

The Greatest Show on Earth

Tres Crow



Fiction

**A Novel About the
End of the World**

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.



*For my brothers Tom, Pouya, GK, and
Francis, without whom this book couldn't
have been completed.*



The Greatest Show on Earth

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Chapter One

Josh Stone takes his medicine

Josh Stone stood and kissed his wife's forehead. Her skin and hair tasted familiar, like the ocean slamming against rocks. But there was another note there too, antiseptic, clinical, as though her very pores had finally begun to accept the harsh, neon light and sterilized walls of the hospital. It was a smell that was as foreign to her as it was obscene. Every time he came to visit her, the smell was stronger.

She smiled at him the way she always did now, her eyes an unfocused sadness. He patted her hand and tried to smile back.

"I'll see you next week." He said it like a sentence passed down; every week for three years. She covered his hand with her other one and nodded, her eyes growing distant as she sunk inside herself.

He pulled himself free, and turned to head out the door, one hand on the knob.

"Oh! Josh! Remind me next week to tell you about my plans for Darlene's party," she called cheerfully. Her voice was like forks through wet paper. "It's almost December already. Wow. I can't believe our little girl's going to be three. I better be out of here by then. Don't let me forget, Josh. Promise?"

He couldn't look at her. His face was a frozen grin, humorless and terrifying. He took a moment to control his voice.

"Sure, Lina. I will."

Then he opened the door and left the room. In the hallway his face collapsed, his skin taut over the sharp bones of his face. There were black pools under his eyes. He hadn't slept well for a very long time. He stuffed his hands in his pockets if only to hide their shaking, and drifted over to the nurses' stand.

"Hello, Mr. Stone. How's Mrs. Stone doing?" asked the nurse cheerily, her tone indicating she had no idea what she was really asking.

"The same," said Josh. "Tell Dr. Richards she's still talking about the birthday party. Will you?"

"Yes, sir. Will you be back next week?"

He hesitated, then said, "Always."

She offered him a smile, which he didn't return.

The late November air was bitterly cold, even for Michigan. The wind had been howling around the clock for weeks now, picking up steam across the great nothingness of Minnesota and Wisconsin before crossing Lake Michigan where it acquired the snow-wet bite that seemed especially reserved for West Michigan winters. Josh tightened his coat but the wind had fingers, and they prodded and poked, found the holes in his clothes. His teeth clicked together. His eyes watered, if only to keep from freezing in his skull.

He'd made the decision to walk the mile from his small house on Grand Avenue to the hospital when the sun was still up—it was one of the few benefits of living in a small town; he could walk most everywhere—but now that night had fallen hard and the wind was high, he regretted the decision. He breathed in deep and the smell of winter choked him. It was brassy, lonely, strangely comforting. It was a smell he'd never known before moving here. The air in Detroit never quite achieved the same metal tang, the same longing. At first he'd hated it, but

over time it began to suit him, like junk piling up in a back room.

He turned onto Grand and headed up the long, steady hill that led to his small, two bedroom cottage, and then beyond to the sandy shores of Lake Michigan. The wind tumbled down the hill and flapped his coat behind him. He stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets, braced himself. He walked faster.

At the top of the hill he could see the last bend in the road, as Grand Avenue transformed into Harbor and hugged the lakeshore before tracing the line of the Grand River back to downtown. Through the trees he could see the moon reflected on the glass of the frozen lake, and despite the chill he stopped for a moment and watched the pale mirage on the ice. It glimmered like air over hot black top. There were no stars in the sky. The moon hung lonely there, surrounded on all sides by emptiness. It occurred to Josh that maybe he and the moon both could use some company tonight. He decided to go down to the beach, winter be damned. The beach seemed as good a place to do this as any. The cold would probably help.

It had been his idea to move to Grand Haven. Most of his life, the place had been like a dream to him, something he remembered from long ago, a lyric from a forgotten song. Lina was pregnant with Darlene and each passing day Detroit seemed larger and yet more desolate, like a withering skeleton with wide flung arms. He needed to get out of there.

He'd visited Grand Haven once, when he was ten. It had been the last (and only) family trip before his dad had left his mom for Carol, and that one weekend had stuck with Josh, burnished in his memory with the sort of honeyed glow reserved for favorite songs and first blowjobs. The beach, the riverfront, the ribbon of boardwalk that ran lock and step with the river before stabbing into Lake Michigan, all of it vibrated in his mind. He carried that memory with him into adulthood, the mostly bullshit idea that there existed someplace magical in this world where you could walk somewhere that wasn't a liquor store, where you could stand next to a lake that seemed big enough to be an ocean, and feel the breeze off the water and smell fish and funnel cakes on the air.

He'd never actually been back, but those memories were the first things that came to his mind when their neighbor wound up shot in the stomach and bleeding on their front stoop. He'd held the guy, bathed in alternating red and blue lights, and the blood seeped through his t-shirt. He made up his mind quickly. The only fatherly thing he could do, the only thing that was really in his control, was to get the hell out of that place and make sure his daughter grew up never knowing a damn thing about the sting of fists and the metallic tang of blood or the way gunshots sound funny and exhilarating like firecrackers, until the screaming starts.

Lina'd put up more of a fight than he'd expected. Her family and friends were in Detroit. She'd never been anywhere else. It seemed stupid to her to move to some yuppie lake town where they didn't know anybody just because Josh had some vague memory of eating a ∞-damn corn dog when he was ten.

They fought for nearly four months, but then one night, late, three in the morning, Darlene kicked for the first time, and the imprint of her tiny foot pushing against the inside of Lina's womb had a profound effect on her. Lina was not *unmaternal*, but she came to accept motherhood more gradually than the pregnancy magazines and the books she'd rented from the library made seem natural. Over the course of her first two trimesters Josh's obsession with leaving their home, and the mounting pressure of her own apparent maternal ambivalence weighed heavily on her. She worried that she was a monster, that within her was a black abyss which had no room for a child. She was certain that she lacked something elemental with which

all mothers were born, but which she was inexplicably missing. She began to worry that truly loving someone other than herself was something that she would never be able to accomplish. She was being tested and she was failing miserably.

But everything changed when Darlene planted her tiny foot sharp into Lina's side. It was like waking up. It was like someone had been slowly turning down the lights and Lina hadn't even realized how deeply in the dark she was until right then, when the lights were turned back on. She'd laid there in the bed, pressing back against the little person growing inside of her, and there was a moment when Darlene's foot pressed even harder against her fingers, and Lina, she'd closed her eyes and felt the spark she'd been missing all that time, starting small, then consuming her in a passion she couldn't control. She shook with it. She cried with it.

Josh slept through the whole thing, but the next morning he woke to a wife who was inexplicably more willing to move than the one with which he'd fallen asleep. She made him promise that if she agreed to move and she didn't like it, he wouldn't argue, they'd just move back. He agreed.

Selling their 2-bedroom rat hole in Ferndale was about a million times easier than they'd expected, but after moving costs and the real estate agent's fees there wasn't enough to put toward a proper down payment on a new house. Josh was insistent they live near the beach, no matter whether they had to rent or live in a shack. In the back of his head he had a vague memory of riding a rented bike full-tilt into the sand and his forward momentum pitching him into the warm-sheet goodness of the beach and him just lying there and looking up at the sky and the clouds and the endless expanse of the lake, and feeling his toes and his fingers and delighting in them the way only ten year-olds can delight in themselves. And he remembered there'd been a light, brighter than the sun, and there'd been a brilliant flash of white, a feeling so good he couldn't shake it. This memory possessed him, convinced him that the move would be wasted if they couldn't find a way to get within walking distance of the beach.

Within weeks they found the perfect place, a small cottage with wooden shingles and a faded pink door less than 200 yards from the beach. They shouldn't have been able to afford it, but the owner was so desperate to get it off his books before his divorce was final that he was willing to do a lease-purchase and put all of Josh and Lina's rent toward the down payment. Josh ran the numbers; within a year they would be able to buy the place with a mortgage they could actually afford. They jumped.

Lina was seven months pregnant the day they put the key in that faded pink door, and stepped into a dream come true.

Josh slid the key into the now green door, and shoved with his shoulder. The door stuck as always. He shoved harder. The door screeched open, vibrating on its hinges until it clacked against the wall. He stepped across the darkened threshold and fumbled for the light, and then there were lights and he was walking into the living room, taking off his coat and laying it on the back of a couch that was so covered in layers of clothes and papers and beer cans that there was no space left for sitting. The whole house was like this, garbage strewn everywhere like the skin of some giant snake. His hip bumped a side table and more beer cans clattered. He crossed into the kitchen and had to step over a stack of newspapers that nearly rose up to his crotch.

He passed dirty dishes, covered in mold and fruit flies, vying for space in the sink and on the counters and kitchen table. He climbed over more newspaper towers and then he was walking upstairs to the bedrooms. The top of the stairs ended in a thin hallway with three doors opening off of it, two across from each other, Josh's bedroom and the nursery, and one at the end, a

bathroom. He went to the third, and switched on the light. He winced as he always did when the Home Depot sconces on the bathroom walls revealed the granite countertop and well-matched tiles, and the well-matched shower curtain, the indelible *Lina*-ness of the place. It was the only place in the house that couldn't be neglected enough to get rid of her. She persisted in the tiles and the toilet and the shower curtain and the faucet.

It had all been her idea, the bathroom, every bit of it, and she'd been so proud of it when she'd finished. She'd insisted that no place could feel like home without a proper bathroom. She'd even installed the faucets and sconces herself, and all of this when she was eight and a half months pregnant. Now the whole thing just gave Josh the willies. Most days he felt like taking a sledge hammer to it, except it was the only bathroom in the house. So, he didn't.

He went to the sink. It was unavoidable looking at himself in the mirror and once he did he found the hollowed-out image of his own face horribly fascinating. His eyes had been blue once, but now they were just the color of soapy water. His cheekbones were too sharp; his nose, a smokestack rising from the bean field plateau of his forehead. He rubbed his face and the cold of the night lingered there, in his skin. It wouldn't come off no matter how much he rubbed. He tried on a smile, just to see how it looked on him. It looked false. Of course it did.

He turned his reflection aside and reached into the medicine cabinet that hid behind the mirror. There was a small, orange prescription bottle on one of the shelves. The label said there was Vicodin in the bottle, and he grabbed the bottle and he opened it. There were a lot of pills left. They'd been prescribed by Josh's doctor a year ago when he'd fallen down drunk and sprained his ankle. He hadn't used many of them because his ankle hadn't hurt nearly as bad as he'd let on and also because alcohol was as good for the pain as the pills.

Josh shook out one, two, three pills onto his palm and looked at them for a moment. He looked into his own gray eyes in the mirror and realized exactly where he was for the first time in his life. He'd thought he could escape his dad's drinking, and his mom's fucking around, and the bleeding neighbor on his ∞-damn front yard by coming to this tiny town on the edge of the world, but all that stuff had followed him here. It had been inside him the whole time, just waiting to come out. In the mirror his face looked drawn and thin from the effort of squeezing blood from a stone.

He threw all three pills into his mouth and filled his palm with water from the faucet, threw the water in his mouth too, and swallowed the whole mess down. The pills stuck in his throat and he coughed, once, filled his hand with more water and swallowed hard. He closed the bottle and put it in his pocket. He headed back downstairs.

The door to the nursery was open, and he couldn't help but look as he passed. Moonlight coming through the one window set the room on fire with pale blue flames, illuminated the yellow painted walls, the pink drapery, the shelves covered in stuffed animals, the empty crib. He took a small step into the room. It was the only uncluttered place in the whole house, clean as a museum exhibit, dust coating everything, everything in its right place. He looked at the crib and his chest spasmed and a small sound escaped him. He pressed his hand tightly around the bottle of Vicodin in his pocket. This was the furthest he'd set foot in here for almost three years. The skin of his face drew tight against his skull as he grinned like a wolf.

"Three years," he said to the darkness and that spasm in his chest choked everything out of him. His escaping breath almost sounded like a laugh.

He retreated down to the kitchen, digging at his eyes as if to shut out some vision. He tripped on one of the piles of newspapers and sent the stack fluttering over the linoleum and under the table. He cursed aloud. He made no attempt to replace the papers. He walked to the

refrigerator where an unopened bottle of scotch stood on top amongst the rabble of half-eaten potato chip bags and boxes of Girl Scout cookies. He grabbed the bottle, tested it in his hand, felt the pleasing weight of it.

He'd bought the bottle special for the occasion. He wasn't much of a liquor guy, but yesterday he'd gone down to Laketown Liquors and asked Billy what was the best bottle of scotch he had in the place. Billy'd scanned the shelves behind him and pulled a thin tube out of a long line of them, and handed the tube to Josh.

"Talisker, 10 year. Good fucking scotch, man," he'd said. It had been pricey too, but Josh bought it anyway.

He walked back into the living room and put his coat on and buttoned it tight, placing the bottle in one of the inside pockets, where it bulged like a third arm. He rummaged in the front hall closet and pulled out a scarf his mom had given him when he was fourteen. It was silver and blue, the Detroit Lions, perpetual losers. He'd been a huge fan of the Lions when he was a teenager, when he'd thought he was going to be a professional football star. He'd thought a lot of things when he was a teenager.

He wrapped the scarf around his neck and tucked the loose ends into his coat the way his mom had taught him, and opened the front door, pausing as he remembered something. He went back into the kitchen and grabbed the one page note he'd written out the night before as he'd finished a twelve pack of Pabst and his eyes had blurred from a veil of tears and drink. He stuffed the note in his pocket and headed out the front door into the howling winter wind. He didn't bother locking the front door; he wasn't coming back anyway.

Darlene was born a week early, but was otherwise a perfectly healthy 7-lb baby girl. Lina was in labor for fourteen hours and despite the near-constant prodding of the doctor and nurses, she eschewed any painkiller beside Tylenol and gritted her teeth and screamed when she was in pain and panted when she wasn't. Eventually she was always in pain and the contractions came long and hard and she screeched like she was being torn in two and Josh stood impotently by her side, holding her hand and one of her legs up, and sweating, wishing he could be more help, feeling vestigial. No amount of breathing classes or labor reenactments could have prepared him for the neon-light-pacing-hallway boredom of labor, or the feeling of being swept up in some great rush of humanity as his first child came out of his wife and laid on the table below her and looked into the world and screamed at what she saw.

