

One moment they're standing on the earth like you and me — maybe just brushing their teeth and wondering about an elusive dream — the next moment they're looking back at us from the wrong side of the River Styx. They don't remember dying, but they're in Hell, literally, and I'm a guide from the cool green world of the living, waving at them from across the River, holding out a promise that maybe, just maybe, they can cross back over.

As I looked at the Dog looking at me, I wondered if he'd ever cross over.

Then I thought about him biting Trooper Smalley.

A wicked smile creased the corners of my mind and I had to admit I garnered more than a little satisfaction from Smalley's discomfort.

Maybe it was for all the wrong reasons, but suddenly I liked this strange and timid young man who looked like a harlequin and bayed like a hound and bit the bad guys. That's the sum total of everything I knew about him at that point, and suddenly it was enough. I dropped my eyes and stopped staring at him.

"It's okay, my friend, you don't have to tell me your name. If it was me, I wouldn't feel like talking either. Besides, I know that if Trooper Smalley was involved in your arrest, he didn't make it easy for you. He's a mean-spirited asshole who gets his kicks by pounding on people who can't or won't complain. So it's my guess that he provoked you, that biting him

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was an act of self-defense. And it's also my guess that right now you don't trust anybody. I don't blame you.

“So you don't have to tell me your name and you don't have to trust me. I'm not expecting you to, not yet. But I want you to know that I'm on your side. It may be hard for you to believe that anybody's on your side right now, but that's what your lawyer Diane and I get paid to do — be on your side when no one else will. We won't judge you, we don't even have to believe you are innocent, but at some point we do have to know that you understand the criminal charges you're facing and that you can help us defend you against those charges.”

It was a long speech, but by the end I thought I saw a flicker of comprehension flash across the Dog's face.

Then I heard Rod pounding on the steel door.

“Time to go, Jimmy. The sheriffs are waiting.”

3. *The Lawyer*

Even after nine hours in court, Diane Ashley-Warner, Esq., looked exquisite to me. It wasn't just her physical appearance, which I found alluring enough, but something deeper, a kind of sensual energy that pulled me towards her unrelentingly. Of course Diane was unaware of this. Long ago I had learned the trick of masking sexual interest with smug indifference. When you look the way I do, dissembling is a survival skill. Yet at certain rare moments I let slip the iron mask to study her unawares.

This was one of those moments.

As I had entered the first set of double doors on the Eastern Avenue side of the brick courthouse, I had spied Diane at the other end of the long hallway. She was talking animatedly to someone inside the district court clerk's office. I'd stopped before knocking on the second set of glass doors and lingered a moment, feasting on the sight of this woman who wielded more raw power over me than she'll ever know.

I love to watch her body speak its subtle tongues. The quick sweep of her elegant fingers as they punctuate a point. The way her hips swivel as she laughs. The slight tilt of her head when perplexed. All of it titillates and amuses me, making me feel more alive than I manage on my own.

She was dressed in a pale yellow cotton shift that hung to her knees, a purposely loose fit to hide her body from invasive eyes like mine. Diane has a runner's body, thin yet lithe, her legs long and finely muscled, her shoulders broad, her breasts small. She has a pointy nose on a face that's too often too solemn, but when she smiles she holds nothing back.

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Except for the black blazer whose padded shoulders gave her the more formal look required for court, she could have been headed for a boat party on Lake Champlain. Her silver-blond hair, which must have been white as a child, was held back by a barrette at the nape of her neck. She had black slipper-like shoes on her feet, the right one softly stroking the back of her left calf. As she did so, a black leather shoulder bag swung slightly at her side. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of tiny gold ear studs and a very large and ostentatious diamond ring.

I once had chided her about the ring, which I'd implied was out of character, and she had defended it as Bob's choice. "It was his mother's wedding ring," she had replied curtly, obviously aware of the lavish statement the ring achieved.

At that moment I'd looked into her green eyes and seen that I had hit a sore spot, so I mumbled something about the value of tradition and changed the subject.

Now as I studied her I could see my own reflection in the glass panel of the door before me. What I saw was a tired-looking man of forty-eight with dark bulging eyes and thinning gray hair pulled tightly back into a long pony tail. A thick salt-n-pepper beard dominated my face but couldn't hide the flat, wide nose, the swarthy complexion. Thick-bodied and short, I was dressed in my usual uniform: dark jeans, a blue work shirt unbuttoned at the collar, a knit tie loosely knotted, a tan corduroy sport coat I'd found at a church rummage sale. I saw my rumpled reflection, then through it to Diane, and realized not for the first time the absurdity of my infatuation.

An ugly man should know his limits, resist and dissemble.

I resumed my iron mask of indifference and pounded on the locked inner door to the courthouse. The glass rattled loudly, making Diane turn towards me. I saw her eyes light up in recognition, then she said something to the person inside the office, whose braying laughter spilled into the hallway, so I knew it was Lucy Miller, the district court clerk. Miller must have pressed the buzzer that unlocked the door, for I heard the lock click open. Even in pastoral Vermont, court security was getting tighter every year.

Diane turned away and headed down the hallway in my direction. Her black slippers made soft sliding sounds on the tiled floor. Her eyes bore into mine, making me flush with anticipation.

We met outside the jury room where we usually interview clients before arraignments. She stood very close to me, our shoulders nearly touching, and then she placed a hand on my arm, pulling me even closer. Our faces were so near I could feel her breath on my neck, and for a moment I thought her lips were parting in invitation.

My fantasy splintered as her lips broke into lawyer's words.

“Lucy just told me that Judge Stone is biting at the bit to get this over with so we can all go home, but I convinced Lucy we need a few minutes to go over the case with our client before the arraignment. What did you find out at the jail?”

I flinched inside, then tried to form a response but couldn't. What I had interpreted as intimacy was merely Diane being professionally discreet. I turned away from her and opened the door to the jury room.

When she followed me inside, I said with my back to her, “Not much, he wouldn't talk to me either. I wouldn't even know his name now except I got lucky as I left the jail.”

“Lucky?”

“You got it — Lucky — that's what he calls himself.”

“What's his legal name?”

“Donald Allen Hall. I know this only because I ran into Sue Lecroix. Do you know her?”

“Isn't she a new correctional officer?”

“That's right. Turns out she also volunteers at the community meals held at Grace Church. He apparently has been coming there to eat for the past few months. Sue recognized him. He used to live on a farm near her parents' hunting camp in North Danville. She told me he was a foster kid there. Apparently the farm family had a contract with the state to provide emergency shelter for kids who're especially troubled.”

“And our client was one of them?”

“Definitely. Sue told me he rarely talks, and then only in response to direct questions. She also told me he has no family here. No one knows much about him, just his name and age. He simply appeared one evening at the rest area on Interstate 91 in Lyndonville. The attendant said he saw a

battered old Chevy with Connecticut plates. Someone shoved a teenaged kid out the door, then took off fast. He called the cops, and Lucky ended up living with Sue's neighbors until he turned eighteen."

"I thought social services keeps working with kids like him even after eighteen."

"They probably did, but that was four years ago and they must have given up at some point because Sue says he's been living in a tent down by the river underneath the Portland Street Bridge."

Diane considered this for a moment, then went back to an earlier point she wanted clarified. "If the farm family provided temporary shelter, why did he continue to live there?"

"I don't know. Maybe social services couldn't find anywhere else to place him. I guess he was too weird for their long term foster homes."

"You mean because he doesn't talk?"

"Not exactly."

Just then we heard the courthouse doors open and the sound of a dog whimpering. I looked at Diane and inclined my head in the direction of the whimper.

"Tell me that's *not* who I think it is," Diane said, her eyes widening in disbelief.

"You ain't heard nothin' yet," I said as a baying howl erupted in the high-ceilinged hallway.

A gruff voice hissed "Shut-up!" Then there was a sharp rap on the frosted glass of the jury room door. When Diane opened it, two grim-looking sheriff's deputies stood on either side of Lucky. I'd seen both of them before but didn't know them by name.

“Here’s your *client*,” the taller one said, layering more contempt on the word “client” than I thought possible.

“We’ll be sitting right there,” the second deputy said, pointing with his trigger finger at a bench directly across the hall. Then he shoved Lucky inside the room and quickly closed the door before Diane could object to the shove.

As soon as Lucky spotted me, he shuffled over to my side of two large conference tables placed end-to-end in the narrow room. His chains rattled as he sidled up to me. He whimpered a few moments then stopped, clearly calmed by my presence, which surprised me.

Diane took it all in without comment, then walked to the other side of the tables and sat down in one of the Windsor chairs. She removed a file from her black leather shoulder bag and opened it. Inside was the Information, a pink sheet of paper that contained the formal criminal charges brought by the State’s Attorney. Attached to it were affidavits by the investigating officers, including Trooper Smalley. She read them over carefully, then turned to Lucky and said, “My name is Diane. I’m the public defender for Caledonia County. Judge Stone, who’ll be presiding at your arraignment in a few minutes, has appointed me to represent you, at least for the arraignment.”

Lucky stared at her blankly.

“Would you like to sit down?” Diane asked, motioning towards a chair in front of him and directly across the wide table from her.

When he didn’t respond, she tried again. “What’s your name?”

He just moved closer to me, clearly disturbed by her persistence.

Then Diane abruptly pushed back the Windsor chair and stood up. The steel-capped chair legs scraped loudly on the floor, which made Lucky

wince. Diane started walking along the other side of the table towards the windows at the end of the room, dodging chairs in her way. It was stuffy and dark in the room, so I assumed she was going to open a window or raise the dark green shades. Instead of stopping at the windows she kept coming around the second conference table until she was on our side of the room. She walked right up to Lucky, looked directly into his eyes, and smiled at him warmly.

“Let me start again,” she said. “My name is Diane.” She held out her hand, and when Lucky didn’t take it, she continued reaching towards him until she gently touched his forearm. Lucky looked down at the floor, avoiding her gaze, but he didn’t pull away.

Then she said softly, “It’s okay, Lucky.”

When he heard her say his name, he snuck a glance before quickly lowering his eyes again.

Diane patted his arm and pulled two chairs out from the table so that they faced one another. She sat down in one and motioned to the other. Lucky glanced at her again, hesitated, then sat in the chair, his shoulders hunched over and his head hanging.

Diane reached out and took both his hands in hers. As she did so, the chain that was strapped to the belt on his waist rattled slightly.

“Do you have any idea why you are here, Lucky?” she asked in a voice uncharacteristically gentle.

Lucky looked up at her with his doleful eyes, then shook his head, almost imperceptibly. If I hadn’t been watching intently, I would have missed it.

“I didn’t think so,” Diane said. She studied him a moment more, glanced at me, then continued. “The police say you took a six-month-old

baby out of her mother's car and then killed her by shaking her body until it broke apart."

Lucky responded, as he had in the jail, as if he'd been punched in the face.

"I'm sorry, Lucky. I don't want to upset you, but we have to go over this before the arraignment. As part of the arraignment, the judge first must decide if there's been a crime committed, which obviously there has, and then whether it's likely that you are the person who committed it. That's called determining probable cause. The state police who arrested you claim that you were seen by the store manager at the mini-mart at the time of the kidnapping." She dropped Lucky's hands and reached across the gleaming maple table to grab the paperwork. After glancing at the Information she said, "This was almost three weeks ago on a Friday afternoon, September 25. Do you remember anything about that day?"

This time Lucky didn't respond at all as far as I could tell.

"Lucky, you have to think about this. It's important that you remember where you were on that day, who you were with, what happened. You have to be able to help us. If you weren't there at the mini-mart, if you can prove you were somewhere else entirely, we can claim you have an alibi, but we have to make the claim soon or lose the legal right to that defense."

It was as if she hadn't spoken, and I could see that Diane was losing her patience. Her voice took on a more aggressive tone. "Lucky, this is important. You *must* talk with me. You're being charged with murder and kidnapping! You could end up spending the rest of your life behind bars, whether you did it or not. *Please talk to me!*"

She might as well have been speaking to the wall. Lucky had gone somewhere else. He was an empty container. No one home.

As soon as she realized this, Diane turned to me and casually announced, "I'm going to ask Judge Stone to order a competency evaluation."

"Don't do it, Diane."

Her face flushed with anger. "Why the hell not? My client won't even talk to me!"

"Because they'll never find him competent, and you know it. It's a cheap shot: Send your difficult client off to the shrinks and never see him again. No trial, no conviction, no work, just Waterbury State Hospital for Lucky until he dies or they kill him with their so-called 'treatments.' Is that what you want?"

She glared at me, then said, nearly shouting, "This is my call, not yours! If he can't communicate, he can't assist in his defense, which means he's legally incompetent to stand trial. I don't know what your problem is, but take it somewhere else!"

I couldn't believe she was saying this. "I thought we were a team, Diane."

"Not when you're attacking my professional judgment."

"Fuck your professional judgment! We're talking about a human life here."

"What about the victim? Was hers not 'a human life'?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "I don't know where you're coming from on this. Just because he won't talk to you doesn't mean he's guilty. We have no idea what happened that day, whether he was even there."

"And how do you propose to find out?"

“I don’t know, but we’ll never get the chance if you go ahead with your competency request.”

“I don’t see any alternative. At least he won’t be in jail.”

“There are worse places than jail, Diane.” As soon as it was out, I wished I hadn’t said it. She’d hear the pain in my voice, and it pricked her curiosity. She looked at me a long moment, then asked quietly, “Why do you say that?”

I stared back at her, resisting her green-eyed gaze until the silence that rose up between us solidified like a granite wall, each of us on either side of it.

There was a knock on the door, which opened just enough for Lucy Miller to stick her head in.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Judge Stone is waiting.”

4. The Defendant

Accusing a public defender of selling out her client does not exactly enhance career longevity, but at the time I didn't care. Lucky deserved better than Diane was giving him, and I was the only one around to remind her of that. If doing so meant I had to put my job on the line, then I would. I'm not a hero, but I'm no wage-slave, either. Besides, street lawyers are supposed to be above the hierarchal mindset of their more conventional colleagues, or so I always believed.

As we entered the small courtroom across the hall, I hoped Diane was reconsidering her position on Lucky, but no sooner had they sat down at counsel table than he let out one of his ear-splitting howls. When Judge Stone grimaced in distaste, Diane turned to me with a superior look that confirmed her earlier intention. From the set of Judge Stone's face, it was obvious Diane would have no problem getting him to agree.

Not that she would under normal circumstance. Any of the actors — the judge, the attorney for either side, a guardian, even some “other person acting on behalf of the defendant” — can raise the issue of competency, though in practice it's left up to defense counsel to question whether their client can meet the two-pronged test. Simply put, criminal defendants must be able to understand the charges they face and be able to assist their lawyers in their defense. Although the threshold to be found competent is low, I doubted Lucky would ever pass the test.

Which meant that unless a miracle happened, the whole question of his guilt or innocence would never be addressed.

Judge Stone began reading aloud from the Information, but quickly stopped when he saw the John Doe. “Mr. Brown,” he said to the State’s Attorney, “do we have an ID for the defendant yet?”

“I may be able to help, your Honor,” Diane said before Brown could reply. “My client’s name is Donald Allen Hall.”

“What’s your date of birth, Mr. Hall?”

When the judge looked directly at him, Lucky started whimpering and glancing back to where I sat in the first row behind the defendant’s table.

“I don’t have an exact date of birth,” Diane said, “but I believe he’s twenty-two years old.”

Lucky’s whimpers grew louder and more insistent, the judge’s irritation more pronounced. Stone wasn’t known for his patience, though in other ways he was a fair and competent judge.

“Isn’t there something you can do to calm your client?” he asked Diane.

“I’m not sure, your Honor, but I think if my investigator was sitting next to him, it might help.” As a non-lawyer I wasn’t permitted on the other side of the bar that defined the legal arena.

Judge Stone looked at me and nodded his head in consent.

I quickly took the seat next to Lucky, which appeared to help. Though his breathing, a kind of staccato panting, was loud enough to fill the courtroom, he immediately stopped whimpering and sat quite still.

In the quiet that followed, Judge Stone quickly found probable cause, then informed the defendant of his legal rights, including the right to return the following day for the official arraignment. As usual, Diane agreed to waive the 24-hour rule and proceed directly to the formal arraignment. Stone then accepted the not guilty plea Diane tendered on behalf of Lucky,

and at the State's request denied bail to the defendant, "given the capital nature of the offense."

When Diane stood up and requested an evaluation for competency, Stone glanced down at the form he was filling in and asked, "And insanity at the time of the offense, as well?"

She hesitated, and I didn't know why since it was standard practice to address both issues if there were any chance that the defendant's mental state might be raised, either during trial or at sentencing. When she started shuffling papers on the table in front of her, an obvious ploy for time, I suspected she was having second thoughts, that what I'd said was starting to sink in. She glanced my way and saw me staring at her. Then she stiffened and said emphatically, "Yes, your Honor."

He checked off the additional box on the form and then ordered Lucky sent directly to the Vermont State Hospital at Waterbury for up to thirty days.

The State's Attorney jumped to his feet and objected. "Your Honor, the State requests that the evaluation be done at the correctional center or at the offices of Northeast Kingdom Mental Health. We do not believe that the defendant needs to be transferred to Vermont State Hospital. We're under the impression that sending him there could result in unnecessary delay of the case."

What he really meant was that he was grasping at straws to avoid a finding of incompetency. The last thing Brown wanted was an incompetent defendant, which would mean no clear conviction on a widely publicized homicide that had horrified the public. State's Attorneys were elected officials in Vermont, and the next election was looming. This was exactly the kind of case that incensed voters, exacerbating their worst fears about

public safety. Brown, who had been in office for the past sixteen years, knew that he had to bring in a quick and clear conviction with maximum punishment.

Diane rose and countered Brown's argument. "The Division of Mental Health is expediting all evaluations. They clearly want to reduce their census in a continuing effort to downsize the state hospital." She put her hands inside the pockets of her black blazer, then continued. "I also would point out that given my client's — " she grasped for the right words — "current demeanor, he faces harassment and potential physical violence from the other inmates at the correctional center. I suggest the state hospital would be a safer, more appropriate setting for the evaluation to occur."

Judge Stone nodded his head in agreement and said simply, "My order stands. The State's objection is noted for the record." Then he stood up and started leaving the courtroom. A pale man of fifty whose nervous eyes darted behind gold wire-rim glasses, Stone was short with a growing paunch, neither of which was noticeable until he came down from the elevated judge's bench.

"Judge Stone," the State's Attorney called after him. Walter Brown had a high, almost whiny voice that seemed at odds with his physical stature, for he was a tall, trim man who always held himself erect as though he were standing at attention.

Stone turned brusquely back, clearly annoyed. "Mr. Brown, I am not eager to hear whatever it is you insist on saying. We have been in this courtroom since eight o'clock this morning and it is now nearly seven in the evening."

“I’m well aware of that your Honor, but I want to point out that 13 V.S.A. 4815 requires that the defendant go through a screening process before a formal evaluation occurs.”

Brown was a fighter who never gave up, even on the most picayune points. He was relentless, some said ruthless, and it made him one of the toughest prosecutors in the state.

Stone turned to Diane for help, and while she knew the prosecutor was legally on solid ground, she said, “If the State is truly concerned with timeliness, it ought to understand that the screening process itself will result in additional delay. At this time of night, it’s unlikely that the competency screener would be immediately available. The statute allows the court to forego the screener’s recommendations if they can’t be made within two hours of the defendant’s appearance at court.”

Judge Stone considered the options for a moment, then turned to the State’s Attorney. “Thank you, Mr. Brown, for reminding us of the wisdom of the legislature in circumscribing judicial discretion.” His sarcasm cut through the courtroom.

“Your welcome, your Honor,” Brown said, ignoring the sarcasm because he’d thought he’d won.

Judge Stone turned to Diane. “And thank you, Ms. Ashley-Warner, for making it possible for us to go home tonight.” He quickly gathered together the various documents before him and handed them to Lucy Miller, who had been monitoring the tape machine that was recording the proceedings. Then Stone pronounced with finality, “The defendant will be transferred to the state hospital for an immediate evaluation to determine competency to stand trial and insanity at the time of the offense.”

He banged his gavel, something I'd never seen him do, and was gone from the bench in a flurry of black judicial robes.

Diane smiled sweetly at Brown, who shrugged his shoulders in feigned nonchalance. She could afford to be gracious, having gotten exactly what she'd wanted.

I stood in the empty hallway and watched the sheriff's deputies march Lucky out the front door. At the last possible moment Lucky turned his head and gave me one of his sad looks.

I said, "I'm sorry," though I doubted he heard me.

As the heavy doors closed behind him, Diane came out of the courtroom, very buoyant and expansive. She came right up to me and said, "Now we have to decide what to do next."

"I thought it was already decided. Lucky's on his way to being found incompetent."

"I'm not talking about Lucky." She looked at me then, very intensely, and there was a tone in her voice I'd never heard before. She was standing close to me again, her hand on my arm as it had been before the arraignment. Once more I could feel her breath on my neck.

"Then who are you talking about?"

"You and me."

"Look, Diane, I just can't agree with your plan to get Lucky found incompetent. It's nothing personal. You know that."

"You don't understand, Jimmy." She looked away a moment as if embarrassed, then ran her tongue over her lips before saying very distinctly, "I'm talking about what we're going to do about the way you keep looking at me."

“What do you mean?” I asked, though of course I knew exactly what she’d meant. I felt my heart speed up, my mind begin to race as I wondered what I could say to stop this impossible moment of Beauty confronting the Beast.

Just then we heard Judge Stone and Lucy approaching down the hall. In a moment they’d be in sight.

“Let’s get out of here,” Diane said, then took my arm as we headed towards the exit. Her car, a new silver Audi, was parked in the lot next to the courthouse. My old Toyota pickup was down the street in the public parking lot behind Anthony’s Diner.

“Let’s take my car,” she said.

“Where to?”

“How about dinner at my place?”

“What about Bob? Isn’t he waiting?”

“No,” she said, then grimaced and gave a low laugh, which had more than a little bitterness in it. “Believe me, Bob is not waiting.”

PART TWO: WANTING

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Psalm 23:1

Moondance

Coyote was so puffed up with pride that he wanted Everything-that-is to know about Dog's new trick. So he ranged here and there through the hills until he found a high precipice from which he could see all the way around the Earth to his own backside.

Satisfied, Coyote settled down on his rear haunches and gazed up at the night sky. He saw the brand new Moon, which was full of darkness and of no use to anyone.

Then Coyote got a clever idea and began to howl straight at the dark Moon. He howled and howled until it started to glow with the fire of his thrilling song. Coyote howled a long time more, and when at last the Moon shone full and round and ripe, just like Dog before she dropped the pups, Coyote howled one last time. Then he sauntered off the precipice very pleased with himself. He could hardly wait to tell Dog what he had done.

Meanwhile, the mysterious light from the pregnant Moon fell upon the People, waking them from a dead sleep. They rubbed their eyes and scratched their naked bodies, then stared in wonder at the night now lit with this silvery light.

Everything looked odd, which made them laugh out loud and clap their hands with glee at this strange show. They kept laughing and clapping

their hands, louder and louder. Before they quite knew what they were doing, the People began to move in a circle to the rhythm of their loud clapping.

It was the first Dance, and it got wilder and wilder in the lusty light of the ripe Moon.

When the People could dance no more, they fell giggling on the ground, exhausted but very pleased with themselves, just like Coyote.

From where they lay they looked up at the pregnant Moon. Then the People knew they wanted to have pups, too, just like Dog.

Only they didn't know how to do it.

First the People put their back ends in the air and pushed and grunted like Dog had done. But nothing came out of them except some very bad air.

Then the People tried playing tricks like Coyote. But nothing came out of them except some very bad jokes.

Finally they gave up, all of them.

Except for one persistent woman named Evening Star. She convinced the others to press Coyote for the secret.

"Tell us, Clever Coyote, how Dog got those pups to grow inside her."

Coyote, never one to pass up the chance for a good trick, pretended he was pleased that the People wanted to know the Secret of Life.

"You must swallow the stones of the fruit in the Great Garden," he told them, then sniggered into his mangy fur collar, for he knew that the old Gardener was very jealous and never let anyone touch his luscious fruit.

At once the People started to walk away in every direction as if they knew exactly where to go. They kept walking in search of the Great Garden until they had spread across the face of the Earth.

Only Evening Star stayed to ask Coyote, "But where is the Great Garden?"

Coyote the Trickster studied Evening Star and saw at once how persistent she was. Humph! he thought to himself, this one is trouble.

So he told her, "Take three steps backwards and two forwards at the same time and you'll get where you deserve to be."

Evening Star tried to follow Coyote's new Dance, but of course it couldn't be done and she merely fell on her face in the dust.

Coyote laughed at her foolishness, then shouted behind him as he loped back towards the hills, "I forgot to mention that if you want to find the Secret of Life you must have a hard man come with you." He winked one eye at his own cleverness, but of course Evening Star didn't know what a wink meant.

"Why a man?" called Evening Star, who was known to like women better.

"Why not?" she thought she heard Coyote reply, though she wasn't too sure because by then he was far away. He could have said, "His cock."

Evening Star looked around her. No one was left except for a man everyone called A Damn Fool. He was standing there in the moonlight with a silly grin on his face and his cock in his hand.

Hmmm, Evening Star thought, this is a man who thinks with his cock. Maybe he's what Coyote meant.

She walked right up to A Damn Fool and took his free hand. "Come along with me," she said. "I want you to take three steps backwards and two forwards at the same time."

A Damn Fool agreed. After all, Evening Star was persistent and her hand in his felt better than his own cock. Or at least as good.

*So he tried to do the new Dance with her, but of course he couldn't.
When they both fell down in a dusty heap, Evening Star began to cry.
"He's tricked us! Coyote's tricked us again!"*

*A Damn Fool saw how sad Evening Star was, and he began to cry
with her.*

*Together they cried for a long time until their tears watered the
parched Earth and a perfect garden sprang up all around them.*

*Evening Star threw her arms around A Damn Fool and cried out,
"We're there!"*

*A Damn Fool didn't know where "there" was, but he liked the way
Evening Star's soft arms felt around his neck. So he put his around hers.*

"Eve," he sighed.

*As he pulled her closer, she felt something hard pressed between her
legs. It felt good, very good, and she felt herself grow warm and moist, very
moist.*

"A Damn," she murmured back, moving her hips in a new way.

And that was the best Dance they learned that night in the Moonlight.

5. *Diane* What does it mean to want another person? I'd been wanting Diane for so long it had become a visceral part of me, like hunger when I don't eat or exhaustion when I don't sleep. I wanted her, had wanted her since the first time I saw her. That's what I knew though I didn't understand what it meant in the larger picture of my life.

The first time I saw Diane she was half naked.

She had just returned from an early morning run and was changing into her court clothes. I hadn't known she was starting work that day, didn't even know her name. That year the office had been going through attorneys like popsicles on a steamy summer day. They'd come for a week or a month and suffer extreme meltdown. They'd get overwhelmed by the workload, or decide they hated our clients, or their spouse would get into medical school in Wisconsin. It was a revolving door of young lawyers, and often we'd go brief stretches with no attorney on staff.

So I wasn't expecting anyone to be in the attorney's office when I had cut through it to get to my own. It was a shortcut I often took, especially first thing in the morning when no one else was around. I had opened the closed door, a cup of Green Mountain coffee in one hand, a copy of the Vermont criminal statutes in the other. The shades had been pulled and the room was in semi-darkness. My head was down, so the first thing I saw was a pair of bare feet standing next to running shoes stuffed with socks.

My head jerked up to find a blonde woman around thirty standing in front of the desk. We were less than an arm-stretch away. She was dressed only in black Lycra shorts, having just pulled off her jogging bra, which she

held inside out in both hands. She didn't say a word, didn't cross her arms in front of her, didn't flinch or scream, but simply stood there looking at me looking at her, just as if she were fully clothed.

The room was cold and her nipples were erect. Her breasts were small and firm, encircled by wide purple-brown aureoles. Despite the cold, a single clear bead of sweat slid down her chest. High on her left breast was a tiny mole with two black hairs growing out of it. I saw all this in a glance, then averted my eyes.

"Sorry," I blurted. "I didn't know anyone was in here."

"It's okay," she answered calmly. It's what people say and never really mean. But she did mean it. Diane was comfortable in her semi-nakedness in the semi-dark in a way I'd never experienced before. I guess I should have been embarrassed even if she wasn't, but her calm acceptance of this awkward encounter kept me from it.

I backed out of the room and quietly closed the door behind me, then sat on the couch in the reception area, sipping my coffee and trying to read the annotations to *Disorderly Conduct*.

A few minutes later she came out of her office dressed in a gray wool business suit, a black satiny blouse with a floral tie, and low black heels. Her blonde hair was brushed back high on her head, and she exuded a vitality that made me smile with pleasure.

"Hi, I'm Diane Ashley-Warner," she said, her arm outstretched to shake hands. I rose from the couch and took her hand. Her green eyes were looking directly into mine, and she was smiling at me in that incredibly open way she has.

And that was it.

We never once talked about meeting that way, no embarrassed laughter, no veiled allusions, nothing. It was as if it hadn't happened, or rather that it wasn't weird enough to warrant comment.

Only I couldn't get the feel of her unashamed nakedness out of my mind. It was like a page in a sexy novel that kept spreading itself open to me, day after day, night after night, enticing me to revisit the scene one more time.

So I wanted her, wanted to run my tongue over those erect nipples, to play with the twin black hairs, to know what it felt like to slip inside her.

Did I care that she was married? That she was a beautiful, vibrant woman almost twenty years younger? That I was an ugly man who had no reason to hope she would return my passion?

No, I didn't care about any of that, or if I did, it didn't stop me from wanting her. It only kept me from letting her in on the secret.

"You think it's secret but it isn't," Diane said as she drove by St. Johnsbury Academy and down the hill on Western Avenue past the Middle School.

"What do you mean?"

"The way you look at me. What else could I be talking about?"

I didn't know what to say. This was not a conversation I had ever imagined. My silence grew louder the longer it lasted, louder even than the pinging of a classical guitar from the CD player or the intermittent swish of the windshield wipers.

It had started raining as we had gotten into the car at the courthouse, and now as we passed by the ramps to I-91 and headed towards Danville on Route 2, the rain was changing into wet snow, heavy splotches that splattered against the windshield. It was mid-October and the first real snow

of the season, not unusual in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom where winter arrived early and stayed late.

I stared out the side window. It was dark now and I couldn't see very far into the leafless woods, but I kept trying anyway.

Diane let my silence go on, though I could feel her starting to get impatient. She looked at me, turned her eyes back to the road, glanced at me again, turned up the volume on the CD player, then back down. Her impatience suddenly crystallized into anger. "Are you going to pretend that I'm making this up?"

"What do you want me to say, Diane? That I want you, that I've wanted you from the first moment we met?"

I thought I saw a small satisfied smile cross her face, then she reached over to place her hand on mine as she said softly, "Yes, if that's what's true."

Which could have meant many things, including that it was okay for me to want her, that she felt the same way; but this was so far beyond my reckoning that I interpreted her hand and her "yes" to mean one thing and one thing only — that it was understandable for a man like me to want a woman like her.

She squeezed my hand with hers, then brought it back to the steering wheel as we approached a long incline.

We drove the rest of the way to Danville in silence, then she turned left at the village and headed south on the Peacham Road where she and Bob had remodeled an old farmhouse. It perched on the side of a hill surrounded in front with a hundred acres of pasture and behind with a hardwood forest. The driveway was a dirt road that wound up through the fields for a quarter

of a mile. The house, a classic Cape, stood next to a huge red barn that they'd restored.

She parked in front of the house, leaving the keys in the ignition.

Nodding at the keys I said, "I see you're starting to acquire Vermont habits."

"Yeah, you'd think I would know better given what we do for a living."

There were two horses, a black and a gray, in a paddock next to the barn, and as she opened the door to the Audi she said, "I have to take care of the horses as soon as I change. Would you like to help or would you prefer to get the stove going?"

"Now there's a Hobson's Choice if I ever heard one."

"You sound like a lawyer, Jimmy. I've heard that term before, but don't know what it means. And who the hell is Hobson?"

"Hobson ran a livery stable in England and promised his customers any horse in the house. Only it turned out they had to take the horse closest to the door, which meant it wasn't a true choice."

Diane laughed and said, "Actually, you don't have to do anything but relax. Come on inside. I know there's a beer in there with your name on it."

I got out of the Audi and stepped into a couple of inches of wet snow, wondering where this was leading. From somewhere above us spotlights came on automatically, apparently triggered by our motion. I could see the house better now. It had new clapboards that were stained a rich brown. Every window had been replaced, the panes gleaming, and the roof had been re-shingled with cedar shakes. The house had that gentrified look common along the Peacham Road. Not many years ago it had been lined with dairy farms, but now instead of cows there were riding horses in the fields.

I followed Diane into a mudroom that led into the kitchen. Once indoors, she started turning on lights in every room, calling out behind her, “Check the fridge, I’m sure there’s some Catamount Ale on the door.” I heard her pull open the cast iron door of a wood stove and quickly toss in wood, then run upstairs, yelling “Make yourself at home.”

The old Cape had been gutted and completely redone, the kitchen being some North Country designer’s dream of modernity-meets-the-farm. The floor was laid in blue slate, the walls done in oak wainscot beneath swirled plaster painted a desert sand color. Overhead the original beams had been exposed, dark and massive. There was a butcher-block table in front of the back wall, which was all windows, floor-to-ceiling, looking out on a grape arbor that was lit by colored floodlights.

In one corner of the kitchen was an ancient Warm Morning wood cookstove in mint condition. Opposite it was a wall of natural oak cabinets where there were dual sinks, a dishwasher, a refrigerator and freezer — all of them stainless steel. There also was a long counter with a microwave, toaster oven, espresso machine, and an automatic coffee maker — all of them the color of ripe Georgia peaches. In the center of the room was an island that included a gas range beneath a hand-forged, black iron ring from which hung copper-bottomed pots and pans and long garlands of onions and garlic. Next to the stove was a butcher-block work counter covered with Mason jars filled with dried herbs, beans, and grains. The room was lit with recessed fixtures and small spotlights in the corners, creating a dappled scene of soft light and shadows.

Diane must have turned on a sound system, for suddenly I could hear meteorologist Mark Breen on Vermont Public Radio. “From the Fairbanks Museum in St. Johnsbury, this is the evening report of ‘Eye On The Sky.’”

He described the fledgling winter storm outdoors, promising strong winds and accumulations of up to a foot in the higher elevations. His voice filled the room from speakers cleverly hidden by leafy green plants, which were the only sign of life. There was no clutter, no dirty dishes in the sink, no newspapers or junk mail or human detritus anywhere.

It had all the warmth of a museum.

I walked over to the refrigerator and opened the door. The shelves were packed with fresh herbs, fruits, and vegetables, and small plastic containers of designer health foods. There also were six types of mustard. I counted. And three bottles of white wine: two kinds of Chardonnay and a White Zinfandel. On the door were samples from every micro-brewery in Vermont, from Magic Hat to Long Trail to Catamount. I pulled out a bottle of Amber Ale and started searching the drawers for an opener.

At that moment Diane walked through the room dressed in jeans and a red flannel shirt. “It’s in the middle drawer. I’ll be back shortly. If you’d like, feel free to soak in the hot tub. It’s a great way to unwind.”

When she reached the door to the mudroom, she turned back. “Oh yeah, can you shut down the wood stove in the livingroom in a few minutes?”

I nodded my head.

“Thanks!” she said, and was gone.

I took my brew and explored the rest of the house, which was pretty much as expected — both upscale and laid back, yet not really lived in. On the walls and shelves of every room, even in both first-floor bathrooms, were framed photographs of Bob and Diane. Mountain biking in France. Body-surfing on Maui. Snowboarding in Stowe. They exuded health and wealth, the handsome American couple on safari in the world’s playgrounds.

What the hell am I doing here? And where's Bob?

I was standing in his office, a darkly paneled room lined with law books and Bob's diplomas. Robert Ashley-Warner at thirty years old was everything I wasn't — educated at Harvard, then Stanford Law, now firmly ensconced in one of Vermont's largest and most prestigious firms, Downs, Rachlin & Martin. There even was talk of an upcoming foray into state politics. Bob certainly had the look. Tall and fit, clean-shaven and square-jawed, he carried himself with the kind of assurance that successfully seduces voters. Besides that, Bob was smooth, smart, and Diane's husband of five years.

I left the office and went back into the livingroom where I shut down the wood stove. In one corner there was a sound system that baffled me for several minutes until I figured out how to eject the CD cartridge. On shelves above the unit were hundreds of CDs, which ranged from classical to pop. I picked out what appealed to me: The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* and Van Morrison's *The Healing Game*. In the cover photo Morrison looked like an aging Mafioso Don. "We're getting old, hey Van?" I switched the tuner from radio to CD, then cranked up the volume.

I walked down a narrow hallway that headed towards the back of the house and discovered an add-on to the original Cape. It was a pentagonal room with floor-to-ceiling windows on each wall. The room was heavily carpeted and filled with plants and exercise equipment, including a treadmill, some kind of Nautilus, and free weights. At the far end was a glass door that opened to the outside. Beckoning to me from the middle of a raised platform was a hot tub, steam rising off it as heavy flakes of wet snow swirled in the golden light shining from the windows.

I set my ale on a windowsill and my clothes on a stool by the door. Stepping into the deepening snow cover, I left a set of barefoot tracks behind me and climbed into the tub. The Beatles filled the night air from outdoor speakers, and I was lost in a steamy womb of hot jets and sizzling snow.

I don't know how long I soaked, but it must have been awhile because Van Morrison was singing the second cut, "Fire In The Belly":

*Spring in my heart, fire in my belly too
I come apart, I don't know just what to do
Got a heart and a mind and a fire inside
And I'm crazy about you*

I was sitting at the far end of the tub facing the house, and when I opened my eyes I saw Diane inside the pentagonal room doing yoga stretches. Though the lights in the room had been dimmed, I could see she was naked. Her supple body eased through a series of postures, making them look like a sinuous dance to *The Healing Game*.

At one point she was sitting on the rug, her legs stretched far apart, her arms crisscrossing her breasts. Her eyes, which had been closed, slowly opened and looked directly into mine, so she knew I was there and watching her.

Slowly she lowered her head all the way to the floor in front of her, then came back up, brought the soles of her feet together as she lifted her arms straight over her head and continued backwards until her head touched the floor behind her. As she did this she arched her back and her hips rose up, exposing her fully. She brought both hands to her thighs and began

massaging them, starting at just below each knee and moving down until both hands fingered apart her labia.

With the middle finger of her right hand she began slowly rubbing herself just below her clitoris. It was a fluid, circular motion that got faster and faster.

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

As she got more and more aroused, I did, too, and I thought I might come when I saw her shudder and melt back down into the soft rug. She lay there for a moment, taking deep breaths, then rose and quickly walked outdoors to slip into the tub opposite me.

She ducked all the way under the water, came up and shook the wet hair away from her face. As she put both arms along the edge of the tub, her feet reached out and touched my leg, then she stretched further until her toes grazed my penis as if she wanted to make sure I was hard.

Satisfied, she grinned, rather sheepishly, I thought, for someone who'd just revealed her own sexuality so completely.

Then Diane got very serious and looked into me, not at me, but all the way down inside me until all I could see and feel was her.

Finally she spoke. "That's what I've been doing every night since the first time you looked at me in my office that day." She sighed. "I'm tired of doing it alone."

She let go of the tub, floated over and straddled me, then eased herself down until I was inside her. I slipped my arms under hers and held onto her shoulders as she wrapped her hands around my neck. In the heat of the tub underneath the stormy sky, our mouths opened and met, and we danced to the sultry rhythm of the swirling snow.