And Darlene had screamed. The only time Josh's mom called him after he'd moved to Grand Haven, she'd been drunk and had told him slurry stories about her own labor with him, and about how he'd had to be smacked three or four times before he'd say a peep, and even then his voice had been weak and milky, like a cat meowing in the distance. But Darlene had come out of her mother screeching like the wind and her eyes wide, and black as beetles, and her arms splayed out and fingers working the air like dough. She didn't quiet until the nurses placed her in Josh's arms, and then it was like a lamp being switched off, her mouth closed and she looked up into his eyes and he fell in love with her. And that was what it was like, one moment he was walking along perfectly fine, and then the next the very ground he walked on just disappeared and he was plunged headlong into the obsession that was Darlene, his baby girl. He'd held her like that, looking down into her perfect, alien, squashed face and she'd yawned and his chest had hitched with sobs his body wasn't equipped to handle, and eventually he had to give her to her mother. It was the most selfless thing he ever did.

But that first embrace established something hard and palpable. Over the next few weeks,

after Lina and Josh had taken their new daughter home and sat up the whole first night for fear they'd miss something, it became clear that Darlene only had eyes for her daddy. Sure she spent hours suckling at her mother's breasts, but as soon as the milk ran dry she would bark and moan until finally Josh would grab her up and lay her on his lap, or cuddle her close, or set her in some pillows next to him on the couch so she could watch him as he existed. Just existed. It was terrifying and intoxicating all at once, being the center of someone's universe.

Josh didn't head back out to the street, but instead followed the wooded pathway to the beach that ran around from the side of his house. It was pitch black, but he knew the way by heart. He'd followed it almost every night since they'd moved here, down to the lake, and the ceaseless rolling of the surf. It calmed him, reminded him why he'd come here, even now after all that'd happened. Reminded him that there were bigger things than himself, if only until he fell asleep or his ass got so sore that he had to go back inside.

The sounds of the woods were amplified in the blackness: owls hooting, snow flopping from branches, the wind shivering the tops of the trees, a solitary screech of a crow. His footsteps made crunching noises as his feet penetrated the thin scrim of ice atop the nearly foot of snow. His breath was ragged. Already he could feel the Vicodin slowing down his thoughts, making it harder to focus on where he was going, or what he was doing. He closed his eyes and lights bloomed there behind his eyelids. His breath was rushing in his ears.

He heard something else in the woods, footsteps, like an echo of his own. He opened his eyes and looked toward the source of the sound. He saw a shape in between the trees, tall, black, with skeletal fingers or branches rising up and into the undergrowth of the trees. Two glistening eyes watched him. He heard the grunting of hot breath on the frozen air. His own breath froze in his throat as he looked away and hurried his steps and told himself that he wasn't really seeing any of this.

But he'd seen the eyes before; they were nothing new.

Then the trees broke and he was standing at the top of a tall, wooden staircase, looking out at the beach and the solitary moon in its inky perch. He followed the stairs down to the beach and found a place close to the edge of the frozen water, which had grown, piling up one thin layer at a time until the edge of the water looked like seven foot waves frozen in mid break. He set himself down gingerly on the rock hard sand and snow and ice, pulling his knees up to his chest, and pulling the bottle of scotch out of his coat.

His fingers buzzed from the Vicodin. They were clumsy as he fumbled with the foil and cork top. The cork popped out and he spilled a little scotch on his jacket sleeve. He slurped at his sleeve and the first burning taste dribbled down his throat. He coughed then put the bottle to his lips and he swallowed. He coughed some more. The liquor tore at him and lit little flames in his esophagus and then his stomach and then his whole body, setting his fingertips aflame so that he felt like he was sitting next to a roaring bonfire, on the inside.

The pills and liquor worked on him quickly, making his head swim, making his extremities into puffs of vapor flapping in the wind. He was aware that it was freezing outside, but remotely, as though he were being read a story of someone in the cold, while sitting somewhere warm and wrapped in a blanket. He took another swallow of scotch, and lay back on the gentle incline of the beach.

The moon glowed, howling its silent, permanent rage to the earth. Ice crystals in the air made the moonlight into a halo and Josh tried to remember what that meant. Lina had told him once, what it meant when the moon had a halo, but his thoughts were disconnected and they

came in and went out as regularly as the waves in the long, frozen distance.

He closed his eyes and he could still see the moon, or some other light in the darkness. It shimmered and beckoned. His breathing shallowed. He took another swallow of whiskey and sighed, his body buzzing, as electric as an egg timer, ticking and ticking. He could feel himself falling asleep, that familiar dropping into the quicksand of his subconscious, like a buzzing body mold of earth and he fought against it because this had to work. This wasn't some cry for help or attempt to reconcile or some other psychobabble bullshit; this was the real deal. It *had* to work. He was done with all this; he was looking for the exit sign in the buzz, not another door.

He tried to sit up but couldn't. He was as trapped as a mammoth in ice, but his wispy, vapor arms, made as they were of fluidity and kinesis, could still move through the air and so he brought the bottle of scotch to his lips again and forced himself to take a deep swallow, and then several more swallows until he was coughing and choking and spitting scotch out onto his face and down his cheeks and in his ears, his hair. Scotch dripped onto the snow like amber piss lines.

"It's supposed to be good luck," he said to the darkness, and it was true. That was what Lina had told him about halos around the moon. He chuckled and the laughter came back to him as if from halfway down the beach.

He drank more and there was no more burn, just liquid fire and the somber lick of the waves against ice, 100 yards away, washing over him. He drank again and held the bottle up to the moon. The scotch looked black in the moonlight. Half of it was gone. Josh set the bottle aside and it thunked against the frozen sand and ice, and he reached in his pocket, pulled out the bottle of pills. He shook out two more and sat up, his wounded equilibrium taking him around in large vicious circles. He stared at the pills in his cupped hands for a long moment, his mind tracing loops of incoherence, fingering and losing and fingering and losing the thought that it wasn't exactly too late, but if he took these last pills and finished that bottle of liquor, it probably would be, and if there was a fork in the road, this was it, and if he wanted to turn back, he still might have time, and etc and etc and etc.

And he saw how blue his fingers looked in the moonlight and that brought a whole other razor-wire string of thoughts to his head, the very thoughts he'd come out here to forget, forever. He thought of Darlene's tiny, blue, curled fingers, and that snapped his wandering mind into horrible focus, and his own blue hands started to shake. The pills jittered. He shook his head against the memories, but it didn't help. He tossed the pills to the back of his throat and swallowed. The pills left little snail-trails of bitter saliva down his throat which he tried to wash away with a draught of scotch, but which stayed until long after his mind had wandered far away off this beach into some nightmare he couldn't articulate. This was the bonfire he needed to jump through before he could reach the end, the final labyrinth, the end. The end.

He chugged the liquor; his stomach revolted, but he fought for the chance to bathe in that bonfire. Her little blue fingers, curled like the sad talons of a tiny bird. He finished the bottle and looked up into the moon and he made faces at the moon's rage.

"Fuck you!" Josh yelled. "Fuckin fuck fuck...fuck."

And there was a certain jazz to it, a rhythm that beat with his pulse and tapped out a heart-monitor hopelessness. It was the sound of parents sitting next to hospital gurneys and sobbing their fucking heads off and praying for that one mistake to be taken back even though the evidence lay there wrapped in low thread-count cotton. And of the helpless, trite doctor platitudes. "*There was really nothing you could do...*" The sound of being left standing on the edge of an impossible abyss so deep and sad and black that you felt compelled to take one step and then another and then another.

“*There was really nothing you could do...*”

“Fuckin Goddamn...”

Lina, for her part, didn't even make it to the hospital before she just sprinted to the edge of the abyss and flung herself in. She didn't even look back to see if Josh was following her; she just went bye-bye. And now every day for her was as if nothing happened, a whole string of Fridays with a never-ending lot of Saturdays to look forward to. She'd never have to worry about finding Darlene cold and blue on the living room floor because Darlene went on and on and on for her. Josh had waited patiently for three years at the edge, looking into the blackness, waving his hands out in hopes that one day Lina would reach back and come home, but she wasn't going to. He knew that now. And now tonight he had his own date with the abyss.

He finished the bottle of scotch and the moon dribbled like so much white marshmallow cream. It wobbled in the glaze of tears over his eyes, and finally he closed his eyes and felt himself dropping, dropping, dropping, tiptoeing to the edge of the abyss. It didn't stare at him; it ignored him. He called and heard his own voice echoed back, as it had sounded on that day, “Oh fuck, fuck, no...” and his whole body clenched to hear those words so clear. Those words, spluttered, spat out onto the floor next to his daughter. He hadn't even been awake really when he'd said them, but he remembered them so clearly. “Oh fuck, fuck, no...”

The abyss widened and there was vertigo and it gripped his vision and his heart with that tantalizing, coaxing voice that all jumpers feel eventually. He took a step forward, and gravel skittered over the edge and out of view, and part of him was aware even now the absurdity of this mental construction. He knew he was dying, and in the end he'd created a cliff and a wide expanse to symbolize it. He laughed and laughed and laughed at his own unimaginativeness, and his voice echoed back to him, “Oh fuck, fuck, no...”

He stopped laughing.

Another step and there was only one more left. One left. The end of the construction. The end. He didn't think. For once, he just put one foot in front of the other and kissed the darkness.

“Y'oshu'a.”

“Y'oshu'a.”

“Wake up.”

Josh opened his eyes and he felt strong, large hands lifting him up into a seated position. The alcohol and pills pulled at him, coaxed him, tempted him to just lie back and ignore the hands and the voice. *Come back to bed; come back to bed.*

“Y'oshu'a.”

The voice was calm and powerful, like the wash of waves, and for a moment Josh thought he was hearing voices in the lake. *Come back to bed.* He went limp and tried to lean back but the hands held him firm.

“Y'oshu'a, it's time to wake up.”

And Josh had this random good memory from second grade of his mom calling to him from the foot of the stairs and the smell of bacon and eggs and morning and light winter snowfall. He lifted his head and reached up and felt his mussed up, second-grade hair.

“That's it. Come back. Wake up.”

Josh opened his eyes for the second time, for the *real* time, and he looked out at the lake and the frozen waves and the sand and ice and part of him was immediately, horribly certain he was in hell. It was exactly like the place he'd just left.

A flash of white shimmered on the edge of his vision, something brilliant and gilded and

present in a way that made everything else feel like an afterthought. He followed the shimmer and saw one, brilliant white wing spread out into the winter wind, catching feathers, vibrating, ghostly. He looked into Michael's eyes as the angel bent over him and cradled him, and he shook his head, "No, no, please..."

Michael smiled, "Yes, Y'oshu'a. It's time. The dream is over."

Chapter Two

Chuck Gardner meets an old friend

By the time Gabriel, archangel of ∞, clapped him on the back and forever changed the course of his life, Chuck Gardner was deep into his 2,556th consecutive day of drunkenness. When he woke that morning there were no obvious signs that this day would be any different than any other, but there were clues, small whispers along the way, which he naturally paid no attention to.

The day began similarly to the preceding 2,555 days. Chuck laid for a while in his nest of bundled jackets, looking at the gray-amber lines of morning light creeping through the cracks in the boards. He tried to not think about anything because thinking hurt too much. Still, thoughts came, mostly snatches from the night before. And they hurt, the thoughts. After a few minutes he sat up and felt the blood empty painfully from his head. His heart thudded against his ribs. He whacked his chest a couple of times, loosened up stringers of mucus and spat onto the patched rug, then stood up with a grunt.

Chuck lived in a room in the back of a half-condemned house in East Atlanta. He'd been renting it from one of his "drinking buddies" for about a year and though the two of them hadn't actually spoken in months, they had a deal worked out where Chuck gave his buddy \$75 a month, and in return his buddy made sure the city of Atlanta didn't bulldoze the place. There was no running water or heat or even more than one or two unbroken windows in the place, but Chuck had no use for the first, and had alcohol for the second and third, so all in all Chuck felt he had it pretty good, or at least as good as he deserved. Some months a mysterious case of Pabst even showed up at the back door.

The house was built to hold at least three people, but since no one else wanted the place, he had the whole house to himself. Even so, he had lately started peeking in all the closets and rooms each morning to make sure he was still alone. Privacy was the only thing Chuck prized as much as alcohol and for a very long time he'd managed to maintain it nearly perfectly, for good and for bad. But just a few weeks ago he'd stumbled out of his room to find some kid in the living room getting a blowjob from a hooker Chuck vaguely recognized from one of the Eastside shelters. Neither the woman nor the kid noticed him, and so he slunk back into his room until he heard the grunting and sighing, and then the whisper of cash.

Chuck had waited for ten minutes until he was certain they were both gone, and then he'd poked his head out of his room. The woman was still in the house, lying against the far wall, her head lolling on her scrawny neck like a pumpkin on a toothpick. She saw him from across the room and called to him.

"Hey! How long you been watchin me?"

"I...I wasn't..." Chuck stammered, fighting an urge to just crawl back to his corner and pull his dingy covers back over his head.

"Yes, you were. I seen you jus' a few minutes ago."

Her speech was slow and drawn out like she was talking in slow-motion. "You got a drink?"

Chuck emerged from his bedroom. "I was gonna ask y'all the same thing," he said, offering as warm a smile as he could, but the woman didn't smile back, she just shifted her head to the other shoulder and fixed him with a winking look as if she were staring into the sun.

"This yer place?" she asked, closing her eyes.

“I pay someone to sleep here, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You mad that I’m here?”

“No. I just rent out the back. You aren’t gettin in my way.”

“Alright. I’m gonna sit for a while, then.”

Chuck shrugged noncommittally, “Like I say, this ain’t my place.”

She nodded as if he’d stated some universal truth then said, “I just gotta get outta the sun for awhile. The light’s just so bright.”

She squinted again as if for effect and Chuck looked out the half-boarded window at the overcast sky. The two of them lingered in silence for a moment.

“I’ve seen you around,” he said, fishing for her name.

“I’ve been around.”

There were a few more moments of silence, then she asked, “I suck your dick?”

“Naw.”

“You want me to?” Chuck shook his head and pointed to the ten dollar bill crumpled and sticking out of her bra strap.

“You got more money than I do, right about now.”

“On the house, then.”

“I appreciate it, but...umm, you can stay as long as you want. There’s some sheets in my room...”

“I’m fine here.”

“Suit yerself.”

He lingered for awhile watching her until she started to snore and then he went and got the sheets anyway. He covered her up and headed out into the blue-sky cloudiness of Atlanta in late Fall to find his own way to shake hands with oblivion. Later that night, with a head swirling from two pints of gin, he came back to find the hooker gone and his blankets gone too.

That had been two weeks ago, and he hadn’t seen her since, but her memory kept him checking the closets and bathrooms every morning. Part of him hoped he’d find her again. Another part just wanted his blankets back.

This morning, though, there was no hooker in the living room, just the sound of his shuffling bare feet on the worn-wood floor. There was the sickening rush of blood in his ears, the splitting of his head down the middle, the whacking of his aging heart against his ribcage. Unseen birds chirruped outside.

He walked across the kitchen and pissed into the sink, his eyes barely open, his lips puffy and numb. He snorted; he hadn’t been able to breathe through his nose for a decade. He snorted again, spat, zipped up.

“Where you at?” he asked, though he wasn’t entirely certain who he was talking to, or at, or about.

His hips hurt. They always hurt when he was hung-over. It was one of those countless mysteries he didn’t have answers for. He hobbled back into the living room.

“Where you at?” he asked again.

His mind was like a glass window whose angle to the sun was such that all that could be seen was a solid white sheen. There was no thinking, just the sheen. And it would stay that way until he got his first drink, then slowly, with each draught, the angle would change and thoughts would begin to flow, ideas would start to empty out and Chuck Gardner would wake up for the second time, for the *true* time.

There were streamers at the edges of his vision, crawling over one another, like lightning

silhouettes that he couldn't quite catch. When he turned his head to see, they disappeared or moved again to the periphery, never really seen but always there. *The Rats*. Like a hammer, they stalked, waiting for that odd slow morning when Chuck wouldn't beg enough change outside the EZ-Mart, waiting for mid-day to come without some gin or vodka or mouthwash, waiting to smash the white sheen glass of his mind and leave him shaking and chomping welts into his tongue, and vomiting bloody foam onto the sidewalk.

Chuck stood in the middle of the living room, hearing but not listening to the birds outside his window, and trying to think through the construction light of his mind and wanting to make some kind of plan for the day, but knowing it was no use. He was already too far gone to do anything useful with the day. It was never a good sign when he woke up to *The Rats* already knocking on his door, crawling and mewling, waiting. There was darkness behind those streamers, darkness he knew, had known, and was very much afraid of. They were all the push he needed to ditch any grander plans than the quick get-out-of-jail-free card of panhandling and pints. There would be no standing outside of Home Depot hoping to get some day work moving some furniture or painting, no bid for pay large enough to keep both *The Rats* and his absentee landlord at bay. It had been over three weeks since he'd done more than languish outside the EZ-Mart scrounging for pints, but this wasn't the day to change that. No, this wasn't the day.

He looked at his hands. They were gray and hard, with deep-set wrinkles that crisscrossed both sides. They were the hands of a much older man than Chuck's 57, and they shamed him in their unearned decrepitude. They were tokens of a life well wasted, outward and obvious the way the damage to his heart and liver were hidden and secret.

"Where'd you get to?" he asked and chuckled to himself, shaking his shabby, porcupine head. "I dunno, ole boy... I dunno."

He stared at the spot in the corner where the hooker had lain and a small needle prick stabbed his chest. He wished now that he'd taken her up on the blowjob; he hadn't been with a woman in years. Hell, he hadn't even *touched* another person since time out of mind, and suddenly the years of physical solitude weighed on him unbearably. Like his hands and his liver and his heart there was damage everywhere, before him, in him, and behind him, wreckage. Wife, kids, jobs, endless strangers he'd spurned or who'd spurned him because he smelled like garbage, all of these interactions dumped like sour milk in his stomach, giving his hands another reason to shake, revealing themselves to be the *real* poison he'd been drowning in all these years, not alcohol but some self-spun amniotic sac, which cloyed to him, keeping everyone out, but more importantly keeping him in.

A tortured sound crawled from his lips and laid limp as a rag on the floor. He sat with the echo of the sound for a long time, hating himself not only for the sound but also for the thoughts and emotions and actions which had produced it. He dropped his aged and shaking hands to his sides.

All of this loathing and negative self-reflection were part of Chuck's morning routine, nourishing that part of his brain which needed to believe deeply and unwaveringly in a flawed Chuck Gardner in order to keep the door propped wide open for his personal demon, and best friend in defeat, alcohol. If his aching body and gray hands weren't enough to drive him to the bottle, by mid-day his bullied, utterly defeated ego would drag out memories of his wife and his children and the car accident that precipitated his disastrous slide down the rabbit hole. Like moth-eaten photo albums his subconscious would blow the dust off the covers and say, "Hey, Chuck m'boy, remember the good ole' days?" and then trot out memories of baseball games and love making and family dinners, all imbued with a healthy amber glow and set to a Hollywood

soundtrack. They were fictions, of course, these memories--Chuck's wife had left him before their oldest child was even in middle school--but, still, they were effective at getting the ball rolling. It was a lot easier to ignore the addiction when he could convince himself he was a failure and drinking was the only thing that made life bearable. Most days Chuck didn't need the old memories to get himself in the bag, but they were always there if he did.

Chuck made another horrible, moaning sound and then grabbed a dog-eared, greasy cardboard sign and headed to his customary position in front, and a few calculated feet off the property of, the EZ-Mart in Little Five Points.

He'd barely had enough time to get comfortable and unfold his sign when someone threw a ten dollar bill at his feet as they hurried passed.

"Hey, thanks," he said and looked up but the person was gone, a disappearing silhouette against the corona of the sun. He squinted and grabbed up the bill, flattening it against his shirt, testing it against the sky. "Thanks."

He grunted to his feet, a rare grin spread in the spider legs of his beard. He clutched the bill tightly in his fist.

"Jesus. Ten dollars...*already*."

Chuck thought, *Finally, a bit of luck*, and on the fifteen-minute walk from the EZ Mart to Valley's Liquor Emporium he ignored *The Rats* that crawled and gibbered on either side of him. He was going to be free of them today, by ten o' clock no less.

He weighed his options as he walked. He could purchase a fifth of really cheap gin *and* a bottle of tonic water to wash the shit down with (at least until he was too tossed to notice the gin); he could nix the tonic and just save the extra cash in case tomorrow didn't go nearly as well as today; or he could just splurge on a decent quart of vodka or tequila or rum. Briefly a fourth option bloomed in his mind, one that involved coffee and a modest solid breakfast, but he squashed the idea before it could take root, clutching the ten dollar bill even tighter in his gray hands. That wasn't really an option and he knew it.

Valley's was already open when he got there despite the early hour. The cashier eyed him warily when he came in, but he wagged the bill at him and grinned.

"High roller today?" the cashier asked, crossing his massive, tattooed arms.

"Won the lottery," replied Chuck, heading to the gin aisle.

"Don't take all day. Customers'll be here soon."

"I *am* a customer, asshole," said Chuck under his breath as he twisted his beard and scanned the bottom shelves, pawing the bottles with his eyes. Each label took him to a different place, a different time.

He grabbed a bottle of Bombay Sapphire off the top shelf and stared at the drawing of Victoria on the label. She stared not at him, but away, off to the side, as though he were too uncouth for Her Royal Majesty to sully her gaze, or though maybe she was looking sadly into the distance at the far reaches of her long dead empire. Chuck thought of colonial officials in a long ago India, mixing their Sapphire with dull tonic water and grimacing with each sip, praying the quinine would keep malaria at bay and the gin would make them forget where they were. Chuck placed the Sapphire back on the shelf, touching the label one last time; for some reason the ice blue bottle always made him think 19th century thoughts, of empire, and tooth extraction, and remedies in small bottles with small corks and labels.

"If you're just gonna pet the bottles, you can get the hell out of here!" shouted the cashier. He was trapped behind the counter, but he moved to the edge of his cage, pointing one of his beefy fingers at Chuck.

“Fuck you. I got money,” replied Chuck, continuing to eye the bottles of gin.

The cashier’s face flushed and he fully uncrossed his arms. They dangled at his sides as he circled around the counter, bulging and obscene. He had to turn sideways to get through, scraping his ass on the counter as he went, but he shimmied through in one smooth gesture and then headed for Chuck.

“What’d you say to me?” asked the cashier.

“I didn’t say anything.”

Chuck looked around the store in disbelief, for a way out. Blood rushed through his aged heart, made him dizzy. He wasn’t afraid of being manhandled by this pile of meat, or even beaten, he was afraid of being thrown out without anything to drink. He waved his ten dollars in front of him like a shield, but the cashier advanced. Chuck panicked. He grabbed the bottle of Sapphire and clutched it under his armpit like a football and ran away down the aisle in the other direction.

The cashier cried out and chased after him. Chuck rounded the corner at the end of the aisle and nearly lost his footing. His hip slammed into a display of margarita mix and several of the plastic bottles clattered to the floor. He could hear the monster behind him, breathing and snuffling and muttering obscenities under his breath. Chuck could hear the rage in the man’s breathing, and he realized that somehow he’d crossed over some invisible line, there was no going back. This man was going to beat the living shit out of him if he caught him. It was an animating realization; it was now a matter of survival. He grabbed bottles off the shelves and tossed them onto the ground behind him. Some smashed; others clattered and jiggled across the floor. He heard the squeak of the cashier’s shoes in one of the puddles of spilled liquor and then there was a loud crash as the cashier brought down half a shelf of tequila.

“Goddamn!” shouted the cashier from behind him. “Get back here, you drunk ass motherfucker!”

But it was an empty threat, and Chuck hurried down the aisle for the front door, but as he passed the cash register he paused for a moment. He leaned over the counter and pressed a few buttons at random, and incredibly the drawer shot open. It was filled to overflowing with twenties and fifties and tens.

“Oh, hell no!” cried the cashier, getting to his feet, his shoes squeaking and sliding.

Chuck stuffed a handful of twenties (just enough to pay rent, only enough for rent) and a few airplane bottles in his pockets and then, clutching the bottle of gin ever tighter, ran out the front door and down the street, taking the first sharp corner he found. A few minutes later the cashier burst from the store and pointed at Chuck’s wasted and retreating figure.

“Someone stop that fucker! Stop him!” shouted the cashier but there was no one to help. After a moment he added, though Chuck was out of sight, “I see you again I’m gonna fuckin kill you!”

Chuck drank nearly the entire bottle of Sapphire that day, if for no other reason than to get rid of the evidence. It was more than he’d drank in months and he was blacked out by 7pm. He wandered twisted paths across the jagged, rumped sidewalks of East Atlanta, choked with weeds and scrub grass, passing his house multiple times, but never stopping in. He couldn’t stop; he was on a mission to find something, though he didn’t know what. Twice it had crossed his mind to go back to the liquor store and return the cash he’d stolen, and twice he’d tossed the idea out as insane. He’d already opened the gin and the \$10 he’d started with wouldn’t come close to covering the bottle. Besides, the cashier seemed like an honest man; he would kill Chuck if he

ever went back.

So he wandered, his head swirling so violently that he almost felt sober again, like a ship that capsizes so suddenly it pops up the other side and rights itself. The sun was a shimmering golden something behind cotton-ball clouds, and it cast shadows through the trees onto the sidewalk at his feet. He watched the shadows, and elongated or shortened his steps to avoid adding his own to them. They made shapes that looked like familiar objects, then they shifted and became nothing at all.

Twice he thought he saw the woman from a few weeks back out of the corner of his eye, and both times his breath caught in his chest and a strange nervousness he remembered from being a teenager stirred the liquor inside him. But the one time it was someone else, and the other it was a slim, young Beech tree waving in the breeze. They were just tricks of his mind. His mood soured afterwards in both cases.

Once the sun reached its zenith, Chuck found a dark place where two bushes met against a building with yellow, peeled paint and crawled in. The dirt was blessedly cool and it gave the air a musty, ancient smell, and he lay back against the roots of the building and looked out at the street. Pairs of legs passed intermittently, hurrying to wherever their masters needed them to go. Spiders and pill bugs occasionally joined him in his hideaway but only briefly and then they too passed on their way.

Chuck finished the remainder of the gin and the day moved into fast-forward. The shadows of the trees across the street crept from right to left as if the Earth were suddenly revolving a quarter turn every 30 minutes. Chuck marveled at the passing of the time and his good fortune, and the gin set fire to the straw of all the bad things, leaving only the rock of the good and so he forgot about the angry cashier and the fact that he hadn't voluntarily gone a day without a drink in a decade, and when he looked at his hands he didn't see their rough, gray agedness, he saw the hands of a much younger man. He forgot about the hooker. He smiled and his jagged mouth spread above his scraggly beard and the grin touched his eyes and they shone and flashed.

He pulled the crumpled bills he'd *borrowed*—for even in his thoughts he couldn't bring himself to think the word *stolen*—from the liquor store and he counted the money and was surprised to find that it wasn't \$20's he'd grabbed, like he'd thought, but a handful of \$50's and so he had \$350, enough for him to pay his rent forward an extra month and *also* have enough left over for drinks the next two months.

What fortune there is in the world, he thought and he meant it and it was like a little benediction, though Chuck hadn't been to a church ceremony since he was 17-years-old. His life had wandered twisted paths since then.

He stuffed the money back in his pocket and crawled out from his hideaway just as the sun gave up the reins to the moon, and yellow and orange and red fingers of light reached halfway across the sky, the last, dying gasps of this 2,556th day. Chuck looked around and realized he'd finished up not far away from the Long Hop, a bar he'd frequented in those days when he could afford to frequent bars. He decided to treat himself to a good and proper beer. He deserved it. It had been a long time.

He'd had many friends at the Long Hop of the type that frequent small, local bars that pay more attention to the prices of their beers than to dressing the walls with anything more fancy than local tchotchke and sports paraphernalia. That is to say, Chuck had many people with whom he'd talk endlessly about politics and sports and jobs, but about whom he never knew anything at all. They were creampuff friendships; all sugar and sweetness but no substance. And

now, at least five years on, he didn't even remember any of their names.

Still, he bent his path to this place. He had the money to once again sit at the bar as an equal and he was going to do that, go up to the bar as if he belonged there and talk to people and smile and laugh and raise glasses to victories past, and he was going to ignore the sideways looks of the young, well-heeled hipsters in the corner, and raise his glass to even them. Creampuff friendships there may be at the Long Hop, but when one is starving, even junk food will do.

He patted his pockets and felt the wad of cash and then he walked the three blocks to the corner where the Long Hop used to be. Instead, a new bar called the Cloverleaf Bar and Grill, stood in its place. Its garish sign splashed the cement with alternating reds and greens. Chuck stood for a moment on the other side of the street, looking up at the sign and wondering sadly when the bar had changed its name. Had it really been that long?