6. *The Husband* This is what Bob wants, not me.” Diane waved her fork dismissively at the room around us. We were sitting at the butcher-block table in the kitchen eating whole wheat linguine smothered in olive oil, fresh basil, and garlic. It was laced with diced green peppers and bright red hot-house tomatoes Diane said had been picked the day before in East Thetford. “I’d rather live the way you do.”

“How do you know how I live?”

“I’ve been to your cabin.”

“When?” I couldn’t keep the edge out of my voice.

“Several times. Is that a crime I somehow missed in Title 13?”

“Of course not. I’m just curious, Diane.”

She wasn’t mollified.

“You undress me with your eyes every day for a year and then resent my curiosity about you? That doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I’m a very private person.”

“There’s a difference between private and secretive. Do you realize the only thing I know about you is your name and where you live? And I wouldn’t know that much if I hadn’t followed you one night after you left the bar at Grandpa’s Cigar.”

She had stopped eating and was just playing with her pasta, pushing it around the plate with her fork. She took another sip of wine. She’d been sucking down glasses of Chardonnay since we had showered and dressed. At first it hadn’t seem to affect her, but now she was getting both looser and more aggressive. “Did I ever tell you I hate that name? It reminds me of fat

stinking cigars and greasy Good Ol' Boys. What kind of image is that for a restaurant?"

"It's just a family thing. A good meal at their house was followed by grandpa lighting up his cigar."

"I still think it's a lousy image. And I hate the decor, if that's what you can call it: Pine boards everywhere you look and no windows. I feel like I'm inside a fucking coffin."

"If you had seen it before they remodeled you might not complain."

"What was it like?"

"A Howdy's fast food joint. All garish plastic." I wound up another forkful of linguine, chewed slowly, then said in what I thought was a normal tone, "Why didn't you let me know you were at the cabin?"

"Why are you so goddamned guarded about everything?" Her eyes flashed with anger, but then she backed off some. "I just wasn't ready yet, okay?"

"Ready for what?"

"For tonight, what else?"

"What is tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what are we doing?"

"It's called 'starting an affair.' Are you familiar with the term, Mr. Hobson's Choice, or shall I elucidate?"

In the background Sheryl Crow was singing *All I wanna do is have some fun / I got a feeling I'm not the only one* It was Diane's pick, not mine. Crow's voice annoyed me. Too much sultry whine and screaming adolescent.

Diane looked straight at me and started singing the chorus. She had a good voice, more depth than Crow's, less whine and more woman. She knew she was good, too, and smiled at me as she found the harmony:

*All I wanna do is have some fun
I got a feeling I'm not the only one
Until the sun comes up over Santa Monica Boulevard.*

As she sang she rolled her bare shoulders to the rhythm, and her dark nipples rubbed against the sheer tank top she had put on.

I was getting aroused again, the third time that evening.

We had gone straight from the hot tub to her bed, a massive canopied structure where we had groped and licked and cavorted till I thought the bed would break. It had been years since I'd been with a woman, and I had forgotten how fine it felt to abandon oneself to another's sexuality.

All I wanted to do was make love until the sun came up over Peacham Road.

I dropped my fork on the plate and stood up. Diane met me halfway around the table and I slipped my hand past the elastic band of her mauve sweat pants. She was wet and wide open to my fingers. She trembled and came quickly, then I turned her around, unzipped my fly and entered her from behind.

She started moaning, getting louder with each thrust of my hips, calling out to me over and over. Her passionate wailing was somewhere near ecstasy, and it made me feel powerful, almost invincible, and more beautiful than I'd ever felt in my life.

Yes, beautiful.

We were standing that way — her straight-arming the table top for support as I pulled out and thrust back in, cupping her breasts in both my hands — when the door from the mudroom opened and a cold blast of air hit us from behind.

“How charming! My faithful wife and her lover at play in the kitchen.” Bob’s voice vibrated with rage. Though we’d never met, I knew it was him. Who else could it be?

I re-zipped my pants as Diane pulled hers back up, and we turned in tandem to face him.

Neither of us said a word as we caught sight of the small handgun he was pointing directly at us, but I thought I heard Diane take in a sharp breath. The silver barrel gleamed in the light as Bob pointed it first at me, then at Diane.

“Jesus Christ, Bob! Put that thing away!” Diane said, trying for a commanding voice but failing miserably. I could feel her starting to shake beside me.

“Not a chance, Diane. I’ve been watching you for over an hour, and I’m not in any mood to negotiate anything.” Then he aimed directly at my crotch and I watched in horror as he slowly squeezed the trigger.

Time stopped but my mind didn’t: This is how it ends, after all these years of hiding, it ends here and now.

But instead of a fiery flash I saw a long stream of water shoot from the pistol and wet my crotch as Diane and Bob doubled over with laughter. They shrieked and they howled, their faces contorted in unrestrained mirth, while I struggled to make sense of being alive.

I waffled between relief and rage, disbelief and humiliation, then started to walk out the open door. Bob reached out a hand to stop me, but I pushed it aside.

“Wait!” Diane yelled after me, but I kept going through the mudroom and into the night.

When I got outdoors I climbed into the driver’s side of the Audi and turned the key. I jammed it into reverse and floored it. As I flew backwards down the drive, I could see Diane running in the snow after me.

The Audi started sliding and I cut the wheel hard, spinning the car all the way around until it was facing downhill.

I rammed it into low and took off, the plinking of a classical guitar playing softly in the background.

So I had gotten exactly what I'd wanted. Only I hadn't known that the price would be so high. I wondered how long they had planned their little joke. And how I could face Diane in the morning.

7. *The Accident*

I couldn't. It was that simple.

I couldn't imagine seeing her ever again.

But what about the Audi?

I'd park it where I'd left my truck behind Anthony's Diner, pack up my things in the office, head to the cabin, and stay there.

No, I wanted all the way out.

I'd go to the cabin, grab some clothes, and disappear. Just be gone into the storm like I'd never been here in the first place.

No trace. No trail. Just gone.

I'd done it once, I could do it again.

I drove back towards Danville on the Peacham Road, pushing the Audi hard, almost losing it in the dip at Harvey's Hollow but not caring.

Rage and humiliation coursed through me like a drug, slamming me against the spiked walls of my mind.

How could I have been so naive, so stupid to believe that she had wanted me, too?

It had been a joke from the start, an amusing sexual drama for the bored couple, a one-act farce replete with silly props.

Why hadn't I noticed that the gun was a fake? Was I that much of a fool?

I pounded my fist against the steering wheel and screamed.

Fuck me fuck me fuck me!

She had, hadn't she? All the way round.

When I started to gag on my own gall, I forced myself to breathe deeply.

As I did I caught her scent in my beard, and it teased me mercilessly until I knew I still wanted her, even now.

I saw Diane's naked body stretching in the soft light, watched her open her eyes and stare seductively into mine. The entire evening started re-playing in my mind. Steam rose from the tub, I tasted her tongue, felt her fingers beneath the water pushing me deep inside her. I closed my eyes and

Flashing orange lights ripped through the scene as I heard the bull-roar of an air horn. I slammed on the brakes, slid sideways and stopped just before careening into a state road truck. Its giant plow shot a wave of slush and snow onto the Audi's windshield, violently rocking the stalled car.

Then it was gone.

I sat for a moment, my heart pounding at this second brush with death.

No, that's wrong. The first was an act, a fool's game.

I re-started the engine, but the wipers wouldn't budge beneath the heavy snow, so I got out of the car and pushed the snow away until they broke free.

I stared at the back of the orange truck as it disappeared to the east on Route 2, the clack-clacking of its tire chains echoing eerily in the night. I looked around me and couldn't believe I was in Danville. How long had I been oblivious?

I checked the digital clock on the dash. It was 11:24.

It had stopped snowing and the temperature was dropping fast. I shivered as a frigid gust of north wind bit into me.

I realized I'd left my sport coat at Diane's.

Fuck it!

I wasn't going back there, not now, not ever.

Then I knew something I hadn't guessed until that moment: I wouldn't be needing that coat because I had no intention of going back to legal work.

The decision was so clear and irrevocable that I felt momentarily better. I realized I'd been heading in this direction for a while. I just hadn't been able to admit it until now. Until I'd been pushed over a ledge I hadn't even known was there.

I felt a rank distaste for the work I'd been doing, and then I knew why I hadn't let myself feel it until this moment.

Because I had been blinded by pride, just as I had been tricked by lust.

I hadn't been helping people cross back over the River, all I had been doing was standing safely on the other side, giving the *appearance* of help. I made the system look fair when it wasn't, never would be. Look at Lucky. The Dog would never see the light of day again. He'd be caged for the rest of his life, and no one would care whether he'd killed that baby or not.

Thanks to the one person who was supposed to help him.

Diane Ashley-Warner, Esq.

She'd fucked more than me tonight.

And I had let her get away with it. Had even helped her! Had sat next to Lucky, keeping him calm while she deliberately sold out the one and only hope he had — the right to proceed to trial.

I punched the roof of the car with the heel of my fist, then screamed in pain, but whether it was more psychic or physical I didn't know. I stuck my battered hand into a clump of snow until it stopped throbbing, then climbed into the car. I backed up and straightened out, turned right onto the highway, then sharp right again. I'd take Joe's Brook Road, cut diagonally through Danville to reach Barnet Mountain and the cabin. The back way wouldn't be plowed yet, but the snow wasn't so deep I couldn't get through it in the Audi, which was a heavy car with all wheel drive.

Just as I passed by the headquarters of the American Society of Dowers, the thick cloud cover started breaking up. I could see the moon rising above the White Mountains in the east. It was nearly full and very bright, made even brighter by the reflective surface of the new snow.

I saw snow-devils whirling across open fields, racing with the flickering shadows cast by the moon behind passing clouds. It felt as if I were racing with them, skating at high speed over the virgin snow.

My mind began to slow down, to empty itself in the moonlit snowscape, and when it did I felt a great sadness take over. It was overpowering in its intensity, and I needed to cry but couldn't. The sobs that shuddered inside me wouldn't break to the surface, and I felt deadened by their weight.

I started to feel physically ill as if I might be sick to my stomach, so I eased up on the accelerator, turned off the CD player, and let the car slowly drift to a stop just before Barnet Center Road. I lowered the power windows about half way and let the cold air revive me. I could hear Joe's Brook rushing along the roadside to my left. It was a reassuring sound, calming and cleansing at the same time.

Then I heard something more than the brook, a grunting whine like a dog makes when it's hurt or trapped. It stopped, started again, and I wondered where it might be coming from since there were no houses or farms nearby. I looked at the clump of cedars that fronted the bank above the brook. There were two slight indentations that hadn't completely filled with snow. They looked like a set of tire tracks.

I opened the door to the Audi and got out. When I stood on the road, I could hear a dog's howl fill the night around me. There was no doubt that it came from over the bank. I trudged through the new snow, which was maybe six inches deep here, and when I reached the embankment, I could see a car. It was a white Ford with a set of blue lights on top and Caledonia Sheriff stickers all over it. It must have been coming down the steep road from Barnet Center, coming too fast down the mountain in the storm and been unable to make the turn. It would have ended up in Joe's Brook if it hadn't crashed into a thick cedar half-way down the embankment. The front end was pushed back into the passenger compartment, and I wondered if anyone were left alive.

I started sliding down the embankment towards the vehicle, snow pushing up my pant legs.

When I reached the vehicle, I could see a shadowy figure in the back seat clawing at the heavy metal screen that separated the cabin.

I pushed the snow away from the window and peered into it. Staring back at me on the other side of the glass was Lucky, his eyes wide with terror. It didn't look as if he had been injured, and he started thrashing about, shaking his chains and whimpering at me.

I looked up front and saw the two deputies, their lower bodies crushed by the front end, their faces a mask of blood.

I couldn't get a door open, either because they were locked or blocked by the snow and brush.

Clambering up the embankment, I found a tire iron in the trunk of the Audi.

When I got back to the wreck, I yelled to Lucky, "Get over to the other side and turn away from me!"

I had to repeat it two or three times before he cowered by the opposite door. With both hands I smashed the tire iron into the side window. The glass splintered but held together as it's supposed to, so I kept whacking it with the iron until finally I'd emptied most of the shattered glass from the window opening.

"Climb through the window, Lucky!"

It wasn't easy, especially with him trussed in chains, but by pulling and lifting, I finally got him through the opening. As I did, I slipped in the snow and fell backwards, Lucky tumbling on top of me. We started rolling down the bank towards the brook, but stopped after a few feet.

Lucky was trembling with cold and fright, and I had to half-carry, half-drag him back up the embankment. There was a car blanket in the back seat of the Audi, and I wrapped it around Lucky as I helped him climb into the front seat.

The only thing I could do for the two men in the car was let it be known where they were. It was clear they wouldn't be wanting anything more in this life.

What do you want, Lucky?" As soon as I had gotten into the driver's seat he had reached over and begun pulling at my sleeve, trying to convey something I couldn't fathom. He was whining and moaning, obviously in deep distress. At first I thought it was due to the trauma of the accident and the cold, but as he continued to yank my sleeve I wondered if he had been hurt after all.

I turned on the dome light and spread open the blanket to see if I could find any obvious injuries. It was then that I saw the burn marks on his left wrist.

"Oh my god," I said as I pulled up the sleeve to the ratty coat he wore.

There were numerous small blisters, some broken and oozing, all of them inflamed. The handcuff had rubbed raw those blisters directly beneath it. To have the metal touch the raw flesh of his wrist must have been agonizing.

"How did you get these burns?" It looked as if someone had deliberately applied a lit cigarette to his wrist, creating some kind of pattern or design.

"Who did this to you, Lucky?"

Tears started running down his face, and I thought he nodded his head towards the wreck in reply, but I wasn't sure.

I had seen a small first aid kit in the trunk, so I retrieved it and applied a salve. There was a roll of gauze in the kit, which I wrapped around his wrists beneath the handcuff. When I finished I gently pulled his sleeve back down.

I started the car and drove the short distance to where Joe's Brook Road meets Route 5. Five miles to the left was the State Police barracks, two miles to the right was my cabin. I had planned to drive directly to the barracks, but now I was starting to wonder. I put the Audi in park and stared at the stop sign.

Those burn marks hadn't been there when I'd last seen Lucky at the courthouse less than six hours ago. As far as I knew, the only people he had been with in the intervening time were law enforcement.

"Are you telling me the cops did this to you?" I was incredulous. I knew Vermont cops, worked with them every day. Despite my angry complaints when they violated the rights of suspects, overall I found them to be decent human beings who took to heart their duty to serve and protect. Sure there were bad apples like Trooper Smalley, but it didn't seem possible that even someone as mean-spirited as Smalley would stoop to torture.

Lucky must have sensed my disbelief, for he started sobbing uncontrollably, his shoulders heaving, his chest shaking. I put my right arm over his shoulders and pulled him towards me, trying to comfort him as best I could.

Then I started wondering why the sheriffs had been coming down the back side of Barnet Mountain in a snowstorm when they were supposed to have been transporting Lucky to the Vermont State Hospital fifty miles away in Waterbury.

"It's okay, Lucky. You're safe now. It's okay," I crooned over and over until he had cried himself out. Then he rubbed his runny nose on the sleeve of his coat, took several panting breaths the way a child does after sobbing, and fell asleep in my embrace.

As he did, I glanced down and studied his face. The moon was shining through the windshield directly on him, highlighting the split image of his skin. One half of his face was dark from the port-wine stain of the strawberry; the other half was pale white, nearly translucent in the bright moonlight.

Who was this strange young man I held in my arms? Was he a vicious murderer of an innocent baby? A hapless victim of torture? Could he be both?

As I pondered the questions and studied Lucky, there came a moment when I stopped seeing the split sides of his face. He took a deep breath, shuddered one last time, then relaxed into deep sleep. As he did so, his dichotomous features merged into one, a childlike innocence fusing the whole of him.

At that moment Lucky looked more like an angel than anyone I'd ever seen. I drew him closer to me, rocking him slightly as he snuffled and snored. Then I asked myself whether I could risk turning him over to his tormentors.

I didn't have to ask twice.

I put the Audi in gear and turned right to my cabin.

The private dirt road up my side of Barnet Mountain is steep and rocky, and it runs like an exit ramp directly off Route 5 a half-mile north of Barnet Village. Of course the road hadn't been plowed yet, so as I approached it I picked up speed, hoping momentum and all-wheel drive would suffice. The Audi flew up Barnet Mountain in a spray of white until it hit a deep hole in the road about half-way up, then the rear end started coming around until it hit a second hole and bounced back in the right direction. After that I eased

up on the accelerator and climbed the remaining quarter-mile steadily to the top.

My cabin sits on a ten-acre parcel on the eastern side of Barnet Mountain, adjacent to Milarepa Center. Milarepa is one of two Tibetan Buddhist retreat centers on Barnet Mountain. The road I'd just driven up was actually their driveway, but they let me use it in return for helping to maintain it. As I pulled into the small turn-out where I park, I could see the two-story farmhouse that Milarepa uses as their center. There were several cars parked in front, but the house was dark except for a dim glow through the windows of the meditation room on the second floor. I knew the altar was lit day and night with a string of tiny white Christmas tree lights, so it seemed safe to assume no one was awake.

I didn't need or want any witnesses to Lucky's arrival.

"Come on, Lucky, we've got a short hike to make." I gently shook his shoulder to wake him. I don't know how he had stayed asleep through the bouncy ride up the drive, but he had.

We got out of the car and began walking slowly down the path that led into the woods. My small cabin, which I'd built from spruce logs I'd cut off the land, perches on a knoll that faces southeast down the Connecticut River Valley. You can see it plainly from the turn-out. As I glanced towards it, I noticed the soft glow of kerosene lamplight through the two front windows. I looked down at the path and saw footprints in the new snow.

So much for no witnesses, I thought ruefully to myself.

"Someone's here," I said aloud to Lucky, who seemed to have revived after his short sleep. Without complaint he trudged through the snow, made more difficult with his ankles chained by cuffs.

Just before the small porch, I told him to wait until I could find out who was inside. Stepping noiselessly onto the porch, I peered anxiously through a window. When I saw who it was — this potential witness to my crime of helping a murder suspect to escape — I think I actually laughed out loud with relief.

Perched on an overstuffed cushion before the wood stove was a Buddha-shaped woman of fifty dressed in purple and playing a small hand drum called a djembe, which was tucked between her crossed legs.

Rapping on the window to alert her, I called out “It’s me,” then turned back to Lucky and motioned him to come forward.

As we walked inside I bellowed, “Sister O!” and blew her a kiss across the room. I went directly to the tiny propane-powered refrigerator by the sink and pulled out a Catamount Ale.

The Buddha nodded her head in greeting and continued to tap the taut skin of the djembe. She was wearing a coarse cotton smock dyed deep purple and loose-fitting purple pants tied with a draw string. She had removed her black boots at the door and had thick wool socks on her feet. A clay figurine of a pregnant goddess dangled from a woven thong around her neck. Her graying hair was cropped short on the top and sides, but a single thin braid fell several inches down her back from the base of her neck. A gold nose ring sparkled in the lamplight.

“Lucky, my new friend, this is Odysea, my old friend.”

A wary look sprang to both their faces, but I didn’t care. I simply turned them over to each other and flopped into a battered armchair to one side of the wood stove. As I sank into the soft cushions, sipping the ale and soaking up the heat pouring off the stove, I suddenly realized my exhaustion. I felt drained and, perhaps because of it, detached from the weird events of

the night. I couldn't imagine what would come of it all, nor did I particularly care at that moment.

Lucky stood just inside the closed door and stared with his golden eyes straight at Odysea, wary but drawn by her drumming. If she had noticed his harlequin's mask or the handcuffs and chains, she never let on. She simply looked back at Lucky with the same wide-eyed innocence that he now looked at her.

There was a marked chill in the room as this frank study went on too long, and I wondered what each was seeing in the other.

I was about to intervene when apparently some kind of understanding was reached, for I saw smiles of acceptance appear simultaneously on their faces. I was glad I hadn't spoken.

Immediately the beating of the drum grew louder and more compelling.

Lucky responded by bobbing his head, then weaving his shoulders from side to side, doing it awkwardly at first but with increasing grace as he caught the beat. Then he started to shuffle his feet in a small circle as Odysea began a chant:

Djembe! it sings the song

Now you know it won't be long.

Djembe! it weaves the tale

Makes you move and makes you wail.

Djembe! Djembe! Djembe!

She repeated the chant many times over. With each repetition Lucky became more energized. The circle of his dancing expanded until he filled

the whole room, prancing wildly and rattling his chains like a tambourine, until the drumming and the dancing were as one.

Suddenly the drumming ceased and Odysea repeated the final line of the chant in an hypnotic drone. The air vibrated with it.

“Djembe! Djembe! Djembe!”

I thought I heard a second, deeper voice join hers. I looked at Lucky, but he was turned away from me and I couldn't see his face.

The droning stopped, but the vibration lingered while Odysea and Lucky gazed at each other in open admiration. Lucky beamed at her, a giant grin pasted to his face. I realized I'd never seen him smile until meeting Odysea. It transformed his face, giving his normally vacuous gaze a look of both intelligence and awareness.

“You dance very well,” she said.

“You drum very well,” came the whispered reply.

“You talk!” I shouted, startling Lucky.

“Of course he does,” Odysea stated matter of factly. She reached out and placed a hand on Lucky's arm, which seemed to reassure him after my outburst.

I recalled that Sue Lecroix, the correctional officer who had told me about Lucky, had mentioned that he spoke at times. Immediately I had a million questions to ask, but Odysea cut me a look that turned me to stone.

Satisfied, she turned back to Lucky and motioned towards a steaming kettle sitting on an iron trivet on top of the wood stove.

“Would you like some Mu tea?”

“Yes,” he answered once more in that soft whisper, then nodded his head eagerly, as if a cup of Mu tea was precisely what he'd been waiting for his whole life.

Odysea rose from her cushion and got two chipped china tea cups from the shelf over the sink. Then she took a pouch from a canvas tote bag that hung with her dark wool cloak on a wooden peg near the door. Inside the pouch were numerous smaller bags from which she drew pinches of various herbs, concocting her own mix of Mu tea. She sprinkled the herbs one by one into the steaming kettle, and a pungent aroma filled the cabin. As she waited for the tea to brew, she murmured a long prayer or incantation.

All the while Lucky's adoring gaze never left her.

Finally she poured the strong tea into each cup with a deliberateness that fascinated even me, though I'd seen her do it countless times. She handed Lucky his cup and invited him to share her cushion. I didn't see how they both would fit, but he snuggled so closely to her that it wasn't a problem.

She turned to me and announced, "Now we must do something about his chains." She expressed no curiosity about why Lucky was chained, but merely stated the obvious — that he needed to be freed.

"Any ideas?" I asked. "Handcuffs are not my specialty."

"As a matter of fact, I do have an idea."

"Don't tell me you carry handcuff keys in your bag of tricks?"

"No, but I have a friend who collects handcuffs, and she may have a key that works on these."

"Should I ask why she collects steel bracelets?"

"If you need to ask, perhaps you shouldn't." She sipped her tea, an unreadable look in her eyes. "But I can see by the disappointment on your face that you won't rest until you know." She took another slow sip, then asked, quite seriously, "Jimmy, why is sex such an issue for you?"

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I protested, thinking about Diane earlier. I felt myself flush, and the pain I felt must have shown on my face, for her tone softened.

“I think you do,” she said, then added as an afterthought, “And, no, my friend’s handcuffs are not used for sexual purposes. Just the opposite. They represent her liberation from sexual bondage as a child when her policeman father used his handcuffs on her if she refused him.”

My stomach turned over and I felt obscene for what I’d been thinking. “Sorry,” I said, then asked because I had to, “Where does your friend keep her keys?”

“At Womyn’s Land. We’ll go there tomorrow on our way south.”

“What makes you think we’re going south?” I asked, though that’s precisely the direction I’d been thinking of heading by myself.

“I had a vision tonight while I was meditating.” Odysea often used one of Milarepa’s tiny meditation cabins a half mile into the woods. This time she had been in retreat for nearly a month.

“What did you see in the vision?”

“I saw a broken man, a dog, and an old witch on a deserted highway.”

I didn’t need to ask who the broken man was.

“I want to go home, Jimmy. I have no money and my car is broken down. Will you take me?” A look of deep sorrow spread across her face, which suddenly was heavily lined with age.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Salina.” Tears filled Odysea’s eyes and began streaming down her cheeks. I’d never met Salina, though I knew she had been Odysea’s first woman lover. Salina lived in the Hill Country west of Austin where Odysea

had gone to college after growing up in West Texas. Even after all her years in Vermont her voice still carried a bit of Texas in it.

“What’s wrong with Salina?”

Odysea started sobbing in response to my question, but finally managed to say, “She’s dying.”

Lucky carefully put his cup down, then reached for her hand and held it in his. He, too, began to weep.

I climbed out of the chair and knelt on the floor in front of them. I wrapped my arms around them both and drew us together until our heads touched.

The fire in the stove popped. The tea kettle hissed.

“Of course we’ll go,” I said.

“In the morning,” Lucky added.

PART THREE: NEEDING

“Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy.”

Proverbs 31:9

Beyond the Garden

When Eve and A Damn woke the next morning, their bodies were entwined like twin saplings reaching for the sky. They had fallen asleep upon a bed of springy moss near a stream, so now their skin was soaked with morning dew. Yet they felt neither damp nor chilled, for this was the Great Garden.

“Ah,” Eve sighed contentedly as a Water Bird trilled its good morning song. It perched in a low bush and sang to her. She listened and lay very still, thrilling to the moment.

Then A Damn, his eyes still closed, began pressing his hips against her ever so slightly. Eve smiled and responded eagerly, and they danced as they had the night before.

Their wet glistening bodies gleamed in the new morning light as they reached for something that had no name. They called out to one another, encouraging, pleading, whispering sweet words and hot promises, making the first love song.

Consumed as they were with the dance, they were unaware that during this most private moment they were being observed and judged.

When they had finished their dance, they lay entwined awhile longer, languid and satisfied, enchanted with where the dance had taken them. Inside the perfect Garden, they had found an even more perfect place. This discovery made them glow with an inner light the Garden had never seen before.

The secret watcher writhed with jealous anger.

As A Damn started to fall back asleep, Eve remembered why they were in the Great Garden. She sat up and plucked the fruit from an overhanging branch of the nearest tree.

“Help me eat this so we can get to the stones inside.”

“Why?” A Damn asked. He truly couldn't remember.

“Because Coyote said that if you swallow the stones inside the fruit, new pups will grow inside you, just like Dog.”

A Damn wasn't interested in having pups grow inside him, but the fruit looked good enough to eat, so he did.

No sooner had he taken that first bite than the ground beneath them started to rumble and shake, and a great booming voice ripped apart the peaceful morning: “TRESPASSERS! THIEVES! FORNICATORS!”

Eve and A Damn trembled in fear as they heard the bushes parting behind them.

They expected a giant to stalk through, but when they turned to look there was just an angry old man who wore a long white robe and carried a green staff that turned out to be a snake. He was shaking with rage and shouting at them.

“How dare you break into my garden and eat my fruit!”

Now that she could see him, Eve wasn't in the least afraid. In fact she laughed out loud with unrestrained glee. The First People walked the Earth

naked. They had thick black hair on their heads and hairless faces. So the balding old man with his flowing robes and long white beard looked like a clown to her, and she simply couldn't take him seriously.

Of course her laughter enraged him all the more, and he began to curse her and A Damn, making vile predictions about their future.

A Damn shook with fear, for he could see what Eve could not — that this was not a clown but a wrathful god who despised them. Besides, A Damn was terrified of the snake. He started pulling Eve in the direction the jealous old man had been pointing with the snake, which kept hissing and flicking its orange tongue directly at A Damn.

Just as they reached the gates of the Garden, the other Gardener saw them and called out, "Wait!"

Eve heard and reached out a hand to the old woman, whose white hair was braided in long plaits just like the First People. She was naked, too, and nestled between her sagging breasts was a pregnant figure of red clay that hung from a woven garland around her neck.

A look passed between them, and Eve remembered why she loved women.

"Wait!" she called to A Damn, but he couldn't hear her. Compelled by fear of the jealous god, he dragged Eve out the snaky Garden forever.

"Yahweh," the naked Gardener sighed. She had lived with him in their perfect garden a long, long time, had watched him grow old and bitter, and she thought she knew why. There had been too many times like now when she, too, had yearned for something more than a perfect garden to tend.

The angry Gardener appeared and immediately started to defend himself until he saw the despair on her face. It was then that he knew his

jealous temper had undone them at last. He hung his proud head and asked her to forgive him. Her sad silence told him what he most feared — that words alone would never suffice.

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to undo what you have done. Bring back those children! Go into the world and find them, Yahweh, and do not return until you bring them with you.”

And that's how it happened that the Gardener left with his snake to follow Evening Star and A Damn Fool into Coyote's world.

Sometimes I feel like the neediest person in the world,” Odysea had said the first time we met. It was during student orientation at Woodbury College in Montpelier. She was in Woodbury’s mediation program, while I was taking paralegal studies. We’d be in different classes once the term began, but for orientation we had been paired for an exercise where you introduced your partner to the group.

A tall and lanky middle-aged man everyone called Brower was facilitating the exercise. He was dressed in blue denim and spoke with a marked New York accent. Apparently his speech patterns were infectious, for the staff unknowingly mimicked them. Along with a lawyer friend named Larry Mandell, Brower had started the school a dozen years earlier. A therapist who hugged indiscriminately, Brower laughed uproariously and generally kept the atmosphere light and friendly. He was writing sample topics on a piece of newsprint that was taped to shelves stuffed with law books. I skipped the first two and went immediately to the third.

“Name one need you hope to satisfy by studying at Woodbury,” I read aloud to Odysea.

“Just one?” She laughed in a self-effacing way, and I knew right away this was someone I liked.

“Are you saying you’re a needy person?” I answered, trying to be clever.

“Sometimes I feel like the neediest person in the world,” she said. She was still smiling but her eyes revealed a sadness so profound I felt compelled to reassure her. I placed a hand lightly on her arm, and when I did she flinched.

“Sorry,” I said, immediately withdrawing my hand.

“No,” she said as she realized I’d been offering solace, “I’m the one who should apologize.” She took my hand in hers and squeezed it gently. As we sat there hand-in-hand, her eyes began to cloud over and I thought for a moment she was going to cry. Then she did.

We were sitting by an outside door of the small blue farmhouse Woodbury called home at the time. Odysea was facing away from the two dozen students and staff who were chatting fiercely, trying to get an easy handle on their partners. The students were adults, for Woodbury specialized in one-year programs for adults who were returning to school or starting new careers.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s get some coffee and have a real conversation. I hate to talk by prescription.”

Ten minutes later we were sitting in the Horn of the Moon Cafe on Langdon Street in downtown Montpelier. It was mid-morning, so we had the place to ourselves. The bright September sun streamed through the huge plate glass windows, and an old Joan Baez song, “Diamonds and Rust,” was playing softly in the background. From where we sat beneath towering green plants, we could see the iron bridge that crossed the river running next to the cafe.

“A lot of water’s gone under that bridge,” I said to break the silence.

Odysea cut right to the point, “I’m not always so weepy.” She was a bit embarrassed but determined not to ignore why we were here instead of Woodbury.

“Want to talk about it?” I offered.

She hesitated a moment, and I could see her weighing the decision of opening her heart to me. I waited, interested but not needing to know anything more than I already did, which was that I instinctively trusted her. Maybe it was the way her hands trembled slightly, which made me see her as vulnerable, or the long hairs left uncut on her chin, which made me see her as strong. Or maybe it was her look of wide-eyed innocence that inspired my trust.

Then again, perhaps it had nothing to do with her. Maybe I simply needed to trust someone at that moment in my life, and Odysea was the person sitting across the table.

“You first,” she said.

And before I quite knew what I was doing, I decided to tell her the stories of my life.

“I don’t know where to begin,” I began lamely.

“Begin at the beginning, then go to the end, then stop.” I knew she was quoting somebody because she held up the index and middle fingers on each hand and flicked them twice the way people do.

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

I looked at her then, looked into her eyes, which I noticed were slate blue and deep. She had a handsome face, heavily lined yet still youthful, and as she looked back at me our eyes locked for what seemed like a long time.

Just as I was about to break eye contact, she reached out and touched me lightly with her hand. “You’re as sad as I am, Jimmy.”

My eyes started to cloud over, then I laughed out loud at the role reversal we’d just gone through.

“Okay, you win,” I said. “I’m going to trust you with my life.”

“Whoa! I’m not sure I’m ready for that much!”

“Too late. The water has passed beneath the bridge on which we stand and already has reached the sea. Can’t call it back now.”

“So this is a pact of total trust we’re making here?”

“Total,” I said.

“Total,” she echoed.

“Then I’ll start by telling you that I’m not the person whose name I wear like a borrowed suit of clothing.”

“Who are you?”

“I don’t want to tell you my real name yet. I will someday, I promise, but for now I’d feel safer that way. It also keeps you safer, for you can’t be held accountable for something you don’t know.”

“Then I won’t tell you my real name.”

“Touché,” I laughed. “Actually, I didn’t think you were born as Odysea.”

“No, I was ‘born-again’ as Odysea. When I decided to become lesbian I wanted to create a whole new persona, to leave my old self behind.”

“And did you succeed?”

“Yes and no. But the point is that naming myself was taking the first step.”

“Did you give yourself a new last name?”

“No. I’m just Odysea.”

“How’s Corporate America feel about that?”

“They’re not too happy, but with persistence they comply. Actually, it’s Big Government that’s the real problem. Last winter when things were tough I applied for food stamps, and Welfare told me they couldn’t process my application without a last name. So they told the computer I was Odysea Odysea.”

We both chuckled at that.

She sipped her coffee, then asked, “Can you tell me why you needed a new name?”

“Certain people would like to find me, and it isn’t because they owe me money.”

“Have you been hiding for long?”

“Seventeen years, six months, four days, twenty hours, and seven minutes.”

She laughed as I had hoped, then looked thoughtful for a moment. “What’s it like?”

“At first it was a nightmare because of the reason I was forced into hiding. I went through a long period where I kept looking over my shoulder, suspecting everyone, especially their motives in wanting to know me better. Not being able to trust anyone made me lonelier than I can describe. Now it’s more like a mild headache or some persistent pain that hurts but not enough to cry out. It’s just something I’m used to. There’s always this tension in the background, but after all these years I feel fairly safe from discovery. Sometimes that worries me. I know this sounds silly, but I’ve read enough spy novels to know that letting down one’s guard invites capture.”

“Are you a spy?”

“No. I actually think of myself as a patriot, a true believer in ‘Truth, Justice, and the American Way.’” It was my turn to flick my fingers twice.

“So you’re Superman!”

We laughed, and just then a tan young woman dressed in a long hippie skirt and Birkenstocks brought us our order of scrambled tofu and wheat toast.

“Would you care for more coffee?” she asked.

Odysea said no, I said yes. We waited in silence while she brought the pot over and refilled my cup with French Roast. When she had returned to the counter across the room, we began eating and talking again, but somehow the conversation felt lighter. It was as if the turbulent water of new relationship really had passed beneath the bridge, and now we were free to relax.

I've often wondered why on that particular morning I was ready to start trusting someone again. I've never come up with a satisfying explanation, nor have I ever regretted my decision.

That night Odysea moved into my cabin on Barnet Mountain, which was cramped with two of us, but better than the front seat of her car where she had been living.

A week earlier her partner had kicked her out of their apartment in White River Junction, and Odysea had been sleeping in Woodbury's parking lot ever since. I learned this when we returned to Woodbury for the afternoon session. I had pulled up to her car, a tiny red compact with a pink triangle affixed to the rear window and a bumper sticker that read SHE WHO LAUGHS, LASTS.

I noticed that the back seat was packed with what were obviously all her belongings.

"Are you homeless?"

"Let's just say I'm in between."

"Don't you have any friends where you could crash?"

"I don't want to poison their lives with my misery."

"Then come poison mine." She started to object, but I cut her off. "Misery loves company," I insisted.

That night we slept together for the first time.

No, we didn't have sex. It wasn't an issue. We slept together because there was a double mattress in the sleeping loft of my cabin, and it was the only option. We slept like two old people who've spent decades keeping each other warm.

On bad nights when Odysea wept into her pillow, trying not to disturb me, I'd cozy up to her and hold on tightly until she eased into sleep.

And on my bad nights when I lay in bed with my eyes wide open, seeing a past I wished had never happened, she'd tell me little stories of her

childhood in Texas. She told me about the vast spaces, about her uncle's ranch, about Salina and their woman's love.

The months passed that way, and we grew as close as two people can. We fought sometimes, especially in deep winter, but never seriously enough to ruin things. At our graduation from Woodbury College that spring, we were given an award as "Woodbury's Odd Couple." At the party that followed we hugged Brower until he complained "Enough already!" We got seriously impaired on a bottle of cheap wine and danced until the band refused to play. For old time's sake we spent the night in Odysea's car in the parking lot.

The following week she moved into one of Milarepa's retreat cabins. She'd grown fascinated with the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and wanted to test herself by a prolonged period of meditation. Every day I'd walk the half mile to a spot in the woods where she would leave notes about her thoughts (*Scrambled thinking is like scrambled eggs — fills you up but harms the heart*) and her needs (*I yearn for an orange, juicy and sweet*). I'd bring her food or books from Milarepa's library, and leave my own short notes of what life was like without her (*I keep talking to you, but there's no reply*).

Yes, I was lonely again, though it didn't last. That summer I started work as an investigator at St. Johnsbury's Public Defender Office, and my life was as full and challenging as any I could imagine.

I need you,” I heard a small voice call from far away. I tried to make it Diane’s voice, for I was having an important conversation with her about a new client; but the voice was too soft and pleading to be Diane’s, which confused me. Then impatient hands started pulling at me, and I realized I had been dreaming.

I could hear Odysea snoring next to me, so the hands weren’t hers. I opened my eyes and saw Lucky crouched beneath the eaves of the sleeping loft, a pleading look on his face.

“What?” I asked, “what did you say?”

“I need help.” His voice was barely audible. I was reading his lips as much as hearing him.

I slipped from beneath the covers and eased off the mattress, trying not to disturb Odysea. I could see a pale light coming through the tiny window on the opposite wall, so I knew it was early morning. Late last night the three of us had climbed the ladder to the loft and squeezed onto the double mattress. Lucky had fallen asleep almost at once. Then Odysea had drifted off, and I must have followed soon after.

The roof slants sharply beyond the mattress, so there’s not enough room for two people even if they’re both crouching. I motioned Lucky to go down the ladder, then followed after him.

Of course he was fully dressed, including his coat, since he couldn’t take anything off with the handcuffs still on. I had slept in my flannel nightshirt, and as I stepped barefoot onto the freezing plywood floor, I winced and quickly slipped my feet into my wool boot liners, which doubled as slippers. I opened the damper to the wood stove, put some scrap paper

and kindling on the coals left from the night before, added a few pieces of limb wood, then left the door slightly ajar so it all would catch. When I heard the whoosh of the paper going up in flames, I turned to Lucky.

“What do you need help with?”

He hung his head, clearly embarrassed, and muttered something inaudible.

“Can you look at me and repeat that?”

Reluctantly he complied, saying, “I have to use the toilet.”

“The outhouse is off the trail we followed from the car last night.”

He hesitated and looked chagrined. I thought he hadn't understood my directions. “Just go out the door and you'll see it at the edge of the clearing.”

Then he mumbled into his chin again, but this time I caught his meaning. “Okay, I'll come with you.” I put on my winter coat and slipped into my snow boots, feeling more than a little stupid for not realizing the obvious — that there was no way he could wipe himself with his hands in cuffs.

I can't say that I've had any experience wiping someone else, but I figured it couldn't be that much different from wiping myself.

I was wrong about that.

The reality was humiliating for him and unpleasant for me. But we got through it, and I guess it brought us closer in that basic-need way.