Other things had changed as well. The spotty, empty fronts which had characterized this block when he'd known it were born anew, and sporting names like The Cosmetics Corner, or simply the word *Shop*. The new fronts' brilliant colors and dainty displays made the small, green, peeled-paint façade of the Cloverleaf incongruous, like a single wilting flower amongst a bouquet of popping buds. The shabby look of the bar reassured Chuck. Maybe the name was all that had really changed.

He drifted across the street and pushed open the door. It squealed on its hinges and every eye was drawn to him. He looked around. The hipsters he'd imagined would be here were, and they sat in the corner and had beers in special glasses and they looked at him like he was a talking dog. The bartender scowled, his face old with lines bracketing his lips and creasing his brow. Chuck paused in the doorway; he knew how he looked, how he smelled, and was even more aware of it now. He patted his pockets and felt the money there and gathered strength from the money. He'd come to sit as an equal at this bar. He pulled the money out and he forced himself to find a seat, next to two men who looked so similar they had to be brothers.

He set the money in a crumpled wad on the worn wood of the bar and said, "I'll take a Pabst." His tongue was heavy in his mouth. He covered his missing teeth with his lips. He didn't look at the bartender.

"I think you've had enough already," replied the bartender.

"I'll decide when I've had enough."

"You drivin'?"

"No."

The bartender shrugged and grabbed a bottle from a cooler behind him and snapped off the cap with a practiced hand. He popped the bottle on the bar and said, "Three bucks." Chuck handed over one of his fifties and the man spent a cruel amount of time studying the bill against the bar's backlighting. Chuck got nervous that he was simply searching for an excuse to kick him out, so he started to drink the beer as fast as he could. But a few seconds later the bartender took the fifty, slammed the buttons on an old, worn cash register and tossed Chuck his change. Chuck just left the change out on the bar; he planned on spending it all.

He took another sip and looked at himself in the crusted mirror behind the bottles of liquor. He was frightened by what he saw. Somewhere between now and the last time he'd looked in a mirror, decades must've passed for all the lines in his cheeks and his forehead, the gray in his beard. His eyes were faded to the dusty color of a hazy, desert sky, gunmetal blue. His reflection confirmed all the worst suspicions he'd harbored every time he'd goggled at the lines and agedness of his hands. He marveled at himself, like he'd marveled at the circus freaks on the midway when he was a child, a long time ago. He was the freak now, a grotesque, the result of

chasing a singular obsession, his body and face and mind perverted by the striving.

He looked back down at his beer and started peeling off the label. He let the little granules of sticky paper drop to the bar in a small pile like the sand in an hourglass. They piled there and he soon forgot about them. He could sense the man next to him looking at him, offering furtive glances like confetti. It made him nervous. He looked at the man in the mirror and was surprised to see him staring right back. For a brief moment they locked eyes and where Chuck would normally have lowered his head and studied his beer, this time he looked.

The man was pale, with eyes like shards of ice and a face that was very old *seeming* though only the thinnest of worry lines scratched the skin between the eyebrows of his otherwise flawless complexion. He held a liquor drink with both hands like a candle and he hunched over the drink as though protecting its flame. Yet even in this hunched shape there was something majestic about him, something which *shown* from him, a radiance that soothed some sputtering equivalency inside Chuck. The feeling, the charge between them, was powerful, if fleeting, and it brought him back to himself. Chuck dropped his eyes and went back to studying his beer, confused by how he felt.

“You found her yet?” asked the man.

“Excuse me?” replied Chuck, confused.

“The woman, the prostitute. You found her yet?”

Chuck was too shocked to do anything but tell the truth. He said, “Not yet. Been looking all day, I suppose...now I think about it.” Chuck paused a moment and then added, “I don’t know where she went. She’s got my blankets.”

The man nodded and kept those icy eyes on Chuck’s face, studying the lines and the scraggles of beard. It was hard to stay calm when you knew you were being looked at by those eyes. There was a weight to the gaze, and it made Chuck’s head spin. He squeezed his eyes shut and kept his head down.

“Hey, get my friend here another beer,” said the man, then he turned back to Chuck and he laughed. “You’re looking a little rough today, Chuck.”

“How do you know...?”

“Your name? Lucky guess, I suppose,” The man finished the rest of his drink and waved at the bartender. “While you’re at it, get me another gin and tonic.” He turned back to Chuck and smiled wide. “My name’s Gabriel.”

The bartender brought them their drinks and set them on the bar much harder than he needed to. “You payin for him?” he asked and Gabriel nodded. “10 bucks, then.”

Gabriel tossed a \$50 bill on the bar and said, “Keep the change, buy your lady some new eyeliner.”

The bartender snatched up the fifty and went to the other end of the bar without so much as a smile. Gabriel turned back to Chuck and whispered, “That guy’s an asshole. He’s been beating the shit out of his girlfriend for months.”

The man sitting next to Gabriel, who looked so similar to him they could have been brothers, fidgeted and cleared his throat.

Gabriel looked back at the man and said sarcastically, “Oh, hey, Michael, I’d almost forgotten you were there. Michael, this is Chuck. Chuck...Michael.”

Chuck tried to say hello but all he could manage was a nod and a strangled, pathetic sound. The two, Gabriel and Michael, looked similar for sure, but there was something very different about them. Where Gabriel was loose and slouched and easy, Michael was rigid and fierce. Chuck never looked Michael once in the face.

Gabriel slid Chuck's beer over to him.

"Thanks," said Chuck and then added with a nod toward the two men, "Your names are very Biblical."

Gabriel's lips parted in a thin smile and he glanced over at Michael.

Then Gabriel raised his drink in the air and said, "A toast. To new friends and new beginnings and one door closing and another opening and all that happy horseshit."

Chuck and Gabriel clinked glasses while Michael fidgeted and sipped his Diet Coke. The threesome settled into an uneasy silence. Chuck watched his beer bottle, and listened to the sounds of the bar, voices intertwining, noodles of thoughts and opinions in a soup of junk rock and clinking glasses and scraped chair legs. He felt light-headed and giddy at the same time, a combination that left his head detached from his body, floating around somewhere on the ceiling. He'd felt like this once before, when he'd tried whippets with some Tech students downtown, when he'd followed a trail of sorority girls in search of a free keg, and woken next morning with a terrible headache and lungs that felt like they were on fire. Those whippets, for all the hell they'd unleashed on his middle-aged lungs, had sent him around the moon and pinned his head to the ceiling all night. He felt like that now, spinning wildly out of control.

Gabriel leaned into Chuck, "Drink up, buddy. Things are gonna be very different soon."

Chuck did as he was told and took a long swig of beer. Gabriel smiled, sipped his drink, and then twirled his glass in his hand and opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

"Chuck...I gotta tell you, man...there's a lot more going on than you even know. *A lot* more. What you're seeing now, what you've seen all your life, it's like a ∞ -damn hall of mirrors, bending everything back to you, making you see yourself over and over and over again. But it's about as real as the drunk you're feeling right now...about as fleeting. Behind those mirrors there's gears and cogs and *rats*...and beautiful things, more beautiful than you can imagine, and just a thin piece of glass separates you from all that stuff.

"I'm telling you this 'cause it makes me sad to see you so damn determined to miss it all. That mirror, the maze of mirrors, it's *you*. *You* are keeping yourself from seeing behind the veil. You're wandering around in the darkness of your own accord. All you gotta do is switch on the light."

Gabriel snapped his fingers and looked Chuck sharply in the eyes. He became serious and fierce, and Chuck now saw that this one, Gabriel, could be just as intense as the other. Deep down, these two men were made of the same stuff. Chuck brought the beer to his lips with shaking hands.

Gabriel looked away again and laughed to himself, shaking his head.

"I'm not trying to freak you out. I realize we're different, you and me. Same pattern for the most part, but totally different cloth." Chuck nodded vacantly. Gabriel became contemplative and looked into his drink, guided the slice of lime through the ice and gin with his straw and then frowned. "Though, I suppose, when it comes to it, we aren't really all that different...not in the end...not really."

Michael fidgeted in his seat and coughed, "Gabriel..." Gabriel stiffened at the sound of his voice but Michael persisted. "Gabriel, we're not here for him...you know this..."

"Yeah. Got it." Gabriel finished his drink and set the glass down hard on the bar. "Hey! Bartender! Get me a scotch, will ya? Don't care which."

He brought his hands to his face and dug his knuckles into his eyes. Chuck looked from Gabriel to Michael and back to Gabriel, astonished. It was the first time he'd heard either of them speak to one another and it was like they were speaking a completely different language. Or

rather it was like listening to someone speak English but on a CD that kept skipping, so that the words were garbled syllables, linguistic confetti. Surely the fifth of gin had turned Chuck's ears soft.

Gabriel remained for a long time with his hands covering his face and his shoulders slumped, and when he finally pulled his hands away, for a very brief moment Chuck saw in his unguarded eyes all the weariness and sadness he carried. It was like being held underwater by some masked assailant and only being able to stare up into his eyes as the blackness overtook you. Chuck gulped for air, gulped down his beer and then Gabriel looked at him and smiled and the veil went back up, and there was radiance again.

The bartender came back with a tumbler and slammed it on the bar, and poured the scotch. He brought the water hose up and Gabriel shouted at him. Michael coughed and looked uncomfortable. Chuck cowered around his empty beer bottle. The room was spinning. He tried to track the quivering zoom lines of the wood paneling and the liquor bottles and the drunk hipsters, but his eyes just shivered in their sockets. His stomach soured. His bowels loosened.

"What's wrong with you, Chuck?" he asked himself under his breath. He shook his head. It didn't help.

His fingers pressed into the wood of the bar. His gray knuckles paled.

Gabriel turned back to him, sipping his scotch. He continued but Chuck didn't understand a word, "I guess we're really like you guys. For the most part at least. But of course there's the wings."

Gabriel reached back and smacked the air behind him and there was the sound of rustling tobacco leaves and then a dusty white feather popped out of thin air and drifted silently to the floor. Chuck traced the feather's descent and a feverish grin spread on his face. His thoughts came unhinged and just sort of flapped in the twisting storm the bar had become. That didn't just happen, right? He asked this over and over until it became another unanswered thing in his head.

"The only difference I can see..." continued Gabriel but Chuck studied his empty beer bottle, the only thing in the room that still made sense. His heartbeat was thumping and rushing in his ears and he was sweating through his shirt. He could feel the heat on the back of his neck, and then Gabriel was saying something about the Garden of Eden and lights and His eye and Chuck was certain someone had set a light bulb a few inches from the back of his neck but he was too drunk and wild and disoriented to turn and look. He grinned and grinned and tried to just focus on the damn beer bottle and Gabriel's words and not on the fact that ∞-damn if he wasn't burning up it's so hot in here and the room wasn't even visible it was spinning so madly. He just closed his eyes and listened as Gabriel and Michael hissed angrily at each other in their jumbled, skipping-CD language and he was certain this time that they actually *were* talking like that and even though the room was spinning so hard he couldn't open his eyes and he was now pretty sure he was having a heart attack and he was going to fall backwards right off his stool he knew that something wasn't right about these two guys and that he probably should have never come into the bar. In the back of his mind a little prayer crawled out of a box of memories he hadn't opened in years, a prayer as sincere and simple as that of a child who begs for snow to cancel school. He said: *Please, ∞, if you just let me survive this, I promise I'll stop drinking.* But the storm raged on, more powerfully than before and he kept promising and ∞ laughed at him but he promised and ∞ laughed and he promised.

And then Gabriel leaned back into him and said, "But, hey, listen. There's something I need to tell you..." and Michael started to fidget and Gabriel ignored him and said, "...there're big things going down. *Huge* things..." and then Michael stood up and it was like Chuck was

looking at a bear standing on its hind legs and roaring. He was terrifying and the bartender noticed that something was happening and started to wander over to them and Gabriel kept talking to Chuck and Chuck had his eyes open now watching everything happening around him and though the room was still a hurricane Gabriel and Michael were like its eye and there was a feeling of electricity building up in him like when you're about to touch a doorknob and you just know you're gonna get shocked but you touch the damn thing anyway. Gabriel said, "...You'd do best to set the bottle down for a while, buddy. Sober up, keep your eyes clear..." and Chuck pushed the bottle of beer away from him even though it was empty anyway, he didn't even really realize he was doing it, and then Gabriel reached over and clapped him on the back and suddenly the whole ∞-damn world exploded into a shining white light that was hotter and more icy cold than anything Chuck had ever felt in his life and he *did* fall backwards into the shining bright emptiness that opened up all around him. He heard in the void Gabriel's voice telling him, "...that's right, man, that's right. Big things are coming, real soon. The greatest show on..." and then Michael yelled and the bartender started yelling and somewhere in the distance, receding like an echo far away was Gabriel saying, "Get ready, man, 'cause the shit's about to hit the fan," and Chuck fell and fell and fell until he landed with a thud back in his stool, in the Cloverleaf Bar and Grill, alone, and more sober than he'd been in ten years.

Chapter Three

Katrina Freeman kisses her mother goodbye

Katrina walked into *Pulse*, a club near Midtown Atlanta, and stood awkwardly at the threshold. She looked around. She felt the throbbing music, she heard the roar of the people. Lights flashed and sparkled. She pulled her dress down a little, and held her clutch tighter under her arm. Some big-haired chick sitting at a table a few feet away gave her a nasty look, but Katrina was feeling good, she was feeling transcendent; she wasn't gonna let some catty bitch ruin her good time. She had a night off for once, and she was going to enjoy it. She was going to empty herself onto the dance floor.

She scanned the crowd for a face she recognized, and saw a guy from a psych class she'd taken a year ago when she'd still been enrolled in classes. His name was Sherrod, or Terrell, or something. She picked a path through the crowd and pushed next to him at the bar. He was tall, and blandly handsome. He smiled at her. She smiled back and leaned into him, put her lips to his ear.

"We had class together, didn't we?" she asked. "Sherrod, right?"

They switched positions and he put his mouth to her ear. His breath was sour with vodka, but the warmth of it tickled the side of her neck.

"Yeah. And you're Katrina." He said her name like he'd practiced it. There was something country in the way he emphasized the middle syllable of her name that excited her.

She leaned back and looked at him for a moment, making a show of it, letting him look at her, enjoying his looking at her. Then she said, "Buy me a drink."

Sherrod flattered himself by raising his hand to the bartender. She smiled at the side of his face and adjusted her dress again, flipped her hair back over her shoulders. Sherrod turned around a few moments later with a couple of shots of vodka and he handed one to her. She nodded, raised the glass, toasted to nothing, and the two of them drank the shots down.

Sherrod leaned into her after, "Do you come here often? I haven't seen you here before."

Katrina waved a hand at him and replied, "Boring. Next question."

She watched his reaction, his brown eyes sag into something childish and confused, a little pathetic. She waved her hand again and smiled at him.

"I don't wanna talk to you," she said and grabbed his hand and pulled him behind her through the crowd to the massive dance floor at the center of things.

Katrina let go of his hand at the edge, cutting him adrift in the writhing tadpole pond. She looked back at him and smiled and her teeth were blue in the blacklight, her eyes a filament gray. She backed into the mess, closing her eyes, feeling the thud of the drums. She'd drunk a pint of vodka on the train ride over here, and it was spreading like a bonfire in her stomach, animating her limbs, lithe and thinly-muscled, like cords of driftwood scarred with the strangle-lines of kudzu, her veins. She was well-aware of her body's beauty, its sexual authority, a thing she'd known since she was eleven. Her dress was in concert with her body and she moved; it rode up as high as it could without ending the mystery.

She opened her eyes and Sherrod was still staring at her from the edges of the flashing lights, a red and blue twilight ghost. She beckoned him and then turned and twined her hands above her head, waited for his arms to wrap around her, closed her eyes. He pressed against her and she could smell the mingled alcoholic tang of drunken sweat, the softer notes of the cologne he'd put on his skin hours ago. Under it all was the smell of him, sand and wood.

He stiffened against her and she bent over and ground into him. His hands kneaded the flesh of her hips. She stood straight again and pressed herself flat against his chest, flipping her hair into his face, letting him smell her. His lips were against her neck and kissing under her ear. She let him. She pushed into him, like two fingers squeezing out a splinter, or poison from a wound. She pushed and pushed and rolled around until she could feel the tension in his fingers and his chest and his beating heart.

She closed her eyes again and the music filled her head, ignited the liquor, and the conflagration bathed her mind in a yellow thrumming emptiness and she grinned the most terrifying grin in the room, the grin of a woman who's got nowhere to run. She turned around to face Sherrod and she grabbed his hips and brought him to her and she kissed him hard. She breathed herself into his mouth and she rubbed herself against his thigh, and his hands moved from her ass to her back to her hips like lost children in a mall. She bit his lip, heard him breathe in sharply and his body recoil a little. But she grabbed him tighter and tasted salt and nickel in her mouth.

And then she pushed him away and she could see a rill of blood on his lower lip. His whole body was rigid, his eyes were glazed. She smiled and walked past him, grabbed his arm and dragged him off the dance floor. They wandered to the bathrooms and she could feel the moment rushing in on her, the danger and the violence rushing to fill the yellow emptiness inside her stomach. Her heart was thudding in her ears, her thighs quivered. There was a line of black-dressed girls unspooling from the women's bathroom and the girls chattered and chirped and sucked their teeth as Katrina pulled Sherrod into the men's bathroom. Someone slow-clapped.

A scrawny white kid in a Lakers jersey and oversized black jeans was at one of the urinals, his back to them. He shook his dick and said to the wall, "A lotta fine ass bitches in this place tonight, know what I'm sayin?" He turned around and he saw Katrina and his face paled. He zipped up his pants and gave them a wide berth as he made his exit.

Katrina heckled him, "You can watch if you want," but the kid scurried away.

She backed into the furthest stall from the door and pulled Sherrod after her. She sat down on the toilet and unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his pants, pushed up his shirt and raked her fingernails down his stomach. She let the weight of his belt buckle pull his pants to the ground as she grabbed his cock and kissed its head. His penis was long and skinny and she kissed it and breathed onto it but didn't put it in her mouth. He pushed forward, but she held it tight in her hand, made him do the work. The door opened and there was the sound of feet shuffling to the urinals.

She stood and lifted her leg onto the toilet seat, her heel stabbing against the porcelain. She pulled her underwear aside and said, "Lick it." She said it loudly so that the dude standing at the urinal with his dick in his hand would hear, be shocked, be jealous. Sherrod paused for a moment, clearly far deeper than he'd planned, and then he bent to his knees and started to kiss and lick her pussy. She leaned into the corner and grabbed his head and kneaded her fingers into his hair and pressed his face against her, her breathing quickening as she did so. He didn't know what he was doing; his tongue jabbed and scraped against her, furtive and unconfident. But she hissed anyway and put on a show and dug her heel into the side of the toilet and ground her hips into his face.

Another pair of feet shuffled in and out of the bathroom and Katrina grabbed Sherrod's hair and pulled him to his feet. She dropped her underwear and turned around. "Fuck me," she said and he paused again.

“I don’t have a condom...”

“Fuck me.”

He grabbed her hips and she pushed with her toes to her fullest height, bent over against the far wall. He pushed himself inside of her, as graceless with his dick as he’d been with his tongue. There was pain for a moment, but then the pain melted away into a building throb as he pushed against her. She closed her eyes and saw yellow, a bare tree, a field going on and on forever, empty. She fumbled her way through it, and she bit her lip and held on tight as he grunted behind her and she tried to stay in that bright yellow and empty and tried to just not think at all and she made sounds that turned her on and she reached back and played with herself and made more sounds and feet shuffled in and then more and soon feet were all around the stall and someone tried to open the door but it was locked and so the feet just stayed. The empty yellow bloomed and blossomed and she thought of flowers opening as the sun shone down, opened to receive, opened in some vacant lot she’d seen as a kid and now couldn’t completely remember except for times like these, and she was blooming and opening and her voice rose and she was getting there. But then Sherrod tensed and he grunted and he pulled out and she could feel the heat of him on her back.

She turned around and pushed him hard against the inside of the stall door. He fell backward. He nearly tripped from his pants around his ankles.

“What the fuck you doing!?” she screamed at him, shoving a finger into his chest and leaning into him. His face was like a Rubin’s vase, torn between confused anger and post-orgasm calm. His cut lip was bruised. “You cum in your Goddamn hand. This ain’t no porno. I ain’t no porno.”

“What the hell...?”

She reached back and wiped some of the cum onto her fingers, and flicked it in his face.

“Eat your own cum, corny motherfucker,” she said and pulled up her underwear, pulled down her dress.

“The fuck’s your *problem*?” said Sherrod, straightening and pushing Katrina back against the wall. He fumbled for his own underwear and pants.

“Don’t touch me!” she said as she shoved him aside and he slipped to the ground.

She unlocked the stall door, and he grabbed at her wrist with his free hand but she twisted out of his grip and flung the door open. It smacked the same scrawny white kid in the face. He’d been watching at the crack in the door and he fell back against the wall, clutching at his nose.

A small, stunned crowd stood frozen as Katrina pushed past them, tugging at her dress and hair, wiping the sheen of sweat off her forehead. Sherrod got to his feet and pulled his pants up. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes danced around the room, embarrassed and angry and gloating all at once. He took an unsure step forward but Katrina flipped her hair over her shoulder and pushed her way out of the bathroom.

The line of girls waiting in the hallway had barely moved and when Katrina emerged they all turned to look at her, pulling their features into disapproving masks, and sucking their teeth. The chick with the big hair who’d looked at her wrong when she’d come into the bar was in line and she stared Katrina up and down and whispered something to her friend. There was the word “...ho,” somewhere in there and Katrina, who was fuming and fevered and all-the-way-drunk, rushed at the girl screaming, “You got something to say, you fat bitch!?”

The girl was unmoved by Katrina’s bluster and she spit back, “Yeah, *bitch*, I said it smelled like a ho just come through here.” The girl made a show of sniffing the air and then smiled cruelly. “I guess it’s you,” she said.

There were a few laughs but all Katrina heard was the sound of her blood rushing through her arteries as she vomited a guttural howl and lunged at the girl, grabbing at her weave and pulling her violently to the ground. A clump of the hair came away in Katrina's hand and she let it drop to the ground and grabbed another fistful. The two of them fell to the floor, Katrina on top, both of them spitting obscenities. The girl's friends circled around and tried to pull Katrina off her, but Katrina was stronger than she looked and was filled with sex and violence; the two empty cups, the twins. She tore at the girl with her nails, scratching rivulets of scandalized skin into her cheeks and neck and exposed arms. She pulled more hair, threw punches, felt the girl's nose give way in a splatter of red, felt her go from screeching in anger to whimpering and then pleading, then nothing. Katrina reared back and punched and punched and punched until her knuckles popped and the pain cut through the yellow bloom of her rage.

The other girls, and the guys who'd emptied from the men's bathroom, shouted and chanted and cheered at first but then there was too much blood and the girl on her back wasn't moving and the girl on top just kept punching and punching. Then everyone just sort of watched in horrified silence until finally security showed up. Two bouncers dressed all in black yanked the writhing and spewing Katrina off the bloodied girl. Her friends rushed into the vacuum and raised her to a seated position. Her nose was broken and deep scratches were scrawled over her cheeks and neck, clumps of hair were missing, one eye was blackened, its fake eyelashes dangling. A tooth was cracked.

"Who's the ho now, bitch? *Bitch!* No one's gonna want you now. I broke you, Barbie. No one's gonna want you now!?" shouted Katrina, over and over as the bouncers dragged her away and to the front door of the club, where the police waited with their red and blue lights glittering off the club's industrial brick façade.

Katrina spent the night in jail trying to sleep but unable to because of her broken hand. There were two other women in the cell with her and one of them was a busted prostitute, who spent the whole night shivering and mumbling incoherently. Occasionally she would screech into the darkness and then she would grow quiet for a long time until slowly the shivering and mumbling started again, like the fade in on some wild sound experiment. Katrina spent most of the time trying to figure out what she was saying, *anything* to take her mind off the pain.

She'd completely fucked up her hand. The last two knuckles were bent at an awkward angle to the other two, and she couldn't straighten out her pinkie. It just curled under like a child nestling into its mother.

She had a cell with a window and the moon was high, and it shone through the bars and the bullet-proof glass and she could trace the lines of the old man's face. She could relate to his unceasing rage, and he made her feel a little less alone.

Her own rage had receded as quickly as it'd come once she was placed in the police car and she'd looked out the window and seen the crowd spilling out of the club to marvel at her, the crazy bitch. The yellow was gone. All those people, all those witnesses to her shame, the limitless shame and guilt and anger that she carried. She felt like a neon bulb dropped on cement, shattered into a million dusty pieces and so toxic everyone was afraid to pick up the pieces, even to throw them away. She'd sat in the back of that car, her chest hitching with the sobs, and she'd tried to blame the tears on her broken hand painfully handcuffed behind her back. She wished she could've covered her face, to hide her crumpled eyes, and the snot running into her mouth, but she couldn't. Everyone could see her crying. One more shame laid on the top.

In the cell she was able to see the line clearly. What had happened was exactly what she'd

intended to happen. It wasn't destiny because she'd made it happen and she wasn't ∞. And the inevitability of it made everything worse and she rolled over and squeezed her eyes shut and instead of ignoring the pain in her hand she focused on it, anything to forget and forget and forget. Anything.

They pushed her arraignment up to the next morning, Wednesday, citing extenuating circumstances, which was a nice way of saying that she was broke as shit and had a mom dying of lung cancer and she was the only one left to pay the fucking hospital bills. Katrina waited on the hard wooden benches with the rest of the broken, used-up people, bored and hurting. She wished she had her clutch, with her cell phone, chapstick, etc., but she'd left it at the club. She felt like crying all over again. She'd have to get a new fake ID.

There wasn't time for her court-appointed lawyer to show up, so when her name was called she went to the stand alone and said she was not guilty of the charges against her, assault and battery, feeling embarrassed in her tight black dress and heels and runny mascara. The judge was a bitter hag who looked over her half-moon glasses with the same clucking-hen disapproval Katrina saw everywhere these days, and she gave a tart clack of her gavel and told Katrina she was to only go from her house to work, and to the hospital for structured visits with her mother, and to be back in court on December 18th for her trial. Katrina nodded and clutched her broken hand in front of her lap and kept her face from belying anything violent or angry or bitter, the never-ending denial of self.

The tiny, decaying duplex Katrina had shared with her mama until three months ago was just one blackened tooth in a rotted jaw of crumbling houses. Brick ranches all of them, all the rage during the housing boom of the 1940s and once the homes of the burgeoning middle class, but now government-subsidized housing for the legion of Atlanta poor. Paint peeling, chain-link fences breaking the landscape into rigid, rusty lines, large and mangy dogs barking and barking, children's toys tossed in dusty yards. She'd walked these streets for so long that Katrina didn't even notice how uneasy it all made her. It was a horror movie set made real, and everyday for over a decade it had been her home. Over time the part of her that yearned for beautiful things and believed it was her *right* to see beautiful things and to possess them, that part of her atrophied so that she no longer made any connection between the dread of her surroundings and the gloom that settled around her heart like fog the moment she woke.

She entered the house through the carport door because the front door had been broken for years, and though their landlord told them every month he was going to fix it, he never came out and looked at it. The side door opened onto their tiny kitchen, which Katrina kept spotless even if the faded yellow of the linoleum and Formica made the whole room look worn out and dirty, like a photograph of a kitchen from the seventies that had been buried in a shoebox for the last thirty years.

Katrina tossed her keys into a small Yellowjackets dish on the counter and locked the door behind her. She had to stifle an impulse to call for her mama, and then hated herself all the more for the compulsion. Years of testing the house for her mama's chaotic presence had established the habit, but her mama wasn't here; she was in Grady slowly drowning on her own blood. Old habits die slow deaths.

Katrina dropped her heels in a closet on the way to the bathroom, where she let her clothes pool on the floor. She looked at her hand in the mirror and winced at the crumpled knuckles and fetal pinkie, the criss-crossed cuts. Her hand looked like a shriveled, fallen leaf. She ran a shower and stayed a long time under the steaming water, until her lungs filled with the

humidity and she felt dizzy from the heat. She washed herself thoroughly, but the feeling remained.

After the shower she dressed and she wrapped her hand with some gauze she found under the bathroom sink and secured it with a bobby pin. She ate a brunch of hot dog buns and American cheese. It was two in the afternoon and she hadn't eaten anything since the night before. She was ravenous, but the fridge and cupboards were filled with expired condiments and leftover odds and ends from parties past.

Little blooms of blood already shown through on her knuckles.

She stood in the combination living room/dinette and stared at the empty house, suddenly terrified at the prospect of being alone with herself in this place, all day. She wished for perhaps the first time in her life that she didn't have the day off from work, that there weren't all these empty hours to fill. She felt uncomfortable in her own skin, like there was an itch somewhere inside of her that she couldn't scratch and it made her feel like she had to piss and throw up and laugh all at the same time. She twisted on the spot, hoping somehow something might jump out at her, give her a direction to walk, scratch the itch.