As we walked back to the cabin, the sun rose over the White Mountains to the east. Its soft glow lit up the snowy world around us, which looked like a winter wonderland. The boughs of the pine trees drooped with mounds of fluffy snow, and every branch of the hardwoods was outlined in

white. The air was crisp and biting, the sky cloudless and growing bluer by the moment.

“I feel like I’m in Narnia,” I said to Lucky. Then I wondered if he knew about *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis’ children’s book about good and evil in a magical land.

“Can you read, Lucky?”

He nodded his head, yes.

“Ever read C.S. Lewis?”

Another Yes.

“What else?”

“Myths.”

“Which ones?” I was thinking of the D’Aulaires’ books of Greek and Norse myths.

“All of them,” he answered simply.

I laughed because I thought he was kidding.

Just then the cabin door opened and Odysea peeked out. “Oh, there you are,” she said. “Anybody hungry? I’m making some oatmeal.”

Both of us nodded our heads eagerly.

Back inside I added more wood to the stove, then brewed a pot of Nantucket Blend. We sat around my homemade table constructed of 2x6s, sipping hot coffee and eating oatmeal with maple syrup on top. The simple domesticity of the scene made me chuckle to myself. Here we are, Mom and Dad and Junior having a solid North Country breakfast on the morning after the first storm of the season.

Then I looked at my two companions and, for the first time, wondered what the hell I was doing.

Last night I'd had no doubt about disappearing, but my plan had been to do it alone. Now I'd committed to driving with a suspected murderer to a stranger's deathbed in Texas. Worse than that was the fact that three odd-looking people like us were easier to remember than an ugly man alone. If I were serious about disappearing, taking the Witch and the Dog along with me would be a major tactical mistake.

"What's worrying you, Jimmy?" Odysea asked.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Know what's going on in my head."

"I don't. But your body language is fairly obvious to me after all this time."

"Okay," I admitted, "I am worried. I'm worried about hitting the road with companions as easy to spot as you two."

"Why does it matter?"

"Don't you have the slightest curiosity about why our boy here is in chains?"

"I thought if it were important for me to know, you would tell me."

I blew out air through my compressed lips, getting more and more frustrated with her calm acceptance of everything. I tried to control the sound of my voice by speaking slowly. "Well, I guess it's about time you realized that helping him could mean a serious criminal charge for both of us."

"And that worries you?"

"No!" It was an angry retort, and I tried to control the edge in my voice. "What worries me is that it *doesn't* worry you." I looked straight at her. "*Why not?*"

“What’s your real name, Jimmy?”

I was totally taken aback by her question. “Where’s that coming from?”

“I think it’s time to lay our cards on the table.”

“This isn’t a card game, Odysea, this is real life we’re doing here.”

“All the more reason to be totally straight with one another.”

I glared at her, pissed off at the way I felt she was cornering me.

She stared right back at me, and then repeated her question, enunciating deliberately: “What’s your real name?”

“Robert Joseph Santoro,” I whispered in a voice softer than Lucky’s. I hadn’t said it aloud in decades.

“I couldn’t hear you,” she pressed.

“ROBERT FUCKING JOSEPH SANTORO!” I screamed loudly enough for the whole hilltop to hear. Lucky flinched but Odysea seemed unfazed. She sat still as stone, like a statue of the Buddha.

“And why is it you’re in hiding?”

“You just won’t give me an inch, will you?”

“No.”

“What the fuck!” I shouted. I felt like I was suffocating, that she had her hand on my throat and was squeezing the breath out of me. Then I lost it totally. I threw my bowl of oatmeal across the room where it smashed against a log and splattered all over the wall.

Lucky started whimpering like a dog again, and Odysea stood up to stand by him.

Suddenly I felt drained and foolish. “What difference does it make to you, anyway?”

“None, really,” she replied, “but it obviously makes a great difference to you.”

I put my head down in my arms, which were crossed on the table top. She was right. It did make a difference. It had soured my whole life, even now when I had achieved so much. Then I thought about the life I'd made for myself.

“My life is absurd,” I muttered into my arms, “a total, complete soap opera. I've been in hiding for over twenty-five years for reasons even I'm starting to forget. The woman I'm in love with uses me as some kind of sex toy. My only friend is a Buddhist dyke who's so goddamned detached she doesn't even know when to run for cover. And I've got a client I'm helping to avoid prosecution on a murder charge by driving him across who knows how many state lines.”

“Why are you helping him?” Odysea asked.

“Show her your wrist, Lucky.”

He pulled up the sleeve to his coat, and I reached across the table to unwind the gauze. When I'd finished, Odysea gasped much the way I had the night before.

The burns looked bad, but they had healed a little since then, making the pattern more apparent. It looked like two lines, one an inverted V, the other a capital L on its side.

“What happened to him?” Odysea asked as she broke off a stalk from an aloe vera plant that sat on my windowsill. Gently she squeezed its healing juice directly onto the burns.

“I don't know. I only know that he had no burns when the sheriffs took him last night from the courthouse to the State Hospital. But they never

made it. When I found him before midnight in a wreck by Joe's Brook, the burn marks looked fresh."

"What about the sheriffs?"

"Both deputies had been crushed to death in the front seat. What they were doing coming down Barnet Mountain in a snow storm is anybody's guess."

"Do you think the cops tortured him?"

"I don't know. It's hard to believe. Last night he couldn't talk when I asked."

We looked at Lucky, then Odysea asked for both of us: "Can you tell us what happened?"

I thought for a moment he was going to do his dog trick again, but instead he took a deep breath and said quite clearly, "The one I bit did it."

"You mean Trooper Smalley?"

He nodded his head.

"Why?"

Lucky shrugged, then said, "He said it was to mark me so they'd know who I was."

"Who's 'they'?"

He shrugged again.

"Where were you when this happened?"

"In a field."

"What did it look like?"

"A field."

"I know, Lucky, but what I'm asking is if there was anything different you noticed about it?"

“There was this . . . hmm . . . I don’t know . . . like a covered thing we passed by.”

“The *stupa!*” Odysea exclaimed. “Maybe that’s what he saw.” She knew every inch of the woods from the long hikes she did as walking meditation during her retreats.

“What’s a *stupa?*” I asked.

“It’s a Tibetan funeral monument. The folks at Karme Choling built one where they cremated Trungpa Rinpoche.” Karme Choling was the other Tibetan meditation center. “It’s the only odd structure that’s near a field on Barnet Mountain. Lucky must have been taken to Sunnyside, which is what everyone calls the clearing between here and Karme Choling.”

“This is getting weirder and weirder.”

“I think we’d better get out of here, Jimmy. The people who hurt Lucky seem to have some connection to Barnet Mountain, and the longer he’s here the more likely it is that they’ll discover him.”

Her words rang all too true to me.

“There’s one more thing,” I said, afraid to ask but absolutely needing to know. “Lucky, did you kill that baby?”

He shuddered, then once more spoke clearly. “No.”

“Did you have anything to do with her death?”

He looked away, and I wondered for a moment whether he would tell us the truth.

“Yes,” he said less clearly.

Odysea and I looked at each other, wary for the first time.

“What did you do?”

I thought he would never answer and was about to insist when he mumbled something I couldn’t make out.

“What did he say?” I asked Odysea who was right next to him.

“He said he took her from the car.”

“Why?”

Lucky turned directly to me, a look of terror on his face. When at last he spoke, I had to read his lips to get it. “He made me.”

“Who made you?”

“The one I bit.”

There was a loud rap on the door, and the three of us jumped. “Quick,” I whispered, “get him up to the loft.” Louder, I called out, “Hold on, I’ll be right there.”

As soon as Odysea and Lucky climbed into the loft, I walked over to the door and opened it a crack. I saw at once the wide brimmed hat of a Vermont State Trooper. When he lifted his head, there was Trooper Smalley looking down at me. He was probably close to forty with a square jaw and an intense gaze.

“Good morning,” he said before he recognized me. When he did, he added dismissively, “Oh it’s you. I’d heard you lived somewhere around here.” He said it as if I’d done something wrong.

“Morning,” I managed to say. “Up early, aren’t you?”

“We’re looking for an escaped prisoner who may be in the vicinity. In fact I believe he’s one of your clients.”

“Is that right? Who are we talking about?”

“Mind if I come in?”

“Actually I do. I’m on my way out.”

“Dressed in that?” He pointed at my flannel nightshirt.

“Yeah. We’re having Pajama Day at the office.”

“You’re a real smart ass, St. James.”

“It’s St. John.” He looked at me dumbly. “My last name, it’s St. John.”

“Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t,” he said in that accusing tone he used to perfection. Smalley pinned me with his steely gaze, and I noticed again how square his jaw was.

All my red flags went flying up the mast. I tried to think of something to say, anything that would turn his attention away from me, but I was dumbstruck. Then I saw the bandage on his hand.

“Dog bite you?” I said it with a sneer so he’d know that I knew who had done it. Then I realized how stupid it was to remind him of Lucky.

As if on cue a doggy whimper sounded from the loft.

I cringed, then coughed loudly, but it didn’t fool Trooper Smalley.

“Now I do need to come in,” he said, and pushed his way through the doorway, his hand on his service revolver.

As soon as he was inside, he noticed the mess of oatmeal on the wall. “Not much of a housekeeper, are you, St. James?”

Before I could think of something smart to say back, I heard Odysea moan from the loft.

“Jimmy,” she called out in a sultry voice. “I don’t want to wait much longer.”

Then she started playing a sexy beat on her djembe, which I didn’t even know was up there.

“Maybe you could take your search somewhere else, Smalley. I’ve got some private business to take care of.” I gave him what I hoped was a manly wink, which made him hesitate as if he were deciding whether to believe me or not. Then there was a second rap on the door, and his partner stuck her head through the open doorway.

“Come on, Derrick, we got a bad 1050 on the Interstate.”

A 1050 is Vermont police code for an accident, and he couldn't ignore it.

“Tell them we're on the way,” he answered.

He turned to me just before walking out the door. “If you see your client before I do, tell him we'll meet again.” There was pure menace in his voice, and if I had doubted Lucky before, I didn't any more. “And when you're done upstairs, which I have no doubt will take you about 30 seconds, tell her to come see me if she wants some real satisfaction.”

He rubbed his crotch with one hand and winked salaciously.

I didn't say a word, just nodded and shut the door quietly behind him.

You win, Trooper Smalley.

Next stop, Texas.

PART FOUR: TAKING

*“Take therefore no thought for the morrow:
for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.”*

Matthew 6:34

The Birth of Good and Evil and Their Sister

Evening Star could not stop thinking about the naked Gardener. “Did you see the look in her eyes?” she asked A Damn Fool.

“No,” was all he would say. He was still in a state of terror despite the distance they had traversed since fleeing the Garden. He kept looking back in the direction they’d come, expecting to see the spiteful god and his hissing snake.

When Eve noticed his fear, she dismissed it. Why be afraid of a clown?

If she had asked aloud, A Damn might have told her. But she was too engrossed in finding the right words to name what she’d seen in the old woman’s eyes.

“I saw Loneliness and Solace and Fierce Love for Everything-that-is.” Eve thrilled to her new words. “There was something more, but I don’t know what to call it. Do you?”

“No,” A Damn repeated.

Though she suspected A Damn hadn’t understood a word she’d said, she didn’t stop talking. She was starting to fall in love with the sound of her own voice. “And did you notice the round belly on the clay figure between her breasts? I think it was supposed to have pups inside.”

They were resting by a river. Actually, it was two rivers that tumbled out of a steamy green land high above them before dropping together to a deep pool far below. From this pool emerged a single, shallow, and slow moving river.

Eve and A Damn sat on the river's conjugal banks and nibbled at the fruit A Damn unknowingly had taken from the Garden. No matter how much they ate, they never got close to the stone in its middle. Even as they bit into it, the juicy pulp replenished itself.

"It must be a trick," Eve said, very frustrated. "Do you think Coyote's behind it?" She threw the useless fruit into the river and watched as it disappeared downstream.

A Damn replied in the negative as he did to everything, but it didn't stop her.

"Why do you think we're in this wet land instead of the dry land where the First People lived? Do you think we left by the wrong gate?"

And of course the answer was No.

She shrugged her shoulders and followed him as he waded across the river. There was every kind of animal drinking and lazing about in the water. The animals didn't seem to notice the People as they crossed over.

Eve didn't know where they were going or why, only that A Damn seemed to know something she didn't. So she followed him blindly. This would cost her more than all of the angry Gardener's vilest predictions come true.

As they walked through the endless green land, they saw the Moon grow fat and full many times before Eve noticed that she was growing fat and full,

too. Several Moons more and even A Damn could see that Eve looked like Dog before she dropped her pups.

One day Eve refused to walk anymore. "I can't," she shouted at A Damn, which so startled him that he actually said something more than no.

"Why not?"

"I think I have pups who want to come out of me."

"How?"

Eve didn't know how the pups had gotten inside her, but she knew exactly how they wanted to come out. She started to point between her legs but couldn't, it all happened so quickly.

"Help me!" she pleaded.

A Damn thought she was asking him, but actually she was calling out to the naked Gardener.

She squatted against a tree and moaned. A gushing stream poured out of her, then A Damn saw something dark and knobby appear in the widening slit between her legs.

Eve panted, she pushed, she panted, she pushed, and then a purplish sac whooshed out of her and lay inert between her legs.

A Damn knelt down to see what was what.

When he tore at the filmy sac he found two tiny pups inside.

Eve started to moan again, and then push and pant until another sac dropped out of her. When A Damn opened this one, there was another pup. It had a small slit between her legs just like Eve's, whereas the first two came with tiny cocks like A Damn's.

A Damn bit through the pulpy ropes that attached the pups to Eve. Finally one last large sac came out, a large empty one crisscrossed with a maze of red and blue and black webs.

Then it was all over except for the mewling of the pups.

Evening Star felt her breasts tingle when the pups mewled, so she put their sucking mouths to each breast, though of course one of the three had to wait. That one grew angry and red faced, screaming curses at A Damn just like the angry Gardener. It scared him so much that he dropped the pup, who lay on the ground twisted and bent but still cursing.

At that moment the angry Gardener and his snake showed up. It had taken them a long time to catch up with Eve and A Damn, but at last they had.

When A Damn saw them, he tried to pull Eve from the ground where she was crouched over the dropped pup. She was offering him first one empty breast then the other.

The Gardener called out, "I'm here to offer refuge and asylum," but Eve and A Damn paid him no heed.

The Serpent hissed at A Damn, "I saw you throw that pup on the ground!"

A Damn shook his head emphatically, trying to speak in his own defense but unable to utter a word. The snake came closer, and A Damn picked up a stick from the ground and waved it wildly at the snake, which dodged the blows with ease. "I saw," it hissed. "I saw what you did to that pup!"

Eve touched the twisted body of her new pup and wailed, "He's broken, this pup is broken!"

This was the moment that father Coyote had instructed me to seize. I snuck from behind a low bush and snatched a sleepy pup by the nape of her neck. Unseen, I carried her dangling in my jaws.

The last thing I heard was the dull thud of a stick against snake flesh and the Gardener's angry shout, "For shame!"

Then I snapped my white-tipped tail and flew between worlds.

Later, much later, Eve and A Damn were watching their two pups play. They were in a cold and heartless land, hungry and lost and longing for the Garden and its magical fruit. The strong pup kept picking on the other, calling it cruel names and tormenting its crooked body.

Eve said, "Now I know what to call that last look in the naked Gardener's eyes."

A Damn whacked the strong pup with a stick. He shouted at it, "For shame!" It was the same stick that had killed the snake a long time ago. Then he turned to Eve and asked, "What did you say?"

She could tell he didn't really care. She looked away from him and, her voice a hateful sound to her own ears, whispered into the wind, "Sorrow."

11. Chains

It was still early morning when I pulled into the metered parking lot behind Anthony's Diner in St. Johnsbury. The town hadn't plowed it yet, but it didn't matter since it had snowed only a few inches here. I parked the Audi in the empty space next to my pickup and left the keys over the visor. Diane used this same lot, so she'd find it soon, maybe that morning.

When I got into the Toyota, it fired up right away, but as soon as I put it into gear and backed out of the space, it resisted and died. I tried to turn it over again, but nothing happened.

Then I remembered the coolant leak from last summer. Since July I'd been pouring water into the radiator whenever it was low. I'd kept reminding myself to replace the leaky hose and buy some coolant, but it was summertime in Vermont — that brief interlude when life is too glorious for such mundane acts — and I never got around to it.

“Shit!” I said out loud about sixteen times when I opened the radiator cap. Inside was a solid chunk of ice. At best it would take hours to thaw, and I didn't have hours; at worst I had just cracked the block. Either way the truck was worthless to me.

I got back into the Audi and was reaching for the keys in the visor when I saw a 1965 powder blue Mercedes drive into the lot. It was Bob's car, and he pulled up behind me, blocking me in. As I watched in the rearview mirror, Diane climbed out of the passenger side.

I could see Bob looking at me. When he knew he had my eye in the mirror, he actually smiled as if I were an old friend. Then he made a pistol out of his fingers and pulled the mock trigger. He winked at me and drove off.

Diane strode up to the Audi and climbed into the passenger side, settling herself as if we were about to have a long chat.

This was definitely not on my agenda for a quick getaway.

Before I could say anything, she began. “I don't know what you think happened last night, but obviously we need to talk.”

"I don't have time."

"We're both an hour early for work, and this is something we need to get straight before walking in the door."

"I'm not going to work."

She hesitated a moment, considering, then said, "I'm sure Linda and I can manage for one day without you." Diane wasn't being sarcastic, just businesslike. Linda Penniman was the office manager. She was easy going and competent, a rare mix in the law. Having lived in St. Johnsbury her whole life, Linda knew the area and its people, which was good because her job description was about to expand dramatically.

"It's going to be a lot longer than one day."

"How much longer?"

I'd been staring out the windshield at Anthony's back door, but now I turned to face her. She was dressed completely in black and looked beautiful to me, stunning and very sexy. For some reason, that infuriated me. So when I answered her, it was with more than a little bitterness.

"How about *forever*?"

"Why?" she asked in a pained voice. The glow went out of her green eyes.

I ignored her and put the keys in the ignition. When I turned on the car, she put her hand on my arm.

"Jimmy, don't do this to us."

"There's no 'us' to do anything to. Now would you please get out of the car."

"What are you talking about? This is *my* car!"

"Yeah, well, let's just say you're loaning it to me for a while."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll let you know when I get there."

"That's not good enough, Jimmy."

"It'll have to be. Now get out, Diane, I'm taking your car."

I must have given her a hard look, because she opened the door and got out. Before she shut the door she leaned in and said, "I don't care about this car and I don't care whether you ever work with me again. But I do care about you and about us and I'm not giving up on either." Then she closed the door and walked away without looking back.

Two hours later Lucky and I were parked by the bakery in Richmond. It was where Odysea and I met whenever she was staying at Womyn's Land, a place where men weren't welcome.

Now she was inside the bakery, calling the main house to ask her friend to bring the box of handcuff keys.

We had taken back roads from Barnet to Barre, then gotten on Interstate 89. The whole trip we'd been listening to the news on different stations — WSTJ in St. Johnsbury, the Point in Montpelier, WDEV in Waterbury — but there had been no mention of Lucky's escape.

"I don't understand why it's not on the radio. The Department of Corrections always puts out an immediate alert."

"Is there anyone you could call to find out what's going on?" Odysea had asked. She was riding shotgun, while Lucky was hunched down in the back seat wearing a ski mask. He looked like a bank robber, but it seemed preferable to his harlequin's mask, at least in ski country where we might get away with it. I had wanted to wait until dark before leaving Barnet Mountain, but Odysea had insisted that we weren't safe there, and ultimately I'd agreed.

"Yeah, there is someone I could call."

When Odysea came out of the bakery, I went inside to call Rod. I figured he'd be at home sleeping before his swing shift. I got his number from information and dialed it. After six rings I heard a sleepy growl that must have been "Hello."

"Big Man Rod, this is your ol' buddy Jimmy."

"This better be important, Jimmy," he mumbled into the phone.

"It is."

"Okay, then I guess I'll wake up a little."

"What's happening with my friend from last night?"

"Who we talkin' 'bout here?"

"The one who reminded you of your old coon dog."

"Henh, henh," he said, which I knew was his notion of a chuckle. "That's who I thought was under consideration." There was a long silence, and I was about to ask again when finally Rod spoke. "Jimmy, if I was you I wouldn't get too close to that one."

"Why's that, Rod?"

“Let’s just put it this way: You ever walk by a wasp nest? As long as you’re not in one of them sucker’s flying pattern, they leave you alone. But if you just happen to be where they’re headin’, it’s all over. You can’t shake them, you just get stung till they’re satisfied you ain’t comin’ back again soon.”

“Rod, you’ve got to do better than that. I’m in trouble here.”

“That’s what I’m tellin’ you, Jimmy.”

“Do you know where my client is?”

“No, but I know where he isn’t.”

“Where’s that?”

“The state hospital.”

“How come it’s not on the news?”

“Been a blackout. Don’t know why. Never seen it before. Well, there was one time a guy took a short sabbatical from Windsor Prison and we kept the lid on it for sixteen hours till we caught him near Putney.”

“Why was that?”

“He was the son of a police chief in Rutland County, and we didn’t wanna embarrass the father more than he’d already been.”

“So you’re telling me there’s some kind of police connection here?”

“I don’t really know, Jimmy. I’m just talkin’ in my sleep, if you get my drift.”

I figured that was the end of the conversation. “Sweet dreams, Big Man.”

“I always dream sweet, Jimmy. You know why?”

“Haven’t a clue.”

“Cause when I’m awake I follow the advice of Satchel Paige, the finest pitcher baseball ever saw and a pretty damn good philosopher, too: ‘Don’t look back,’ he said, ‘something might be gaining on you.’ You hear me, Jimmy?”

“The words are coming through the wire, but I’m standing in a dark place and can’t see the forest for the trees, Rod. Can you shed more light?”

“Not right now, buddy, but I guess I can keep my ears open as long as you can keep your mouth shut.”

“Deal,” I answered, “but at the risk of ruining a good thing, why are you doing this for me?”

“I ain’t doing it for you, Jimmy, I’m doing it for me.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Simple: I don’t like bullies. Never have.” Then he yawned loudly into the receiver and hung up.

Ten minutes later a young woman who was dressed in overalls and work boots handed over an old White Owl cigar box full of keys to Odysea. Her hair, like Odysea’s, was cropped short except for a tail in back. She never looked at Lucky or me, never spoke a word, merely handed over the box and waited nearby in an old Chevy pickup hand-painted a bright pink.

It took us ten minutes and dozens of keys before we found one that worked. The tension had been growing the whole time, and I for one had given up when I heard the first click. A collective sigh filled the car.

I stuffed Lucky’s handcuffs, chains, and belt into a Grand Union supermarket bag that read JUST SAY NO, then buried it beneath a mound of black plastic garbage bags in a green dumpster at the edge of the parking lot.

“Okay, now we’re free,” Odysea said when she’d gotten back into the car after returning the cigar box. I got the feeling she meant all three of us, not just Lucky.

We pulled out of the bakery’s lot just behind the pink pickup. It went towards Womyn’s Land, and we turned back towards the interstate.

“Why did she help us?”

“She doesn’t like bullies,” Odysea answered.

“That’s the theme of the day,” I said, then told her about my conversation with Rod. She wasn’t surprised at the coincidence.

“There’s no such thing as coincidence, Jimmy.”

“I’ve heard that said before, but it feels just a little too neat for how I see the universe.”

“The universe appears chaotic but actually is very purposeful,” Odysea insisted. “Besides, there are more freedom fighters in this world than the forces of evil admit.”

“You think that’s what this is about, Good and Evil?”

“It’s *always* about good and evil. Every breath we take, every thought, every moment of our existence is a yea or nay, a choice between those two irreconcilable forces.”

“I’m surprised that a Buddhist like you sees the world in black and white. I thought you tried for a gray dispassionate approach.”

“I do. But that doesn’t mean I don’t recognize how seductive evil can be. Evil plays endlessly on our desires, the cause of all suffering. Which is why we must strive for awareness.”

“I’m not so sure about the ‘striving’ part.”

“I am,” a tiny voice said from the back seat.

I laughed out loud. “I keep forgetting that you talk, Lucky.”

“Mostly I listen,” he answered in a very somber tone.

“Why don’t you say more?” Odysea asked.

“I’m afraid.” His tiny voice quaked as he said it.

“Can you tell us why?”

“Some time.”

“We’ve got all the time in the world,” I said as I drove up the ramp that led onto I-89 heading to Burlington. My plan was get into New York state as fast as possible, then go south to Albany where we’d head west. “How long do you figure it will take us to reach Austin?” I asked Odysea.

“If we sleep at night, about three days.”

“Three days,” I mused. “That’s a lot of hours to fill.”

“I know one way to fill them,” Odysea said, looking right at me.

I must have smirked, because she laughed and said “Don’t look like that. I’m not prying. I just think we’re past the point of having any secrets, Jimmy. You, Lucky, me — we’ve thrown our futures into the same stream, and so our pasts are flowing together, too, in ways that may not be visible but are real and powerful.”

“Sounds like we’re about to make a pact,” I said sardonically. Then I remembered the September morning in the Horn of the Moon Cafe and realized I’d already made this pact. Only I hadn’t lived up to it, had held back more than I’d promised to give. Odysea must have read my mind.

“I’ve never pressed you to tell me about your past until today. I knew you needed to hold onto it. But now I think the opposite is true.” She was silent awhile, letting what she’d said settle.

As I pulled into the passing lane to get by a semi with Quebec plates, she resumed speaking. “We’re at the start of a new journey with a new partner, and maybe we should begin by agreeing to share everything, including our stories. Especially our stories.”

“Just for the record, what are you asking for here?”

“How about the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me Goddess. Are you ready for that, Jimmy?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

I glanced over at her and saw the determined look on her face. In the rearview mirror I spotted Lucky with the same look in his golden eyes. I didn’t have to ask whether he agreed. It was obvious.

I was the lone holdout. It was getting tiresome always being in that role.

I must have sighed, because Odysea put a hand on my shoulder and left it there. From the back seat Lucky put his hand on top of hers. I smiled at them both, I couldn’t help myself. They looked beautiful to me, radiant with a glow that made me feel loved and honored, maybe for the first time in my life. A calm, intense energy passed among us at that moment. It buoyed me up, and I felt connected to them in a way that astounded me because it was real and natural.

“So where do we begin,” I asked.

They both smiled and settled back as Odysea said, “Actually, I was wondering why you ended up working in the law.”

“I thought I told you during our Woodbury College days.”

“Not really. You just said that you wanted to help people who had no one else on their side. You never told me why.”

I, too, settled into the Audi’s plush seat. I put on the blinker and returned to the right lane, set the cruise control for 64 mph, and put it all on automatic. Almost at once I started seeing the faces of men who will haunt me for as long as I live.

12. Maddogs

The double doors clanged shut behind me, and I stared in wonder at the sunlight streaming through a wall of windows. Such a simple thing — sunlight through a window — yet I was mesmerized, for it had been too long since I'd seen the light of day.

A short and muscular young man approached me. He had dark, shaggy hair that made his face look round despite his rodent-like features. With his barrel chest he reminded me of someone I couldn't place. He leaned close to me and spoke in a whisper. "Want a blow job, man?"

"What did you say?"

"You want a blow job?"

I told him no, but he persisted until I got angry, then he laughed at me and sauntered away.

I discovered that he was called Mighty Mouse, for he remarkably resembled that TV cartoon character, which explained why he had looked so familiar. I often saw him pacing the corridors with a middle-aged man who had befriended him, not for sexual favors but because Mighty Mouse needed friends desperately. Even the most troubled of us could see that much.

It was 1974 and we were the maddogs of Miami, psychiatric prisoners housed in a maximum security ward for the criminally insane.

Not long after my arrival, a dozen or more of the men who lived on Flagler Ward were hanging around the dayroom. Some stared off into space, others talked amiably, most simply listened to the rock music that resounded loudly in the large room. John Lennon and Elton John were singing with wild energy:

*Whatever gets you through your life
It's alright, it's alright
Do it wrong or do it right*

It's alright, it's alright. . . .

Some of us started dancing to the irresistible beat of the song, its message reminding us that there was still hope for us maddogs. Those who weren't dancing watched in amusement, caught by the elation of our wild prancing.

Suddenly Mighty Mouse seized a heavy chair and rushed at his best friend, clearly intending to bash his brains out.

"Mighty Mouse!" someone shouted.

Out of the corner of an eye the friend saw him coming and ducked as the chair flew by, barely missing his head.

Immediately the staff cornered Mighty Mouse, though the inmates tried to divert them — "Mighty Mouse just kidding, man" — but they weren't fooled. They dragged him off to a "Quiet Room."

Mighty Mouse went kicking and screaming all the way. He knew what was in store for him.

"Tell me why you are here, Mr. St. John," the psychiatrist said as I sat facing him at his desk in his office on the ward. The blinds were drawn, and it was cool and shady. He spoke with a strong Spanish accent, for he was Cuban. A short, middle-aged man with a neatly clipped mustache and curly hair graying at the temples, he was handsome and genteel, unusually un-aggressive for a psychiatrist.

Why was I there? All the reasons, including those I knew too well and those that I only sensed, spun through my mind in a split second filled with doubt and hesitation.

I saw the flash of fire, felt the concussion, and for a moment I thought I would start screaming. But I didn't. I just looked him in the eyes and gave him the simple truth, that during the summer a friend had given me a shopping bag full of peyote buttons he had picked in the desert in the southwest.

"Every morning I woke up and ate a few. By the fall there was little difference between fantasy and reality to me."

"I think I am going to give you some medicine to help you calm down."

“Please don’t,” I begged. “I’m very sensitive to any kind of drugs, and the whole reason I’m here is because of them.”

He hesitated, thought for a moment, then finally said, “Okay, we’ll see.”

That evening I heard the night nurse slide open the glass window of the staff room and call out, “Medication!”

I watched as the men shuffled up to the window and accepted their drugs. When the long line finished, she started calling out the names of those who hadn’t appeared. I was surprised to hear my name.

“There must be some mistake.”

“There’s no mistake. Your doctor signed an order for you to take this medicine.” She was an attractive white woman, perhaps forty, her crisp nurse’s uniform heavily starched, her long peach fingernails perfectly polished.

“But he told me this afternoon that he wasn’t going to,” I insisted.

She bristled and said, “Either you take this medicine now or I call Central.”

I didn’t know what Central was, so I said, “Can’t you call him and ask?”

“No, I’m not going to bother the doctor at home. Now stop wasting my time and take this medicine.” Her face was rigid and unyielding. I knew the conversation was over, and I felt like I were living *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

“No way in hell,” I said, then turned away.

Three minutes later I could hear the loud locks turning in the double doors to the outside, and six huge men stormed into the room.

“Goddamn you, St. John!” the shift supervisor yelled as the five other gorillas grabbed me. I resisted, but one of them got hold of my thumb and wrenched it back until I thought he would break it off. The others each seized a limb and stretched me in more directions than I knew existed, pummeling me in ways that hurt but didn’t leave bruises.

They carried me struggling to a Quiet Room where they pinned me on my stomach to a bare mattress. The supervisor yanked my pants below my knees. Then he rammed a long needle into my ass and pumped the syringe, which suddenly shot the offensive fluid into my body.

That’s right, I’m talking about rape. Gang rape at that.

Almost immediately a heavy veil of fog filled the room and I felt my joints stiffen as if concrete had been poured into my veins.

The fog continued to fill the room for two more days.

I couldn't see and I couldn't feel and I couldn't think.

I was the living dead.

The L-shaped ward was split into two wings. At night the new inmates and those less tractable were locked into a dormitory room. To sleep in the rooms on the other side of that locked door was an earned privilege. After I finally had worked my way into one of the smaller bedrooms, I went to bed one night to discover Mighty Mouse getting into the bed next to mine. I knew he hadn't earned the privilege, and I was not about to sleep next to this volatile person, so I complained to the staff. Mighty Mouse was forced back to the dorm, and I slept soundly.

The next morning a man named Michael said to me, "Hey, St. John, come in my room. I want to talk to you." Michael was a long-term inmate. He was the leader of a gang of young white men on the ward who obviously controlled their end of it.

It seemed as if nearly every member of Michael's gang had been charged with or convicted of brutal sex crimes. One powerfully built young man, whose pale face was deeply pitted from acne, leered at me every time I passed him in the hallways. "That's my new girlfriend," he'd tell his sniggering friends. Now he stood guard outside the door as Michael shut it behind him.

"Sit down, St. John," he said.

I sat on one of the beds, uncertain and wary. Michael stood over me, one foot up on the bed next to my leg, leaning with his face very close to mine. His breath was sour, made so by the psychiatric drugs we were forced to take. Michael started speaking slowly, quietly, but soon worked himself into a rage.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, St. John? We brought Mighty Mouse over from the dorm last night and you got him sent back! We've been working on this for weeks! We're tryin' to get him better, you asshole! You got a big mouth, and the next time you open it . . .," here he paused for breath and shook his clenched fist right next to my face, "we're comin' in the shower room when you're in there." The menace in his voice

was so real it filled the room around us. I stared at him, transfixed by his anger.

“You know people slip on soap all the time in showers,” Michael said. “It’s tragic, it really is. Some of them even get fucked first, then they fall on their heads and they die. It’s tragic, you know what I mean?”

Then he swung his arm back as if he were going to punch me in the face, but for some reason he controlled himself at the last second and lightly tapped my nose with his fist. Even so, I could feel the incredible force of his rage.

He glowered at me, then growled, “Get out of my room.”

I left, and from then on I rarely spoke to anyone without thinking first.

Pacing the halls, pacing the halls, pacing the halls. It was the only real activity that was available. Up and down one corridor of the L, up and down the other. Every day I paced, along with many of the other inmates.

One of these was a man from Germany who kept raving in bouts. No one understood what he was saying, for most of it was in German. Day after day we passed each other in the halls, though he never noticed me. He was just under six feet and very gaunt. His greasy hair hung limply to his shoulders, and he rarely shaved the stubble from his chin.

One morning I began to walk alongside of him. Carefully, deliberately, I started matching his pace, which often was furious. At first he didn’t notice, so consumed was he with his ravings. Then I saw him glance out of the corner of one eye to look at me. I smiled at him and just kept walking.

The next day I did the same thing. And then the day after that. Soon we were partners in our pacing, and the German began to pause in his ranting to talk with me in halting English.

He never called me by name, but referred to me as “my friend.” It was always, “Good morning, my friend,” or “It’s good to see you, my friend.” Some days he was consumed by his rage, and if I came near he would wave me away. When he saw the concern on my face, he’d gesture me to him. I remember his hands, very pale and soft, with long, slender fingers. He would gently pat me on the arm, and whisper, “I’m okay, my friend, this is just something I have to do.” Then he’d bolt down the hall,

gesticulating wildly, shouting and swearing in German. Other days he was calm and, as we paced the halls, able to tell me his story.

He had come to Miami on vacation. One night, walking the streets alone, he had been mugged and robbed of all his money. Was that when his ranting began? I don't know for certain, I only know that the heavy psychiatric drugs he was forced to take were no help to him. Because he continued to vent his anger and frustration, the staff was threatening to use electric shock to end his raving. They didn't even know why he was so upset, nor did they see the gentle man beneath the threats and shouts. They saw the obvious and cared about one thing only — controlling his behavior.

I feared for him, for I had seen other inmates returning onto the ward after having been shocked. It was very disturbing. They had to be assisted by the staff, for they stumbled as if in a drunken stupor. Some stared blankly, most grinned stupidly.

Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) is the industry's name for shock, which is an electric kick in the head that leaves your brain traumatized. Often your memory is affected, sometimes permanently, and you feel light-headed and care-free, which is common when people suffer head injuries. The "high" from shock, however, lasts only about four months, then the overwhelming sorrow or despair returns, and the shock docs are there waiting. It is the most lucrative treatment there is, spawning an industry that provides ample documentation for its "success-rate," especially among the most powerless people in our culture, including old women.

As the German and I paced the halls, my attention was often caught by a young black man with a cleanly shaved head who was pacing, as well. His name was Mufti, and when he smiled his entire face lit up with a rosy glow and he gave off a gentle light I can only describe as holy. At times I actually could see an aura — waves of color and light — emanating around him in a brilliant scheme.

One day, and I'm not sure why, he and I were summoned together for an interview by the treatment team. On the team of about ten was an elderly black woman who alternately reprimanded and praised us as if she had a personal stake in our lives. She was the only staff member who spoke this way. The others hid behind a wall of professional jargon.

As Mufti and I walked out of the room together, I asked him, “Did you see the green aura around her?”

“You can see auras, too?” he asked, clearly surprised. Then he smiled at me, a brilliant smile that lit up his beautiful face. From that moment on we often walked the halls together.

Once, as we passed under the fluorescent lights, the transformers crackled and hissed. Mufti laughed, pointed at the ceiling, and said ingenuously, “That’s because of me!” I believed, him, too, for his energy was, while very calm, also quite intense.

In time Mufti trusted me enough to tell me his story: “Last year I was walking the streets of Miami when Allah spoke to me.” As Mufti related in detail what his god had told him, I could feel the depth of his faith, could sense his unerring acceptance of the holy command he was receiving. I listened intently as the drama then unfolded precisely as the voice Mufti heard had predicted.

“So I came to the hotel,” he continued, “and walked inside as I had been told. There stood the police officer in my vision. I reached in my coat and slowly took out my gun.” Mufti, like many of the young men of Miami, was always armed. “I aimed it carefully and then fired, killing him. Everyone screamed.”

Mufti told this story calmly, without visible sign of emotion or doubt as to whether he had done anything wrong. His god had spoken to him, and he had obeyed.

“They sent me here where the doctors want me to say I was crazy. But I wasn’t.”

The psychiatrists at South Florida State Hospital were Cubans who had left their homeland after the revolution. They were compassionate men who did not want to see their patients’ tragic lives destroyed by the harsh criminal justice system. In Mufti’s case, they believed he was insane at the time of the crime. Moreover, because he refused to accept their label of mental illness, they held that he was incompetent to stand trial since he would not be able to assist his lawyer in his own defense. When they looked at him, they saw a sweet, confused, sick young man who would surely be sent to death row if they returned him to court.

Mufti, however, felt that he had been acting from a holy directive.

I never doubted Mufti's religious sincerity, and I was not alone in this. He was much beloved by the other inmates, including those who had worked their way off our ward to a less restrictive one.

We sometimes would see these men as we walked to meals in the dining hall, a separate building connected to our ward by open-air corridors completely enclosed with chain-link fence. From their walkway across a square of lawn, someone would spot Mufti and call out his name. Soon many would be chanting: "MUFTI! MUFTI! MUFTI!"

The warm Florida air would fill with the rhythmic chanting as a serene smile slowly spread across Mufti's beautiful face, a holy glow emanating from his slender body.

Eventually I worked my way off the maximum security ward, though it was more by accident than design. No one had ever explained to me the rules or procedure. The day I walked onto my new ward the Cubans there adopted me, making sure I got a semi-private room near their end of the corridor.

Every evening around seven o'clock they would take over the kitchen on the ward and make their strong, sweet coffee. They always offered me some, which one drank very quickly in small amounts. It was like a shot of speed coursing through the veins.

As soon as we drank the coffee, everyone would start talking very fast all at once, laughing and being very gay. They would speak to me in their mix of English and Spanish, which I didn't really comprehend, but it didn't matter because we were comrades in the kitchen they had made our own.

In time I began to feel better, more clear and in control. It wasn't because of any treatment I received, nor was it due to the psychiatric drugs that I dutifully took and spat out twice a day. It was just because people naturally heal when allowed to rest and restore themselves.

I continued to learn the stories of the men around me, so many of whom were violent offenders. To me, the murderers seemed to be the gentler souls on the ward — men who had killed in fits of unrestrained passion and afterwards had to confront this most irretrievable act. On the other hand, the sex offenders seemed to be the more volatile of the group. Boundless rage seethed within them.