She mostly hated this house, with its ragged, scavenged furniture, but there was something nostalgic and comforting about the smell of her mama's cigarettes always lingering like she'd just stubbed one out around the corner. Even a threadbare blanket can keep you warm sometimes.

The house phone rang and she jumped at the sound. She walked into the kitchen where the phone hung on the wall, an old rotary that her mom had been too broke to replace.

"Hello?"

"Is this Katrina Freeman?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, good, we've been trying all morning to get hold of you but the number we have keeps going to voicemail."

"I lost my phone...who is this?"

"I'm Nurse Steeger over at Grady Hospital...I've been on shift today and...well, it's your mother...Dr. Prinesh told me to call you and tell you there probably isn't much time."

Nurse Steeger said a few more things but Katrina stopped listening and just mumbled a vacant thank you and hung up the phone. She went to the closet and got an old pair of sneakers out of the closet, and then left the house, marveling at the infinite amount of shit that could still be piled on an already tall heap.

The trip to the hospital passed in a blur. She ran most of the seven blocks north to the MARTA stop and managed to catch a bus just about to pull its doors closed. Most of the stops were empty and so the driver made only cursory stops, and within a half hour the bus pulled into Sweet Auburn. She ran the remaining blocks to Grady, a stitch growing in her side, which she ignored.

Her mom had been moved to the intensive care unit about a week before, when the blood had started to seep through the mucus walls of her lungs and it became clear what came next, a lot of morphine and expensive bullshit about making her comfortable. Katrina rode the elevator up to the fourth floor and found Nurse Steeger at the nurses' stand. She was a short, chubby woman with laugh lines around her mouth and eyes. She leveled Katrina with solemnity when Katrina introduced herself and asked to check in.

"No need for that, just go to her. You know which room?" said Nurse Steeger.

Katrina nodded and went to her mama's room.

Everything was exactly as she'd left it the day before, her mama lying gaunt and pale in the middle of a sterile, white-sheeted bed, clusters of wires flying away from her like the strings of a puppet. There was a heart monitor which beeped rhythmically. There was an empty table. There was the uncomfortable chair that Katrina sat in when she visited her, which had been nearly every day since she'd been moved to the ICU.

Katrina stepped into the room and sat down, looking into her mama's withered face. The cancer had eaten her insides, but the mark of the feast was all over her, in the impossible sharpness of her cheekbones and the way her skin sagged into her eye sockets, her limp, toothless mouth, the sticks that used to be her arms. It was impossible for Katrina to look at her like this and remember the way she used to be; all she could see was the cadaver in front of her. And in all her memories this wasted version of her mama cavorted: making her burnt breakfast before school, coming home late at night after one of her dates, wasted and wistful and talking about how big the guy's cock had been, smoking in her chair, all day and all night, smoking in her chair.

Katrina leaned forward and stared at her mama's closed eyelids. Morphine dripped in an IV. The heart monitor beeped. A neon light in the far corner blinkered.

"Mama," said Katrina simply, though her face contorted with a riot of emotions, and her eyes reddened and glazed with tears which stung at the back of her eyes. She leaned back and scrubbed her face and breathed a deep sigh. "Mama. They said you're dying." She waited as though her mama might answer, her lip quivering. "I got here as quick as I could."

She tried to think of something to say, some parting words that could somehow make up for everything that had passed between them, but so much filled her head that she couldn't focus on anything. She sat in silence for a long time listening to the sanitized sounds of modern dying. Footsteps squeaked in the hallway, a voice crackled over a radio, a gurney rushed by the open door, the monitor beeped. Eventually she opened her mouth and words came out and once they started she couldn't stop.

"Do you remember that one guy you dated back when I was in sixth grade? Robert. Robert Parkinson. Do you remember, mama? He used to drive that black Camaro, and he smelled like cloves. Y'all didn't date for long, so maybe you don't, but he used to stay over all the time, and you two'd get shit-faced and smoke cigarettes and then you'd fuck him in your room and he was really loud when he came. D'you remember that? The way he sounded like a bear chewing off his own paw? It used to scare me the way he sounded, but I never told you because you liked him and I didn't wanna ruin things for you. You were always so sad...and angry when you weren't getting fucked." Katrina's face grew flushed as she spoke, her eyes and cheeks and lips, all of her red. "I never told you this either, though, because one night after you'd passed out, Robert came into my room and...and he fucked me *too*, mama. He told me to never tell anyone, and I never did. I never did." She was leaning forward again, gripping the arms of the chair with white-knuckled hands, talking through numbed lips. "He wasn't the only one either. Jim Thompson, he...when I was thirteen. He came over after school and...and there were others too, mama...all these men...I was just a *kid*...I was just a fucking kid and you kept bringing 'em around..."

Tears were coming now and they stung her flushed cheeks and dribbled into her mouth. She tasted salt and bile and the bitterness of a decade of unsaid words. Blood poured into the gauze on her broken hand from the grip she had on the chair.

"*You* did this. To yourself; to me. To *me!* *You* did this. You were supposed to protect me,

mama!”

And she was standing now, and leaning over her unresponsive mother and spittle flew onto her mama’s face and she was pointing at her and screaming and she wished if she could slap her mama awake with her words maybe things could be better, maybe she could get her mama to see, to admit to, all the things she made happen, and somehow that would make everything better, would make everything make sense. But the selfish bitch wouldn’t even give her that. She’d gone and gotten cancer and she’d made Katrina take care of her these last three months, and now she was going to die without even saying goodbye, without apologizing. She was just going to die.

“You were supposed to fucking protect me!”

Katrina pounded on the edge of the bed and raged at her mama and a few nurses heard her yelling and made their way to the room. Katrina’s mama jerked and her eyes opened and Katrina saw her irises for just the briefest of moments and she saw all the pain of dying and the fear and the profundity of that loss and for the first time she really saw her mama. Then the heart monitor went flat and started to beep.

“NO!” cried Katrina and she grabbed at her mama as the nurses who’d been on their way to check on her now rushed to the bed and someone said something and there were electric paddles and Katrina couldn’t watch and she couldn’t listen so she ran out of the room and down the hall to the elevator.

The rest of the afternoon was filled with paperwork, first at the nurses station where she signed all the forms related to the how’s and why’s of dying, and then at the cashier where she learned about the cost. The hospital, of course, had a payment plan, and as long as Katrina made a \$50/month payment, the balance would never be sent to collections. It probably would never be paid off either, but at least Katrina’s credit wouldn’t be affected. She laughed at that last part, and with her flamed-out eyes she looked frightening. She signed some more papers and then finally she left.

She emptied out of the hospital, and the sun shone down on her like an interrogation light. It was unseasonably hot. Through the gap in the buildings she could see clouds drifting. Nowhere to go. She just started walking, northwest up Marietta St. The city was brimming with some kind of apoplectic energy, the sounds of traffic and shoes clacking and the breeze through the buildings was too loud, crackling with an energy. She tried to stuff her hands in her pockets but couldn’t fit her swollen fist through the opening, so she let them dangle awkwardly by her sides. Ahead of her the air opened and became freer and the sky seemed to eat up the buildings and grow larger as Marietta skirted by Centennial Park before diving back into the glitz and grime of Techwood. She left the street and walked through the park, a wide flat of grass with randomly placed sculptures celebrating the “spirit of brotherhood.”

Katrina had only been five at the time but she remembered the Olympics, and the money and the mood that infected the city. It had reached even into the shit project she was living in at the time. She remembered her neighbor, a fat old woman with yellowed eyes, talking excitedly about all the jobs and money the games were bringing to the city, how it was gonna really change things. Katrina remembered when the bomb went off. She saw it on TV. Everyone in the project had a cousin who died in the blast, and though most of those people were probably full of shit, the truth was, the bomb seemed more like the real thing than all the statues and the fireworks and the hopefulness. That bomb was the real spirit of Atlanta.

Katrina walked over to a large stone replica of the Olympic symbol, with small

fountainheads placed into the stone. The fountains shot jets of water into the air. When she was a kid her mama would take her down here occasionally and let her jump around in the water, to cool off on really hot summer days. Katrina sat down on a ledge and stared into the mist. There were no kids in the water today. It was December; warm for December certainly, but still not water fountain kind of weather.

She scrubbed her cheeks and sighed, thankful for the thin winter breeze that blew in this empty green space, cooled her reddened cheeks and tossed her hair around her face. A stone had settled into her chest, a feeling as though she was drowning on the very air she breathed. She looked into the fountain mist, imagining her seven-year old self leaping through the jets. Through the haze something showed brilliantly white, a piece of glass or something suspended in the air. She squinted her eyes but the glare was gone. She looked at her hands.

“I’m sorry about your mama,” said a voice from beside her and Katrina yelped in surprise.

“The fuck you know about me?” she said, recovering quickly.

But the stranger simply chuckled wryly and said, “More than you, I expect,” which sent Katrina’s insides into a blender and she opened her mouth to lay into him. He put a hand on her forearm and she forgot what she was going to say. “You don’t have to say anything, Katrina. You don’t always have to say something.” She opened her mouth again and he tightened his grip on her forearm. She closed her mouth.

She looked at the stranger’s hand on her arm and she thought over and over again to tell him to let go of her, but the thoughts wouldn’t leave her mouth. They just tumbled around her head, making a pile of broken syllables and semi-sentences. It occurred to her that she should be afraid. A strange man had grabbed her in the park. But she wasn’t.

She looked into his face for the first time and then she was afraid, but not in any way she was used to. It wasn’t the fear of pain, or the fear of being the butt of some bitch’s cruel joke. No, this was fear like before you give a speech for the whole school, or meet the president, or see your favorite singer and have to talk yourself into asking for her autograph. This was fear mixed with giddiness and the joy at being touched by the impossible, at standing next to immortality and actually being allowed to stay. This was something she’d felt only once before, something heady. And like before, her mind swooned under those blue eyes, spun madly about until she couldn’t tell which direction was up, except there was a light ahead and she looked into the light and she stayed there best she could. She knew this man. She knew his face, this feeling, those eyes. She’d waited so long that she’d forgotten it’d ever happened. She’d forgotten who she was supposed to be.

“It’s time, Katrina. You’ve been patient. Now we need to talk,” said the stranger. “But I need to make it perfectly clear that that bullshit you pulled in the club last night isn’t going to fly going forward. I know you know that already, or you wouldn’t’ve done such a number on that girl. You were guilty even as you were doing it. But, still, I have to remind you of the seriousness of what lies ahead. Her name was Nicole, by the way, the girl you tore up. I think it’s important you know that. She’s got a name.”

Katrina looked away to the jets of water, her mouth dry, her head lurching.

“Where have you been, Gabriel?” she asked through numbed lips.

“All over. The years have flown away haven’t they? You’re a grown woman now, wow, look at you,” said Gabriel, and the angel tried a smile.

Katrina didn’t say anything. Gabriel looked at her hard for a moment and she could feel him reaching into her thoughts and it repulsed her, the invasion, so she pushed back and he

receded quickly, looking sheepish. They didn't say anything for a while. Katrina's thoughts went white then dark then yellow. A narcotizing calm spread through her stomach and heart and limbs.

Eventually Gabriel said, "Do you remember what I told you the first time we met?"

"Yes," said Katrina, and Gabriel waited for a moment until he realized she wasn't going to say anything else.

"Well, the time I spoke about is coming," said Gabriel. "It's here already, really, though you can't see it yet. A darkening on the horizon. A welling of clouds. I assume you've heard about Armageddon, Apocalypse, the End of Times...?" Katrina nodded her head imperceptibly. "Yeah, well all *that's* about to happen."

Katrina didn't look at him, she looked at her hands and she looked in the distance at the towers rising all around the park. Anywhere but at him. Her lower lip twitched. She looked like a little girl and she knew she did and it made her so angry, remembering the years since their first meeting and what he'd said and all that had happened since then.

Eventually she did look up at him and her eyes glistened but no tears fell and she asked again, "Where've you been, really? I waited for you like you said, for *years*, but then...then I got older and I just thought I'd dreamed you up. Where were you all this time, through all the...when...?"

"It's been a long time hasn't it? I get it, Katrina, it's been years. *Years*. A lot's happened..."

Katrina chuffed sarcastically, her vulnerability flashing to anger, "A lot's happened? Fuck that. You said you'd be right back. You told me I was special, that you'd take me away somewhere where I couldn't get hurt."

"You are, and I am. I'm here now."

"Too late."

"No. Not too late. Katrina..."

"I ain't going..."

"Katrina," said Gabriel, leveling her with a severe gaze that froze her blood, the heavy hand of inevitability. "You don't have a choice. No more than I do. You know that, so stop acting like a child." Katrina didn't say anything. Her jaw was set. "You made a promise. To Him. Those promises can't be broken."

"What about the Devil...?"

"That's different..." said Gabriel solemnly, and for the first time *he* dropped his eyes. It was only a moment, a very short moment, but it scared Katrina a hell of a lot, those down-turned eyes, the uneasiness, the clasped hands. But then Gabriel looked back up and he said simply, "It starts in a few days...*you're* time, not ours. I'll be back for you before then. You won't need anything except yourself..." and Gabriel touched her shoulder and the light grew stronger and surrounded her with a powerful amber glow and she saw the yellow flowers and the field that had kept her through all the bad times, and she felt like she was going to snap in two. "...it's the most important thing you have. Stay out of trouble, child. I'll be back."

Then Katrina was alone on the stone ledge, looking into the mist, and for the second time in her life, she wondered if she'd simply made the angel up.

Chapter Five

Katrina Freeman sees some crazy shit

By the time Katrina got to the bus stop, rode the bus to Memorial and Columbia, and walked the last few miles to her house, she'd managed to convince herself she'd made up the whole episode with Gabriel in the park. The wind had been too high, the sun too bright, her mama's death too near. She was exhausted. That was all. She was imagining things.

The house was empty when she got there. Of course. Just her now. She stood for a while in the kitchen, staring at the wheat-colored sunlight as it glittered on the faded linoleum.

Her hand hurt like hell so she searched the cabinets in the kitchen and the bathroom for some aspirin. She found a bottle of baby Tylenol, certainly expired, but she swallowed three pills anyway, wishing she'd asked for something stronger when she was at the hospital. She went into the front room, with its heavy gold curtains and paintings of tigers and its massive crucifix. She sat opposite her mama's chair, holding her injured hand.

There was no other furniture in the room, save for these two chairs. The rest had been sold in a yard sale when her mama had first gotten sick. Everything else had followed afterwards, as the cancer left her lungs and took root in the fertile cells of her lymph nodes. The dinette set and TV and hutch, which had spent three generations in her mama's family, all were sold. Liquidated. Turned to liquid. Blood. Thicker than water, but not thicker than the paper hospital bills were printed on.

Eventually she fell asleep and when she dreamed she dreamed about her mama, only in her dream her mama was a horse with giant hooves and a big, fluffy white tail that shook and shook. Katrina said, "Mama, will you take me with you," but her mama didn't answer. She just swished that big tail of hers and flew off, leaving a trail of shit behind her. Even as she was dreaming, Katrina knew what that meant.

When she woke up it was dark, and for the briefest of moments she was certain she was dead too. She went to the bathroom and unwrapped her hand under some cool water. Her makeshift dressings had barely made it through the day. They fell in bloody tatters into the sink, damming the drain, and pooling magenta water behind them. She looked at her crumpled knuckles and wondered how the big-haired bitch looked today.

Her name was Nicole...I think it's important you know that.

Was she as torn up as Katrina's knuckles? Probably. Maybe more.

"Serves the bitch right," started Katrina but her heart wasn't in it, so she stopped talking.

She grabbed some toilet paper and rewrapped her hand, and watched little carnations of blood soak into the paper. She didn't look at her reflection in the mirror.

Something moved in the living room, a chair leg or a stick scraping against the wood floor, and her stomach dropped so suddenly she almost pissed herself. The roll of toilet paper fell to the floor and wheeled away from her into the middle of the hallway. She paused, unsure of whether she should close the door or go see what made the noise. This wasn't her first night alone in this house by far, but it was the first without anyone else *out there*, somewhere in the world, who might come back at some point. There was no one who should be here right now but her.

She took a few tentative steps forward, leaning into the doorjamb to sneak a look into the hallway, but as she stretched her neck to see she heard another thump, this time louder, the sound of something heavy on the floor, boot falls maybe.

Her breath caught in her throat and she pressed herself tight against the opened door. The bathroom light played on the darkened hallway floor and wall, a flashing arrow pointing the intruder right to her. The roll of toilet paper sat in the middle of the floor casting strange shadows. She looked around the bathroom for any kind of weapon, but all she could find was a cracked and shit-caked plunger. She grabbed it in her good hand and held it in front of her, backing to the far wall opposite the doorway. The steps came closer. Something hard and heavy scraped against the walls. The steps came closer.

Katrina wasn't frightened; this was altogether different. She felt exploded, as if something inside of her was inflating and inflating and pushing everything else out of her, thoughts, emotions, fears. She was like a plucked string that just wouldn't stop vibrating. The plunger shook in her hand. The fingernails on her wounded hand clacked SOS signals on the wall.

The steps were just outside the door and Katrina took a breath and held it and then she couldn't breathe at all and then the steps were there in the hallway, outside the bathroom, directly across from her, and yet she saw nothing. *Something* should've been there, standing right in front of her, but there wasn't.

She waited some more and when the footfalls didn't return she took a few wary steps into the hallway, turning on the spot to check in all directions. The house was dark and empty. The back door was closed. Everything was exactly how she'd left it.

She breathed out heavily. "Trina...girl, get a hold of yourself," she said as she flicked off the bathroom light and went into the kitchen, still holding the plunger.

She set the plunger down next to the kitchen sink and filled a glass with water. The moon was high in the sky through the kitchen window. She brought the glass to her lips.

There was a click behind her, like garden shears opened and snapped shut, and she yelped, dropping the glass to the linoleum where it shattered into a constellation of tiny rhinestones. She turned and grabbed the plunger, a half-articulated cry of anger bubbling in the back of her throat. But as soon as she saw the owner of the garden shears, the plunger followed the broken glass to the floor, and she simply stood terrified beyond horror itself, the cry of anger turning to a frozen, silent scream.

The creature had the body of a man and the great, black head of a raven, its beak sharp and clicking, dark eyes roving, the legs of a goat. It spread its wings across the entire kitchen. They were so much like Gabriel's wings, yet thinner and coated in something like years of dust. Cold, black eyes watched Katrina, like the marbles she used to play with when she was a kid. The bird cocked its head from side to side, watching her with one eye then the other then the other then the other.

The creature took a step toward her, its hoofs making hollow clops that hung in the air like an echo. She pressed herself harder into the counter, feeling the cold bite against her hip. The creature squawked and black blood dripped onto the floor. It sniffed at her, its neck stretching, clawed hands grasping at the air. A high, whistling noise flitted somewhere in the back of its throat.

"You are Katrina Freeman," said the creature, and its voice was unnatural, formed not from air passing through taut muscles but as though the words were objects carved out of the elements in the air, like the words were part of the environment. They came in a language she didn't know, but still understood.

Katrina said nothing, she couldn't, and the creature responded by reaching out for her with a speed she didn't expect. Its claws pinched into her skin and drew blood. A vague and

pervasive hopelessness covered her thoughts like a black film. The night deepened, the blackness of the creature's eye swelled until it was all she could see. She fell into the yawning emptiness that lay beyond. She could feel the creature reaching out to her, latching onto her, incorporating her into itself and she spun around with no sense of direction, no landmarks. She could feel the fullness of the creature's depravity filling her and emptying her and she wanted to scream and cry and laugh all at once. She saw everything that had ever happened, things she'd forgotten, things she'd never known, things she didn't want to see. She saw a woman tied to a rock, screaming and crying while a horse stamped on her feet and legs until her blood foamed in the dirt. She saw a man sitting on a couch with his pants pooled around his feet. She saw knees broken and bodies left to rot in alleys. She saw plagues and burglaries gone wrong and brothers with sisters, and she saw her own mother asleep while she bit back tears in the other room.

Something inside her revolted and she pulled back, freeing herself of the creature's searching mind. She grunted aloud and she could hear the creature make a sound too, so high-pitched that it was almost inaudible, angry. Maybe it was in her head. Then she was free, or rather her mind was her own and the raven was separate from her. The creature laughed.

"No wonder the angel is so interested in you," clicked the raven. Katrina saw rows of sharp teeth lining the inside. "You are strong..." It bobbed its head and retracted its wings. "Though, I have seen what I needed to see."

Katrina's mind was charred and useless. She could form no words. She opened and closed her mouth several times but no sound came out. She could feel the hands of her mama's first boyfriend on her skin. She could smell him on the air, the scent of sweat and animal musk, the smell of a lion or a wolf.

"I frighten you, child," said the raven, its beak inches from her face. "You are so scared. Of me, yes. But not *only* of me. You poor, poor thing. You have been lied to."

The creature paused for a moment and in the silence Katrina could feel it trying to pry at her again, to crack her open and read her mind. Katrina groaned and struggled but whatever strength had repelled the creature before had been sapped. She was opened wide. She could feel it all again, the first biting thrust and the blood. Twelve years old. Blood coming six months before blood. Blood before blood. It dripped from her arm and onto the rhinestone galaxy at her feet, spinning out into seven years of torment.

"You did not ask for any of that, child," whispered the bird. "Those things that happened to you. They were not your fault. You did not deserve any of it. The angel lied to you. Did he not say he would keep you safe? Did he not say he would take you away from this place? Where was he when you needed him? Where is he now?"

She couldn't answer. She couldn't move.

"The angel is a liar, just like his Maker. You do not have to go with him. There is no promise you have made. A faithless servant of a faithless god deserves no vows from you. ∞ does not care about this place, never has. He just does not want anyone else to have it. But in the end, He will quit when He gets weary. He will let us have this place and we will finally be able to put things right. We have been shackled for too long."

A bitter sorrow poured forth from the creature. Katrina could feel the relentless infinite of its torment and grief, trapped here among the humans, invisible, hated, misunderstood. It roared through her like a piston, driving, driving.

"The years! All these years! Wearing these rags, these dusty wings. I am Andras, Child of the Severance, forced to play my part in the greatest depravities on this earth. Forced to be a rotten thing, filled with loathing and violence. That is what I have become. That is what I was

created for. In ∞'s world, *that* is my purpose. But this world won't be His for much longer. and when He's gone, we will regrow the Garden and *finally* sew everything back together."

Katrina sunk deeper and deeper, her world spinning out and out and around, the creature Andras' voice resounding inside her.

"The angel knows what's going to happen to you if you go with him, just like he knows it was ∞ who let you suffer through all that pain and sadness. ∞ does not care about you. You are nobody...to Him. And in the end you will be discarded like everything else that bores Him. Like me. Like He has already done to you."

Andras moved his eye closer to Katrina, and she could see her reflection deep down in the blackness there.

"Do not go with the angel. You owe them nothing. They will only bring death."

The bird let go of her and she collapsed against the counter. It looked down on her for a long moment, and then it turned away.

"Choose wisely, child. You only get the one choice."

The creature took a step away and it was as if the shadows themselves swallowed the hulking thing's arms and legs, and wings. It disappeared into the gloaming and Katrina stood frozen in its wake like a statue drifting to the bottom of a very deep sea.

She resurfaced the next afternoon. She sat slumped in her mama's armchair, her neck sore from the cock-eyed angle in which she'd fallen asleep. Someting beeped periodically and the sound of it faded into her consciousness slowly, like the sound of the birds outside and the sound of running water in the kitchen.

She stood slowly and walked to the kitchen to turn off the faucet. A black cloud covered her thoughts. The glass from the night before was on the counter and she grabbed it and filled it with water. She drank the water, and snapped off the faucet. She sat for several minutes before she remembered that the glass had been broken, but when she looked on the floor there was no glass. She lifted the glass to her face, astonished, and saw her now unbroken hand for the first time.

"What the fuck...?" she said, holding her hand in front of her. She flexed it, and scrunched it and it didn't hurt at all. There were no bandages, no cuts, no bent knuckles. There wasn't even a scar.

She dropped the glass for the second time and this time it stayed shattered on the floor.

She felt like the world was warping inside her, a funhouse hall of mirrors that made her memories and thoughts unrecognizable. She couldn't shake the last things she'd said to her mama, as she lay prostrate, moments away from rolling off this planet. Those last things, those confessions, the bile and vomit. She couldn't help feeling that those words were the boot heels that finally kicked her mama, clutching and screaming, into the abyss. Those feelings, none of them any good. Her mama dead, and things haunting her sleep.

The phone rang, and Katrina gasped before walking over and snatching the receiver off the wall.

"Hello?"

"Is this Katrina Freeman?"

"Yes, who's this?"

The man introduced himself as Trevor from the funeral services company and told her she needed to get over to his office today to make arrangements for her mother's remains. She told him she would be over as soon as she could. She hung up the call, then showered. She

stepped over the broken glass on her way out the back door.

Trevor looked pretty much exactly like Katrina thought he would from his voice: white, gaunt, with a nervous energy that made the lines of his face seem like hastily sketched afterthoughts. He never fully resolved for her, not in any corporeal kind of way.

"I'm sure you're aware that you are responsible for your mother's funeral arrangements?" he said, making his fingers into a steeple in front of his face. He sat in the Funeral Director's chair, trying to fill the space with as much of himself as he could. He was very young. Katrina didn't say anything; she wanted to snap his fingers in half. It was starting to get dark already since the bus ride here had taken so damn long. "Fulton County can be very aggressive in its prosecution of the unclaimed deceased. According to the law as long as a next of kin can be determined, the County is not responsible for the cost of funeral arrangements. That's why they've contacted me, to get in touch with you and see to the proper disposal of your mother's remains."

The two of them looked at each other for a moment. His steepled fingers trembled a little and he unclasped them and set them on the arms of the chair. He pulled out a leather-bound brochure and opened to the first page, labeled *economy*. There was a picture of a lightly stained pine coffin.

"Right. Well, as you can see we have a multitude of options..."

"Can't you just burn her?" interrupted Katrina and the shock of her voice sent the young man's tongue into stammers. Katrina waved her hand dismissively at the brochure. "I don't need a funeral. Nothing like that."

"Certainly cremation is an option, but don't you think your mother's friends and other relatives would want the opportunity...?"

"There ain't no one else. Just me. How much does cremation cost?"

The man smiled but it wilted at the edges of his lips.

"Well, depending on the type of urn you would like..."

"I don't need no Goddamn urn. Just tell me how much I need to pay you to have this all done with."

The assistant opened some drawers in the desk and fumbled through some files and papers and after a few moments Katrina reached into her pockets and tossed the only money she had on the desk.

"Is \$27 enough?"

The assistant looked at the money as though it were a poisonous spider.

"We don't accept cash..."

"Of course you don't," chuffed Katrina. "But that wasn't what I was asking? Would that be enough?"

"No. Our basic cremation package costs \$500."

"Ok, fine. Consider this a down payment then."

"We don't accept cash payments..."

"Goddamnit! I get it, I get it. What *do* you take, then?"

"Credit card, personal check, or money order."

"Alright. Sure. Fine. Where do I sign? I'm sure you've got paperwork and everything."

The assistant smiled toothily. He reached into one of the drawers and pulled out a stapled stack of papers and set them in front of her. He set a pen on the stack.

"Of course. There's just a few signatures I need."

The bus home was lit by alternating shades of green and blue. There was a short in the light fixtures in the ceiling and each time the bus hit a bump the world changed from a sickly seaweed color to an equally sickly aqua. After a few minutes of this she closed her eyes and watched the flickering from behind her eyelids. There were two people on the bus with her, a young kid in very tight jeans, and Chucks, with long black hair that hung in his face the whole time, and an extraordinarily large woman with a litter of plastic bags gathered around her legs like cats. But Katrina wasn't looking at either of them; her eyes were closed. She'd seen a million people like them in this city. It occurred to her that she probably looked the same to them and instead of the thought depressing her, she relished the anonymity. She hoped she didn't stick out. She didn't really even want to be here, let alone have people remember her.

Eventually the bus driver turned off the interior lights and Katrina opened her eyes and watched the city go by. The squat, vaguely industrial buildings of downtown morphed into single houses with stoops or porches or front doors that opened out onto nothing but unkempt grass lots. There was graffiti and there were faded street signs. There was a lot of cement and none of it was even. The street lights blinked as they passed like frames in an old time movie, and every once in a while there was someone in one of the cones of light, smoking, standing, watching, all of them faceless and vague. Katrina couldn't imagine what a single one of them were doing there.

She thought about how the hell she was going to scrape together \$500 to burn her mama and that thought led naturally to the creeping paper octopus of her mama's hospital bills, and all of these little bills and big bills felt to her like a virus she might never be rid of.