As I started feeling better I also felt more despair and sorrow because of what had brought me there in the first place. It was as if I bore an open

wound that went untreated, a stigmata of the heart. The weeks dragged on with little to do on the ward but rehash my life's tragedy, and as the winter holiday season approached, I become emotionally charged.

On Thanksgiving evening I watched the other inmates visit with their friends and family. I sat alone in a corner until the last visitor had left and the room was empty. Then I stood up and dialed on the pay phone a collect call to my sister. As soon as I heard her voice, I began to weep.

"Where are you?" she said. I had vanished four years before, and she knew nothing about where I'd gone or why.

I tried to talk but couldn't. She sensed my sorrow, my loneliness, and she began to cry, too. Her tears for me were more than I could bear, and I started to sob silently, my chest heaving, my shoulders shaking. Somehow I managed to mutter "I love you" before hanging up the phone.

I turned and walked out of the room, hoping no one would notice me. All the hard weeks I had spent there among the maddogs of Miami, I had been protected to some degree by a false veneer of hardness. I could not afford to have the other inmates see me in this vulnerable state.

The corridor to my room was empty, so I hastily headed down it. Then out of his room burst Big Willie, the official ward leader. Willie was massive and very powerful. He didn't take crap from anyone. He was there on a murder charge, and it was obvious from the look of him and the way he carried himself that he would kill again if pushed. I did not want Willie of all people to see me, so I averted my face as I rushed by him.

But Willie did see me and called after me, deep concern in his voice, "St. John! St. John! You alright, man?"

I nodded my head and mumbled something, but Willy wouldn't let it go. "Come back, St. John. We'll talk, man, . . ."

I couldn't go back, couldn't face the tender gift he was offering, but the warmth of his gesture carried me to some safer place than I had been in a long time.

Big Willy, thank you.

Cuban comrades, I salute you.

Mufti, bless you.

The German, I think of you.

Michael, be gentle.

Mighty Mouse, be well.

You are all maddogs, it's true.
But you are maddogs I have loved.

There was a long silence when I'd finished my story, not an empty, uncomfortable silence, but one that felt full and reflective. To me it was the best response because it meant that I had been heard and perhaps understood.

13. Silence

We were standing on the deck of the ferry that crossed Lake Champlain. We'd boarded at Burlington and were headed towards Port Arthur on one of the final runs of the season. Gulls swooped overhead, their cries raucous and familiar. There was a chill wind blowing — the perfect excuse for Lucky to be wearing a ski mask — and it had forced most of the other passengers into the cabin during the hour-long crossing to New York.

Forty miles away the Adirondack Mountains rose in black relief as the sun sank behind their jagged peaks. It was a magnificent sunset, as is often the case looking west across the lake from Burlington. Glorious long streamers of white clouds turned red and orange, then golden, and finally gray.

Just before the ferry docked, Odysea turned to me and said simply, "Thank you, Jimmy." Lucky's head bobbed in agreement.

"You're welcome," I muttered, suddenly a bit shy.

"Did you keep in touch with any of them?"

"No. I never even said goodbye. On the day I got sent back to Dade County Jail, it was early in the morning and no one was awake. I just disappeared from the ward as if I'd never been there."

"Do you ever wonder about them?"

"All the time. I'll hear a line from a popular song from 1974 and their faces flash before my eyes. I find myself wanting to reach out to them, to find out what happened to Mufti or The German. I could do it, too, though it wouldn't be easy. I rarely knew people's last names, sometimes not even their first, but I'm an investigator and sooner or later I'd figure it out."

I fell silent, thinking about how to begin the search. I could probably tap into Florida's public defender system, maybe talk a colleague into checking with their department of corrections

Odysea shifted in her seat, bringing me back to the present.

“But I never follow through. It’s odd, too, because I was as close to them as anyone I’ve ever known.” When I heard myself say that, I remembered that there were many others I loved whom I had buried in the closed chapters of my life. It was a sobering thought.

An hour later we were cruising south on I-87, heading towards the New York Thruway. Lucky had fallen asleep in the back seat. It was dark and he was free at last from the ski mask. Odysea and I were discussing her work as a mediator. She’d spent the previous summer traveling from one women’s festival to another, acting as “keeper of the vibes” and mediating whatever conflicts arose. She also had been asked by a lesbian community in Florida to teach mediation skills in late winter. “It’s work I love doing, though I barely make enough money to stay alive,” she was saying when the unmistakable sound of a ringing phone filled the car. I groped beneath the driver’s seat and discovered a cell phone I hadn’t known was there.

“Do I answer?”

“Do you want to?”

“I *always* want to answer ringing phones.”

Odysea laughed. “Then do it.”

“I don’t know. I’m just wary, I guess.”

It kept ringing, and finally I flipped it open but didn’t say anything.

“Jimmy?”

It was Diane.

“I know you’re there. Please talk to me. It’s about Lucky.”

“What about him?” I said immediately.

“He’s missing. There was some kind of horrible accident when he was being transported. Both sheriffs are dead, but Lucky walked away from the wreck.”

“How do you know this?”

“The state police called and wanted to know if I’d heard from him.”

“What did you say?”

“The usual: ‘I haven’t heard from my client and if I do you’ll be the last to know.’ They weren’t too happy with my response, but who cares. I really don’t like that Smalley. There’s something creepy about him.”

“You have no idea, Diane.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if you want to help Lucky, find out everything you can about Smalley. There’s some kind of connection between them.”

“How do you know?” she asked, a bit perplexed and maybe even a little suspicious. As far as she knew, I’d had nothing more to do with the case and wouldn’t have been privy to new information.

Just then Lucky started whimpering in the back seat. He must have been having a bad dream, for the whimpers got louder and more dog-like. The kid’s timing is astounding, absolutely impeccably totally fucking astounding.

“Jimmy, tell me that’s not who I think it is!” Diane’s voice was incredulous, but I knew she knew.

When I didn’t say anything, she sighed.

“I cannot believe this. I refuse to believe that you are driving a fugitive in my car. What are you thinking, Jimmy? There are limits to the attorney-client privilege, and aiding and abetting is not now, never has been, and never will be a protected area.”

“It’s a long story, Diane.”

“I don’t want to know it. I just want you to take him immediately to the nearest state police barracks.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You have to, Jimmy. I’m not asking, I’m ordering.”

“I don’t work for you anymore.”

“You are driving *my* car!”

“With your permission, counselor.”

“Whoa, wait just a minute. I never consented to your using my vehicle for illegal purposes.”

“That’s not what I’m going to tell the Professional Conduct Board.”

That shut her up.

The Professional Conduct Board considers ethical complaints against attorneys and can recommend license suspensions to the Vermont Supreme Court. Most lawyers care about two things in life: winning comes first, then comes their license to practice, without which they can’t even play the game. Despite my threat, I would never lie about Diane’s role in this, but she’d have to call my bluff to know that for sure. I didn’t think she’d risk that much.

“Okay,” she succumbed. A part of me was disappointed to be so right about her. “You win. It’s just that I’m not sure what the spoils are.”

“It’s simple, Diane. You hang up the phone and leave us alone. Just forget about this conversation and your former client.”

“He’s not my ‘former’ client.” Her voice was as cutting as I’d ever heard it. “He’s my client — *Period* — until such time as the court tells me otherwise, and don’t you forget it, St. John.” She exuded hostility, and I didn’t blame her. But this was hard ball we were playing, and Lucky couldn’t afford to lose an inning let alone the whole game.

“I’ll make a deal with you, Diane.”

“I’m listening.”

“You sit on this for 72 hours and I’ll deliver Lucky to the nearest cop if you still insist on it then.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. I’ll have to talk to Robert first.”

Robert Appel was the Defender General, Vermont’s head public defender and someone I trusted and liked. He was our mutual boss and the final word on ethical issues. Robert had been an auto mechanic who had attended Woodbury College and worked his way up the legal ladder. Starting as an investigator, he had completed a four-year law clerkship that entitled him to take the Bar exam. When he passed it he was admitted to the Bar and worked as a public defender before heading the Civil Rights Division in the state Attorney General’s Office. Robert was one of several Vermont lawyers, including Justice Marilyn Skoglund of the Vermont Supreme Court, who had “read law” instead of attending law school, then gone on to play a key role in the legal community.

“Okay, you talk to Robert. And see what you can find out about Smalley and Lucky.” I was about to flip shut the cell phone when I heard her say something else.

“What did you say?”

“I said despite the fact that you’re being a total asshole, I’m in love with you.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “You have a weird way of showing it.”

“You mean last night?” Had it really been just 24 hours since I was at her house? It was hard to believe. “Look, Jimmy, you completely misinterpreted what was happening.”

“Which part did I misinterpret — the passion or the pistol?”

"I'm talking about my husband, you jerk! First of all, I didn't expect him back from Chicago until today. Second, Bob would *never* point a real gun at anyone. He's a total cream puff. I thought you knew that, and even if you didn't, you must have heard the melodrama in our voices. It was all a silly act. Why didn't you know that?"

I didn't know what to say. Suddenly I started to doubt my doubts. "Just explain one thing to me: What's going on with you and Bob?"

"Nothing," she insisted, then must have sensed my confusion. "I mean nothing in the sense that we're not lovers, never have been."

"What are you then?"

"Friends, old friends."

"Then why are you married?"

"It's a marriage of convenience."

"I don't understand," I said, then heard massive crackling on the line. She faded in and out, and I just caught snatches. There was something about "political ambitions" and what sounded like "the closet," but I couldn't be sure.

"I'm losing you," I shouted, though I had no idea if she heard. More static, then she came through again.

"Call me at home when — "

The line went dead.

"Sounded like an intense conversation," Odysea offered. It was an invitation to talk.

I stared at the unending ribbon of highway in front of me. I felt drained, both from my conversation with Diane and from talking about South Florida State Hospital. It was as if I'd given away too much of myself in too short a time.

"I don't know if I'm up to more 'deep disclosure,'" I said in a weary tone. "I'm starting to feel like I'm on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*."

"How do you know what that show is like? You don't have a TV."

"You're right, I have no idea. I've never seen it. I just know it's what people say these days when they feel as if they're revealing too much."

"You're not revealing too much, you're just letting out what you normally keep stuffed inside. You've stuffed so much for so long that it's choking you, Jimmy."

I didn't know what to say. Was she right? Was I choking?

"It must feel strange for you to open up, but it's a healthy way of being. It sets us free, gets us ready for the next, newest moment so that we can truly experience the present. Besides, to share what's going on inside us is the only true gift we can offer. To hold back, to hide and feint, is to feed the grandest illusion of all — social convention."

As the mile markers flashed by us, I considered what she'd said. If she were right, I had a lifetime of habit to unlearn.

I still hadn't responded when Odysea spoke again. "I guess I do need to know if you're serious about turning Lucky over to the cops."

"I doubt it. It was an offer that seemed to make sense at the moment. I don't want her reporting this car to the police, and I didn't know what else to offer to forestall her. I'm just hoping for enough time to get us to Texas."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. Maybe by then the pieces of this puzzle will start to fit together so that I can make some sense out of it."

"Do you think she would turn us in?"

"She might. She's a lawyer, and I suspect she'll do whatever she must to protect herself."

"You don't like lawyers, do you?"

"I have a love-hate relationship with the law and lawyers."

"And Diane is no exception to that?"

"Up until yesterday I thought I respected her as a lawyer and lusted for her as a woman."

"And today?"

"Today I no longer trust her as a lawyer. What has always bothered me about lawyers is that every single one of them is an officer of the court. Their first allegiance is to the judicial system, not to their clients. That's a fundamental conflict in my mind, one the profession denies."

"And what about Diane as a woman?"

"As a woman, she's got me on the ropes. I don't know what to believe or how I feel about her."

"How does she feel about you?"

"She says she's in love with me, but I don't understand why."

"You can't conceive of a woman loving you, can you?"

“I’m not going to fool myself. I’m short, squat, ugly, lined, and gray. Why would a beautiful young woman like Diane fall in love with me?”

“Maybe she doesn’t care about your physical appearance. Or maybe she likes the way you look. I do. You have this intense look that makes you very interesting. Plus there’s a mystery about you because of the way you hold everything so close.”

I scoffed. “First you tell me to let loose, then you tell me holding tight is what makes me appealing. That’s why I love you, Odysea. You know just how to milk both sides of an issue. It’s the mediator in you. Or maybe you should have been a lawyer!”

“Now I’m going to pout because I think you’re insulting me.” She put on a perfect pout, which made us both laugh.

This whole time Lucky had been sleeping in the back seat. Even when I’d shouted over the phone, it hadn’t disturbed him. Now he was starting to whimper as he had earlier, to whine and yap in that dog-like way. I thought he was waking up, but he just got wilder and more dog-like.

“Should we wake him?”

“I don’t know,” Odysea said.

Then he howled, which actually hurt in the close confines of the car.

“Lucky!” I shouted.

He groaned, then yipped and yapped a few seconds more.

“Lucky, come on, wake up!”

I looked in the rearview mirror and could see his golden eyes opening out of sleep. He looked dazed, as if he’d been dreaming something disturbing.

Odysea loosened her seatbelt and leaned over the seat to stroke Lucky.

“Are you okay, Lucky?”

He stared at her in confusion until a look of recognition took form in his eyes.

“I’m okay now,” he whispered. He sat up straighter, stretched his long limbs as best he could, and yawned without restraint.

“Were you dreaming?” Odysea asked.

He nodded his head, Yes.

“Can you tell us about the dream?”

Again he nodded Yes, then yawned massively. It was catching. Odysea yawned into her hand, and I found myself yawning, as well.

He began to speak, haltingly at first, then with less uncertainty and more confidence, yet always with a pained look on his face. He told us it was a dream he often had, one that had repeated itself for as long as he had known what dreams were.

The telling took a long time. Sometimes he'd fall silent, apparently lost in the dream. Then we would prod him with a question or encourage him with praise until slowly, piece by piece, the dream took shape for us. When it had, we knew without question why he felt tormented by it.

PART FIVE: GIVING

“Give to those that asketh thee, . . .”

Matthew 6:42

Lucky's Dream

You must hurry!” my father insists. His voice quakes and echoes along the ridge, which carries his words to me too many times, making them weird and terrifying.

I know I should hurry, but I am tired and the way is steep and rocky. I do not want to follow him. He is wild tonight and I am afraid. When we set out, his eyes darted this way and that, suspicious and wary. Even now I hear him arguing with a spirit who wails in the chill wind that blows down the path.

“Hurry!” he shouts back at me. I walk faster but slip on loose rock. I fall and scramble back up as he screams at the spirit. I can't understand what he says, but his resolve is weakening. Soon the spirit will win.

A cold mist rises in a stinging rain, pushing me back.

I resist and climb higher.

No sooner do I reach my father than a wall of darkness prevails. It feels alive, so thick and vile I might be swallowed whole and disappear forever. I consider running down the mountain, back to my mother and the fire. But my father pulls me towards him and I cannot resist.

He is an old man who begins his mornings with a song of praise to the rising sun. The song is long and intricate, woven of many strands, including his gratitude for me. He tells the sun that he never expected a child at his age. That I am like a sun to him.

Sometimes I can't tell whether he's saying Son or Sun. He gets confused when he sings, as if the effort is too much.

Tonight as we reach the top of the mountain, he makes me sit with him on a narrow ledge of rock. We wait in the long dark moments before day. I do not want to wait, I do not want to listen to his song, but he makes me. Though his body is old and bent, his spirit is fierce.

I cannot refuse him. His will is mine.

I hear him mumbling to the spirit. "I will," he says submissively, so I know it's won. "He is yours," he promises again and again.

The sky grows lighter and the mist thinner. When the rain slows, then stops, I start to see patches of empty land far below me.

By day we wander through it in search of a perfect garden my mother promises is there.

By night she tells me the story of her childhood. It's a strange tale, one my father hints she made up.

"I am the lost child of Evening Star, taken from her by Coyote's pup on the day of my birth."

"Humph," my father snorts, then pretends he is coughing.

My mother sighs but continues.

"Evening Star went to the Great Garden in search of the Secret of Life. She entered without fear and left without remorse. Because of this she was blessed by the Mother and pursued across the world by the Angry Gardener.

My mother describes him to me, and I laugh at his clownish look; but my father warns me, "This is no clown! Laugh at your peril!"

I stifle my laughter, and my mother sighs again.

"He has lost hope, but I have not, which is why we still walk in search of the Garden." She pauses, then smiles serenely and promises, "One day soon the Mother will welcome us as her lost children."

My father never snorts at this part. I think he believes it, or at least he once believed. For as long as I can remember he has followed her day after day through the bitter dry land.

But he follows no more.

Instead he listens to the spirit on the mountain who calls to him at night while we sleep. He thinks only he can hear its booming voice in the thunder, but it isn't true.

It offers much: He will be the first of a great tribe spreading across a rich land of green promise.

It asks little: A single sacrifice of warm blood.

My mother watches him when he thinks she's sleeping. She watches and tries to read his moving lips.

I watch her watching him until my eyes close into sleep.

“Stand up,” my father insists.

The sun is about to rise. I look at him and wonder why he has not begun his song.

“Get up!” He drags me to my feet, then shoves me to the lip of the ledge where I tremble and nearly fall.

“Not yet!” he screams and pulls me back.

The sun climbs quickly out of the night, and as its glowing rim clears the earth, he whispers, “Now.”

I don't know what he wants. He does not sing. He simply stares at me expectantly.

“What, father?”

“Fly!” his voice is a hoarse command. “Fly like Coyote's pup!”

“But I can't!”

“Fly from the ledge! Do it now!”

He's about to lunge at me, to push me from the ledge, when I hear my mother's echoing scream, “Noooo!”

Just below us she stoops for a stone and hurls it at my father as he lunges towards me. The stone strikes him from behind, hitting him hard in the head, making him stumble towards the abyss.

As he flies over the edge he reaches out for me, a look of surprise on his face.

I grab for him but miss his outstretched hand.

He floats silently towards the rocks far below.

When his body hits the parched earth, the rising sun strikes the very spot, turning it blood red.

I am blinded by it.

Brilliant flashes of red and orange and harsh white light.

When I can see again, the world looks green like a perfect garden, and there is a tribe of tents on the rich land below.

I think I must be dreaming.

I awake and hear him shouting above me.

“You must hurry!” my father insists. His voice quakes and echoes along the ridge, which carries his words to me too many times, making them weird and terrifying.

It has begun again.

We drove until nearly two the next morning. By then it didn't matter how many cups of coffee I sucked down, the caffeine had quit working. Odysea and Lucky were snoring in tandem, and I sensed myself being lulled into their sleepy rhythm. I resisted for over an hour, blasting the radio and constantly changing stations to stay awake, then felt sick I was so exhausted.

Earlier in the evening I had napped in the back seat as Odysea drove us across New York State. I'd fall asleep for a moment, then my skull would start buzzing from the road vibrations on the window, momentarily waking me up. It was like dipping in and out of a shallow stream. I kept falling into parts of Lucky's dream, which were mixed with scenes from earlier in the day: Trooper Smalley at the cabin, Diane behind Anthony's Diner, Lucky in his ski mask throwing crackers to the gulls on Lake Champlain. It all melded into a bizarre dream-movie replete with characters from South Florida State Hospital.

When the Cuban shrinks started conspiring with Smalley, I forced myself awake. We had just crossed into Pennsylvania. I stretched and yawned and asked Odysea how she was doing. It was then that Lucky offered to drive.

"You don't have a license, do you?"

"I've got a license."

I almost laughed out loud at the idea of the Dog taking Motor Vehicle's road test. Then I realized I had to stop thinking of him as the Dog. Obviously there was more to Lucky than his canine persona.

"Is the license in your name?"

"Of course."

"We can't risk it. If you get stopped driving for any reason, the police will run a record check on you, and we can't take that chance."

He was disappointed. Fortunately, Lucky wasn't the sulking kind.

I shifted the conversation to his dream. I told him how much it had affected me. "Your dream is powerful, even mythical."

“Especially mythical,” Odysea said.

He wouldn't respond, though we kept coming at it in different ways. Odysea mentioned the similarities between the dream and the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. I talked about how the dream-mother had saved her son. Lucky grew even more reserved. I suspected that telling the dream out loud had taken too much out of him.

At that point, which was near Erie on I-90, all he would say was, “I'm not ready yet.”

When I persisted, Odysea said, “Let it be,” so I did.

By 2 AM I'd had enough. When I suggested we stop at a motel, my groggy companions grunted their approval.

We spent what was left of the night in a Best Western in Ohio. Or was it a Day's Inn in Pennsylvania? The problem with interstate travel is that my sense of place gets obliterated by corporate logos that blend and blur until I have no idea where I am. I thought we were in Ohio, but we could have been Anywhere, USA.

After sixteen hours on the conveyor belt I felt as grimy and gritty as last winter's road salt. I couldn't wait to hit the shower. I registered while they waited in the car, paying with cash I'd gotten that morning from an ATM. I had emptied my meager savings, but it was enough to get us to Texas, which was as far ahead as I could see.

Though the elderly man at the desk didn't ask, I told him we were a family of three. “My wife and my adult son,” I offered. He just nodded his head and complained about the drunk in Room 211.

When his phone rang he rolled his eyes and said, “Guess who?” before answering. “Front desk.” He listened for a while, then hung up without replying. “One more call like that and he'll be taking a little ride in a big car with a bubble on top.” The idea seemed to reassure him. He actually smiled at me, which brought out his handsome features. He was dressed in casual but expensive clothing. I wondered how he had ended up as a motel clerk on the night shift.

“We need a quiet room,” I said, “if that's at all possible.” His smile faded immediately and he looked at me suspiciously. “We're from Vermont,” I explained, but he didn't get it. “You know, it's quiet there.”

He put us in 212.

Fortunately our neighbor across the hall in 211 never made a sound, or if he did it was drowned out by the roar of the semis on the interstate. It didn't seem to disturb Odysea or Lucky, but I could feel the vibration of every truck as it roared by our exit.

The next morning when I awoke it took a few moments before I realized where I was and why. I was lying on my side on the hard floor, wrapped in a bedspread, and my shoulders ached. Sometime in the night I had rolled off the bed to escape Lucky's kicks under the covers. Now I could see early morning sunlight behind the heavy curtains over the windows.

I sat up, rubbed my shoulders, and tried to focus my eyes. Right away I noticed the two beds were empty. Odysea and Lucky must have gone for a walk, or maybe they were having breakfast in one of the nearby fast food places.

I stood up and stretched and scratched in all the usual places. I stumbled into the bathroom, relieved myself, then turned on the shower to its hottest setting. As I waited for the steam to build, I noticed a courtesy coffee maker on the counter. It took me several tries to tear open the foil-wrapped package of coffee, but eventually I started the machine brewing. It hissed and popped and gurgled until a thin stream of black goo dripped into the small glass pot.

By then the bathroom mirror had fogged over completely, so I climbed over the tub and stretched my stiff body. I luxuriated under the pelting spray of the shower for ten minutes or more. When I'd had enough, I climbed out and wrapped my long hair in a towel. I wiped the mirror with another towel and brushed my teeth until my gums bristled. Then I stood beneath the glowing red heat lamp in the ceiling and studied myself in the mirror. It's not something I've done very often. In fact in my cabin there's only one small mirror I rarely use. But I was curious to see what Diane saw when she looked at me naked. Was there anything about my aging body that might be attractive?

If there were, I couldn't find it. To me I looked old and gray and ape-like.

Then I noticed the way the white and black hair on my chest swirled around my nipples before falling in a narrow line down my belly until it

reached my crotch. I suppose if you like Neanderthal, you might think it looked sexy.

I noticed my penis, too, something I'd never seen from any angle other than a straight shot looking down. Retracted into the nest of my crotch, it looked small and shriveled from the hot shower, though I had no idea what to compare it to. I know American males are supposed to be keenly aware of the relative size of their maleness, but I wasn't.

As I thought these things, I noticed it started to move. I wasn't getting hard, just bigger. What a strange thing to have between one's legs, this member with its own will.

I studied it from different angles and liked what I saw. I'd always had this idea that my penis was ugly, but now as I studied my whole body, I got a sense of myself as a man. I don't mean that I thought I was handsome or sexy in a Hollywood sense, just that I looked manly. The way my penis protruded from between my legs, the rise and fall of my chest as I breathed, the slope of my shoulders, the curve of my buttocks — all of it taken together helped me to see myself as vibrant and maybe even attractive.

I laughed out loud. "One night of wild sex and you're already getting vain," I said to my reflection in the mirror. My reflection grinned back at me, a bit embarrassed.

I poured a cup of black coffee and sipped it tentatively. I'd made it strong, using only half the recommended amount of water. It was perfect.

I put on some clean clothes and opened the curtains to the window. I could see the interstate a quarter mile away and the access road lined with gas stations and fast food places. I noticed that the motel's pool was covered with a blue vinyl top. Autumn leaves carpeted the concrete deck around the pool. The parking lot below was packed with cars. I scanned the room and spotted a digital clock that read 6:43, early enough to eat up a lot of miles before dark. I grabbed my gear to leave. I put the room key on the night stand and threw the bedspread back onto the bed.

I glanced out the window and noticed Odysea and Lucky's heads rising above the roof of the Audi. They had been crouching on the side opposite me. They stepped back a few paces and studied the car, animatedly discussing something. I had no idea what they were looking at.

“What are you two gawking at?” I called across the lot as I exited the building. They were arm-in-arm, a satisfied look on their faces.

“Come see for yourself,” Odysea called back. Lucky nodded his head eagerly.

As I rounded their side of the car, Odysea trumpeted “Ta-dah!”

On the driver’s side of the Audi they had painted a colorful scene of a dancing dog, a drumming witch, and a bearded man with cracks of light shining through his body. At one end of the trio there were green mountains, at the other a lone star, both joined by a silver ribbon of highway. The painting was cartoon-like, very flat and two-dimensional, exuding comic flair and hilarity. The colors were bright and glaring in the sunlight, creating an overall effect that shouted to the world, “Look at us and laugh! This is a freak-mobile!”

I was speechless. My mouth must have been hanging open, for Odysea said, “Close your mouth, Jimmy, it’ll be okay.”

“Don’t you like it?” Lucky asked, the proud look on his face crumbling into doubt.

I looked down at the pavement and noticed the paint brushes and small jars of acrylics next to Odysea’s backpack. I looked back at the painting, at Odysea and Lucky, at the blue sky. I heard the semis humming on the highway, a bird chirping in the warm October morning. I thought about Diane and how she’d react to this custom paint job on her \$60,000 Audi.

A woman with two young kids walked out of the motel into the lot. As they passed by us, the girl exclaimed, “Look Mommy, they colored their car!” She was delighted and started giggling. “Can we color ours?”

“It looks pretty silly, doesn’t it,” I said to her.

“I like it!” she insisted.

Then her younger brother yelled, “Me, too!” and started to laugh and hiccup at the same time.

Before I knew it everyone was laughing, even me.

“You realize this is an invitation to get busted,” I muttered under my breath to Odysea.

“No it’s not, Mr. Worry Too Much.” She put an arm over my shoulder and gave a squeeze. “It’s an invitation to joy.”

We spent the day driving west and south, too often sandwiched between screaming semis, but making good time nonetheless. We stopped for meals and gas or whenever one of us needed to pee, which was often because of the river of coffee I consumed. We stayed on I-90 until we reached Cleveland, then took I-71 cutting southwest through Ohio to Columbus where we got on I-70 heading due west.

We were cruising past downtown Columbus when I saw the blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror. "Shit!" I said, and slammed a hand across the steering wheel. "I knew it. I knew that goddamn painting was going to do this."

"Lucky, put the blanket over your head and pretend to be asleep," Odysea told him. She was annoyingly calm.

I pulled over to the shoulder and came to a stop. The trooper parked behind me, got out, and approached us on Odysea's side of the car. She hit the automatic window button. As the glass lowered he peered inside, scanning the cabin for any blatant misdoing. From beneath the visor of his hat, his eyes bore into mine.

"You're a long ways from home. I assume that means you're in a hurry to get somewhere."

"We are traveling a good distance, but I thought I had the cruise control set at 64."

"The maximum speed inside the city limits is 55 miles per hour."

"Sorry. I guess I missed the signs."

"Um-hmm." He studied Odysea, then looked at the crumpled form in the back seat. "Can I see your paperwork, please?"

I fumbled in the glove compartment, hoping the registration and insurance card would be there. They were. I fished out my license from my wallet and handed it to Odysea who passed it all to the trooper. He was a middle-aged man, old for highway duty, and so far he'd been cold and suspicious but not hostile. He studied the names and noticed the discrepancy.

"Are you the owner of this car, Ma'am?" he asked Odysea.

"Actually it belongs to a friend. She loaned it to us because we're on our way to Texas where another close friend is dying."

I couldn't believe she told him our destination. I sank a little lower in the seat.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said in a sincere voice. I sat back up a little straighter.

He considered us for moment longer, then said, "I'm going to run a standard check on your license and registration. Do any of you have a controlled substance in your possession?"

It's at this point that I always wonder if they actually expect druggies to hand over their stash. *Sure, officer, here's my pipe and six vials of crack. Thanks for asking. If you give me a half hour or so I might even be able to procure a few illegal handguns.*

"No," we said in unison, even Lucky from the back seat, though I wished he'd kept quiet. He was supposed to be asleep, damn it.

"When I return from the cruiser I'll be bringing a dog with me. He has been trained to sniff out drugs and not to attack except on command, but it would be safer for everyone if you kept your windows and doors closed."

Again we all nodded our heads as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

I saw him get back into the cruiser and pick up the handset to call in the record check. I had no idea what he was going to discover. There was nothing we could do but sit and wait.

"Do you think she reported the car stolen?"

"I don't know."

Lucky began whimpering in the back seat. I started to reassure him, but what was the point? We were on the edge of big trouble, and I felt like whimpering myself. Odysea reached a hand over the seat and petted him.

Suddenly the trooper appeared at the window. Odysea lowered it and he handed the paperwork to her. There was no dog with him.

"I've got to respond to another call and want to wish you folks well on your travels through Ohio. I hope your friend in Texas recovers, Ma'am. Please observe the speed limits."

"Thank you," Odysea said, beaming good will.

He nodded at her, then added, "I like the painting on the side of your car. Very unusual and cheerful."

Then he was gone.

Odysea turned to me with a silly grin on her face. She didn't say "I told you so."

Instead she crowed, "Thank you universe!"

Amen.

At Indianapolis I-70 veers southwest through the rest of Indiana and Illinois, but I missed it entirely as I snoozed away the afternoon. Odysea woke me up to see the sun set over the arch at St. Louis, and by nightfall we were sailing straight south on Route 67 to Poplar Bluff in southern Missouri. It was a relief to get off the interstates.

“When we get to Poplar Bluff do you want to stop for some dinner and a normal night’s rest?” I asked Odysea and Lucky.

“Yes,” Odysea said, “I’m absolutely road weary.”

“What about you, Lucky?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

I realized that it was true, that this journey meant something different to him than to either of us. He wasn’t going to a destination but away from trouble that could catch up to him at any time and any place.

I was about to comment when the cell phone started chirping.

“Guess who?” Odysea said smiling.

I didn’t hesitate to answer this time. I’d been thinking about her all day, seeing her naked body as I napped across two states. I had been floating on the sexual energy my mind had produced, and I was eager to make any kind of contact I could. Besides, I missed her. She had been a major part of every day of my life for a year.

“Hi Diane.”

“Why didn’t you call me last night?” It was an accusation.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to call.” In the silence that followed I felt her considering an argument, so I added in a conciliatory tone, “The end of our conversation was garbled by static. I couldn’t make out what you were saying.”

“All the more reason for you to call me at home when you stopped for the night.”

“Sorry,” I said and meant it.

“I wanted to tell you more about Bob and me.”

“I’m eager to hear.”

“It all started in San Francisco where I worked as a dancer.”

“I didn’t know you danced.”

“I did it for seven years, from the time I left home at 18 until we got married when I was 25.”

“Did you work in a company?”

“Not exactly, Jimmy.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was more private than that.”

She hesitated, and I could hear the miles between us echoing from tower to satellite and back to earth. “Remember that song Tina Turner did several years ago called ‘Private Dancer’?” She started to sing the lyrics to me. “*I’m your private dancer,*”

“Diane, are you telling me you worked as a stripper for seven years?”

“I was a lap dancer, Jimmy. I made a lot of money that enabled me to go to college and see the world.”

For the second time that day I felt my mind shut down in total consternation. I simply did not know how to respond to this news. Obviously I had kept my past life secret from her, but I never imagined that she had been doing the same with me.

“My stage name was Little Lori,” she said, then told me her story as we entered Mark Twain National Forest.

It was easy finding my own dance music, which was one of the few freedoms management gave us. That and picking your persona. You could be whoever you wanted as long as there weren't too many other girls with the same character. Management wanted us to keep it mixed.

15. Little Lori I chose to be Little Lori. My breasts are small, so it made sense for me to be a young girl. It paid off, too. On nights when things were slow and the other girls sat staring into space or gossiping in groups, Little Lori danced.

There are more popular songs than you'd ever guess that are about tempting young girls. I use "tempting" in both senses: my clients wanted to tempt me and they wanted me to tempt them. In that respect it was a mutual dance, one I loved to perform because of the dual tension. I had to strike the perfect balance.

To do it right, I psyched out the customers as soon as they walked in the door. I had to do it without them knowing. As a young girl I wasn't supposed to have the sophistication to see into their adult psyches, so if they caught me at it I lost my innocence.

That was my persona, the ingénue/temptress. I dressed in a short white crinoline dress over a frilly white slip. I wore a bright red cape with a hood and carried a small wicker basket, trying for the Little Red Riding Hood archetype.

I can't tell you how many times a customer would howl like a wolf when I walked by. Each one thought he was being original, too. I'd make my eyes go big with fear, then giggle and skip away a few steps, glance back over my shoulder with a little girl look. It's all in the eyes. Other dancers thought talking dirty is what turned the joes on. But I knew it's what you say with your eyes. I'd give them that look, "You're so bad and I'm so good!" and they'd follow me straight into the back like they were on a leash.

The more clothes I wore the better. I ran it per item, so much for each piece, the closer to my flesh the more it cost. If I was good, if I got the joe totally excited, he'd pay whatever I asked to take off the next piece.

I also carried a jump rope in the basket, which I sometimes used in my dance. My dress and slip would fly up as I skipped rope, bringing back those playground scenes to my eager little boys.

I braided my hair in pig tails and wore Mary Janes on my feet with white ankle socks folded neatly at the top. My cheeks were rouged to look flushed and my eyes made up for a doe-eyed look.

It worked like a charm. A magic money charm.

I cashed in from the first night, made more money than I ever dreamed possible. It paid for four years at San Francisco State and trips to everywhere from Paris to Katmandu.

On an average night I netted \$300, but sometimes I walked away with \$1,000 or more, and I didn't have to give blow jobs or entertain a joe outside the club. Then there were the gifts — rental cars, hotel rooms, cell phones with the bills already paid — and those were on top of the tips. I'm talking about clearing a \$1,000 over and above my fee to the club.

There were no fees when I first started lap dancing, but now they range from \$50 to \$100 a night. The club fee to dancers is one reason the newer girls are forced into offering sexual favors, as a way of keeping their customers coming back and tipping large. There are some nights when girls actually lose money because of the fees. It sucks, it really does, but it's not my concern any more.

Every man I've ever known, and even a few women, want to seduce a young girl. For some of them it's the innocence of young sex that's the draw. They want to step back in time and start over, maybe do it right this time, or maybe just do it at all. For others they want to corrupt what is pure. Or they want to *be* corrupted. They look at me and see a latent slut who's begging them to ravish her. It sounds sick, but I never judged the joes.

I considered myself a professional dancer, and dancing erotically is as ancient an art form as there is. It's right up there with painting on cave walls.

My dancing has always been suggestive, even before I turned professional, but I never saw it as sex. I never had sex for money. I mean

absolutely never. Not once. What I gave the joe was a lap dance, which cost \$20 up front. I'm a professional dancer. A performance artist.

I'd bring the customer to a booth in the back where I'd sit him down in a chair facing me. I'd smile a lot and chatter like a girl, then turn on the music and start to dance seductively.

I used my clothing to stir up interest, fanning my dress to show my slip, raising my slip to reveal a thigh. When the joe got hot, I took off my cape, flung it from me as if he was turning me on and I couldn't hold back. The cape was free. From then on it cost.

As the dance progressed I'd offer to remove another layer, demanding more money, usually in small increments. When I got down to my panties and bra, I'd soak him for whatever I could get. They always wanted to touch my hips and breasts, which is where the big bucks came from. I have small breasts, so it matched my little girl look. They'd touch me and whisper somebody's name from their past, or maybe their present. I didn't care. "My name's Little Lori," I'd whisper back, "but you go ahead and call me Susie 'cause I love the way you touch me. Makes me want you, daddy."

It's against club rules to ejaculate in the club, but I couldn't stop them. What goes on in the booth is private, no one is peeking around the curtain or looking through two-way mirrors. I wouldn't ever touch a joe's penis intentionally, but the room is small and dark, and sometimes when I was dancing I couldn't help but make contact.

It drove them wild.

They paid for it.

There's always a cover charge at the door of a sex club, as high as \$50, which goes straight to management. Conventional strippers are dancing on stage, while we lap dancers mingle in the audience looking to catch someone who wants more. It's like fishing. Only the fisher and the bait and the hook are all the same thing. Me.

I'd catch someone's eye, and he would make an offer. "How much for a private dance?" he'd ask if it was his first time.

"How much you got?" I'd answer, which always made them laugh.

Of course a lot of the men were repeat customers. It's like I was part of their weekly budget. So much for food, housing, transportation, and Little Lori.

What kind of men came to the clubs? People make this assumption that only dirty old men in trench coats frequent sex clubs, but it's not true. Sure, the trench-coated types are there, but so is every other kind of man, from top floor business executives in their Armani suits to groups of young fraternity boys in GAP sweats. There's even the occasional woman, maybe five per cent of the total clientele.

But the point is that the joes are the same, no matter how they're dressed. They're looking for the same experience. Eroticism. It's a part of being male in America, I don't care how many times the New Age Man denies it. I was in the industry too long to be fooled by their delusions. All men want sex with young girls, the younger the better.

In the sixties Gary Pucket and the Union Gap had a hit called "Young Girl," which is a total turn on for men weaned on it. Then there's Bruce Springsteen's "I'm On Fire," which is some kind of male national anthem. As soon as they hear the Boss's voice, they start mouthing the words as if it's them singing to Little Lori. Only I turn it all around and I sing it to them:

*Hey little girl is your daddy home
Did he go away and leave you all alone
I got a bad desire
I'm on fire
Tell me now baby is he good to you
Can he do to you the things that I do
I can take you higher
I'm on fire*

Nobody sings to me. Nobody. You see what I did as a lap dancer was all about me. I was in control, not them. I led them in a dance that I started and I stopped. My music, my persona. Every move, each word and nuance, every look was directed towards one end — arousal — and I decided when it began and when it peaked. I told you, I'm an artist.

Sure there were exceptions. Sometimes all the joe wanted was to talk. I didn't have to dance or even turn on the music. I've had men so lonely for a woman's sweetness that they started crying when I gave it. I'm serious. Tears running down their cheeks because I said, "You're a good man.

You're the kind of man I want to grow up and marry. *You're handsome, really you are.*"

Or maybe all they needed was a hug. That's how lonely some men are, they come to a sex club and put out a \$100 for a hug!

People always want to know why I was a lap dancer. Were you sexually abused as a child? No. Did you have a drug problem? No. Were you destitute? No. No. No.

I used to look at the women I worked with, and most of them could answer yes to those questions, but not me. So why did I do it? I think it has to do with intimacy. It's a very intimate thing, erotic dancing. I can feel the joe inside me and me inside him. I see how what I'm doing affects him, makes him hard, drives him wild, and there's this bond that happens between us, even if it's only for a fraction of an hour. It's deep, it really is.

I know what you're thinking. That I have a serious problem with real intimacy. You're right. I do. Who doesn't? I'm working on it. That's why I'm in therapy now. That's why I'm telling you all this. My therapist told me to. She said if I cared about you, if I loved you, I had to let you know about this part of me.

Just don't judge me. Okay?

I grew up in a small town in southern Ohio. My father was an insurance agent. State Farm Insurance. Like A Good Neighbor. He was a good neighbor. And a good father and husband. My mother taught school. Fifth grade. I have a brother who's three years younger who was an Eagle Scout. We had a cat named Fluffy and a bull dog named Butch. I took ballet and piano. In the summer I went to day camp at the Methodist Church.

When I was fifteen I was in the church youth group, and one week we were supposed to act out our favorite Bible story. I didn't have any favorites, so at home I opened the Bible at random. The pages parted at the story of Salome. Do you know it? It's about John the Baptist and King Herod.

They were great friends even though Herod had imprisoned John for discrediting his marriage with Herodias. Actually Herodias was Herod's brother's wife, and John said they were living in sin. Herodias hated John for stirring up the people against her, so she made Herod arrest John. But it

worked against her because every day Herod would visit John and converse. John was brilliant, captivating, and though Herod denied it, Herodias knew he was starting to believe John's message of repentance.

One night there was a banquet for Herod's closest friends. Herodias told her daughter to dance for the men. "You know how," she said. "Dance the way I taught you."

The young Salome drove the men wild. It was the kind of erotic dancing that men kill for. As she finished they shouted their praise. Herod was so pleased that he offered Salome whatever she wanted. "Just ask and it is yours," he pronounced grandly before his friends. They nodded their heads in approval.

Salome was overjoyed. Anything she wanted! Her young mind raced with visions of horses and jewels and servants. So much to choose from! She ran to her mother and said, "What do you think I should ask for?"

This was the moment her mother had planned.

"Ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter."

Salome was shocked.

"Do it!" her mother commanded.

Herod balked, turned pale and nearly vomited. "Ask for anything but that," he stammered.

Then he glanced around the room and saw the look on the faces of the men: *Is this the way Herod keeps his promises?*

John's bloody head was delivered on a silver platter.

That's the gist of the story, and when my turn came that week to act it out, I told it just like that. When it was time for Salome's dance, I put on a record that had a middle eastern beat. Then I danced before the class.

I could feel their eyes on me. Could hear the boys' breathing. Even the girls couldn't stop watching my hips thrusting, my breasts shaking beneath my blouse. When I was done I looked at the minister, a young married man new to the church. In the chilly basement room, his forehead was beaded with sweat. He tried to say something, but only babbled.

What would he have given me if I had asked?

I met Bob during the law suit. It was just before his final year at Stanford Law School, and he was clerking during the summer at a firm in San Francisco. They were our lawyers in the class action suit we wanted to bring

against the O'Farrell Theater. That year I had joined the Exotic Dancer's Alliance, a collective fighting for adequate working conditions and civil rights within the sex industry.

People laugh when I tell them about the Alliance. Especially feminists. They scoff at us. Like somehow because we dance for a living we're not entitled to their respect. I consider myself a feminist. I fought for the right to work as a woman without being abused and humiliated. I walked on pickets, I signed petitions, I filed law suits. And I put my livelihood on the line. You think the managers didn't blacklist us? Wake up!

The sex industry isn't going to disappear because feminists say it's degrading to women. It's always been there and it always will be there. Eroticism is part of the human experience.

Anyway, I was dancing with a woman named Jennifer Bryce. She's from Vermont, which is why I came here, because of how she described the people, the land, the simpler lifestyle. Jennifer is this very bright, committed woman, an activist who was raised by sixties' radicals. She inspired me to join her and a few others in fighting back. Personally I didn't need to, I was making good money, but I couldn't watch the abuse any more.

Last week I found this piece by Jennifer on the Net. Let me read it to you: "After years of seeing dancers have to pay for the right to not only make a living, but also put up with many acts of intimidation and coercion, I simply could not keep silent anymore. We paid to work and were called 'bitches' and 'whores' at company meetings. We paid to work and were fired for not allowing friends of the management to fondle us. We paid to work and were told to get down on our hands and knees in a daisy chain or we'd lose our jobs."

The whole thing comes down to one simple point: Only exotic dancers must pay to work. We charged in our law suit that the dancers had been mis-classified as independent contractors rather than employees. It's fundamentally unfair, a violation of equal protection under the law.

But what it's really about is breaking the silence, standing up to the stigma in the community and the fear of losing your job. Over four hundred dancers have taken the chance, come forward and joined the suit.

Of course in the beginning no one wanted to risk it. There were just a few of us. And Bob. He was assigned to do all the preliminary work. He was handsome and attentive and respectful. We all liked him. One Friday afternoon he asked me to join him for a drink. I agreed.

When we got to the bar, there was another young lawyer waiting for us. He and Bob embraced, and I could see at once they were lovers. It didn't surprise me. San Francisco is a free zone. Has been for a long time. You get to be who you are.

So Bob introduces me to his boyfriend. It turns out they live together in an apartment in the Castro district. They're very happy except for one thing: Bob's parents are coming to visit next week and they don't know about his lover. "Mom and Dad wouldn't understand," Bob says. "They're from Salt Lake City."

"So what?" I say.

"They're Mormons."

"So they don't speak English? Talk to them. Let them see how much you're in love. It's the fucking nineties," I insist.

"The new permissiveness doesn't matter to them. It only confirms their Sodom and Gomorrah mind set."

We go around a few more times, and Bob's lover, whose name is Samuel, tries to help me see things from Bob's point of view. "There's different levels of coming out," he explains as he runs a finger over the rim of his wine glass. "Bob can't risk being out with his family, just like I can't risk being out with my employer."

"Where do you work?"

"I work for an investment firm here in the city. *Trés* conservative. They just hired their first black employee last month."

"That's absurd."

Both men nod their heads in agreement.

"But why are you telling me all this?" I ask.

"I need a girlfriend for a few days," Bob says sheepishly.

Samuel pats his arm.

"And you want me to be her?"

"If you're willing. I'd pay you very well."

"Okay."

"You agree?" Bob can't believe his good fortune.

“Of course. You don’t even have to pay me.”

“Oh, I insist.”

So that’s how it started. His parents fell in love with me. When they asked what I did, I told them the truth. “I’m an education major at San Francisco State.”

A month later it was his uncle who was visiting. And then there was a formal dinner at the law firm. That one surprised me until I got there and discovered there wasn’t a gay couple in sight.

Then he brought me home with him to Salt Lake City. In the spring there was graduation week. And not long after he and Samuel broke up, Bob asked me to make our arrangement permanent.

“You mean marry you?”

“Yes. I want to go into politics, and even here in San Francisco they kill gay politicians. Of course it would be a marriage of convenience, though you’d be financially secure for life. I’m very wealthy, you know, and the pre-nuptial agreement would guarantee your well being no matter what. We’d both keep our sex lives separate, but we’d have each other’s company and friendship. You do like me, don’t you? I know you do. We have so much fun together!”

“Where would we live?”

“You keep talking about Vermont. I like the idea of a small state. Easier to make in-roads in the political system. Plus it’s quite liberal, radical even. They’ve got a socialist in Congress, the only one in the country. Maybe someday I could even come out all the way. Of course I mean after my parents have passed away.”

“What would I do while you were working?”

“You could teach. Or go to law school.”

Law school. That clinched it for me.

“You’re on,” I said.

Diane's confession couldn't have come at a worse time for me.

I recoiled from it as I might from a snake poised to strike.
16. Lone Star Ironically, I was starting to believe that opening up was the right way to live, but being on the receiving end made me doubt the wisdom of baring one's soul. Moreover, I had passed the afternoon fantasizing about being with her again. I didn't know how or under what circumstances, but I'd had this hope that we might work things out. She'd totally dismembered my image of her. I don't know why, but I'd never considered Diane with a past. I mean of course she had a past, but not a *Past*.

The person I knew was many things, all of them intriguing to me: She was an articulate legal advocate for the poor, one who staunchly resisted the abuses of the State. She was a respected member of the local bar who successfully promoted *pro bono* causes. She was an alluring and beautiful woman who had been a tantalizing lover.

And now she was one thing more — a former sex industry worker.

At the end of the conversation, or I should say monologue, she asked me what I thought. I didn't know what to say.

The spirit of my dead Italian grandmother wailed at me, *You're in love with a puta!*

Was she a whore? Or was she a performing artist?

Was I in love? Or had I been seduced by Little Lori?

My mind jumped over itself in six different directions until it stopped at our first meeting, which I now saw in an entirely different light. No wonder she hadn't covered her breasts when I had walked in unawares. Standing naked in front of strangers was something she'd done for hire.

And what was this garbage she put out about men? I had no sexual interest in little girls. How could she be so stupid to think that sex club habitués defined adult male sexuality!

I was angry and disappointed and confused. This woman I had respected now appeared manipulative and shallow and ignorant. On the

other hand I was embarrassed at how uncomfortable I felt about her past. Why should professional erotic dancing be this disturbing to me?

Then there was her marriage with Bob. Was a *ménage à trois* how I wanted to live and love? The humiliating scene with the water pistol flashed before me. The prospect of getting caught between them again was daunting.

“Why is it taking you so long to respond, Jimmy?” I could hear the hurt in her voice.

“I can’t answer you right now,” I finally blurted into the cell phone.

“You have to, Jimmy. You can’t leave me hanging like this. It’s not fair. I’ve just opened up to you, taken an incredible risk, and I’m not going to be left hanging.”

“I don’t know what to say, Diane.”

“Just tell me you love me.”

I snapped shut the cell phone.

It was the wrong thing to do, not only to someone who had reached out in a trusting way, but also because of what happened as a result, though it would be awhile before I’d know about that.

We spent the night in a Best Western in Farmington, Missouri. This time I know it was a Best Western because Odysea commented on it.

“You like these Best Westerns, don’t you.”

“I never thought about it,” I answered dully.

“You know I haven’t thanked you for doing this, Jimmy.”

“It’s not necessary. I already had decided to leave Vermont when you asked me to take you to Texas.”

“I still want to thank you. I don’t know how I would have managed the trip if you hadn’t taken charge of things. I didn’t have money or a working vehicle, and Lucky didn’t even have a change of clothes until you retrieved his stuff by the river.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said automatically. I felt miserable, like I was falling apart again. I hadn’t felt so distraught and confused since my days in the psychiatric gulag. I just wanted to hide, to disappear from the harsh realities of my life.

“I want to thank you, too,” Lucky said. He and I were sprawled across the two double beds in the room.

“Don’t mention it,” I repeated. There was an edge to my voice that he’d done nothing to deserve, but I was exhausted and wanted to be left alone.

“But you saved my life,” Lucky persisted.

“Maybe I’ve just gotten you into more trouble.” Even to me my voice sounded caustic.

“Jimmy, please let us thank you,” Odysea said. “It’s important to both of us. We don’t have much else to offer. You’ve taken on our karma, you’ve done it selflessly, like a compassionate *bodhisattva*.”

I lay there on my back staring up at the textured ceiling. I certainly didn’t feel like someone who postpones their own enlightenment to alleviate the suffering of others. I felt more like a fool, a sad clown who trips and bumbles his way through the morass.

In the silence that followed I heard Odysea unzipping her backpack.

Lucky sat up on the bed and watched her do something he found intriguing.

I spotted a fly crawling across the textured ceiling, blindly climbing in and out of its endless sandy ridges and getting nowhere. I felt like that fly.

A few moments later I heard the scratch of a match against a striker, then smelled the sweet acrid aroma of marijuana. I bolted upright. “Odysea! Did you have that pot when the cop stopped us in Ohio?!”

“Of course.” She smiled mischievously, taking a long hit.

I shook my head in disapproval. “What about the Buddhist precept against drugs?”

“There are exceptions for traveling. In the Tantric tradition, traveling monks were permitted to smoke hashish as a way of mediating the effects of the road.”

“So tell me, Ms. Monk, when the drug dog sniffed out your stash were you planning to invoke the First Amendment?”

“No,” she said, “I intended to invoke Mercy!” She giggled, then passed the joint to me.

So we got stoned. All three of us. I’m talking flat out, rollicking, giggling, munchies-craving stoned. I hadn’t been stoned since starting Woodbury College when smoking pot had made me anxious and fearful. I’d forgotten

how much fun it could be, how relaxing and mind-expanding and community-making.

I nearly rolled off the bed laughing when Lucky began describing what life is like for him in *The Side Show*. That's what he called it. He mimed adults sneaking stares at him from behind menus in restaurants, little kids brazenly trying to pull off his harlequin's mask, or drivers doing double-takes as they passed in cars.

He told us that one time an older woman, when she turned to find him standing behind her in the check out line at Butson's Super Market, actually had screamed in terror. She scared him so badly he screamed, too. They stood face to face, screaming at each other until the check-out woman intervened. The older woman was so embarrassed she offered to pay for his soda and chips.

"Just one of the many perks of being a freak," he said, "like never having to dress up for Halloween."

He winked at us in a way that was endearing. I found myself admiring his ability to poke fun, to forgive those whose unwanted attention would otherwise have been a torment. I doubted I would have the same grace.

We ordered pizza and Chinese from two local places that delivered, and while we waited I hit the junk food dispensers in the hallway.

We took a long hot shower together, splashing and giggling like kids after gym class, then dried off each other's backs. At first I worried how Lucky would react, but he took it in stride. Either his sexuality was dormant, or he intuitively understood that our nakedness was innocent.

When we had dressed in clean clothes, Odysea got out her djembe and led us in chants. Some were African, some Native American, some original. Lucky chanted and danced until I thought he was ten whirling dervishes. He filled the room with a spirit-force that revitalized me.

Then he started telling us stories. Odysea was sitting on the floor tapping on the djembe and I was on the bed, propped up on pillows against the headboard. Lucky stood in a corner of the large room underneath a hanging lamp that acted as a spotlight, regaling us with one tale after another. He was captivating, a natural-born performer who knew how to modulate his voice, to gesture compellingly, to manipulate silence and mood so that I found myself laughing one moment and nearly weeping the next.

He told us what sounded like his own versions of myths from various cultures, mixing and matching them indiscriminately. He started with a story he called "Coyote's Pup," then went on to a long tale about the Garden of Eden. As I listened I realized that his dream was the logical next chapter in the sequence. I looked at Odysea. She inclined her head in a way that let me know she'd had the same thought.

When he was done we both applauded and hooted and whistled our appreciation. He bowed grandly from the waist and smiled in a self-satisfied way that gave me great pleasure. It was hard to imagine that only two days before he had been a snarling dog in a cage.

"Where did you learn those stories?" I asked.

"Lucky taught me."

"I don't understand," Odysea said.

"Lucky the Dog taught me. He was Coyote's Pup."

"Do you mean you had a real dog named Lucky?"

"Yes. I lay my head against his and heard the stories. He had a white-tipped tail and could fly between worlds."

"But your name is Lucky."

"I know. I took his name when he disappeared with Jim one day. I always wanted to be Lucky anyway. Now I am."

"Why did you want to be a dog?"

"Because he got the best food. And Jim liked him better. He never hit Lucky, never, not even when he was drunk. Jim played with him, too, took Lucky everywhere in his truck with him."

"Who was Jim?"

Lucky suddenly got a stricken look on his face, then whispered, "He was my father."

Lucky wouldn't talk after that, no matter what we did to divert him. He crawled under the covers on one of the beds and turned away from us. His pain was so palpable it filled the room and settled over us like a shroud.

He still wouldn't talk the next morning, but at least he ate his oatmeal when we found a sit-down restaurant along the local Miracle Mile.

That day we drove south on 67, which turned into a winding forest road through mountains until we crossed into Arkansas.

We drove by a town called Success and wondered what life was like there.

We stopped for gas at a crowded mini-mart and when I went inside to pay for it, the woman at the register said, "You on pump 3? That's six six six."

Every head in the place popped up, and she said, "We won't go there." I laughed. She grinned on the sly. Everyone else looked grim, as if they were expecting the Anti-Christ at any moment.

Arkansas bragged shamelessly on official state road signs about it being Bill Clinton's birthplace. As we hit Little Rock, there was a huge sign that read THE FIRST CAPITAL BILL CLINTON CALLED HOME. At that moment Clinton was being dragged over the coals during House impeachment hearings on charges that included perjury and obstruction of justice.

We entered Texas at Texarkana where we picked up Route 59 until we hit Marshall and jumped on 43 for a short hop to Route 79, which took us almost all the way to Austin. I'd never been in East Texas before, and it was beautiful.

We saw a sign for Elysian Fields, then one for Palestine. The soil was bright orange. Through a pecan grove I could see the sunlit horizon beneath a thick dome of branches and leaves. This was near the Little Brazos River, which ran brown and muddy.

There were oil derricks and natural gas pipelines, grain elevators six stories high.

Lucky spoke for the first time that day. He said, "Words have ruined me, I am a slave to the mind," then resumed his silence.

"Do you think it was wrong to let him get stoned?" I asked Odysea.

"I don't know, but I've worried about it all morning." She looked at Lucky in the back seat. He wouldn't meet her gaze. "I'm hoping it helped him open up about his past in ways he needed. Like you, Jimmy."

"Uh oh," I said, "you're not going to pick that up again, are you?"

"Well I do have a few questions about why you were arrested in Miami. And you've never explained what drove you into hiding in the first place."

"What about you?"

“Are you curious about my past, Jimmy?”

“Of course. Doesn't being back in Texas spark any memories for you?”

She laughed, then sighed. “Yes. All of them.”

Then she, too, fell silent. I didn't intrude.

There were cattle ranches on either side of the highway, lush green fields dotted with Live Oak. Corrugated metal sheds stood next to houses with metal roofs. Giant round hay bales. Windmills. Large ponds with supine cattle.

At Gause the railroad tracks ran next to the highway. There was a freight train that must have been a half-mile long.

Then we were in corn and maize country. Miles and miles of flat fields.

The sun blazed, and when we passed a bank I saw an electronic sign that said it was 80 degrees.

“It's hot,” I said to Odysea.

“Welcome to Texas,” she replied.

Just before reaching Austin on I-35, I dialed Big Rod's number on the cell phone. He picked up on the first ring, “Jimmy, this better be you or I'm gonna be some mad at the telemarketer who's dared disturb my beauty rest.”

“It's me, Big Man.”

“Good. Now give me a second to wake up. Well this ain't too bad, my alarm just went off anyway. Time to get to work.”

“I hope you can spare a few minutes to talk.”

“Are you kidding? I've been waiting on tenterhooks for your call.”

“What's up?”

“You want the good news first or the bad?”

“Any way you think best, Rod.”

“Henh, henh, henh,” he chuckled. “That's what I like about you, Jimmy, you know how to give a man room to talk.”

“So what did you find out?”

“You know anything about the Masons?”

“You mean the fraternal organization?”

“The one and only.”

"I don't know much. My father was a Mason. He wore their ring, though I never knew him to go to meetings. I asked him about it once, but he said he was sworn to secrecy. I have noticed that the lodges seem to be in better shape these days. The old ones are being spruced up, and there are brand new buildings, too."

"That's the problem. The Masons are a growing concern again."

"What difference does it make?"

"Jimmy, I come from a long line of Anti-Masons. Vermonters have never liked secret organizations, especially ones that protect their membership from the obligations for which the rest of us are held liable."

"Rod, you've lost me here."

"Don't you know your history, Jimmy? In the 1820s a man named William Morgan threatened to publish an exposé of Masonic secrets. He was kidnapped in New York and may have escaped, but more likely was killed by Masons. When the Masons tried to cover it up, the Anti-Masonic movement was born. Vermont was one of the staunchest Anti-Mason states."

"What does this have to do with our mutual friend?"

"That's what I'm wondering, Jimmy. Like I promised, I've kept my ears open, and whenever your client's name comes up, I hear these phrases like 'taught to be cautious' or 'on the level'. It's all different ways of finding out whether the other person is 'on the square.'"

"What's that mean?"

"It means you're inside the Brotherhood of Freemasons and can be trusted. And if you aren't, I notice the conversation gets real short. But if you are, the two parties go out of hearing and have a real long chat."

"What about Trooper Smalley? Is he a Mason?"

"He's wearing the ring, Jimmy, just like your father."

"How about those two deputies that got killed?"

"They were on the square, too, read about it in their obituaries. You know what else? They're from Connecticut, just like Trooper Smalley."

"You think the two things are connected?"

"I don't know, but it seems like more than a coincidence. You probably know that correctional officers are on the low end of the law enforcement totem pole. We ain't got much status among the so-called real cops. People like Smalley and his buddies think we're wanna-be's. They

got an attitude, that holier-than-thou thing. Usually it don't bother me, but when you combine it with being a flatlander, it gets old real quick."

Rod was using the term for visitors from other states and non-native Vermonters. "Rod, I'm a flatlander."

"True, but you have acquitted yourself by living in the hills. The hills change a person. Either that or they give up and head back from whence they sprung."

I knew what he meant. Living in the hills had changed me. I was more aware of the natural world, more grateful for the simple gifts life offers for free.

"Vermont's in trouble, Jimmy," Rod continued. "We got a governor who was raised in Manhattan with a silver spoon in his mouth, a Congressman who's a socialist from Brooklyn. Half of our legislators were born elsewhere. The Green Mountains have become the new haven for political opportunists, a regular carpet-bagger's wet dream."

"I don't disagree. What about my client? How's he fit into all this?"

"I don't know yet. I only know he does. I've been talking with Sue Lecroix. When she found out our boy came up missing after the wreck, she was worried something awful. She told me some interesting stuff about him. Apparently he's got smarts I never would have guessed the day I met him. Sue says he used to go over to the Clearing a lot. You familiar with it?"

"You mean the place the Belenkys ran in Marshfield?"

"That's it. Bob and Mary always included him on weekends when they ran retreats for kids. Sue said it's where he saw his first storyteller perform. After that he couldn't get enough of myths, read every book on the subject he could lay hands on. Apparently he's a regular scholar on the subject."

"I think you're right, Big Man. Thanks for the info. Keep you ears open."

"Will do. Something ain't right here, Jimmy, and somehow this young man is caught right in the middle of it."

When I told Odysea about Rod's news, she wanted to know more about the Clearing and the Belenkys. "Bob's a psychologist who started the graduate program at Goddard College, then worked with teens for many years. Before the original Clearing burned down, he used to bring up kids from

New York City whose parents could afford therapeutic weekends in Vermont. And he did a lot of work with Vermont kids who had few or no resources. For a while he tried to get along with social services, but they were too rigid. Now he's spending his retirement visiting orphans in state homes in Russia and Haiti. He travels to the same institutions once or twice a year to hang out with the kids, sort of like the grandfather they never knew."

"That's beautiful," Odysea said. "How do you know the Belenkys?"

"I met them years ago when we hired them to help us convince a judge that a young burglar needed drug rehab, not jail. Mary absolutely charmed Judge Springer. She has this soft, almost dreamy way of speaking, yet she makes lucid the most profound connections."

"I know about Mary. She's famous in feminist circles as the lead author of *Women's Ways of Knowing*. That book has changed how the world looks at womyn and their empathic ways of connecting and learning." She grew thoughtful, then said, "It's so interesting the way some people can affect the world for good. Mary did it on a grand scale with a book, Bob on a personal level with kids. The Clearing sounds a lot like what my uncle's ranch was for me — a safe place at a time when home wasn't."

"You want to tell me about it?"

We were heading west out of Austin on Route 290. We had passed Lady Bird Johnson's Wildflower Center and were finally moving beyond the Austin sprawl. Odysea said that soon we'd be in the Hill Country of Texas.

"I wasn't raised in this area. I'm from West Texas where the land is flat and dry and the people are tough. More like the Texans of old."

"I don't know what that means."

Odysea looked at me, took a deep breath, and began.

I went to live at my uncle's ranch when I was nearly fourteen. This was in 1962, which was the year my mother
17. West Texas died. Only she didn't die, she ran off. And she didn't exactly run off so much as escape with her life. I understand this now, but at the time I felt betrayed and abandoned by her.

I told anyone who asked, "My mother died," so they wouldn't gossip that she'd run off with a tool pusher. At that time death was the only way people in West Texas allowed a woman to leave her family. It was a do-or-die kind of culture, and a woman who put her own needs above her child's was considered a coward and a fool. My mother was neither. She was a survivor.

It was my uncle who came to my rescue. He just showed up one day at my school and said, "You're coming to live with us, Nancy."

I don't know how he knew, but he did, he just knew that I had to get away from my father.

We didn't even go home for my things, we just drove straight to the ranch. My Aunt Penny put her arms around me and hugged me till I thought I'd suffocate in her embrace. She was a tall and bony woman who had a man's strength. I tried to pull away but she wouldn't let me. Then I started to cry. I guess that's what she'd been waiting for. I cried until I sobbed, and after I had stopped sobbing I whimpered for a long time. Aunt Penny held me all the while, saying "It's okay, baby, you're gonna be okay now."

They bought me all new everything. New clothes, new comb and toothbrush, even a new frame for an old photograph of my mama they gave me.

"I don't want that," I told Uncle Roy.

"You may not want it this minute, but you'll want it someday. She's your mother and my sister, and she belongs in your life. Right now she can't be with you, but don't you think for one minute she doesn't love you. I know my sister, I know her like I know myself. She did what she had to do.

You must honor your mother, Nancy. You don't have to like her, but you are going to respect her memory."

It was the one and only time he spoke to me about her.

You see these fancy gates and signs we're driving past right now? Everybody in central Texas with a few acres puts up a gate, runs some fence, and calls it a ranch. They don't know what the word means. Here they talk about acres, but in West Texas we measure land in sections.

A section is 640 acres, and my uncle's ranch was forty sections. And that was only a small piece of the original ranch his father had inherited from my great-grandfather.

My mother's people were part-Scot, part-Comanche. You could see it in my uncle's face, especially when he looked out over the land. It was as if he was seeing another time and place. There's a story my family tells about our Comanche roots. Maybe it's true and maybe it's just a myth, but I believe it. If you ever saw my uncle, you'd believe it too. It's more than the way he looks, it's the way he *sees*.

The story has it that after a Comanche raid on a ranch, a posse was formed to retaliate. They intended to wipe out the Comanche village, to kill not just the men in the raiding party, but the old people, the womyn, the children. Everyone. In the midst of the attack a young Comanche girl was running through the smoke and confusion, dodging the horses of the ranchers who were firing indiscriminately. One of the horses knocked her to the ground, and that's how its rider noticed her. As he took aim he looked into her wide eyes and saw something that made him hesitate. In that moment of doubt he reached down and grabbed her, then rode just beyond the Comanche camp where he set her behind a clump of bushes.

The next day he returned alone. "If she's still alive, I'll raise her," he promised as he approached the desolate scene. He found her wandering through the burned out camp, wide-eyed with terror, but alive.

When she grew up she mothered the family that has come down to me. Sometimes late at night when I can't sleep, I can feel her inside me. If I lay completely still, I can hear her song of mourning for her lost people. It's the saddest, most beautiful song I've ever experienced.

Uncle Roy looked just like the actor Glen Ford, only he was shorter and stockier. He was an old-time cowboy. He and my aunt had come up the hard way. They'd started their married life living in a bunkhouse while my grandfather lived in the main house. My Aunt Penny, who was taller than my uncle, spent every day working side-by-side with him. She could do anything he could, from riding and roping to branding the cattle and castrating the bulls. There are no gender roles as such on a ranch. What you do is limited only by your physical strength and endurance.

When I first came to the ranch we didn't have a whole lot. We had enough to eat and there was always something fun for me to do — like driving the old pick-up across the ranch when I went hunting jackrabbits with my cousins — but we were careful not to waste anything. “Waste not, want not” was so much a part of how we lived that no one ever had to say it out loud.

Things could have been different, but my grandfather never let the oil companies anywhere near his ranch. There was a lot of bad feelings back then towards the oil companies. They had no respect for the ranchers. They'd bust through anywhere their seismographs led them, breaking fence and scaring cattle. It didn't matter to them. They had the oil lust on them, and they cared for one thing only — making the find.

My grandfather hated them with a vengeance. More than once he shot at the seismograph teams. West Texas is a lot like people's idea of the Old West. The land is deemed sacred and trespassers are looked upon in the same way a heathen horde would be elsewhere. You shoot first and ask questions later. Of course Hollywood has made that phrase hackneyed, but it's true in West Texas. It was then and to some extent it still is today.

Sometimes my grandfather got away with it — it was just between him and the sheriff — other times he got dragged into civil court by the oil companies. Most often he won because he had a jury of his peers who understood and respected him, but sometimes he lost. It didn't matter. Either way he wouldn't give in to the oil companies.

My uncle was a lot like my grandfather, but when he saw the other ranchers getting rich off their mineral rights, he began to wonder. Finally he agreed to one single well if the oil companies found something worth drilling for. This was in the early 1960s after my grandfather had died. As

it turned out, they didn't find any oil at all. Instead, they found the largest natural gas deposit in the continental United States.

It made my uncle a very rich man.

You might think all that money would have changed things on the ranch, but it didn't. They'd always lived rough and for the most part they kept living that way. Just because you have plenty doesn't mean you have to gloat. Vanity of that sort was considered low mannered and unbecoming.

Now my uncle had to figure out how to hide his money so the government didn't get it. The only thing worse than the oil companies to the people in West Texas is the government. They love the land and hate the government. It's axiomatic.

So my uncle found every way he could to keep from paying "those fools in Washington." He bought jewels directly from salesmen in fancy cars who showed up on the ranch. I don't know what he did with them. Maybe he buried them because Aunt Penny surely didn't wear them.

Instead she bought the finest antiques the world offered, including Louis XIV furniture. Or was it Louis the XVI? I never could keep them straight. Whichever it was, the ranch house — a board and batten box with a tin roof — was filled with them. Even in the kitchen, where she cooked on an old wood cookstove, there were dainty chairs and cabinets. Every single one of them was scuffed and bruised from the heavy boots we wore.

If my aunt loved her antiques, Uncle Roy felt the same about his "hobbies." At the time I couldn't understand why he switched hobbies so often, but now I know it wasn't an accident that these expense-deductible ventures changed every five years. That's about how long the IRS lets you get away with money-losing operations.

Uncle Roy's first hobby was a museum and zoo. He called it the Indian Trails Museum and Zoo. There were hand-painted signs he nailed to posts out by the highway. He charged a small admission fee, and people actually came.

He put the museum in one of the old bunkhouses. It was a three-room structure with a tin roof. He displayed Native American artifacts. Headdresses, beads, moccasins, knives, tomahawk. There were photos of famous chiefs on the walls. There even was an old wooden cigar store Indian that he dressed in native garb.

He also had an Old West gun collection, including what was claimed to be the original Colt .45 that Buffalo Bill Cody used. There were rifles and pistols and even a Gatling gun.

Since one of the rooms of the museum still had bunks in it, my cousins and I would sleep there sometimes. We were fascinated by the museum. Inspired by the mystery and mystique of the place, we'd spend long hours before falling asleep telling each other scary stories.

One night when the moon was nearly full, my cousin Roy Jr. was going on and on about how the cigar store Indian was really alive, just waiting for us to fall asleep before he'd come after us. He called it "The Revenge of the Comanche."

"But we're Comanche," I reminded him.

"He's only going to kill *half* of you, Nancy, the Scot half!"

I shivered. The moon was casting weird shadows through the windows, and just then we heard someone rustling around in the main room. I figured it was my uncle coming to tell us to quiet down, but the intruder never spoke.

"Who's out there?" Roy Jr. called.

No reply.

"You better answer or I'm going to use this here .38 I got under my pillow." Roy really did have a pistol with him. He always brought it in case one of us had to use the outhouse. There were tons of rattlesnakes and you couldn't be too careful.

Still the intruder said nothing.

Then we heard the sound of the floorboards creaking. The creaks came closer and closer to the bunk room.

A shadow loomed in the doorway in a familiar way that terrified me. I screamed and Roy fired. I'll never forget that brilliant flash and the sound of boots running across the creaking floorboards. We all started screaming. That and the gunshot brought the adults from the main house.

Uncle Roy got us quieted down. He said, "Probably some damn drifter thought there might be a cash box he could grab. Don't worry about it, kids. Just come on inside for tonight."

My cousins packed up and headed for the house, but I lingered with Uncle Roy as he checked things over. I saw him bend down and pick something up off the floor.

“What did you find, Uncle Roy?”

“Never mind, Nancy. You’re okay now. Go on back to the house with the others.”

But I saw what he had picked up. It was a pair of handcuffs.

I started shaking and couldn’t stop. Uncle Roy grabbed me by the shoulders.

“You stop that, Nancy. He isn’t coming anywhere near you ever again. I’m going to make sure of that. You hear me?”

I nodded my head, but I didn’t believe him.

Uncle Roy loved chimps and tigers. When he stocked his zoo he made sure to buy some of each. The chimp was named Colonel, though I don’t know why. Colonel was twelve or thirteen years old when he came to live on the ranch. At first he had free run of the place. He used to sit down at the dinner table with us for the main meal of the day, which was served at noon. That chimp kept us kids laughing all through dinner, making funny faces and burping and farting till Aunt Penny would order him back outside. Then Colonel would put on a sad face like he was filled with remorse and good intentions, but my aunt refused to be fooled by him and out he’d go.

Colonel loved to hug and be hugged. He’d come right up to my uncle and wrap his long arms around him. Only one time he got carried away when he was hugging my youngest cousin. Nearly squeezed Annie to death. She actually turned blue before my uncle knocked Colonel out cold with a two-by-four to the head.

After that Colonel had to live in a cage. He wasn’t too happy about it, either. My uncle used to go inside the cage and visit Colonel. He’d take Colonel his two favorite things: a Lucky Strike and a beer. There was a rocking chair in the cage, and Colonel would rock on that chair smoking his Lucky and sipping his beer with a satisfied grin on his face.

Uncle Roy bought three tigers, too. He always told visitors that one was “the biggest Bengal tiger in captivity.” It left paw prints bigger than a large pie plate.

Every so often Uncle Roy would have to go into the tiger cage. Maybe one of them would be sick or need a shot, and he’d have to go in there and shoo off the other two while he worked on the third. He put a .44 magnum in his belt, and he’d have us keep guard with high-powered rifles.

He'd say, "Now if something happens in there, I want you to do one of two things: shoot the tigers or, if you can't kill them, shoot me, and make sure you finish the job." I was only fifteen years old, and you can imagine what it was like for me to be given that kind of order.

Uncle Roy had made the cages himself from pipe and sucker rod left over from oil wells. Oil companies trash more stuff than you'd ever imagine. He had designed the cages with food slots just the right size for the cartons of meat scraps we fed them. We kids took turns feeding the animals. Of course all the meat was raised and butchered right there on the ranch. There was even a walk-in freezer to store it.

One day when it was my turn to feed and water the animals, I loaded the pickup. I drove up to the tiger cage and got out of the truck. The Bengal was off in the corner of the cage, maybe sixty feet away from me as I approached the tailgate piled with cartons of scraps.

Just as I leaned over the side of the truck to pick up a carton, I felt this hot wind on the back of my neck. The hair on my neck stood straight up like hackles, then I heard a roar that nearly deafened me.

I ducked just as a paw swiped through the bars, then scrambled under the pickup and crawled out the other side. When I turned back towards the cage to look, there was the Bengal tiger up on its hind legs, swiping between the bars with one giant paw. I guess it thought I'd been moving too slow.

How it had managed to cross that sixty feet of cage without me hearing it sent chills up and down my spine. What must it be like, I wondered, to be out in the bush being hunted by such stealth?

One year my uncle decided to grow hay commercially. That meant he had to get rid of all the mesquite whose roots grow deep. It was hard and tedious work, so he hired what at the time we called wetbacks. Today they're called illegal aliens. He gave them room and board and five dollars a day, and a day lasted until the job at hand was done. Of course the Mexican workers were glad for the money, and my uncle was glad for the cheap labor. He couldn't find any locals who'd work that cheap or that hard.

The Mexicans were cowboys in the old way. They could ride and rope the way Texans hadn't been able to in fifty years. The pickup killed cowboyin'. We used horses for roundups, but mostly we used trucks to get around the ranch.

There was one Mexican who looked just like Ricardo Montalban. He had a thin black mustache and coal black hair he kept slicked back. He taught me how to make rawhide *riatas*, which are used for roping cattle. He could ride a horse with grace or fury, whichever was needed or suited his pleasure.

One day I spotted a tall young man approaching the ranch on foot. He was black as ebony and built like Charles Atlas in the back of comic books. With his massive shoulders and no neck to speak of, he looked like a giant black bull. My uncle hired him at once. I'd never seen a black Mexican before, and I wondered about him.

I asked him, "Where'd you learn how to be a cowboy, Jesús?" His name was spelled J-E-S-U-S, but in Spanish it didn't sound like Jesus. It sounded almost like HeyZeus, which I thought was perfect, given his Greek God physique. We were haying together. I could speak a little Spanish and would practice on him as I drove the pickup. Jesús would carry a bale in each hand, then toss them up to me on the top of the stack.

"On ranches outside Juarez."

"Where were you born?"

"That's where I was born. My mother is a whore in Juarez."

He said it matter of factly, but it stunned me into total silence.

Somehow it happened that Jesús and I worked together a lot. He was tough as any ranch hand I'd ever met, but gentle, too. It was his gentleness that intrigued me. I couldn't understand how a man could be both.

I was nearly eighteen, getting ready to leave the ranch that fall for the University of Texas in Austin. Except for my cousins, I hadn't had much experience with boys. I'd shied away from them. But I felt comfortable with Jesús, who was maybe a year or two older than me.

One night in August it was our turn to change water. Changing water involved going out into the hay fields and moving the rainbird sprinklers. It had rained briefly that evening, a hard downpour that meant the rattlers would be out, having been flushed from their holes. I wanted to bring a flashlight, but Jesús never worried about snakes.

"They are my friends," he always said, striding fearlessly into the dark.

I followed him warily. When we had finished changing water, Jesús crouched down and took out what I thought was a cigarette. He lit it, took a long drag, then passed it to me.

“I don’t smoke.”

“It’s not tobacco.”

Then I understood he was offering me marijuana.

This was in 1966 and I’d seen photos in *Life* magazine about hippies. They intrigued me, and I wondered what it would be like to be one. So I shared the joint with him.

I didn’t think it had affected me until we stood up to leave. That’s when I nearly fell over, I was so stoned. Jesús caught me and held me upright. For a moment our faces were very close, and I could see his dark eyes looking into mine. It felt good to be held by him, and I wondered what it would be like to kiss him. He had a thick curly mustache that looked very sensuous as I stared at his mouth.

I reached up and stroked his face with my hand.

Then our lips touched very lightly. It was the sweetest kiss I’ve ever had. It ruined me for the groping boys that followed.

I would have done more with him, much more, and was about to lie down on the wet earth when we heard a rattler. They don’t always rattle a warning, so we were very lucky.

Jesús sighed and said in Spanish, “Maybe it’s better this way.”

Afterwards we were even closer as friends. I spent as much time as I could with Jesús, though we never kissed again.

My uncle had some prized peach trees down by the pond. If no one could find Jesús, we knew to look for him there. He loved those peaches. His favorite pastime was to sit beneath the peach trees feasting on the luscious fruit.

Not long after our night together, my uncle discovered Jesús squatting under a peach tree. He fired him on the spot, and I’ve always wondered if Uncle Roy did it out of fear that Jesús would hurt me somehow.

I watched Jesús walk away from the ranch until he disappeared down the highway. It must have been 120 degrees that day. I felt sadder than I had since mama ran off and left me. Sadder even than after my daddy came into my bedroom that first time.

After Jesús left the ranch, everything changed for me. Two weeks later I was living in a dormitory at the University, dating fraternity boys and trying to figure out why I hated it so much.

The change I experienced was both a beginning and an ending. I began my life as an adult woman in the world and ended my childhood on the ranch that had kept me safe from harm.

You must think I'm pretty dense," I said to Odysea when she'd finished talking about her childhood in West Texas.

18. Final Secrets

"Why do you say that?"

I snorted with self-contempt. "Because it never occurred to me, not once, that it was your father who was the cop who —," I didn't finish the sentence, couldn't finish saying the words out loud. In my mind I saw my friend as a frightened child who first had been abandoned by one parent, then attacked and terrorized by the other. These were the people she was entitled to trust the most, making it the ultimate betrayal.

A sudden sadness consumed me, and I felt overwhelmed with the misery of being human. Why do we inflict such pain? Why must we suffer so much? I thought I was going to lose it right then and there as I drove down Route 290 heading west into the heart of Texas Hill Country.

"Look up there, Jimmy." She pointed through the windshield at the Texas sky, which was vast and dome-like, very different from what we saw in Vermont. "See the simple clarity of the blue sky? It's beautiful, isn't it?" Even though life can be bitter with its endless suffering, there is great beauty and joy. Being human means experiencing both. Being free means not getting stuck in one or the other."

She was right, I knew she was right, and though it helped, I still felt stupid and insensitive. "How many nights did I lie next to you as you cried yourself to sleep? I never once asked why."

"You're too hard on yourself, Jimmy. I could have told you all the gory details of being raped by my father, but sharing that secret was not what I needed then. I needed comfort, and you gave it to me without my having to ask or explain. It's why I'll always love you."

She reached across the seat and took my hand in hers. We held on tightly, and I could feel a force pass between us that somehow made the moment more real than the simple act of holding hands allowed. I wanted it to last forever, then I realized it would.

“Thank you, Odysea,” Lucky said from the back seat. They were his first words since the night before.

“You mean for my ranch stories?”

“Yes,” he said, “but more for keeping the keys that freed me.”

Odysea smiled, and she looked radiant. “I’ve been collecting those handcuff keys for more than thirty years, and all the time I wondered if there would ever be an opportunity to put them to actual use. When we were at the Richmond bakery and finally found a key that worked, it was as if I was unlocking my own chains along with yours.”

“Where did you get all those keys?” I asked.

“Some I found at junk shops, others at locksmiths. Some came with new handcuffs I buy occasionally. I always destroy the cuffs and keep the keys. It’s very ritualistic and healing for me to do that. I also spend a lot of time chatting with cops at restaurants and coffee shops. I’ve gotten quite adept at filching their keys.”

“I’m shocked, Odysea! What about the precepts you Buddhists are supposed to be bound by?”

“This is the second time in less than twenty-four hours that you have imposed the Grave Precepts on me. I didn’t turn to Buddhism for rules, I turned to it for liberation. There’s an important saying I try to keep in mind: ‘If you find the Buddha, kill the Buddha.’”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? I thought Buddhists were pacifists.”

“You’re getting caught in the words. They’re a trap. It’s the meaning that matters. To me that saying means don’t fall victim to the pretensions of Perfection. Be real.”

We were driving through a small town called Dripping Springs when Odysea said, “The next town is Henly, which is where we head south on 165 towards Blanco. Salina’s ranch is in the hills near Lone Woman Mountain. We could be there in twenty minutes, but I was wondering if you two would agree to a brief stop first. It’s a bit out of our way, but I think it might be worth the trouble.”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked.

“Nothing short of a ritual cleansing in the Pedernales River.”

Lucky and I didn't hesitate. Given that only three days ago we'd been trudging through snow, the prospect of swimming was irresistible. We drove a few miles beyond Henly and then headed north towards Pedernales State Park in Johnson City, which had been Lyndon B. Johnson's boyhood home.

I admit I'd had my doubts when Odysea had insisted in Vermont that we bring clothes for summer. Now, as she paid our visitors' fee inside a gatehouse to the park, I leaned against the Audi and basked in the 80° sunshine. It instantly revitalized me, helping to dispatch my road weariness.

We drove through the park on a winding road until we reached the short trail to the falls. As soon as we came out on the overlook, I wanted to rush down the rocky expanse to the river and jump in. The numerous falls create luscious pools that would be ideal for swimming, but the state prohibits it because of flash floods. Photos are posted at the trail head that show the river changing within minutes from a calm ribbon of blue to a churning torrent of gray and yellow. There's even a claxon — an electronic horn to alert people to danger. I'm not a strong swimmer, and the photographs are very convincing, so for one time in my life I obeyed the warning signs.

We drove back through the park and came to a lot two miles down river where we parked, then followed a steep sandy trail down to The Beach. That's what the sign called it, though I couldn't imagine a beach in the middle of Texas.

If it wasn't exactly a beach by my east coast standards, there was sand amidst the boulders and rocks that line the Pedernales. The sand had subtle rosy hues and was very abrasive, sharp enough to cut if you kneeled on it.

When we reached the Pedernales itself, we headed upriver for several minutes until we found a rocky nook that was private. Being mid-week in the off season, there were few visitors to the park and even fewer swimmers, but Odysea insisted on as much privacy as we could get.

The Pedernales was maybe fifty feet wide where we settled. Along the banks were trees that looked like cedars to me, but they were losing their brown needles so perhaps they were junipers. There also were fields of green grass, cacti, and oak. The Pedernales, unlike the muddy brown rivers in East Texas, was clear and very colorful. The colors ranged from pale blue to aquamarine to dark green, and there were dark brown or black strands

woven throughout. I soon would learn that all of the rivers in central Texas had this same Caribbean look to them. I suspected that the local gods, having delivered a lackluster landscape, decided to make up for it by blessing the land with colorful rivers. They contrasted perfectly with the hills that Lucky had complained were too “brown and barren.”

Odysea and I disrobed in the shelter of the boulders, then she sat cross-legged on a flat rock and began meditating in the sun. During the trip she often had meditated in the back seat while Lucky rode shotgun. She told me that the practice of sitting meditation was central to her being able to maintain equanimity. “Without it, I’m a torrent of conflicting emotions and thoughts. With it, I tap into a spiritual wellspring that feels ever deeper.”

Lucky took off his t-shirt and shoes, rolled up his jeans and gingerly tested the water.

“How is it?” I asked.

“Feels warm.”

He was right. The warm water moved surprisingly fast, and there were strong rapids that I had to brace myself against when I waded in. The bottom was sandy, but there also were large boulders and slippery rocks. I knelt down in a pool, then totally immersed myself in the cool rushing river, letting my exhaustion and worries wash away. I stayed beneath the water for as long as I could, came up for air, then went under again. I felt as if I were being baptized, the sins of the world washing away downstream.

Lying on a flat rock that heated up in the sun, I felt myself drifting into sleep. It was delicious. The song of the river lulled me into a state of mind where I floated between this world and some parallel universe of liquid calm.

Some time later I heard Odysea calling my name, then awoke to find her and Lucky looking at me. Each of us was perched on adjacent boulders, and they were smiling in this very friendly way. Once more I felt connected to them, deeply so, as if our journey of 2100 miles had cemented something between us that would last a lifetime.

“Hi,” Odysea said. “Welcome back.”

I yawned and said, “I’m not sure I want to be back.”

“I know what you mean, but we’ve got things we have to discuss.”

I stretched and yawned again. I felt like a cat and nearly purred I was so content. "Hmm, I guess I'm ready to talk if you are."

She turned very businesslike, even sat up straighter. "First, I want to thank you one more time, Jimmy, for getting me to Texas." I started to object, but she shushed me. "Just say, 'You're welcome,' and we'll leave it at that."

"You're welcome."

"I also want to thank you, Lucky, for coming with us on this road trip."

"I didn't have any choice," he desisted.

"Just say, 'You're welcome.'"

"You're welcome," he repeated with a grin.

"Second, I want you both to know that when we arrive at Salina's ranch I am committed to one thing and one thing only: Being with her. That doesn't mean that I will forget about you, but her needs come first."

"We don't have to stay at the ranch with you," I offered, though I hadn't considered what else we might do. My money was nearly gone.

"I'm sure you are welcome to stay there as long as you need or want. There are several small cabins in the hills that will afford you privacy. Of course I'll have to confirm this with Salina, but I have no doubt that she'll insist on your using them. That's the kind of woman she is."

Odysea shifted on the boulder, and I noticed once more the clay figure of a pregnant goddess dangling between her breasts. She clutched it with one hand as she continued. "The night I told you about her dying . . .," she faltered, as if unsure how to say what came next, "well, it was unusual for me to react like that. Death is something I take very much for granted. My sobbing was more over how powerless I felt in reaching Texas than in facing the fact of her death."

I was someone for whom death was terrifying. I didn't even like to talk about it. It brought up too many painful parts of my life. Even now I started to bristle and wish that she would end this part of the conversation. Instead, she dove in deeper.

"There are many pieces to this. I know that I don't know what death brings, if it brings anything. I see it as one of life's mysteries that we have no way of knowing about for sure. Unlike most Buddhists, I'm not convinced of reincarnation, though being able to play with possible afterlife

scenarios intrigues me. I am always amazed and fascinated that some folks think they really know what will happen after their last breath. As far as I am concerned, it is *the* Great Adventure available to us. It will happen to each of us and there really isn't anything we can do about it. I for one look forward to it!"

At this point I half-recalled a story of hers about a friend who had chosen to die. Suddenly I was curious. No, I was more than curious. It was as if there was something I desperately needed to know for myself. "Can you tell me again about your friend who committed suicide?"

Odysea no longer hesitated. "Her name was Kondor and she was one of the most talented people I've known. She wrote hundreds of songs, played guitar and piano (mostly self-taught), and sang with an unusual, gentle voice. She was a woodworker who made beautiful small things entirely by hand. She drew. And created herbal remedies. She did numerology and astrology and tarot with an uncanny instinct.

"Kondor was tiny, 4' 11", and built like a Shetland pony. She had been bulimic since the age of 13 and had been self-mutilating for at least that long. She loved cocaine, but lived on very little money, so rarely had any. She said for that reason alone it was a good thing she was poor. She smoked several joints of marijuana every day, and at the end of her life had been thinking that she needed to confront this addiction.

"She didn't believe that she would live to be 30, and her death by hanging happened about two weeks before her 30th birthday. Her older sister had died in an auto crash the previous year, and Kondor was having a hard time thinking that she was about to become older than that sister.

"Kondor and I had talked about suicide many times during the years we knew each other. Both of us believed that the right to end our lives is a given. When she told me she was going to kill herself, I had many reactions, some of which were very surprising and embarrassing for me: I asked her to wait a week and see if she didn't feel differently about it. I worried what our friends would think of me if they knew that I had known she was going to do it and hadn't done anything to stop her. I cried, both for myself and for her. I knew I was going to miss her terribly. I also knew that she was in such deep psychic pain that there was nothing I could do to alleviate it.

"We talked about her decision for hours, and when it was time she took me to a friend's house and drove off to asphyxiate herself in her truck.

Of course the friend went to look for her and finally found her, still alive and very angry that it hadn't worked.

“In the end she waited the week that I had asked, then hung herself with her dog's leash from the loft of her house.”

Odysea stopped speaking, and we could hear the song of the river fill the silence. She grasped the clay goddess with her right hand and said, “I'm so grateful for Kondor and her gifts, especially the final gift she bequeathed — no longer having to fear death or dying.”

“What's wrong, Jimmy?”

I was sitting upright, very rigid and anxious. I felt physically ill. It was as if I needed to vomit but my throat was constricted or blocked. I must have started gagging, for Odysea and Lucky approached me with worried faces. I waved them off, then deliberately forced the muscles in my throat to relax until I could take shallow breaths again. As I started breathing more regularly, the wave of nausea passed.

I realized that the last thing on earth I wanted to do was head to some ranch in the hills where a woman lay dying.

“I can't do it,” I finally said out loud.

“Do what?”

“I can't go with you to Salina's ranch.”

“Why not?”

“I just can't.”

“Jimmy, you've got to open up about this. It's literally choking you.”

I lay back on the warm rock, listening to the Pedernales rush by. The river's song sounded sad to me now, very forlorn. Odysea stood next to me and lay her hands on my forehead. The clay goddess dangled over my eyes. It was crudely made but all the more beautiful because of it. It swayed back and forth hypnotically. Lucky started to play Odysea's djembe. The rhythm was rough at first, but slowly, very softly, he found the right beat to match the song of the river.

Then I knew it was time.

I sat upright and settled myself cross-legged on the rock.

Odysea looked at me with encouragement.

Lucky smiled sweetly.

And naked beneath a clear blue Texas sky, I set free my final secret.

When I was a small boy my mother would entertain me with the story of Chicken Little, *The sky is falling, the sky is falling!* I'd laugh out loud at silly Chicken Little who believed that a tiny nut dropping from a tree signaled the end of the world. Chicken Little, Foxy Loxy, Turkey Lurkey — I'd laugh at them all and beg my mother to tell the story again, which she would, and then again. I never tired of it.

When I was nineteen I turned into Chicken Little. I felt the world shake and saw the sky fall, but there wasn't anything funny about it at all.

I was driving a dump truck for my Uncle Rocco, who owned a demolition company in central New Jersey. I spent all day driving to the dump, hauling jagged concrete, old brick, cracked porcelain from sinks and toilets — the detritus of whatever building Uncle Rocco had been hired to get out of the way.

This was in the fall of 1969, and unless you lived through it I don't think it's possible to appreciate how broken America felt at the time. It was like one of Uncle Rocco's buildings as the wrecker ball busted it up — totally demolished. I don't mean that everything is fine and dandy now, because obviously it isn't. The difference is that in 1969 people were at each other's throats, taking up sides and getting ready.

We saw it all on TV: Martin Luther King being assassinated in Memphis, Bobby Kennedy in LA. Chicago erupting into street fighting during the Democratic National Convention. On Channel 2 there's the war in Vietnam, on Channel 4 the Black Panthers in Oakland, on 9 Woodstock, LSD, Weathermen. Everyone is sure the shit is going to hit the fan any day. The only question is which side of the barricades you plan to be on.

I'm talking about the revolution.

It was what people hoped for or dreaded, worked towards or against.

Mostly I worked with my Uncle Rocco blowing up buildings in central New Jersey. He'd blow them up or knock them down, then my cousin and I

would haul away the rubble. Vinnie operated the excavator, I drove the truck. It was a small but successful family business.

Occasionally Uncle Rocco got jobs in Manhattan. I hated working in New York. The driving was hellacious on those traffic-choked streets, but my uncle always gave us a bonus for the extra hassle, so it wasn't all bad.

I made good money either way, which I supplemented by dealing pot to friends. Notice I didn't say "selling drugs." I didn't sell drugs. I dealt pot. People who sold drugs back then sold heroin, something I wouldn't touch. Friends did the favor of selling you a lid or two of marijuana. I was a friend, not a drug pusher.

We never thought of pot as a drug. It was grass, herb, a non-addictive high that set your mind free and your spirit soaring. Smoking a joint was a way of connecting with other young people. If you got high you were cool, if you didn't you were straight, and "never the twain shall meet."

The world was black and white and the issues were never cloudy.

That's what revolution is all about.

Don't listen to me. I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm a fool. I'm Chicken Little. I used to drive a dump truck and sell drugs so I didn't have to pay for my own. I don't know anything about revolution. I got suckered like everybody else my age into believing we could change the world. I was one of a whole generation of baby boomers whose sandbox was history. When I hear that term The Revolution, I want to scream, "There was no such thing!" It was mass hysteria like Orson Welles and *The War of the Worlds*. It was a drug-induced fantasy. A day dream. A nightmare.

The cost was tremendous. I'm still paying for it. Every day I wake up in a haze of self-hate. I'm so full of shame that I wonder how I manage to stand upright. Some days simple gravity is more than I can bear, and I haven't even hit fifty yet.

Wait. I'll just tell you what happened. And leave out the rhetoric.

My uncle got a job tearing down a small building near Times Square. It was an easy job because buildings on either side already had been demolished, giving us ready access. The only hitch was that the job had to be done right away. The developers were facing some kind of bank deadline that meant

my uncle had to get the building down immediately. So he took on extra help, including sub-contracting two more dump trucks so we could expedite the clean-up.

That's how I met Fred. Fred was in his early twenties, obviously college educated from the way he talked. Very precise and polite. Normally Uncle Rocco stayed away from college boys because they never lasted. But this time he didn't care. It was only for a couple of weeks at most.

Fred was a flagger. He'd stand out on the streets and hold up traffic while the trucks backed in or out of the site. It was a job for a simpleton, so Uncle Rocco thought maybe the college kid could do it.

Fred was very flamboyant about directing traffic. He stood out on the streets of Manhattan as if he were some kind of air traffic controller. He loved it, absolutely loved the simple power of stopping traffic, then letting it go again.

"Now this is real," he said the first day as he climbed into the cab. It was the last load of the day and Uncle Rocco had told him to ride with me. Fred had red hair and wore black horn-rimmed glasses. He smiled a lot. "What's your name, man?"

"My name is Robert Joseph Santoro. You can call me Bobby," I told him. "What alias do you go by?"

He flinched as if I had hit a nerve, studied me a moment, then did this kind of mental shrug that I saw him do often, like he had decided to let it slide. "My name is Fred. Do you get high, Bobby?"

"Every chance I get."

"Good man." He pulled out a joint and lit up.

We were instant friends.

It was at the dump that Fred first mentioned the Vietnam War. He was very smooth, not pushy at all, just kind of feeling me out. "So have you ever been to an anti-war demonstration?"

I laughed. "Fred, my uncle would fire me the very minute I showed up at one of those demonstrations. Did you notice the flag flying from the top of the wrecking crane? It's not for decorative purposes. Uncle Rocco personally coined the phrase 'Love It or Leave It.'"

Seagulls hovered overhead, their cries competing with the roar of bulldozers leveling the mounds of garbage. It was a gray steamy day in late

September. The noxious smell of diesel mixed with the nauseating odor of human refuse, so I kept the windows up as we waited in line to dump the load.

“Does your uncle own your mind as well as your time?”

“Of course not.” I resented the implication.

“Then you can do whatever you want on your time off, can’t you?”

“Sure,” I insisted, then added with a chuckle, “just as long as he doesn’t know about it.”

After work on Friday, Fred invited me to hang out with him at a townhouse in Greenwich Village. “It belongs to the father of a friend of mine,” he said. “He and his new girlfriend are away for the weekend.”

When we walked inside Fred introduced me to four or five friends who were crashing there. I felt awkward at first. I was definitely out of my league in this fine house with these older college kids. But they were very friendly, made a point of making me feel welcome when they learned that I worked with Fred.

“He drives the dump truck,” he announced as if it was a badge of honor.

I couldn’t tell if he was laughing at me or making me into something I wasn’t. I quickly brought out a plastic baggie of pot and started rolling joints with Bambu rolling papers. It was good pot, and everyone got very stoned.

Somebody turned on the radio to WBAI. A black man named Julius Lester was rapping about honky this and honky that. I noticed right away that the heads in the room were nodding in agreement, but finally Fred said, “Hey, it’s Friday night! Let’s party a little.” He changed the station to Alison Steele, the Nightbird, on WNEW-FM. She was one of the first women disc jockeys to break the gender barrier in New York radio. She had this breathy voice that sounded exotic by comparison with male dj’s. That night she was reading love poems and featuring music from San Francisco. The Jefferson Airplane. The Grateful Dead.

A bottle of Mateus materialized. It was a sweet and mild Portuguese wine that mellowed the whole scene. We laughed a lot, then one by one people got up and went off into other rooms.

Fred disappeared, too, and I found myself alone with a very intense girl named Janet. She had a wide mouth and serious eyes. We talked for a while about life in Greenwich Village, which was new to her. I rolled another joint and fired it up. She took a long hit and motioned me to come close. When I did she put her wide mouth on mine and blew the smoke deep into my lungs. She sucked it back out, then blew back in again. It was very sensual, and I got quite high. Then we started kissing and touching and undressing each other. I was a little worried that Fred or his friends would come back in the room, which had no door. It was my first time making love, and I was nervous, but she said, "It's okay. They'll leave us alone." Just like she had read my mind.

I saw Janet a lot after that night, usually at an apartment in the Lower East Side where she and the others normally stayed. They called themselves a collective, a term that was new to me at the time. When she and Fred learned I dealt a little weed, they asked me if I could score acid. I'd never done LSD, but I pretended that I had. "Sure. How many hits do you want?"

We tripped that weekend. The entire collective dropped the acid together, then had an involved discussion about politics. Finally Fred, Janet, and I went into another room. I lay back on a mattress on the floor and kind of melted into Janet who was lying next to me. Fred sat cross-legged on the floor next to us and went off on this long rap about working class youth and the revolution. I didn't know what he was talking about, but his voice sounded magical. I could see brave new worlds opening up to me in 3-D multicolor. The Beatles' White album was playing on the stereo. John Lennon's voice melded with Fred's, singing *You say you want a revolution / Well, you know / We all want to change the world . . .*

I kept going back into Manhattan even after the job ended and Fred no longer worked with us. The collective bought lids of grass from me every week, which gave me a reason to be there. Janet didn't mind. We spent a lot of time talking and getting naked together.

In November bombs exploded in the Manhattan offices of Chase Manhattan, Standard Oil, General Motors. That's when she started talking to me about the way things were. I listened and tried to understand the terminology, which was all new to me. Imperialism, class antagonism, racist

infrastructure. Over the next few months Janet loaned me some books to read, like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Abbie Hoffman's *Woodstock Nation*, a newspaper called *FIRE!*

In early December two Black Panthers named Mark Clark and Fred Hampton were killed in cold blood in their apartment by Chicago police. "The pigs didn't even try to hide what they'd done," Janet said. "It was an act of assassination, officially sanctioned at the highest level. They're overconfident. We're going to change that very soon."

I wasn't exactly sure who "we" were, but it felt good to be included. For the first time in my life I felt like I belonged.

One day she asked me, "Do you know where your uncle keeps his dynamite?"

"Sure. Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious."

It was early March of 1970. We were lying on her mattress on the floor, having just made love. On one wall there were posters of Ché Guevara and Huey Newton. There was a thin cotton Indian bedspread on the mattress. It was cold, and I pulled Janet towards me.

"I love you," I said. It was the first time I'd ever told a girl I loved her.

She laughed as if I'd said something quaint.

I'm not telling this very well. It sounds stupid. Like I was some pawn they were using in their nefarious terrorist plot. It wasn't like that at all. They were my friends. They wanted some dynamite to wake people up to how seriously wrong things were in America. Uncle Rocco had plenty. He wouldn't miss it.

But he did. "Who's been getting into the dynamite?" he asked me and Vinnie one Monday morning.

"What are you talkin' about?" Vinnie said.

"There's a whole goddamn box of dynamite missing, that's what I'm talkin' about. Now which one of you little fuckers has decided to go into business on his own?"

I had to get it back. Either that or Uncle Rocco told me he was going to kick my ass then call the cops. I drove straight to the townhouse where Fred had taken me the first night. Janet had told me they were staying there again while the owners were on their honeymoon. I got stuck in traffic inside the Holland Tunnel. I was driving my uncle's Cadillac, which he had loaned me for my little errand.

When I arrived at West 11th Street, I kept trying to find a place to park. Finally a spot opened up near the townhouse just as I saw Fred walk inside. I parked, got out, and started towards the townhouse when the whole world trembled and shook. A flash of fire filled the sky. The townhouse seemed to rise up, to grow bigger somehow, then suddenly shrink inside itself. The blast blew a hole in the front of the building, glass shards flying everywhere. It knocked me to the ground. Two women ran out of the building, their clothes blown off them. I recognized both. Neither was Janet.

A man next door who looked like Dustin Hoffman was carrying a lamp from inside his building onto the street. The wail of sirens filled the air. I picked myself off the sidewalk, then limped towards the building, but the front was a heap of rubble as if Uncle Rocco had been at work.

I ran back and forth, screaming "Janet! Fred!"

I started tearing at the bricks, trying to find a way into the heap.

Arms grabbed at me and pushed me aside. Rescue workers in uniforms dragged me away, shouting something about a gas leak, which is what they thought had caused the explosion.

I knew better.

A crowd gathered.

Barricades were set up.

I leaned against one and wondered which side I was on.

I never went back to New Jersey, just left the Cadillac where it was and walked away. Weeks later I found myself standing on a highway in northern New Mexico. I had no idea how I'd gotten there. I started walking down the highway.

That's the way I spent the next four years, walking across America, riding when someone offered, standing for long periods of time staring at the prairie, the desert, the city skyline — wherever I happened to be. My hair

grew long, and I had a beard from not shaving. Hippies always stopped to pick me up. They'd get me stoned, let me crash for the night, sometimes drive me to a commune if they knew of one nearby. I'd stay for a week, a month. I didn't talk much, so people let me be. "He's cool," they'd say. Sooner or later I'd wander off in search of something. I didn't know what.

I found a wallet once in a restroom in Indiana. It had a driver's license, social security card, some money. This was before photo ID's. The date of birth, even the height and weight, were close enough to my own so that I kept the wallet. The name on the ID was James St. John. Thereafter when people asked me my name, I answered "Jimmy."

I ended up in Miami in the fall of 1974. I was standing on a street and saw a red emergency call box. It was the middle of the night. I opened it up, picked up the receiver, said, "I want to report an explosion."

They thought I was nuts.

They were right, but for all the wrong reasons.

I'm not sure what I expected to feel after revealing my secret, but I didn't expect to feel calm. Or normal. Or unperturbed. Yet I felt
20. Lost each of those things, and one thing more — relief. Not the dramatic kind where a great weight has been lifted, just the simple relief that follows upon exhaling a breath held too long. It was as if I could finally resume normal breathing, could pick up my life at the point it had been blown to pieces nearly thirty years before.

As I had been talking, Odysea and Lucky had been watching me intently, ready to rescue me from the cliff-edge along which I tread so precariously. From the start I knew I had to step off that cliff, to cross a chasm deep inside me, though I didn't know how to do it. With their help I took one step after another, telling the story a piece at a time. When I described the explosion, I saw their eyes fill with tears as if the people inside the townhouse had been their friends, their first love.

Their compassion moved me deeply. It became the bridge by which I finally crossed the chasm.

What did I find on the other side?

I found my middle-aged self waiting with open arms to embrace the young and terrified Robert Joseph Santoro.

In the long and comforting silence that followed, I felt unafraid and ready to live my life.

When it was clear I had finished talking, Odysea and Lucky quietly approached the flat boulder where I sat. Without discussing it, they both took one of my hands and joined their own. We held hands without speaking, and once more I felt a force flow into and through me that was remarkable for its power and grace.

Then Lucky did something out of character. I didn't see it because I had my eyes closed, but nonetheless I knew it was him. He gave a great tug on my arm, pulling me off the boulder and into the river. The cool rushing water was a shock after having sat in the hot sunlight so long. I spluttered

and roared, then began splashing my two laughing comrades. They splashed back, then romped into the river. We joined hands again and waded gingerly over slippery rocks until we found a pool deep enough to submerge. Like schoolchildren on holiday, we jumped up and down in the pool, giggling and laughing and celebrating our joyous camaraderie.

When we returned to our boulders, Lucky took off his now soaking jeans, while Odysea removed her goddess necklace and lay it on a rock so that the fiber thong would dry. She turned to me and asked, "How did you finally stop roaming?"

"When I got out of jail in Miami, I had no reason to stay. I didn't even know what had brought me there in the first place. I started hitchhiking north on I-95 and got picked up near Orlando by some hippies heading to Tennessee. They were going to the Farm, a commune led by Stephen Gaskin, and they invited me to join them. I'd heard of Stephen, who had this huge following of young people hungry for spirituality. Stephen was an ex-Catholic, ex-Marine, hippie college teacher in San Francisco who blended the more mystical parts of the world's religions. One of his books, *Monday Night Class*, was an underground classic. This was after Baba Ram Dass had published *Be Here Now*, and about the same time the Jesus Freak movement took off."

"What was the Farm like?"

"It was pretty rough when I got there. People were crowded into old army tents, and there weren't enough privies or showers. Yet it didn't seem to matter to them. They were exhilarated at creating their vision of a low-tech, organic, vegetarian community where people worked at living peacefully.

"Of course I didn't feel as if I belonged there. I still felt the constant pressure to keep moving to protect myself and my secret.

"One day I met some people who had come from God's Land in Kentucky to check out the Farm. They told me they lived on liberated land where anyone was welcome to stay. The deed to the land actually had God named as the owner.

"By then the Farm was overrun with visitors and street people fleeing the cities. There were more rules and structure than felt comfortable to me. God's Land sounded like a haven.

“I went back with them to Kentucky but didn’t stay. For one thing, I couldn’t deal with the heat. It was so hot in both Tennessee and Kentucky that I could barely breathe. And though I didn’t recognize it at the time, I still was lost inside.

“At God’s Land I met a couple who were building a small cabin on the side of a ridge. JC and Mary had moved from Vermont. They mentioned another free-land situation along the Canadian border. It was called Earth People’s Park. It had been started with money the Hog Farm commune got for their work at Woodstock. So I headed north.”

“Did you stay long at Earth People’s Park?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t remember living through a winter there, but I may have. Things are very blurry for me about my time there. I stayed in an old school bus with six other people. We had one thing in common — each of us was running away from something. There were two men avoiding arrest warrants in other states, two teenage runaways from New York City, and a hippie couple fleeing the suburbs of Boston. It was always a precarious community, right up to the end when the state seized the land.”

“So how did you end up in Barnet?”

“I met Peter Baker at Natural Provisions in St. Johnsbury. He and a monk were trying to convert an old farmhouse into a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center. The idea appealed to me, and I offered to help. They didn’t talk much, which meant they were comfortable with my long silences. Their quiet company, the physical labor, the peacefulness of Barnet Mountain, the simple but good food — all of it anchored me in a way I needed.

“I worked with them for over a year, at the end of which they deeded me lifetime rights to ten acres on the edge of Milarepa. After I built my cabin, I floundered for a while, wondering what to do next. That’s when I heard about Woodbury College. The rest you know.”

“How did you come to Vermont?” Lucky asked Odysea. It was the first time he had asked either of us a personal question. It signaled to me a great change in our relationship, as if he finally felt secure.

Odysea told him that when she and Salina had parted, she had moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, attracted by its large lesbian community. Then she went to nearby Brattleboro when she’d found work at the Food Coop. A couple years later she fell in love with a woman who lived in

White River Junction. It was after that relationship had turned abusive that she and I met.

Lucky listened closely, then looked uncomfortable, as if he wanted to ask something more but didn't dare.

Always direct, Odysea asked him, "What would you like to know?"

"Is it different?"

"Do you mean loving womyn?"

He nodded his head shyly.

"Yes, it is different, or at least it is for me. Whenever I had sex with men, I knew they were judging my body. I was too fat, my breasts were too small, I smelled . . . there were a thousand and one things wrong with me. Then I met Salina. She was a graduate student and I was in my senior year at the University of Texas. She was the instructor in a course I took on womyn's literature. I think I loved her from the first moment I saw her. Such eyes! They are like deep brown pools filled with passion and fire!

"Salina is *Tejano* or *Mexica* — indigenous Mexican. Her ancestors lived in what we now call Texas long before Europeans knew it existed. She's aristocratic and demanding and gracious beyond belief. She's also humble and self-effacing, almost to a fault. A very complex and often contradictory woman. I suppose that's what intrigued me about her.

"When the course finally ended and the last paper had been handed in and graded, we met one night in downtown Austin. She walked right up to me and said, 'I'm not your teacher anymore.' 'I know,' I replied.

"That night we made love for the first time. It was the most profound experience of my young life, very erotic and sensual, yet spiritual, too. I floated in her embrace, unafraid, undaunted. She set things free in me.

"With Salina I knew that she liked my body, that it was just right, every part of it. It was like coming home after living in a foreign land. Her affirmation made the whole experience totally different. I felt as if I could love her back since I knew what it was like to be in a woman's body."

Odysea grew silent, thoughtful, and a private smile played across her lips. Then she came back to us and said, "I could go on and on, but I won't. I'm curious about you, Lucky."

"About me? I don't know about making love. I haven't had the chance yet. But I'm still hoping . . ."

We laughed, and Odysea said, "I wasn't really asking about your sexuality, though of course I'm interested in everything about you. What I was curious about is how you came to Vermont."

"My mother brought me from Connecticut when I was sixteen."

So that's who had been driving the car that the rest area attendant had seen.

"Was she from Vermont?" I asked.

"She lived here just before I was born. It's where she met Jim. When she brought me back, she said Jim would take care of me because she couldn't anymore, that she was too sick." His face grew sad, and he added in a whisper, "She had AIDS. I never saw her again."

"I'm sorry, Lucky," Odysea said. She gave him a few moments before asking, "Did you live with Jim?"

"No. Jim turned me over to social services. He acted like he didn't know me."

So Jim must have been the attendant who had called the cops.

During the entire time we had been talking, the weather had been changing. We went from a cloudless sky to a few high flying puffs to massive thunder heads in the west.

Odysea walked to the car to use the cell phone. She wanted to call Salina to let her know that we were about to descend on Lone Woman Mountain. Just as she returned to our spot, the temperature started dropping, and suddenly a wind came up that had a bite to it. She had to raise her voice to be heard.

"Salina insists that you use the cabins for as long as you'd like."

"How is she?"

"She sounds strong for someone who's dying of breast cancer. But I wouldn't have expected otherwise."

Each of us began gathering our things, though we were slow about it. Leaving this serene spot spelled the end of our journey. No matter what, our time together would be different from here on.

I remember I was pulling up my jeans when the claxon sounded. There was no mistake what it was. Those things make a blating roar that shakes your bones. The signs at the parking areas had been clear: Head for high ground immediately. Don't bother collecting your stuff. Just get out.

I grabbed hold of Odysea and started rushing along the river bank, calling out to Lucky, "Come on!" He ran right behind us. We were a ways from the trail that led up the side of the ridge, but it didn't take long to get there. When we did we ran up the sandy path until we reached wooden steps and a platform with benches built into it. It was there that Odysea pulled away.

"Stop, Jimmy! I've got to go back! I left my goddess necklace on the rock!"

She nearly got away from me, but I grabbed her wrist and wouldn't let go.

The claxon roared like an angry giant and the wind blew stinging sand at us.

"You can't!" I shouted.

"Let go!" she screamed at me. "Kondor made the goddess. It was the last thing she ever made. *I have to get it!*"

She struggled and nearly pulled free, but I wrapped both arms around her and wouldn't let go.

Above her pleading and the roar of the claxon and the screaming wind, we heard a new sound. It was coming at us from upriver. It was so loud that it made us stop struggling for a moment to turn in its direction. When we did we saw Lucky far below us standing on the boulder where Odysea had left her necklace. He held it high in one hand so we could see the red clay goddess dangling from the thong. Triumphant and proud, Lucky beamed at us.

Directly behind him came a churning wall of water, yellow and gray, six feet high.

He never knew what hit him.

"You watch the river for any sign of him, I'll call for help on the cell phone!" Though I was standing right next to her, I had to shout to be heard. She nodded her head, her eyes scanning the flood waters.

I ran off the platform and up the wooden stairs that led to the parking area. I yanked open the door to the Audi and scrambled for the cell phone beneath the car seat. The battery had been running low, so I had plugged it into the lighter in the dash. As I clumsily grabbed it, the cord came unplugged. I was frantically trying to reconnect it when I saw flashing blue

lights. There were two Texas State Police cruisers and a Blanco County Sheriff's car coming at high speed into the lot.

Before I had time to flag them, the cruisers boxed in the Audi. I was sitting half-in, half-out of the driver's seat with both feet on the ground. The trooper nearest me bolted to the open door. I started to get out of the car to lead them to the river when he said, "Mr. St. John, I believe." I saw his arm swing back, then a fist came towards me as if in slow motion. It was eerie, for what I noticed was a huge ring just like my father's. It bore the Masonic seal.

Just before his punch connected, breaking my nose and knocking me unconscious, I heard him say, "Consider this a gift from Trooper Smalley."

PART SIX: BEING

“Be ye therefore perfect, . . .”

Matthew 6:48

*Thunderbolts screaming and Yahweh laughing and Coyote wailing
Ending in lamentation, the rain falls and strikes unseen, a churning wall of
wrath. I am obliterated, consumed by my own deceits. The safe
shore slips from my grasping hands, and I swim into the belly of the whale
where my nose grows long for the lies. My father has won. In darkness I
dream an ark dry with deft creatures, a goddess dangling by a thread.*

All rise,” Winston Foley called out drowsily. Winston had been the bailiff in Caledonia County for over thirty years. A frail man with skin so pale and dry he looked like an old beech leaf, he almost had fallen asleep in the overheated courtroom. Now as Judge Stone briskly entered the courtroom, Winston fluttered awake, crying out in a flurry: *“District-Court-of-Vermont-Unit-Number-4-Caledonia-Circuit-Honorable-Robert-J.-Stone-presiding.”*

I stood up, my chains rattling in the nearly empty courtroom. It was a late Friday afternoon in December, and I was an unexpected add-on to an already overcrowded docket. Late that morning I had been brought straight from Burlington International Airport to the St. Johnsbury Correctional Center, where I’d been fingerprinted and photographed before being transported to the court. Being escorted in chains as a criminal defendant felt strange, but no stranger than any of the other bizarre events that had transpired since the last time I’d stood inside this building. It had been on the evening of Lucky’s arraignment seven weeks ago.

In addition to Judge Stone and the bailiff, there were only a handful of others present. Walter Brown, the Caledonia State’s Attorney, sat ramrod straight at the plaintiff’s table to my right. The two sheriffs who had transported me, replacements for the men who had died in the crash, sat directly behind me. Standing next to me at defense table was a local attorney named Larry Hughes, who was slowly collecting his papers from the previous case. Normally, Judge Stone would have insisted that counsel clear the table before proceeding to the next case, but Larry was disabled with cerebral palsy, and it was taking him longer than the brief recess that Stone’s re-appearance now ended.

“Be seated,” the judge said as he took his place at the bench.

As I sat down my eyes were drawn to the windows of the first floor courtroom. They were completely whited-out by a snowstorm that had begun only minutes before. The glass was rattling in its old frames, buffeted

by the high winds. Despite the cold outdoors, the courtroom was stifling. Yet I felt chilled.

Judge Stone began reading from a file in front of him. I could see his eyes darting across the paperwork. When he had finished, he looked directly at me for the first time. He frowned when he noticed the handcuffs and anklecuffs and chains.

I saw him glare at the deputies who sat directly behind me in the front row. "Get this man out of those chains at once," he ordered. His tone was severe, which surprised me, for I'd never known him to object to restraints in his courtroom.

The deputies jumped out of their front row seats and, reaching over the bar, started to unlock the cuffs.

"Not here!" Stone shouted at them. "Take the defendant into the hallway, remove the restraints, then escort Mr. St. John back into the courtroom."

One of the new deputies snorted his contempt, but he was careful that the judge didn't hear. As they sullenly unlocked my chains, an outside door opened and a blast of snowy air penetrated the hall.

I shivered, but not from the cold.

Grief was the heavy cloak I wore to ward off a penetrating chill that had seized me the moment Lucky had been struck down. During the briefest of time, a mere four days, he had insinuated himself into the innermost chambers of my heart. Now he was gone, and I regretted that I had never told him how much I loved him.

It's not enough to love people in silence. That's what Lucky's death had taught me. We must tell each other as often and as clearly as we can, *You are loved*.

I would never have that chance with Lucky, and I couldn't get used to the empty place he had left behind. It was like an open doorway to a frozen world.

I shivered and drew the cloak of my grief ever closer.

"I understand, Mr. St. John, that you intend to represent yourself. Is that correct?"

I rose to reply, but I didn't care whether he granted my request or not. I didn't care about anything. "That's correct, Judge Stone."

Stone nodded his head as if considering, then said, "I acknowledge that you have formal training as a paralegal, as well as many years' experience as a defense investigator, which gives you legal skills that most defendants lack. However, it's a given within the legal profession, as I'm sure you know, that not even the most experienced lawyer will undertake his or her own representation." He waited to see if I would retract my request to proceed *pro se*.

Instead I stared out the windows, which rattled even louder in the mounting fury of the storm.

"These are very serious charges you face, as you obviously understand. The state claims that prior to being apprehended you assisted a former client — one who faced murder and kidnapping charges, I might add — in escaping custody and leaving Vermont, driving him in a stolen vehicle across eight states." He glanced back at the Information and supporting affidavits, then said, "I can't tell from this whether Donald Hall was also arrested in Texas."

Walter Brown rose noisily from his seat, as if to ensure we all were watching him. "He apparently is still at large," he announced in his high whiny voice. I'd been wondering if they knew about Lucky drowning. I was glad they didn't. Let them keep wondering, I thought.

Brown sniffed as if smelling something foul. I wondered if he would say anything about Odysea, but he didn't. I had no idea what had happened to her after my arrest. Apparently they didn't even know about her. Relief must have shown on my face, for Brown scowled at me as he sat down.

"Your Honor," Larry Hughes said, his voice quavering, "if I may interrupt for a moment . . ." Larry was standing right next to me, and I turned to him in surprise.

"Yes, Mr. Hughes?" Judge Stone replied.

"I'd be happy to assist —," he paused to pull in air. I think Larry had to make sure his lungs were full in order to speak more intelligibly. Even so, you had to listen carefully to understand him. "Um, as I was saying, I'd be honored to assist Mr. St. John in defending himself, if the court permits."

I'd known Larry for as long as I'd worked as an investigator. We weren't exactly friends, yet clearly we were more than acquaintances. It

often happened that we arrived at the same time in the morning at Anthony's Diner. We'd share a booth and eat breakfast together, chatting or reading the morning paper in comfortable silence. Now under my breath I said, "I can't pay you Larry. I just don't have the money."

"I'll do it *pro bono*," Larry insisted, his mouth having to work even harder to achieve a whisper.

"Why?" His offer perplexed me, for I doubted he had enough paying clients to justify taking me on for free. There are always smooth-talking lawyers for hire, even in a small town like St. Johnsbury, and as a "mouthpiece" Larry was at an obvious disadvantage.

Larry's head bobbed a few seconds, and I could sense Judge Stone waiting patiently, not his usual *modus operandi*. Obviously this was an unexpected turn of events he approved of. Judges do not like *pro se* defendants for a number of reasons, including that they tend to slow down the machinery of the court by not knowing the law, especially procedural law — the rules by which the game is played.

Finally Larry leaned in close to answer my question. "Let's just say 'I don't like bullies.'" By the way he said it, I heard the quotation marks around the phrase, which made me stare at him in wonder.

Then, and I don't know what made me do it, I turned to look at Walter Brown. He was smirking. I knew that smirk, had seen his officious smile too often. He clearly was gloating at the prospect of running rings around Larry.

"I accept Mr. Hughes' offer, your Honor," I announced to the courtroom. I even turned around to make sure everyone had heard me. Larry Hughes was a kind man and a diligent attorney, and I resented any implication that his help was inferior.

It was then that I spotted Diane sitting in the rear of the courtroom.

She took my breath away. Even now.

I quickly averted my eyes, but not quickly enough. In that brief moment she surely had seen my longing. It bothered me, but not as much as what I'd seen in her eyes: A grief to match my own.

I didn't understand.

I was formally charged with grand larceny of Diane's car and with escape. Under Vermont law, if you help a person in custody to escape, you can be

charged as a principal — as if it were you who had been in custody — which is exactly what Brown did. Like most prosecutors, he charged maximally, always cognizant of potential plea agreements.

I entered a not guilty plea, and Stone set bail at \$50,000, a not unreasonable amount given our jaunt to Texas. Even so, it meant that I would sit in jail waiting for trial. It mattered little to me.

When I turned to be led out of the courtroom, Diane was gone. But as the sheriffs led me in chains out the front door of the courthouse, I glanced back over my shoulder. There was Diane standing in the hall. As they pulled me through the doorway, I saw her lips mouth the words, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m awful sorry to wake you, Jimmy, but the judge just called.” It was Rod standing outside the cell. I must have been dozing. When I’d been returned from court, instead of lodging me in population they had put me into one of the holding cells. I had assumed the jail was overcrowded again.

No sooner did they build a new jail in Vermont than it was filled to overflowing. It was part of the lock-em-up mentality that had predominated in America for the past twenty-five years. At that very moment there were over a million people incarcerated in the United States, despite the fact that most criminologists agreed it didn’t deter crime. In Vermont the jails were so crowded that they had started shipping inmates out of state. Almost 300 prisoners were being lodged in other states’ jails — 20% of all inmates, which ranked Vermont number one in the nation for that dubious distinction. Corrections officials publicly admitted that even when the new prison in Springfield was complete, it would be filled immediately because of the longer sentences being handed down every day of the week.

“You’re gonna appreciate the news, though,” Rod said, then called into his walkie-talkie to the sally port for the doors to be unlocked. There was a buzz, and slowly the bars slid to the side. “Judge says you made bail. He called especial to make sure you were freed tonight. Never known him to do that before. I guess he likes you, Jimmy.”

I was groggy, and it took a moment for Rod’s news to penetrate. This was the first I’d seen him, though obviously he was aware of my incarceration.

“I don’t understand, Rod. I haven’t posted bail.”

“Somebody did, or the judge wouldn’t have told me to fill out the paperwork so as you could go.” Rod looked around to see if anyone could hear him, then said under his breath, “I’m awful sorry about your being here. I never thought we’d be standing on opposite sides of the bars. And I’m not the only one feels that way. So let’s get you out of here as expeditiously as the judge ordered me to do. Okay, good buddy?”

“Rod, can I ask you a question?”

“Course.”

“Do you have any connection with Larry Hughes?”

“Henh, henh, henh,” Rod chuckled, then winked at me as he nodded his head proudly. “Larry’s my brother-in-law.”

It was after seven p.m. when I stepped out of the warm jail into the driving force of the winter storm. There was over a foot of new snow on the ground. I had on running shoes and a light jacket. I was dressed for Texas, not Vermont. My cabin was seven miles south of the correctional center. At this time of night in a storm it was unlikely I’d be able to hitch a ride. I pulled up the collar of the jacket, stuck my un-gloved hands into its thin pockets, and trudged down the snow-covered road that led to the highway.

I had walked along Route 5 for about twenty minutes when I saw the headlights coming from behind me. By then my feet were numb, my hair and beard matted with frozen snow, and I was chilled both inside and out. I turned to face the oncoming vehicle, but was blinded by its lights. I raised my right thumb in the air, and a Toyota pickup slowed and stopped right next to me. I hustled to get into the cab and out of the fierce storm.

“Thanks for stopping,” I tried to say as I pulled shut the door, but the words came out jumbled and indistinct. A blast of hot air from the defroster hit me in the face, and I could feel the snow that had frozen in my hair and beard begin to melt at once.

The driver pulled back onto the highway, fishtailing a moment before gaining traction. Then she spoke. In the darkness of the cab I hadn’t noticed it was a woman.

“I’m sorry I was late.”

As soon as she spoke I realized it was Diane. Then I looked at the dash filled with screwdrivers and spark plugs, the floor littered with Green Mountain Coffee cups, and realized this was my truck.

I didn't understand. Nor did I know what to say or do. I sat in silence, shivering and waiting for whatever came next. The storm battered the Toyota, making driving precarious. I stared at the swirling snow as it whisked through the narrow tunnel of light from the truck's high beams. It was mesmerizing.

"I meant to pick you up at the correctional center, but it took longer than I thought to arrange bail, and then I got a DWI call just as I was walking out the door."

I didn't know what to say or even if I could speak at all. I closed my eyes and tried to focus my mind, but all I could see was the blizzard raging in the night.

When we reached the road that led up Barnett Mountain to Milarepa and my cabin, Diane didn't hesitate. She floored the Toyota and barreled up the steep snow-filled track. The truck's underbody was snowplowing the whole time, and we made it about half-way before the snow accumulated into a solid wall through which we couldn't pass. When the Toyota stopped and stalled, Diane left it in first gear, pulled up the emergency brake as far it would go, then turned off the headlights.

"I'm sorry you have to walk the rest of the way, but we don't seem to have any other choice. I just wish I had been able to take care of everything sooner. This isn't how I wanted it to be."

She climbed out of the cab and came over to my side. The snow was up to her knees, and she nearly fell. Opening my door, she reached in and took me by the hand. I couldn't speak or think, and I didn't know what was wrong with me. I felt numb all the way through. I was trembling with cold, and when she noticed she said, "We'd better get you to the cabin right away."

She took off her winter coat and wrapped it over my shaking shoulders, though I tried to tell her not to. I don't know how we managed to climb through the deep snow in the blinding wind. I slipped and fell twice, and Diane struggled to get me back up. By the end she was bearing most of my weight.

Inside the cabin, which surprisingly was warm — someone had started the fire in the wood stove earlier that day — Diane lit the kerosene lamps and

put the kettle on top of the stove. She took off my wet clothing until I was naked, then helped me climb to the loft. I got under the blankets. The flannel sheets felt cold to the touch but quickly grew warmer. She piled on an afghan and an old torn quilt, then went back to the first floor. I heard her filling the stove with wood as I shook with cold beneath the mound of blankets. Above me the metal roof rattled in the storm.

A few minutes later she came back up with a steaming cup in her hand. "Drink this," she said, helping me to sit up. She held the cup to my lips as I sipped. It wasn't tea as I had expected, but miso soup with finely diced garlic.

I finished as much of the soup as I could, then lay back down. Diane stripped off her own wet clothing until she was naked. She climbed under the covers and lay directly on top of me. The wind howled, the roof rattled, the whole cabin creaked and moaned. I could hear the snow beating against the windowpanes. I don't know how long I shivered beneath Diane's warming flesh, but eventually I must have fallen asleep.

I felt myself floating on a soft warm sea, rising and falling on its gentle swells as the hot sun baked my salty flesh. I was sucking something sweet and tangy, getting more and more aroused at its succulent feel on my lips. I felt myself grow hard, deliciously, erotically hard, and my hips began to undulate in a fluid way. I heard a moan, a low growl of desire that told me I was not alone. I heard it, felt it, saw it, sensed it — all the doors of perception flung open at once, yet I couldn't tell if I were dreaming or if the pliant soft flesh against my lips were real.

Then I realized a woman was opening her legs to me. I slipped inside her, or was it that she wrapped herself around me? No, it was simpler than that: She was wet and I was dripping, and we met in that moist place. It was a joining so mutual that it didn't happen, it just was. More like magic than sex, we were drawn by something deeper than lust, more profound than eroticism, more mystical than romance.

I awoke one notch more to find us riding each other, rising and falling, rising and falling. I felt the slippery world grow firmer until my mind put a name to the body responding to mine: Diane. At that moment I also knew we were about to climax together, but just before we did I felt her relax and pull back, waiting for one delirious moment, waiting for me to

come to her. I pulled back too, floating over the edge of a high waterfall. Suddenly we met, our most vulnerable and naked selves revealed, and I knew her in a way I'd never imagined possible.

How can I say this so that it makes sense? It's very difficult for me to describe mystical feelings. We were having sex but it was no longer sexual. I didn't even care whether she was female. Or beautiful. Or desirable in any worldly way. I cared for one thing and one thing only — the essence of her, the core of who she was and would always be.

Then the falls sucked us over the edge, and as we poured together, I spilling into her, she into me, I promised aloud *I will love you forever.*

22.Loving

In the pale light of dawn the winter storm continued to blast its way across Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. We were snowed in; that much was clear. No one would be going anywhere. The blizzard had put a momentary stop to the routine of everyday existence, insisting that all creatures pause and reflect.

Over coffee and toast, I began to tell Diane what had transpired since I had fled her house in mid-October. I told her everything in as much detail as I could. I started with how I had nearly careened into the state snowplow, which now seemed prophetic. I even described the way the moon had looked that night rising over the White Mountains as I drove to Barnet. I told her about finding Lucky in the wreck, about his burns, about my decision not to turn him back over to the police.

I told her everything in the order that it had happened, including the secret stories of my past. She listened very carefully and didn't interrupt to ask questions, though I could see she had many. It took all morning, and when I was done telling her about my role in the townhouse explosion, we were both spent and drained. But I wasn't finished, and I knew I had to tell her *everything*, no matter how long it took or what it cost emotionally.

When I described the flash flood that had struck Lucky down unawares, I began to cry and couldn't stop. Diane held me close. "I'm sorry," she repeated several times. "I'm sorry for everything. I wish I had listened to you at the arraignment. I feel so guilty. Maybe if I hadn't insisted on getting him sent to Waterbury, none of this would have happened."

I heard the stinging regret in her voice, and it forced me to regain composure. "I'm not blaming you for what happened. I'm not blaming anyone, not even myself. I've lost too many years of my life to self-blame, and I don't want to see you go down that path, too. It doesn't lead anywhere, it's just a vicious maze of dead ends. Yet I do feel an obligation to Lucky, who never got his chance at being vindicated. I'm not going to let his death stop me from finding out the truth about Trooper Smalley."

Diane sat upright and stared at me. Her eyes grew wide in astonishment. "I don't understand. Do you think Lucky's *dead*?"

Now it was my turn to be confused. "Of course. He drowned in the flood."

"He's not dead!" She grabbed my hands and started jumping up and down in excitement. "He survived the flood! I never guessed you didn't know that he's safe and alive! He and Odysea are on their way back to Vermont from Texas right now! They're coming to help defend you against the stupid charges you're facing."

My mind shut down for a few moments. It simply couldn't absorb the information; when it started working again, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. So I did both. Between my relief and joy, my laughter and tears, I blurted out, "Thank god!"

"Actually, it's 'Thank goddess,'" Diane said, laughing with me. We hugged and did a crazy kind of jig around the table, then finally calmed down enough for her to tell me what had happened.

When I had run to the car to call for help on the cell phone, Odysea had started scanning the flood waters for any sign of Lucky. What she saw terrified her: The entire river valley was raging with yellow and gray and brown water that tore at trees and ripped up cacti as if they were dead blades of grass. She knew no one could survive long in that thrashing maelstrom.

Then she thought she saw something waffling in the waters above the flooded ridge a short way down river. At that point the flood had reached up the side of the ridge until it covered a low tree with thick branches. Somehow Lucky had latched onto one of those branches, from which the driving force of the flood kept trying to snatch him. Yet he held on. Odysea ran along the top of the ridge until she had reached the spot above the tree. Fortunately by then the flood had started to ebb, or she herself would have been sucked into it.

She stood frozen for a moment, unsure what to do. Slowly the flood began to recede. This gave her the chance she needed. There was a long branch that lay on the ground along the ridge. She dragged it to the water's edge. Immediately the current sucked it towards the tree from which Lucky dangled. Odysea held on to one end and shouted, "Grab the other end!"

She had no idea whether he could hear her, and for a few moments she thought he couldn't. She yelled again, then saw him reach one hand out to the dead limb. Yet with his other hand he wouldn't let go of the branch of the live tree.

“Let go, Lucky!”

Still he held on.

“Let go!”

Then she saw him raise the arm that held onto the tree in a shaking motion, as if trying to dislodge something. He did it two, three times more until finally whatever it was came free, and he grabbed the dead limb with both hands.

It was at this point that the real danger set in, for now not only was he at risk of washing down river, but it was possible that Odysea could be pulled into the flood waters with him. The flood was subsiding, yet it was far from safe.

She felt Lucky's weight yank the tree limb with enough force to knock her off her feet. She was being dragged straight towards the water when she pulled her knees up to her chest and heaved with her feet, regaining an upright position. Later she would say it was like roping a young bull.

As soon as she was upright again, she began running as fast as she could along the ridge, angling uphill and away from the river. It took her longer than she'd hoped, and by the end her jeans and the skin on her legs were cut and torn from running over and through the cacti, but finally she dragged Lucky to the edge of the flood waters.

She dropped the limb and ran straight to where he lay half-in, half-out of the now calming river. He was nearly drowned, but alive. She rolled him on his back, and as he opened his eyes he held up his right hand. Laying upon his now-open palm was the red clay goddess.

It was then that Odysea realized what saved him: The pregnant goddess. Its thong had caught in a branch of that tree, and it had stayed caught until he had managed to shake it free.

As Lucky handed the goddess to her, Odysea saw the sun split the storm clouds to the west and a perfect rainbow appear upriver. She said that when she saw the rainbow, she knew firsthand the absolute perfection of life. It was a blissful moment of pure *samadhi*.

Odysea and Lucky lay on the quickly drying ridge for a long time, slowly regaining their strength. When at last they were strong enough to hike back to the parking lot, Odysea finally started wondering what had become of me.

It took them a long time to reach the lot. They both needed to rest often, especially since Odysea had to support Lucky most of the way. He was young and strong, but he had been tested to the very limits of his endurance.

Just as they gained the lot, a tow truck was hitching up the Audi. Odysea approached the man operating the winch and asked him what had happened. He didn't know much, only that the driver had been arrested and that he was supposed to impound the vehicle. It was enough for Odysea. She and Lucky quickly returned to the riverbank and waited until dark to hike out of the park. She wouldn't risk either of them being seen.

It took them hours to walk to Henly, then hitch a ride towards Lone Woman Mountain and Salina's ranch. But they made it.

In the weeks that followed Odysea kept trying to find out what had happened to me. She called all the jails and detention centers in central Texas, but none of them claimed to have me incarcerated. Finally she put out the word through the lesbian community that she needed help from anyone who had connections with law enforcement or corrections. A woman named Lilith responded. Lilith worked in communications at the Bexar County Sheriff's Office in San Antonio, and after Odysea told her about searching for me, she found who she thought must be me listed as a John Doe. Lilith said this John Doe had been shuffled back and forth between several different jails, though she couldn't imagine why.

When Odysea tried to visit me that night, she was told that I had been returned to Vermont that afternoon.

That's when she called the St. Johnsbury Public Defender Office and got Diane.

That night over dinner Diane told me that she had left Bob. "When you hung up after I'd told you about having been an erotic dancer, I was totally distraught. I'd never in my life been so hurt by anyone. Bob came home and insisted I tell him why I was sobbing. He was very sweet to me and very angry at you."

“Now it’s my turn to apologize,” I said. I took her hand in mine and looked directly into her green eyes. “I want you to know that I love you. I’m sorry I couldn’t say it that night. There are so many things I haven’t been able to say to people. I’ve been held hostage by my own secrets. For thirty years all my energy has gone into protecting myself. I want to do things differently now.”

She looked at me and said, “So do I.” Then she leaned over and kissed me, a tender kiss that was over too soon. I tried to pull her back but she said, “Wait, I have to finish telling you what happened. The next morning without my permission or knowledge, Bob met with Walter Brown and revealed everything. About your taking the car, about Lucky being with you, about my ordering you to turn him over to the police. That’s when they started tracking calls made from the cell phone, which of course is how they found you in Texas.

“When I got home that night Bob told me what he’d done. I was furious with him. He had no right to do it! I know he was trying to protect me, but it was wrong. I walked out on him and came here to your cabin. I didn’t know where else to go, and I needed to be with you, even if only to stay in your empty home.

“As the weeks passed and I didn’t hear from you, I felt lonely for the first time in my life. I missed your company terribly. You’d been there for me every day for a year, and during that time I’d come to count on you in ways I was only beginning to realize. Why didn’t you love me? I had tried to be the woman I thought you wanted — a savvy street lawyer who fought tooth and nail for our clients — and still you rejected me. Was it Little Lori you couldn’t accept? I began to doubt myself in ways I never had. That and the loneliness forced me to start looking at my life, to examine how I had lived and why. The first thing I saw was the multiple layers of subterfuge.

“I was living a lie by being married to Bob. Bob is one of the finest men I’ve ever known. He’s decent, strong, very stable and self-assured. And he’s safe for me because he’ll never force me to be anything other than what I already am.

“I understand why both of us created this phony marriage, but it hasn’t been good for either of us. I’m filing for divorce. Of course Bob feels very threatened by my decision — it means he has to make some hard choices, too — but it’s time for me to stop hiding. I’m not Little Lori and

I'm not his wife. I'm not even a good lawyer. I put my own interest above those of my client. I know now that's what you were trying to tell me about Lucky. I hate to admit it, but he scared me. I wanted to get rid of him and the horrifying charges he faced and his inability to communicate with me. It was just too hard."

"You're right, it was hard, and I wish I had convinced you to ask for help instead of confronting you the way I did. The Defender General would have found co-counsel for you as a matter of course. I should have reassured you." Then I remembered something. "I'm curious whether you ever talked to Robert when I asked you to give me and Lucky another 72 hours?" Robert was the Defender General, our boss, or at least hers since I'd given verbal notice of quitting.

"I called him right away, and he confirmed what I already knew. He told me that by failing to report you I was implicating myself in criminal activity, which automatically dissolves the protections of the attorney-client privilege. But I wanted you to have that 72 hours even though I didn't know why you needed it. In the end when I balanced what I wanted and what the law demanded, I understood that I was no longer willing to be an attorney." She turned to me and smiled. "Yesterday was my last day as the Caledonia Public Defender."

I was shocked. "You love legal defense work."

"It's true, I do love it. But I love you more, and I couldn't turn you in. Besides, there's something wrong about the law and lawyering. I feel like it's just another way of controlling and manipulating people, something the culture encourages and rewards. I don't know who I am, but I do know that I want to stop being manipulative, and if that means giving up the law, then that's what I'm willing to do."

"I guess it's no accident that we arrived at the same place, though for different reasons. I decided to leave the law not because it brought out the worst in me, but because I don't want to pretend that my work makes a difference. All I ever accomplished was to make a bad system look fair when it isn't."

"I understand what you're saying, Jimmy, but I think you did much more than that. First and last, you treated our clients with respect. For some of them, it was the only time anyone afforded them personal dignity. It's what made me fall in love with you."

“I don’t know how to say this, but . . . it’s hard for me to believe that you do love me.”

“Why do you still doubt yourself? Or is it me you doubt?”

“It isn’t you. I stopped doubting you last night when I saw into you, into who you really are. You’re right about not being Little Lori or Bob’s wife or a public defender. Those are things you’ve done, not who you are.” I grew silent, considering what I’d just heard myself say. “No, it’s not you I doubt, it’s me. I’ve always felt inadequate. I’ve never quite belonged. And when I compare myself to other men, men like Bob who are handsome and accomplished and sophisticated, I feel totally inadequate.”

“Look at me, Jimmy.” I must have had my head downcast, for she lifted my chin until I was looking right into her eyes. They were wonderful eyes, clear and sparkling with life. She smiled, then said slowly and deliberately, “You are the most beautiful man I have ever known.” I thought my heart would burst with gratitude, yet at the same time I felt humbler than I ever have. “You have a gentle heart that inspires me. Your mind is open and accepting of others, their faults and their gifts. You are faithful to those you love. And I am so grateful to be among them.”

She put a hand on either side of my face and kissed me. It was the sweetest kiss I could imagine. I felt loved, truly loved. It was a new feeling, one I very much wanted to keep in my life for as long as I lived.

Part of my job as a criminal investigator had been to assist at trials, but I never had looked forward to it. I've always found trials to be tedious because there are never any surprises. What the jurors hear is a re-hash of information that's been pored over and sifted through so many times that the only surprise is that the parties don't fall asleep out of boredom. This is especially true in Vermont, which has an extensive discovery process that affords both sides the right to learn beforehand which cards are being held and in what order they'll be played. There's no such thing as a wild card, nor is there any possibility of slipping a card up one's sleeve.

The State's Attorney is under particular obligation to reveal all. There's even specific language that describes a prosecutor's duty to serve justice and truth, not just to convict. Heavy sanctions, including outright dismissal of the charges, can and will be levied against a prosecutor who fails to reveal information that could aid the defense. Similarly, the defendant has a duty to ensure that the prosecutor knows which witnesses he or she may call, as well as what special defenses will be pursued.

The actual trial is like a highly choreographed dance whose outcome is fairly predictable given whatever has occurred during pretrial hearings. It's common strategy for the defense to skirmish for months before trial in an attempt either to get the charges dismissed or reduced, or to harass the state into a better plea agreement.

This latter strategy rarely succeeded with Walter Brown. He was a hardass when it came to plea bargaining. He made one offer, take it or leave it. In my case he offered to throw out the larceny of the car if I would plead guilty to the escape charge, on which he would recommend a sentence of five -to-seven years (on a ten-year maximum). Since it was unlikely he could prove I'd stolen the vehicle — Diane would testify that she had implied consent when she'd told me she didn't care about the car — his offer was absurd. I had absolutely nothing to lose by going to trial and everything to gain.

The offer was typical of Brown, which is why Caledonia Public Defenders quickly became seasoned trial lawyers. This was not the case in other Vermont counties, especially in the more urban areas like Burlington where most cases were disposed of through plea bargaining. But St. Johnsbury was in the Northeast Kingdom where justice was equated with stern and swift punishment.

If things had been different, Larry and Diane and I might have followed the normal scenario of pretrial motions and lengthy depositions of the State's witnesses. Instead, we wanted to go to trial as soon as possible. Every day Larry or Diane pressured Lucy Miller, the Caledonia District Court Clerk, to set an earlier date for trial. Normally the quickest one could get a trial date in Caledonia was six weeks after arraignment. That happened rarely, and then only when neither side filed motions and other cases didn't take precedence. To complicate matters for us, the winter holidays were approaching, which meant the entire system would come to a grinding halt, causing additional delay.

We couldn't wait six weeks or more. Odysea and Lucky were in hiding in a cabin in the northeastern-most corner of Vermont. They were surrounded by miles of forest, moose and black bear, and few people. Even so, every day they were at risk of being discovered. Our only hope was to expedite the trial, which we planned to use to expose Trooper Smalley, thereby saving me and Lucky both.

Did we know how to do that? Not really.

We were taking an enormous risk, one that lawyers never take going into trial. The golden rule of trial practice is "Do unto others what they already expect you to do," not "Go fish!"

We couldn't get at Smalley any other way. I had tried every way I knew to discover what he had been doing on Barnet Mountain the night he had burned Lucky. I had tried and failed. Two of the potential witnesses had died in the crash, and Lucky didn't know what was behind the torture. The Masonic lead that Big Rod had offered wasn't going anywhere. The Masons in Vermont were just what they appeared to be — law abiding, hard-working men who served the community and occasionally yukked it up at the lodge. Though we talked with Lucky at length about his having snatched the baby at the mini-mart, he seemed unable to explain any more to

us than he already had. It was obvious that he was terrified. Smalley had a hold on him that we couldn't break or penetrate.

We could have deposed Smalley, dragged him into Larry's office, put him under oath, and gone fishing. But he was a seasoned law enforcement officer who'd been deposed in countless cases. He knew the law, he knew lawyers, and he knew how to respond in ways that sounded reasonable and revealed nothing. All we would have accomplished would have been to alert him to our suspicions.

Surprise was our only ally, which is why we didn't give notice of intent to rely on a defense of necessity. In a necessity defense, also called the defense of justification, the accused admits to the facts but claims there were extenuating circumstances that compelled the illegal activity. In my case, I would admit to helping Lucky escape but claim that I had no choice given the imminent danger he faced had I returned him to custody.

Diane and Larry and I argued over whether to pursue that defense. Larry believed it was our only option, Diane was on the fence, and I was opposed. "The necessity defense rarely works," I pointed out. "Usually you can't even get a judge to instruct the jury on it. And without great instructions, a jury will never buy it."

"There was a case in Burlington," Larry countered, "where protestors against U.S. policy in Central America were charged with trespass when they refused to leave a Senator's office. They claimed necessity and were acquitted."

"That was the one exception, and I think it was because of Judge Mahady." Mahady, now deceased, had been a firebrand on the bench, an avid defender against the excesses of the state. "I did the research yesterday at the law library in Montpelier and found dozens of cases nationwide involving activists that went the other way. In *State v. Warshow* the Vermont Supreme Court established a multi-pronged test, one prong being that there isn't any other legal option by which to avoid the harm. All Brown has to say to the jury is, 'If the defendant seriously believed local law enforcement was corrupt, he should have taken his client to the FBI for protection.'"

"Jimmy," Diane said, "I think you're too close to this to see it clearly. A necessity defense works not because the perpetrator acted logically at the time, but because circumstances were such that anyone would have reacted

in the same way. You have to put the jury in your shoes when you found Lucky. If we can do that, they'll acquit."

"Maybe I am too close to this, Diane, but the fact is that the only successful use of this defense in Vermont happened in Burlington, not St. Johnsbury. How can we seriously suggest to a Caledonia jury that they nullify the law? And Judge Stone is no Mahady."

"I think you're underestimating people," Larry said, "and that's a serious mistake to make. Still, you're the one who has to do the time."

Diane shook her head, "I don't know, I just don't know. We should be able to come up with something better. It feels like we're going in naked and asking the jury to pretend we're wearing the righteous armor of St. Joan."

"Not St. Joan," I quipped, "St. John." Neither of them laughed, but finally they agreed that a surprise attack might shake loose the truth, whatever the truth was.

"Thanks," I said to both of them. I knew it was a terrible trial strategy, the worst I'd ever seen. I also knew it was all we had.

We finally got a break the week before Christmas. There was a trial scheduled that would have lasted right up until the 24th, but the defendant got cold feet and decided to accept Brown's plea offer.

As it happened, Diane and I were in Larry's office when Lucy called. Larry took the call, listened a moment, then said, "Yes, I know I've been after you to expedite the trial date, but one day's notice is simply not enough." Diane and I stared at him in disbelief. Both of us made frantic gestures that proclaimed loudly, *Take it!* Larry hemmed and hawed some more, and just as I was sure Lucy would hang up in exasperation, he said, "Okay, we'll do it." As he hung up the phone, he turned to us with a wicked gleam in his eye, "You can't let these court clerks run you ragged!" Then he winked and said, "Get out your Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes! Tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. we draw a jury."

The trial was as boring as any I'd ever witnessed, despite the fact that it was my fate that hung in the balance. Larry and I shared the *voir dire* of the jury, disagreeing on only one potential juror. I didn't like the way she looked at my pony tail, as if I were some kind of alien. Larry insisted I was

overreacting, but the judge removed her for cause when she admitted that she didn't believe in the presumption of innocence.

Her honesty was rare. Most jurors automatically nod their heads when asked that question. It's like being asked in church, do you believe in God the Almighty? Everyone nods their heads, though secretly many have grave doubts.

We picked the jury that morning, and right after lunch Walter Brown delivered his standard opening statement. As Brown would be the first to admit, he is a creature of habit. He follows precise patterns that never vary. For his opening, he first walks back and forth in front of the jury, then takes two steps back, folds his arms across his chest, and begins. He always recites the basic facts, then strikes a bargain with the jury: "I will do my job to provide you with credible evidence if you will do yours to convict on both counts."

I think I groaned aloud. I'd heard his spiel too many times, and Larry had to shush me. "And please stop scowling," he hissed.

When it was our turn, we waived our opening until the start of our own case. It was not standard practice, but we wanted to see what was up before trying to influence the jury's perception of the facts.

Brown called four witnesses: Trooper Derrick Smalley, to establish that Lucky had been arrested on felony charges; Sheriff Don George, to describe the wreck of the transporting vehicle and Lucky's disappearance; Robert Ashley-Warner, to confirm that I had stolen the Audi; and Diane Ashley-Warner, to prove Lucky's presence when she and I had conversed via the cell phone. Brown also produced phone records to establish the location of the Audi during our calls.

It was as cut-and-dry a case as any I'd ever seen. Had I been a juror, I would have told the judge to dispense with the defense because it didn't matter what they said, I was voting for conviction.

Larry did a credible job with Trooper Smalley. He poked, he jabbed, he politely insinuated. It made no difference. Smalley didn't give away anything.

"Did you know Donald Hall before you arrested him?"

"I did not."

"You never had any connection, official or otherwise?"

"No."

“When you arrested Donald Hall, did he have any unusual marks on his body?”

“One half of his face is discolored with a birth mark.”

“I mean other than that.”

“If he did, I didn’t notice at the time.”

And on and on it went.

As Smalley stepped off the witness stand, I looked at the jury. All seven women and five men were smiling at him as if they wanted to shake his hand for protecting them from vicious criminals like Lucky and me.

I tried to shake up the Sheriff about how odd it was for his deputies to be driving down the back side of Barnet Mountain in a snow storm when they should have been heading to Waterbury.

“I’m embarrassed,” he readily admitted. “They were derelict in their duty, and if they had survived the accident, I would have fired them.”

“But what were they doing on Barnet Mountain?”

“One of the men lived in Barnet Village and obviously had wanted to stop at home.”

“Is that standard operating procedure in your department?”

“Definitely not.”

There wasn’t a lot I could do to counter his testimony, though I kept trying until Brown objected.

“Sheriff George has already answered that question several times!”

Stone sustained.

Larry kept his cross-examination of Bob brief and to the point: “Isn’t it true that title to the Audi is in your wife’s name as well as your own?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ashley-Warner.”

Before Diane testified, we skirmished with Brown over whether she was protected by her attorney-client relationship with Lucky. As we expected, Judge Stone ruled that she would have to answer Brown’s questions on the narrow issue of Lucky’s presence in the car because she had failed to report my illegal actions, thereby waiving the privilege. Larry formally objected and preserved the issue for appeal.

Diane did a great job of trying to save me on the larceny charge, but Brown skillfully got her to admit to our “liaison,” as he called it. Even I could see that she would lie to save me. It didn’t matter that she actually

was telling the truth, what mattered was the look in her eyes whenever she glanced my way from the witness stand. It was pure and unadulterated love, the kind that you can't hide no matter how much you might like to.

So much for beating the larceny conviction.

That was day one.

The next morning we began with Larry asking Judge Stone to dismiss the case because the State had failed to meet its burden of proof. It's one of those ritual motions one must make or forfeit certain appellate rights.

Stone automatically said, "The defendant's motion for judgment of acquittal is denied," then he told Winston Foley, the bailiff, "Please bring the jury up."

We were using the upstairs courtroom, a large and airy space with high ceilings and ornate scroll-work. There always were a few spectators for major felony trials, but today the courtroom was packed. The local legal community had turned out in record numbers to see their own do battle. Plus David Rintell, a tall man with sensual lips who was the local crime reporter, had written a dramatic piece that had gotten picked up by a wire-service. It had drawn the attention of the national print media, mostly because of the connection with Lucky's alleged crime, which had been front-page news.

Linda Penniman, the public defender office manager, kept coming in whenever she could get away from the office. She wanted to be sure I knew she was there. "I believe in you, Jimmy," she told me as we waited for the jury to come up the front stairs.

She gave me a hug, which I appreciated. "Thanks, Linda," I said as I hugged her back. It was then that I glanced into the rear of the room. There was a middle-aged woman who was huddled on the back bench. She looked ghostly, so thin as to be emaciated. Her skin had the pallor of the seriously ill or dying, and though the courtroom already was too hot, she kept her heavy winter coat buttoned to the top. Even so, she was shaking with cold.

When she saw me studying her, she quickly got up and walked out the back door. There was something about her, something I recognized but couldn't define.

“Do you know that woman who’s leaving the courtroom?” I asked Linda. Linda had a great memory for faces and names. I thought the woman might have been a former client.

“Never seen her before,” Linda answered.

As the woman opened the door to leave, Diane was entering from the stairs. They nearly collided, and Diane reached out a hand to steady the frail woman. As she did, the woman flinched. I’d seen that flinch before, and in a flash of memory I realized where — Lucky! The woman looked exactly like Lucky when he pulled back in fear.

“Wait!” I called out to her.

She looked at me in alarm and quickly shoved by Diane. I watched as the woman started to descend the stairs, then bolted after her.

The jurors were entering the front of the courtroom, taking their seats in the jury box.

As I reached Diane, she said, “Jimmy, stop, the jury is almost seated.”

“Hold them off anyway you can,” I said. “That woman is Lucky’s mother!”

When I returned to the courtroom ten minutes later, I knew exactly what I had to do. My mind, which had been spinning wildly as Lucky's mother filled in the missing pieces of the puzzle, was now calm and lucid. I saw the whole picture for the first time and knew I was the only one in the courtroom who did. I understood exactly what I had to do and how to do it. I didn't know if it would work, but when are there are any guarantees in life?

With its endless rules and precedents, a courtroom should be a thoroughly predictable setting in which to effect justice and resolve human conflict. It isn't. There are wild cards that even the broadest discovery and pre-trial procedures can't stop the players from slipping up their sleeves. Life is inherently too chaotic to be controlled so easily. I knew that now in a way I never had because I was holding the wildest card of all — the truth about Trooper Smalley.

"Please approach the bench, Mr. St. John," Judge Stone said, the anger in his voice poorly concealed.

The entire courtroom stared at me as I walked up the center aisle and approached Judge Stone. He leaned over the high bench and said with exaggerated politeness, "Are you ready to proceed this morning, or do you need to make us sit here silently waiting for another ten minutes?"

"I'm sorry, your Honor, the delay was unavoidable. It won't happen again."

"I know it won't," he said grimly, "because if it does I will find you in contempt of this court."

I nodded but didn't worry about his threat. I had other things on my mind.

He sat back in his swivel chair and turned to address the jury. "Thank you for your patience, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The defense informs me that they are ready to proceed. As I explained to you yesterday, the State's case has been concluded and this morning the defense will be

presenting their witnesses. They will begin with an opening statement that I believe Mr. St. John will deliver. Is that correct?"

"Yes, your Honor," Larry answered from defense table.

"Very well. You have our attention, Mr. St. John."

Before beginning to speak I took a deep breath and looked around the courtroom. I saw Diane sitting in the front row, just behind Larry. Yesterday, as a sequestered witness, she'd been forced to wait in one of the attorney's rooms outside the courtroom. Now that her testimony was over, she was free to observe. When she saw me looking at her, she gave me a loving, encouraging smile. At the same time, Larry gave the thumbs-up sign.

Across the aisle from Diane sat Trooper Smalley and Sheriff George. Normally the cops get out of the courtroom and back to duty as soon as they can. I was relieved to see that Smalley had returned for day two. I needed him there, needed him to hear what I was about to say.

I looked into the rear of the crowded courtroom where I spotted Linda. She was sitting next to Lucky's mother as I had asked. Because Linda herself was calm, she had a calming effect on others. Right now Lucky's mother, whose name was Marion, desperately needed Linda's help.

I turned to face Walter Brown, who sat rigidly tall as usual. When our eyes met, he glared at me as if to say, "Get it over with, I have more important things to do than to stare back at you." I wanted to tell him it wasn't a contest, that I merely wanted one last look at the players in this real-life drama.

Then I turned to face the jury. Their eyes were focused directly on me, waiting attentively for me to begin. I looked back, meeting their gaze one-by-one. I wanted to connect with them as individuals, to let them see I had nothing to hide. Some smiled, others stared back uncomfortably.

There were seven women and five men, all of them white because Vermont is over 98% Euro-American. They ranged in age from 23 to 67. Six were married, two single, one widowed, and three divorced. Their occupations varied from sales clerk to logger, English teacher to retiree. It might have felt strange to be looking at twelve strangers in whose hands one's fate rested. It didn't because I felt as if I knew each one of them, had known them my whole life. In their faces I saw my childhood friends, close relatives, former teachers. I knew these people, knew them and cherished

them, and because of that I no longer underestimated them. Larry had been right about that — it was a dangerous thing to do — and I was relieved to be free of that self-defeating doubt. They would do the right thing as long as I gave them the means with which to do it. Put them in your shoes, Diane had said. That's exactly what I intended to do.

"I'm not a religious person," I began. "But perhaps like some of you, when I'm troubled I turn to the god I first met as a child.

"I'm troubled now, and so naturally I'm thinking about Jesus. In particular I'm remembering a section of the Gospels where he advises us to agree with our adversaries when we're in the way with them, or else they might turn upon us and deliver us to the authorities. I don't recall the exact words, but it's something like, lest they take thee before a judge, who delivers you to the officer, who casts you into prison from which you will not escape until you have paid the highest price.

"This morning I stand before a judge. And I am ready to pay whatever price I must for what I have done. But before you decide my fate, and clearly that is what you are here to do, I want you to look inside yourself and consider the meaning of Good and Evil.

"Too often we think we know what those words mean. Too soon we judge those who appear evil without giving ourselves a chance to see the good inside them. We're also quick to assume that those who wear the mantle of Good are therefore incapable of doing Evil. Today I am asking you to put aside those easy preconceptions and do the hard work of finding the deeper truth about who is Good and what is Evil."

I paused for a moment to let them ponder what I'd just asked them to do. I had been standing in front of the judge's bench. I now took a few steps closer to the jury box, stopped in front of the prosecutor's table, and turned to look at Walter Brown.

"As you heard from the State's Attorney, I was until recently a criminal defense investigator. Mr. Brown made special mention of my knowledge of criminal law, pointing out that I could not have acted in innocence when I helped a former client escape from custody.

"He's both right and wrong about that."

I turned back to face the jury.

“Yes, I knew I was breaking the law. Yet I did so in complete innocence.

“The law as I understand it is a very rigid thing. It insists on clarity under cloudy circumstances, on precision when a rule of thumb is the best we can do, on decisions in black-and-white terms when shades of gray are more fitting. Perhaps you, like me, understand that the choices we must make in life are rarely as cut and dried as the law would have them be.

“The law wants to know Who, What, When, and Where, but rarely if ever Why.

“It is the *Why* that I am asking you to consider today.

“The basic facts in this case are so simple that they require little of your attention. They can be reduced to a few direct questions. Namely, did I take without permission the car belonging to the Ashley-Warners?

“The answer is clear: No, I did not. Diane, my former boss and a married woman whom I have loved since the first moment I saw her, has already testified that she gave implied consent.

“What she didn’t tell you is that even if she hadn’t, I would have taken the car. I let her know that in no uncertain terms.

“I know I’m not supposed to admit such a thing, that my co-counsel Larry Hughes is probably squirming in his seat right now.”

I turned to look at Larry, who was indeed squirming. Most of the jurors chuckled at that, which was good. It helped to break the tension I felt was getting too intense.

Walter Brown didn’t laugh. He was frowning at me. I could tell he was considering whether to object. The most serious breach of courtroom etiquette is to interrupt opposing counsel during opening or closing arguments. Yet I knew Walter was tempted, for I had slipped once or twice over the edge of the broad discretion permitted during opening statements. *You aint’ heard nothin’ yet, Walter*, I thought as I turned back to the jury.

“The second question is even simpler: Did I help Donald ‘Lucky’ Hall escape from custody? The answer is No, I didn’t help him, I actually made the decision *for* him.”

There was a shocked murmur from the spectators in the courtroom. Obviously no one expected me to admit so fully to my guilt.

“That’s right. I did it without his knowledge. He was asleep or unconscious when I arrived at the proverbial crossroads. I didn’t ask for, nor

did I receive, his consent. Which is why it makes perfect sense to me that I be charged as a principal in the crime of Escape.”

I paused for a moment, studying the effect my admission of guilt had on the jury. They were neither stunned nor shocked, but seemed to take it in stride, which is what I had hoped for.

Now I stepped right up to the jury box, actually put both hands against the rail, and leaned towards the jurors as closely as I could without losing those seated at either end of the box. I dropped my voice as low as I could, making it confidential. As I spoke I could feel the rest of the courtroom lean forward to hear me better.

“Now I’m going to tell you the Why. But there are certain people in the courtroom I don’t want to hear this. One of them is the State’s Attorney, who may object to my confidence. Another is Trooper Smalley.” I pulled back from the rail and turned directly to Smalley. He met my gaze as if he had nothing to hide. Moral rectitude radiated from him. I almost laughed out loud. Instead I shouted, *“Don’t you pretend for one second you don’t know what I’m referring to!”*

Brown jumped from his seat, “Objection!”

Judge Stone sighed audibly, then asked counsel to approach the bench. It took Larry a little longer to reach the spot where Brown and I stood. When he had, we huddled close as Stone said, “Mr. Brown, you know as well as I that Vermont allows wide discretion in opening remarks. If you interrupt Mr. St. John again, I’m going to be most unhappy.” Then he turned to me, “And Mr. St. John, I am permitting you even greater latitude than I would a member of the Bar, but I will be listening with less patience from this point on. Please wrap it up and stay within the reasonable limits of the law.”

I nodded agreeably while thinking, *Sorry, I just can’t comply.*

Brown said, “Just for the record, I want to object to what’s starting to sound like a defense of necessity. I was never notified that they would rely upon that defense.”

“Is that what you’re about to do?” Stone asked.

“No, it isn’t,” Larry said. “Our understanding is that we’re free to ask the jury to nullify the law without claiming a formal necessity defense. Isn’t that correct, Walter?”

Reluctantly, he agreed.

Judge Stone said, "Okay, but if you come back later asking for jury instructions on necessity, you're not going to get them."

"Fair enough," Larry said, then took me by the arm to get me out of earshot. "I don't know where you're going on this, Jimmy, but you sure got our attention!"

"As I was saying a few minutes ago, I've come to that point in my opening statement when I want to address *why* I made the choices I did. It's most important to me that you understand what motivated me to go beyond the law.

"I believed then, and I am even more certain of it today, that if I had turned my client over to the police after the accident, he would have suffered great harm.

"What I am about to tell you is a bitter pill to swallow, especially here in the Northeast Kingdom where most of us believe that the men and women who work in law enforcement are honest and upright. In fact we can't imagine the kind of police corruption that is taken for granted in cities like Philadelphia or New Orleans. Nor can we conceive of police brutality like that heaped upon Rodney King in Los Angeles. We expect a high standard of behavior from our police and sheriffs, who are people we instinctively trust and respect, rightfully so.

"But there are exceptions to every rule and rotten apples in every profession.

"When I helped Donald 'Lucky' Hall escape, it was because I saw first-hand irrefutable evidence that he had been tortured by the very men into whose care this court had entrusted him.

"Torture is a word I don't use lightly." I turned and looked at Smalley. He was completely calm and unperturbed.

"But torture is what was inflicted upon Donald Hall."

I paused, waited until the entire courtroom had stilled into silence, then announced loudly, "I call my first witness, Donald 'Lucky' Hall."

The courtroom buzzed with anticipation, and I could see reporters rushing out the back doors to call in the unexpected appearance of "the Dog."

Diane rose and walked to the back of the courtroom where on either side there were doorways to the attorneys' rooms. She opened the door to

the defense room on the right, and Lucky walked into the courtroom flanked by federal marshals. Close behind them came Odysea. Their entrance couldn't have been more unexpected or dramatic.

Diane, who had kept Lucky as a client when she'd resigned as public defender, had arranged for the protective custody of the federal marshals. Lucky had been delivered into their care at 8 am that morning. She'd spent all week on the phone with a former classmate at Vermont Law School who now worked at the Department of Justice in Washington. For years Justice had been ignoring the civil rights violations of local law enforcement, and only recently in the wake of widely publicized cases like Rodney King's had they begun paying lip service to federal intervention. She made sure they would do more than palaver when it came to Lucky. She threatened and needed and whined until she secured a promise that federal marshals would escort Lucky into the courtroom and keep him beyond the reach of Trooper Smalley.

Justice first had declined to act, then relented when Diane said she would file a 1983 Civil Rights action in federal court, making Lucky a material witness in a federal case. She'd had the paperwork delivered by courier that morning, naming as respondents Trooper Smalley, the deceased sheriffs, and the heads of their respective agencies, all the way up to and including Governor Howard Dean.

Every eye in that courtroom took in the presence of the federal marshals, every eye except Trooper Smalley. He looked straight ahead as if nothing unusual or unexpected were taking place around him.

He was hard. I had to give him that.

Taking the witness stand can be a terrifying experience. Even though lawyers spend hours coaching their witnesses, **25. *Witnessing*** videotaping and critiquing, prepping them on every point, no one can predict how those witnesses will react under the pressure of testifying. I've seen self-assured and confident adults crumble the moment they turn to face a courtroom.

During the brief time we'd spent coaching Lucky, I had reminded him about his skill as a storyteller. "Just give your answers like you're telling one of your stories." That had seemed to help, but now as I watched him walk down the center aisle of the crowded courtroom, I had my doubts. He marched stiffly as if going to his own execution.

Odysea had told me that since the flood Lucky had held back, refusing to be drawn into conversation. "He's in turmoil, that much is obvious. I think he's deciding whether to tell something that torments him." From the first moment of our reunion, I'd sensed she was right. I had thrown my arms around him in loving embrace. "I'm so glad you're alive, Lucky!"

He had stiffened and replied, "I'm sorry, Jimmy."

"What for?"

He couldn't speak, but just stared at me dolefully.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Lucky." I put a hand on either side of his shoulders, looked straight at him, and said, "When I thought you had drowned I realized how much you meant to me and I regretted that I had never told you that I love you."

He grew solemn and nearly started to cry. I looked at Odysea, who shrugged as if to say, "I don't understand any more than you do."

That had been over two weeks ago, and he seemed to be getting worse, not better. When we'd asked him if he would testify, he had said, "You mean tell the truth?" He'd said it like he yearned to believe that the truth would set him free, yet feared it would doom him for eternity. In the end he'd agreed, saying simply, "That's why we came back from Texas, isn't it?"

Everything hinged on Lucky's testimony. If he told what had happened in a way that was believable, both of us might walk out of the courtroom free men. If he got scared and reverted to his dog-like ways, we were doomed. It was as simple as that.

As he passed by me on his way to the witness stand, I put a reassuring hand on his arm.

He flinched.

It wasn't a good sign.

Before Larry could begin his direct examination of Lucky, Judge Stone wanted to make sure our star witness knew that he didn't have to testify. After all, the last time Stone had seen Lucky, he had ordered him evaluated for competency. "I want you to understand that you have the right to refuse to testify, either about the alleged escape or about anything concerning the other charges you face."

Of course we had anticipated this, had prepared Lucky for Stone's questions. "Just answer yes or no when he asks you a question. If you're not sure, ask him to repeat the question. You have to give your answer out loud because the tape recorder can't see you nod." That made him smile, so we knew he understood.

Lucky tried, oh how he tried, to reply verbally to each question that Stone posed. He'd lean forward as if to respond, his lips would pucker and shake, but no sound was forthcoming. I could feel everyone in the room willing Lucky to answer, but he couldn't no matter how hard he tried.

The best he could do, and then only when Stone persisted, was to nod his head to questions like, "Did your lawyer explain to you that you are not on trial today?"

I expected Judge Stone to lose his patience, but he remained calm. Perhaps the presence of the jury explained why, for even the most irascible judges want jurors to perceive them as wise and patient. Stone smiled several times at the jury as he questioned Lucky, then sighed benevolently before saying, "For the record, I want it noted that Mr. Hall has responded non-verbally to my questions by nodding his head in the affirmative. I am satisfied that he understands, and knowingly waives, his legal rights in this regard. Please proceed, Mr. Hughes."

We had decided that Larry would lead Lucky through direct examination. Our fear was that if I questioned him, the jury might think Lucky were being unduly influenced. Fortunately, Lucky had immediately taken to Larry, who was able to put him at ease.

Larry now stood in front of the witness stand, supported by his walker. His head, which often seemed to bob and shake as if listening to music only he could hear, was cocked sideways so that he could see both Lucky and the jury. His thick eyeglasses were slightly askew, but otherwise he was impeccable, dressed as always in brightly colored slacks and a plaid jacket. Larry was a bit of a Beau Brummell.

By contrast, Lucky wore faded jeans and a blue denim work shirt. We had tried dressing him up, but he was stiff and unnatural in a tie and sports coat. "It's better for him to wear his regular clothes," Diane finally insisted. She had been right, as I now saw. Yet wearing his own clothes or getting encouraging looks from Larry wasn't enough.

Lucky was trembling with fear, which made his head flutter up and down in an insistent tremor. The right side of his face — the side without the strawberry — was highly flushed. The knuckles on both hands were turning white from gripping the side of the armchair in which he sat.

It took Larry longer than usual to begin. I think he was as nervous as Lucky. I could hear people fidgeting throughout the courtroom. Even the jurors shifted in their seats. Finally, after taking several deep breaths, Larry commenced to speak in his halting fashion.

"Please tell us your name and where you lived before your arrest in October of this year."

Lucky stared at a spot on the carpet several feet in front of him. He seemed to be struggling internally, waging a battle that was tearing him to shreds. He didn't even try to reply, nor did he look up at Larry.

"Let me ask again if you will tell us your name."

Lucky kept staring, then I saw him raise his head and peer into the courtroom. His eyes were drawn directly to Trooper Smalley. I shifted slightly in my seat and could see the side of Smalley's face. Probably to anyone else, Smalley's expression remained unchanged. Yet to me, and most certainly to Lucky, there was the subtlest shift in the musculature of his jaw. It tightened, just enough to convey his message: *Say one word, just one single word, and I'll burn you to ashes!*

Lucky began to whimper.

I turned directly behind me to face Odysea who was sitting with Diane in the front row. Odysea nodded her head slightly to let me know that she, too, had witnessed Smalley's evil threat.

"Your Honor," I said too loudly, shattering the silence and nearly knocking over my chair as I jumped out of it. "May we approach the bench." I looked at Brown, who frowned before accompanying me.

"What you're proposing is highly unusual," Stone said when I had finished speaking.

"It's an affront to the dignity of the judicial system," Brown objected. "It'll turn this courtroom into a Bread and Puppet circus!"

Larry was unperturbed by Brown's rhetoric. "The Americans with Disabilities Act imposes upon the criminal justice system an affirmative duty to provide reasonable accommodation to people with disabilities. What we are asking may be unusual, but it is not unreasonable. The witness, as this court knows, suffers from a disability as real and obvious as my own. If I asked for a physical device that would aid me, you would grant it, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Stone admitted, "but this isn't the same."

"Yes it is," I argued. "When Lucky feels threatened, he's unable to communicate through speech. If he were deaf, he'd be provided with an interpreter. Why not do the same for someone who is mute for emotional reasons?"

Stone considered a long moment, then finally nodded his head in agreement. "Okay, we'll try it."

Brown bristled, but there was nothing he could do.

Stone briefly explained to the jury what was about to happen. "This is a bit of an experiment," he said, "so please bear with us a few moments. Bailiff Foley, I want you to set up a folding chair right in front here."

As she sat in the chair that Foley had placed just below the witness stand, Odysea smiled warmly at the jurors. As a group they smiled back, instantly charmed by her relaxed and friendly manner. Courtrooms are very solemn places, yet Odysea was dressed in white cotton pants and a brilliantly colored smock that had been made in Guatemala. Her prized goddess hung

on a newly woven thong the color of a Texas sunrise. Against the deliberately dark and somber backdrop of the courtroom, she looked like the first crocus of spring breaking through frozen ground. Everything about her was at odds with the prevailing atmosphere, and the jury obviously approved.

Brown hadn't been far off track when he had compared what was about to happen to a performance by Bread and Puppet Theater. This was as extraordinary an event as any I'd encountered in a Vermont courtroom.

"I'm ready," Odysea said to Judge Stone.

"Then by all means begin," Stone graciously replied. I was starting to think he was as intrigued by this as everyone else in the room.

Lightly, and then with more force, Odysea began to tap out a rhythm on the djembe, which was cradled between her knees. I recognized the rhythm at once. It was the same song she had played the night I had brought Lucky to my cabin following the accident.

I looked at Lucky, who this entire time had been whimpering quietly and staring at the carpet in front of the witness stand. The cavernous courtroom reverberated with the sound of the drum, slowly drawing him out of his exile of fear. He looked up and saw Odysea, then noticed me. I was standing a few feet in front of him, having switched places with Larry (who had insisted "this is your show from here on, Jimmy").

"Lucky," I said above the beat of the drum, "will you please tell us your name."

I could see that he wanted to, that he truly was trying to reply, but the fear that had gripped him continued to hold him hostage.

I nodded at Odysea, and immediately the beating of the drum grew louder and more compelling. Then she began to chant:

*Djembe! it sings the song
Now you know it won't be long.
Djembe! it weaves the tale
Makes you move and makes you wail.
Djembe! Djembe! Djembe!*

She repeated the chant, and with each repetition Lucky became more energized. I remembered how he had danced that first night, how the circle

of his movement had expanded as he filled the whole cabin, prancing wildly and rattling his chains like a tambourine, until the drumming and the dancing were as one.

Suddenly the drumming ceased and Odysea repeated the final line of the chant in an hypnotic drone. The air in the courtroom vibrated with it.

“Djembe! Djembe! Djembe!”

I thought I heard a second, deeper voice join hers. I looked at Lucky and saw at once that the voice was his.

The droning stopped, but the vibration lingered while Odysea and Lucky gazed at each other in open admiration. Lucky beamed at her, a giant grin pasted to his face. She nodded encouragingly, then resumed tapping lightly on the djembe.

“My name is Donald Allen Hall,” he said, “but really I’m Lucky.”

The spell of fear had been broken, and from that moment on Lucky told his story as if he was telling one of his myths.

We worked our way backwards in time, starting with the accident. He described the sheriff’s car going out of control as they drove down Barnet Mountain in the snow storm. He must have blacked out before impact, because he didn’t remember striking the cedar that had prevented the car from careening into the river. Nor did he have any idea how long he’d been waiting when I had rescued him from the wreck.

“But why had the deputies taken you to Barnet instead of to the State Hospital in Waterbury?”

“They said my old friend wanted to talk to me first.”

He told how he had been marched in chains by the deputies until they met Trooper Smalley in a field beyond the funeral monument near Karne Choling. He said Smalley didn’t speak at first, just stared at him as the snow swirled about them. Suddenly Smalley took a burning cigarette from his lips and held the glowing coal against Lucky’s wrist, repeating it in a pattern. Lucky had screamed in pain and tried to pull away, but the deputies had restrained him.

I asked Lucky to hold up his left wrist so the jury could see the burn marks. Plain as day were two lines, one an inverted V, the other a capital L on its side.

“Do you know what the symbol represents?”

"No," he answered.

"Why did he do this to you?"

"I think to scare me."

"Why would he want to scare you?"

Lucky mumbled something inaudible.

"Can you please repeat that?"

"Because of the baby."

Now things got hard again, and I was afraid Lucky would revert to his earlier state of fear, but Odyssea kept playing and I kept asking simple, direct questions to lead him through the nightmare he described.

Smalley had appeared one night in late summer at Lucky's camp beneath the Portland Street Bridge. He had threatened to arrest Lucky for Trespassing unless Lucky did him a favor.

"What favor did he ask you to do?"

"To take a baby."

"What do you mean, 'take a baby'?"

"He told me a baby was being hurt by her father, and he wanted me to rescue the baby and bring her to him."

He went into detail about waiting at the mini-mart as Smalley had told him to do. "Every day around three o'clock I've seen the mother stop at the Mobil Mini-Mart," Smalley had said. "She always leaves the baby in the car seat. Just wait until you see her go inside the building to pay," Smalley had ordered. "Then open the car door and take the baby out of the car seat and bring her back here to your camp. When the mother calls the police, I'll know to come to the camp. Do you understand?"

Only things had gone wrong, very wrong. Unknown to Smalley, the baby had a seizure disorder and needed regular doses of Phenobarbital. No sooner had Lucky gotten the baby back to his camp than she had begun shaking violently. He had tried but couldn't stop the child's seizure. When Smalley arrived, she was dead.

"What did Smalley do?"

"He took her in his hands and started shaking her, cursing me, and shaking her and shaking her. Then he hit me and threw the little baby against a tree trunk. He wouldn't stop. He kept thrashing her body against the trunk until it broke apart in pieces."

I could feel the courtroom fill with revulsion at the scene Lucky described. He looked pale and drained, and I thought he was going to be sick, so I backed off for a few moments.

The djembe filled the silence with a staccato rhythm like a heart breaking.

“What happened next, Lucky?”

“He told me to leave, to go far away and never come back.”

“Did you?”

“No, I had no where to go.”

A few days later, Smalley showed up with several other cops at the riverside camp to arrest Lucky. When Lucky had tried to run away, Smalley had tackled him and begun beating him. That’s when Lucky bit him.

Walter Brown began his cross examination by ordering Odysea to stop drumming. “Believe me, it won’t be necessary. I’m going to be very, very brief.”

She looked at me, and I shrugged. She resumed her seat next to Diane.

“Now let me get this straight,” Brown said. “You say Trooper Smalley tortured you because he wanted to scare you so that you wouldn’t tell anyone that he had asked you to steal a baby. Do I have that right?”

“Yes,” Lucky said, though it was more a whisper than said aloud.

“That he wanted you to save it from its father, who was hurting the child?”

Lucky nodded, then remembered to speak aloud. “Yes.”

“And you believed him?”

“Yes.”

Here Brown paused for effect, looked at the jury, then said in a stage whisper, “Why?”

“Why?” Lucky repeated.

“That’s right: Why? Why would you believe such a ridiculous story? As I understand it, you’ve been in foster care, isn’t that true?”

“Yes.”

“Then you certainly know that there is an extensive network of social workers who protect children from abuse. Why would a Vermont State Trooper ask a homeless young man to rescue a baby from child abuse?”

Lucky murmured a reply only Brown could hear.

“You say ‘you don’t know.’ You don’t know a lot of things, do you? For instance you don’t know what the burns on your wrist mean. Isn’t it true that the reason you don’t know these things is that you made up the entire story?”

Lucky dropped his head and stared at the carpet again.

“We’re not playing story time, young man, though I admit you’re quite good at it. But you’ve gone too far by making these outrageous accusations against a respected law enforcement officer who has risked his life on more than one occasion to protect the people of Vermont.” Brown shook his head in disbelief. “How can you expect us to take you seriously?” He had asked the question rhetorically, never expecting Lucky to respond. Brown turned away from Lucky in disgust and returned to his seat.

“Lucky, I know this is hard for you,” I said on re-direct examination, “but I want you to answer Mr. Brown’s last question. I’m going to phrase it a little bit differently, though. What do you know about Trooper Smalley that no one else knows?”

Lucky refused to answer. I hadn’t expected otherwise. I knew Smalley had a hold on Lucky, a hold so strong that only one other person in the world could break it, and to Lucky that person was dead.

“Lucky, please look at me.”

Slowly he raised his head and met my eyes. “I want you to keep looking straight ahead for a moment and think about my question.” I stepped to the side, giving Lucky a clear view to the back of the courtroom, then walked directly to the bar in front of Trooper Smalley. I nodded my head once. Lucky’s mother stood up quickly, smiled at Lucky and mouthed the words, “Tell the truth.”

At the same time, I repeated my question, “What do you know about Trooper Smalley that no one else knows?”

Lucky laughed joyfully, an odd sound in the total stillness of the waiting courtroom. I knew what that laugh meant — that he had seen his mother, knew that she was still alive when he had thought her dead, that finally he had permission from her to reveal the truth that had been tormenting him for the past six years since she had dropped him off at the rest area on I-91.

Lucky laughed with joy and I leaned close to Smalley and whispered, "It's all over, Jim."

"He's my father!" Lucky said clearly into the courtroom.

Then *deja vu* struck with the force of lightning as Smalley's fist swung straight at my nose, which broke for the second time in six weeks, knocking me to the floor.

As he connected I noticed the ring on his fist as it came flying at me. There, once again, was the Masonic seal. And then I saw what I should have seen all along, that the pattern of Lucky's burn was a crude rendering of a compass and framing square, the twin tools in the Masonic seal. So Rod had been right after all.

The stunned courtroom erupted into pandemonium as Trooper Smalley, having knocked me to the floor, bolted over the rail towards Lucky. To his great credit Bailiff Winston Foley, old and frail as he was, didn't hesitate to put himself between the lunging Smalley and Lucky. Sheriff George reacted immediately as well, jumping over the rail in a flying tackle, grabbing Smalley around the ankles and bringing him down. At the same time Walter Brown leaped out of his chair and onto Smalley's back, while Larry precisely placed his walker over Smalley's neck, pinning his head to the floor. The federal marshals ran from the back of the courtroom, as Judge Stone banged his gavel and shouted at them, "Arrest that man!"

Though dazed and in serious pain, I was aware on some level of the chaos I had instigated. I leaned back against the rail, my right hand over my throbbing nose, and watched with bemused detachment as the wild scene unfolded in the normally staid courtroom. I saw Odysea run towards Lucky with the ferocity of a she-bear protecting her cub, then realized Diane was kneeling next to me.

She smiled at me, and I swear there was a halo of golden light radiating around her. "Mr. St. John, will you please tell the court how you perceive the criminal justice system at this moment?"

"Here at last is Truth, Justice, and the American Way."

"Amen," she said, kissing me sweetly on the cheek.

It took months for the full story to emerge, but when it finally did I was not surprised to learn that Derrick James Smalley, Jr. — a.k.a. "Jim" to close friends and family — had been involved in an international conspiracy of kidnapping for adoption. It had started five years earlier in London, England, when a police inspector named Peter Laws had uncovered an illegal adoption service that was realizing enormous profits by selling street children from Brazil to wealthy London couples who asked no questions.

Instead of exposing the operation, Inspector Laws had made himself a full partner, intending from the start to expand throughout Great Britain. A longtime Mason, Laws recognized at once what a perfect training ground “the Brotherhood” made. Not only was secrecy inherent in the Masonic Order, but there was the ready-made code that Big Rod had overheard — phrases like “taught to be cautious” and “on the level” — which immediately identified Masons to each other. Laws’ insidious plan was to recruit law enforcement officers who also were Masons. They would act as brokers, giving the illegal adoption service the appearance of legality, while exploiting their Masonic connections to locate childless couples desperate enough to adopt at any price. An additional inducement to potential brokers was the spurious claim that they would be rendering a public service in the Masonic tradition, both to the homeless children and the childless couples.

In fact Trooper Smalley had been approached by a Canadian police officer at the Masonic Lodge in Newport, Vermont, which shares Lake Memphremagog with Quebec. When he’d learned that Smalley was a Vermont Trooper, the Canadian had taken him for a ride on his spiffy new metallic red speedboat. Once on the lake he had described the operation to Smalley, inviting him to become a broker to Vermont couples. Smalley saw the potential at once but deferred until he could “look into the matter.” Then he undertook his own research project.

He learned about Georgia Tann, who during the 1940s had been considered an expert on adoption in Memphis, Tennessee. Just before Tann’s death she was embroiled in scandal and alleged to have been a kidnapper who had made a fortune selling babies. Tann had started with legal adoptions, but apparently discovered she could make more money by shipping kids to New York and California where wealthy couples paid handsomely. Tann was assisted by her friend Camille Kelley, a Shelby County Juvenile Court judge nationally known for her unconventional practices. After the scandal broke, Kelley was portrayed as having coerced parents seeking public assistance into relinquishing parental rights.

Smalley also discovered an article in *Time* magazine about American kids being adopted by childless couples in Australia, Canada, and Europe. The article pointed out that the United States had no exit-visa requirements. Unlike the states, which have strict legal procedures for domestic adoption, the federal government didn’t regulate foreign adoption.

Smalley combined what he'd learned into a pernicious plan to steal children who were suspected victims of child abuse, then ship them out of the country with phony papers via his Canadian connection. Like Judge Kelley, he chose kids from poor families, assuming they would make easier targets. Like Inspector Laws, Smalley convinced his cohorts that they would be improving the abused children's lives by placing them in the homes of the affluent.

Of course he knew about domestic abuse firsthand, having victimized Lucky and his mother for years until he finally had abandoned them to return to Vermont.

"Jim always hated Donald," Lucky's mother, Marion, told us that night at a dinner Larry Hughes hosted at Anthony's Diner. "He refused to marry me when I got pregnant. He called me a whore, said Donald wasn't his child. It wasn't true, I'd never loved anyone but Jim." She looked around the table at each of us as if needing to make sure we understood how deeply she had loved him. "Then when Donald was born with the birth mark on his face, Jim said it was proof of his bestial origins."

She quickly looked at Lucky, saying, "Of course it wasn't true. It was just the meanest thing he could think to say." She turned back to us. "He felt trapped by me and the baby. He was working in a factory on the night shift and complained bitterly about his deadbeat life. I wasn't that surprised when he finally disappeared with our dog. He always loved that dog more than anything.

"I knew he'd go back to Vermont. I hoped one day he'd send for us. But he never did. Ten years passed and then I got very sick. I found out I had AIDS. I thought I was going to die right away. I didn't want Donald to watch me deteriorate, so I brought him to Vermont. I was afraid to take him straight to Jim, which is why I left him at the rest area when I knew Jim would be on call. I always thought Jim would accept him eventually . . ." She broke down crying, then said the last thing she had wanted for Lucky was for him to be raised in foster care. She had been a foster child, and her memories of being sexually abused by her foster father had haunted her for her entire life.

When Lucky had been arrested on murder and kidnapping charges, Marion had seen an article about it in a Hartford, Connecticut, newspaper.

She'd come to Vermont right away, only to discover that she couldn't find her son.

"I kept calling all the jails, but no one knew anything about Donald."

"That's exactly what happened to me in Texas," Odysea said.

"I've been thinking about this ever since you told me," Diane said. "I suspect Trooper Smalley didn't want Lucky apprehended. He did everything he could to avoid it, first by keeping news of his escape out of the media — which actually gave you time to get out of Vermont — then by hiding Jimmy under the John Doe so that you couldn't find him in Texas."

"Smalley is very cunning," Larry said.

"And very evil," I added.

"What he did was evil," Odysea said, "but I'm not sure we have the right to condemn him as evil."

"Judge not, that ye be not judged," Larry quoted.

Lucky spoke for the first time. "Sometimes I think maybe all of us are evil, that it's part of being human, just like being good."

"I agree," Diane said. "We're constantly choosing what we'll bring into the world each day."

Odysea nodded, "Yes, it has so much to do with intentions."

"Sometimes even the best of intentions result in bad things," Marion added. She reached out to Lucky who gently took her hand in his.

I fell silent, thinking about my own intentions and the evil I had made manifest in my life. It was a very sobering thought.

Then Marion told us that when she finally had learned that Lucky had escaped custody, she decided to stay in St. Johnsbury in the event he should be re-captured. "I've made some wonderful friends through Vermont CARES, the AIDS service organization. They've helped me in every way." It wasn't until my trial that she dared to hope she might see her son again.

"Marion, do you have any idea why Jim had Lucky brought to Barnet the night of the storm?" I asked.

She flushed in embarrassment, then nodded her head. "The field called Sunnyside is where Lucky was conceived."

Once again I recoiled at Smalley's evil. He'd been so afflicted by hatred for his son that he'd had him returned to the scene of his conception to be ritually abused one last time. Was it some kind of weird exorcism? Or a final act of dominance? With a man like Smalley, it probably was both.

"I have to do this, Diane," I told her later that night.

"No you don't," she replied bitterly. "You're doing this to avoid being with me."

"It's not true. Being with you is exactly why I have to turn myself in. I don't want to spend the rest of our life together being haunted by my past. Besides, I brought evil into the world. I took the dynamite from someone who trusted me and gave it to people I loved. It killed them. It's that simple."

"Nothing is that simple!" she shouted at me. "They used you, Jimmy. You weren't a person to them, you were their working class hero!"

"I don't believe that. Maybe it started out that way, but in the end we were friends. Besides, it's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"If that dynamite hadn't blown up when they accidentally crossed the wrong wires, it might have killed others. I've read the news reports. They were part of the Weather Underground. Only two weeks before the townhouse explosion, they were suspected of having set off a bomb at Judge Murtaugh's house because he was presiding on the Panther 21 case. When that bomb did little damage, they decided to put nails in the new bombs, intending to seriously hurt people."

"You didn't know anything about that."

"No, I didn't. But I do now, and I can't pretend anymore. It's time to pay the price, whatever that price is, for the role I played in that tragedy."

"You've already paid that price, a million times over! It was a horrible time, Jimmy, and they were just kids, very desperate kids. The government wasn't listening to reason, so in total desperation they resorted to violence thinking it would spark a revolution that would usher in a panacea. You know that."

"Yeah, I know all about the promise of that revolution. It's exactly why I'm turning myself in. I believe in justice, Diane, in fairness, in truth, and, as odd as it may sound, in the American way." I looked at her and was grieved by her sadness. "I'm sorry, but before I can be free, I have to wipe clean the slate of my past."

The next morning broke gray with a clear threat of snow. Diane wouldn't talk to me, and though I tried to kiss her goodbye, she wouldn't respond. "I'll be back," I promised, "and while I don't expect you to wait, I want you to know that I love you, I've always loved you."

She continued to face away from me in accusing silence.

I walked out the cabin door and down the path to my truck.

When I climbed in and turned the key, it groaned, then died. I pumped the gas pedal once, tried again, but all I got was a clicking sound.

I didn't get angry, didn't swear or strike the steering wheel with my fist. I just got out of the truck and walked down the road to Route 5. If I had to, I'd walk all the way to Manhattan.

It gets dark in Vermont very early in late December, and night rose quickly as I waited at the entrance ramp to I-91 in Wells River. I'd been standing across from the P&H Truck Stop since late morning as the snow fell around me. Semis with license plates from every New England state and Quebec drove out of the P&H lot and down the on-ramp. I waved at the drivers, most of whom waved back. I figured one of them eventually would pick me up.

A giant Freightliner had gone down the ramp when I heard its brakes hiss. I turned to see if it were stopping for me, but noticed right away that it was picking up speed to merge with the southbound traffic. When I turned back, there was a powder blue Mercedes stopped right next to me. I opened the door and climbed inside.

Diane was driving.

"Could you use a good lawyer?" she asked.

"As long as it's you!" I said, beaming.

She threw her arms around me. "I love you, Jimmy! Now let's get on with our life."

We kissed for a long time until a semi blared its horn at us for blocking the ramp.

Diane put the Mercedes in gear and took off.

"How did you convince Bob to let you borrow his prized possession?"

"I didn't exactly 'convince Bob' . . . and I didn't exactly 'borrow' it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he doesn't know I have it."

“Diane, are you telling me you stole his car?”

“Actually I left a clear message of intent on his answering machine.”

“What did you say?”

“I played this Sheryl Crow song.” She pushed in a tape and turned up the volume, and the music blared out of the speakers:

*Took your car
Drove to Texas
Sorry, honey
But I suspected we were through
And I can't cry anymore*

She was singing with Sheryl, a perfect harmony as usual. Suddenly I noticed other voices singing from the back seat. I turned around and found Odysea, Lucky, and Marion grinning at me as if it were my surprise birthday party.

Diane laughed and said, “Larry sends his best. He asked me to tell you that he wanted to come, too, but someone has to stay in Vermont to keep an eye on the cops.”

“I don't understand,” I blurted out, totally flummoxed.

“We're on our way to Texas!” Lucky said, more animated than I'd ever seen him.

“I can't go to the Texas, I've got a long overdue appointment with the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.”

“They're not interested, Jimmy,” Odysea said. “And Salina wants you return to Texas and stay at Lone Woman Mountain. She's expecting all of us in three days.”

“What are you people talking about!”

That's when Diane told me about going back to her and Bob's house on the Peacham Road. She'd gone to borrow a vehicle since mine wouldn't start. When she walked in the house, she heard music playing on the stereo, so she assumed Bob was home. She kept walking through the house until she came to the exercise room. When she looked outdoors to the hot tub, she found Bob and a friend in the middle of a very passionate embrace. She quickly turned to leave, but not in time to escape notice.

“And that’s when he admitted that he knew about your past. He even gave me this letter from the Manhattan District Attorney.” Diane handed me a letter typed on official stationary dated two weeks prior.

As I scanned the page, I was startled to read that “while the FBI conclusively matched the fingerprints you’ve provided with those of Robert Joseph Santoro, the State of New York is no longer interested in pursuing indictments for his alleged role in the townhouse explosion. Those indictments were based upon illegal wiretaps and other FBI malfeasance, which this office has never condoned. The case has been considered closed for many years.” It concluded by expressing appreciation for the assistance offered in the matter. I looked at the name of the addressee. All along I had thought Diane had been talking about Bob. Instead, the letter was addressed to Bob’s new lover, the Honorable Walter Brown, Caledonia State’s Attorney.

“There’s something else you should know, Jimmy,” Diane said.

I looked at her and she motioned me to come near. I undid the seat belt and slid over next to her. She reached up and pulled my head close to her mouth, then kissed me before saying, “What would you like to name our new baby when it’s born this summer in Texas?”

I didn’t know what to say — it was too much good news all at once. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I felt a great weight lift from me. It was as if I were being born again, starting over fresh and free.

As the blue Mercedes purred down I-91 towards Lone Woman Mountain, I put my past behind me where it belonged. Then I took up the present moment, filled with promise and new beginnings for us all.

Lucky's Dream

In the beginning was the Word, but before that was the Breath, the searing wind of fire that raged across the cosmic night until the dawning of earth's first day. Then the oceans cooled and sighed and withdrew from the misty shore.

Here in the dry hills I sense the damp sea, nearly taste its salty tang. I half expect to find seashells hidden in the sandy earth of Lone Woman Mountain.

I don't know why I once saw these hills as brown and barren. They are anything but that. There are more subtle colors woven into their sinuous slopes than I can name. And they teem with life: White-tailed deer, wild turkey, and quail. Javelina, coyotes, snakes, and bobcats. I've spotted skunks, jackrabbits, cotton tails, racoons, ring-tailed-cats, bats, possums, hawks, owls. There are doves, sand hill cranes, and, oh yes, armadillos — all these crawl and soar and scurry over the hills as I sit and stare in wonder.

Wonder. That is what I cherish most about being alive.

Wonder and hope and newborn babies suckling in the light of day.

It was twins, Hope and Justice, born to Diane and Jimmy three weeks ago on a night when meteors fell like glittering jewels tossed from Heaven's Gate.

My name is Donald Allen Hall and I am Lucky. But I am not, nor have I ever been, Coyote's Pup who flies between worlds at the flick of his white-tipped tail.

My father is in prison, and my mother's life is ebbing, and I am often lonely despite being surrounded by loving family. I yearn, oh how I yearn! for the soft company of another.

It is fitting that I am lonely on Lone Woman Mountain, which stands near Lone Man Mountain. They never meet, nor touch, nor hope of

reconciliation. In the night I hear them calling to one another, whispering words of longing, promising delights they can neither give nor receive, for the jealous ground holds them rooted and apart.

If I had the faith of a mustard seed, I could move Lone Man closer. If I knew the right Word, I could conjure legs for Lone Woman to defy the prison of relentless gravity. But all I have is Breath, so I climb to the top of Lone Woman and breathe deeply in the night, breathe in, then out, in and out, in and . . . out.

I beat on the djembe and dance in the moonlight and sing a poem by Whitman that Odysea taught me the day Salina died:

*This is what you shall do:
Love the earth and sun and the animals,
despise riches,
give alms to everyone that asks,
stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others,
hate tyrants,
argue not concerning God,
have patience and indulgence toward the people,
take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man
or number of men,
re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any
book,
dismiss whatever insults your own soul,
and your very flesh shall be a great poem.*

I am lonely, but I am alive. And where there is life there is breath and hope and wonder.

This is my dream. It is me. And I am awake and very lucky.