The bus stopped and she started toward the exit, but suddenly she was terrified to get off the bus. Suddenly she was terrified to do anything at all, so she stood in the aisle and held onto one of the hand rails on the back of a seat. The fat lady looked at her and reached down to shepherd a few of her bags. The punk kid just kept hiding behind his hair. The driver looked at Katrina in the mirror and after a moment she raised her eyebrows. Katrina made her body move, one foot leading the other, like water in a siphon, pulling her out of the bus. She offered a smile but her lips were waxworks.

The bus pulled away and Katrina found herself standing in her own cone of street light. The humor of that was not lost on her and she actually laughed, a musical sound which was beautiful and wholesome in ways that made others feel like their hearts were snapping. But you see no one had ever told her that, and so she didn't know. But laughing broke the fear enough for her to make up her mind to go to the liquor store.

The walk home was black in spite of the street lamps. The moon was hidden behind thick clouds which gave the sky a striated quality, like black ribbons coiled over one another. The gusting wind made everything into voices, and they whispered Katrina's name from the eaves of houses and the branches of trees, from the shiver of a lid on a trash can. She held onto the bottle like a weapon though she drew no courage from its weight. She tried chiding herself for being a scared little girl, but she heard the scraping of bird beaks against siding everywhere, the sound of hoofbeats behind her, her name, whispered.

In the darkness her neighborhood was unrecognizable; the shapes of overturned bicycles in weedy yards became black dogs; houses leaned in as though listening to a secret, or craning their necks at a fight. There was no one in the streets, no one on stoops smoking cigarettes or drinking beer. Eventually even the street lights didn't work and the blackness was complete.

"Katrina," said the wind. "Katrina."

She quickened her pace and tried to convince herself the night was just getting to her. But Andras was there walking with her and it was calling her name. Its hooves clopped against the cement. The wind whistled in its opened beak.

“Katrina,” it said.

She reached her house and her shaking hands fumbled for the key. The door opened without one because she’d forgotten to lock up earlier. The door squeaked as it opened, a familiar sound twisted into something horrifying under the circumstances. She stepped into her house and snapped the door behind her.

She had juice in the fridge so she mixed it with the vodka she’d bought, and drank a lot of it while she sat in her mama’s old chair. She turned on all the lights in the house. To keep from having to listen to the whistling wind outside and the sounds of things rummaging in her trash cans and in her back rooms, she pretended her mama was in the other chair. After a while, to make the fantasy more realistic, Katrina moved into the other chair and let her mama have her own.

“I met with the funeral people tonight, mama.”

“___”

“He said it’s gonna cost \$500 to burn your ass.”

“___”

“I know, that’s what *I* was thinking. But I think the county’s gonna make me pay it.”

“___”

“I can pick up a few extra shifts if I need to. At the restaurant. Wait, no...”

“___”

“Maybe.”

The two of them sat in silence for a few moments and Katrina sipped a little more vodka. Her head was vibrating and the shivers went down to her feet and fingers and the pit of her stomach so that she couldn’t hold onto anything long enough to be afraid or angry or sad. She was just pure energy, vibrating.

“What the hell am I gonna do?”

“___”

“About everything. This house, your hospital bills, the thing that...”

“___”

“I dunno, never mind. I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“___”

“I just don’t. I just don’t.” But Katrina talked about it anyway. “Did I ever tell you I talked to an angel when I was a little girl?”

“___”

“I dunno, I’m sure I did. Maybe you just don’t remember.”

“___”

“Well, it don’t matter either way, but he came back. And I think he’s for real this time, not just feeling me out, or some shit. I think it’s time.”

“___”

“I don’t know.”

“___”

“Dunno.”

“___”

Katrina chuckled to herself and finished her glass of vodka and juice, and before she left for the kitchen to fix herself another she said, “There’s another one of them too, and I’m not certain which scares me more.”

Katrina fell asleep with the lights on, her mama’s chair empty across from her save for the ghost she’d placed there. She didn’t dream. She didn’t hear the sounds of mewling animals in the alley behind her house. She didn’t hear the sound of hoofbeats in the halls.

Chapter Four

Chuck Gardner also sees some crazy shit

Chuck turned onto his side and threw up onto the sticky, worn wood floor of the bar. The bartender wasted little time in grabbing Chuck by the back of his shirt and dragging him out the front door. He ended with a violent flourish that sent Chuck stumbling off the curb and into the gutter, where he laid for several minutes, disoriented and vomiting over and over again, his body expelling the vat of poison he'd drank over the last twelve hours.

He rolled onto his back and stared through the misty amber of the streetlights to the faint spangle of stars above. His stomach rolled over, but his head was clear, clearer than it had been in years. It was like sitting alone in a large, empty room.

What the fuck happened? repeated in his head, but his thoughts were slippery objects. They went through his fingers like silt underwater. Chuck had a decade's worth of experience thinking through the fog of alcohol or the blinding white flash of DT, but precious little skill at cold, hard sobriety.

The feather, which popped out of thin air in the bar, had followed him out into the street, carried on a draft of air as the bartender had passed. Chuck stared at the feather lying in a puddle. It gleamed white and silver in the street lights. He picked it up, wiped it on his shirt and put it safely in his breast pocket. He felt a sublime heaviness with it on him, like carrying all your possessions in a backpack. Something profound had just happened to him. He didn't understand it, but the feather was proof that it had happened. The feather was something *real*. It was proof.

He vomited again, nothing left but bile and foam. It went on and on. It hurt. The stars blinkered and he drifted away.

When Chuck woke up, it was the next morning and he was back in his house. He had no idea how'd he'd gotten there. His head pounded. It took him almost 45 minutes to even raise his head from his pallet. His eyes were rotten olives pressed on all sides by sharp plastic swords. He wanted to cry but he was so dehydrated nothing came out, and the press of blood from the sobs just made things worse.

The thin line of sunlight leaking through the boards on his windows crawled across the floor, a homespun sundial. Eventually Chuck made an attempt to lift himself from his bunched jacket. *The Rats* gibbered and crawled at the edges of his vision, formed of floorboards, peeling wallpaper, lint and dust.

Chuck patted his pockets for the money from the night before and found the remainder in his back pocket. He counted the money—\$450—and his mind tripped over the total. He recounted. \$450 again. He swore he'd borrowed—even now he couldn't say *steal*—only \$350, and had broken at least one of the \$50's at the bar. He smiled a toothless smile, despite his headache. He had more than enough to keep *the Rats* at bay. More than enough.

He sat up and the lightness of his heart lifted him through the worst of the hangover. He stood on unsteady feet, leaned against the wall, retched an empty stomach, and stumbled into the living room. *The Rats* emerged from the walls. He could hear their high-pitched squealing. He could be brave, though. All he had to do was get to the nearest liquor store and they would disappear and he would be free again. It was easy as that. Easy.

He didn't piss before he left the house. He didn't have to. He walked with his eyes closed for at least two blocks, getting by on the memory of his feet. The sun was so bright, like a

construction light, burning the stink and heat of his hangover into the air, making him feel feverish. He *looked* feverish.

By the time he could open his eyes he was outside of the liquor mart, and fingering his money in his back pocket. He went in and headed straight to the gin aisle. Sapphire had gotten him here and it was Sapphire that was going to get him out. The bottle cost him \$35, and a shiver of indecent pleasure at the splurge quivered in the pit of his stomach.

Back out in the sun, he opened the bottle and swallowed a long draught, standing just outside the door, paying no mind to the clerk inside who eyed him suspiciously through the front window. He felt the burn. He wandered off down the street, *the Rats* following him, the Pied Piper of Atlanta. He drank again and again, and soon half the bottle was gone. He waited for the buzz to start, for *the Rats* to leave. He waited.

He waited.

He drank more.

He waited.

The sun rose higher in the sky, burning the back of his neck. It was December but it was hot, and he was burning up. Sweat dripped down his cheeks and into the tufts of his beard. His shadow spread out from his feet in a strange contortion and twisted and spread, and shifted. His headache pounded against the inside of his skull. His fingers shook against the neck of the bottle; the gin sloshed and bubbled. The sun was too bright; it overexposed everything and turned it white and shimmering. Chuck closed his eyes and heard *the Rats* squealing all around him.

He drank the rest of the bottle of gin. A fifth in an hour. *Had it been an hour?* He walked aimlessly. The burning wasn't coming from the sun alone; it was coming from inside him too. He could feel his skin boiling from both sides. He threw the bottle against a wall and it smashed, but the sound drifted back to him on a languid, shimmering seaside pool of hot, molten discomfort. He scratched his arms and it was like his skin was peeling, so he stopped, then he scratched again, and it hurt, so he stopped. He ran into a wall because his eyes were closed, but the bricks were so cool that he pressed his face against them and he smiled a terrible, groaning smile. Some college kids gave him a wide berth as they passed. The inside of his eyelids were orange flames. The sun burned through them. The bricks were cool, then they weren't and he had to move on. He had to keep moving. *The Rats* closed in.

"What the hell's wrong with me?" he asked no one and no one answered.

It became clear the gin had evaporated in the heat, out of his arteries and into the brilliant shimmering blue. His mind was an inferno, his arms and legs raged. There was the white sheen of impending DT, of shivering, and burning, and *the Rats* crawling over every part of him, their claws digging, their whiskers seeking out his cavities, his mouth, asshole, armpits. DT. Sobriety. Some distant land that could only be reached through hellish heat and ash.

Eventually he cycled back to the liquor store where he wandered to the aisles of tequila and carried a handle to the counter with shaking hands and sweat dripping onto the counter, and his eyes only open to oversee the counting of cash, and the cashier told him he couldn't have anymore, that it'd only been like fifteen minutes, but Chuck threw a fifty at him and smacked the cashier's hand away when he tried to grab the liquor and then he was outside the store again, chugging tequila like it was water. And it tasted like water, or tears, or something warm and thick and unhealthy, and it soured in his stomach like he'd had too much to drink, and yet he hadn't, he hadn't had enough at all. He was sober. *Sober*. He could never have enough.

The sun shone too bright. He went around to the back of the store, found a cool alley where a few rotting houses leaned into each other like old men on a park bench. He crawled

under a bush but the heat followed. His head swam, a mockery of drunkenness, none of the giddiness, just empty, wanton swimming through pools of fire.

“Goddamn,” he said and for the rest of the day he said nothing else.

He finished the tequila but he knew there was no hope for him. The alcohol wasn’t taking. It wasn’t even alcohol, and he would’ve spent more time thinking about the reasons for this but for all the shivering and aching, and the rottenness in his guts. He threw up. He threw up again. Then again. He fell back and hit his head against the brick foundation of one of the rotting houses and there were splotches of white over his eyes and a splotch of warmth running under his head and into his matted hair, which he knew was blood but which didn’t terrify him because it was small potatoes compared to everything else that was going on with him.

Then the burning and itching lit him up and he knew what came next and he tried to grab branches and blankets or dirt or anything but the cold was cold and he shivered and he shivered and his gums chattered against one another, his arms trembled and goose pimples and he threw up again. The shivering got worse and worse until he wasn’t shivering at all but shaking and then he was actually seizing up, his muscles clenched and bit into his bones like ropes tied around brittle sticks. His right leg quaked so violently that the femur felt like it would shatter and he cried out through his strangled throat and his gums clamped down on his tongue. He made a sound like an animal with a trapped, broken paw. He chewed the paw. There was some blood and his leg trembled and quaked and the pain was so strong that the brittle window pane of his consciousness just smashed and littered glass bits of him all over the sidewalk. He tried to grab them up but his hands were shaking too much.

And the voice of Gabriel mocked him in the blackness, “...You’d do best to set the bottle down for a while, buddy. Sober up, keep your eyes wide...Big things are coming, real soon. The greatest show on...” *On what? On what!?* The voice. On repeat. Saying the same thing over and over. And each time Chuck saw the car coming at him out of his peripheral, hazy and shimmering, a mirage from ten years ago. Each time, he heard Gabriel, and then he saw the car and then there was screaming and broken glass and twisting metal and he started the whole tape loop over again.

Chuck realized he had a problem with alcohol long after it was too late to do anything about it. That’s the way these things work; you don’t know the ground under your feet is crumbling until it just tears away and you start blasting ass over apple cart down the long, deep slide to oblivion. In Chuck’s case he’d already had the car wreck and his wife had already moved into the apartment with the kids, and his boss—who had a thing for the sauce himself—had already fired him then given him a second chance and then fired him again when Chuck just didn’t show up to work for three weeks. He’d already pretty well lost whatever slippery grip he’d had on everything when that moment, that turning-point-type moment, happened. And the sad thing is that at the time Chuck’d been too hammered to even know that’s what was happening. It wasn’t until much later that he realized. And by then...well, by then it was too late, really.

...He wasn’t supposed to drive. The state had taken away his license after the third DUI, after the accident, after the three months in County jail. But for some reason they’d let him keep his car. It was banged up, but it still ran.

He was in his car now, and it didn’t matter that he had drunk about two thirds of a twelve pack or that it was two in the afternoon, or that he was facing at least ten years in prison if he

got caught with another DUI. He was driving to Janet's apartment. He needed to talk to her. She'd had the divorce papers mailed to him; she hadn't visited him once while he was in jail. She'd just waited for him to get out and then had her attorney mail him the paperwork, like the last fifteen years was nothing but a contract ending, an obligation fulfilled, a timecard punched.

He wasn't angry, not deep down at least, but there was really nowhere else for all his emotions to go. They overflowed the riverbanks of his heart and the alcohol just dammed everything up so that anger was the only place left, the only place sturdy enough to hold what was left of him. So he yelled a lot and slammed his fist on the steering wheel, and called his wife of fifteen years a callous bitch who deserted him when he needed her most, and the whole time he knew he was wrong but he yelled anyway and he allowed himself to just fill up because he wasn't strong enough to do anything else.

Her apartment was a small three bedroom, the best she could afford. Her parents helped her out a little, but not enough. They'd never liked Chuck; they blamed Janet for him and what had happened.

He pulled up outside the apartment building and sat in his car for a long time, holding the manila envelope the papers had come in, reading the name and address of the law firm that had filed them, trying to hold onto the anger, to let it propel him into the building to say what he had to say. Which was what, exactly? Now that he was here he felt uncertain of his intentions. What was he going to say? Was he going to beg Janet not to divorce him? Blame her for his drinking? Hit her? What was he really planning on doing here?

He had no answers, even as he stepped unevenly out of the car and slammed the door, leaving the keys in the ignition. He walked into the building, rode the elevator to the third floor, and drifted down the darkened hallway to her apartment door. It was painted green with a silver number three screwed in just above the peep hole. He stuck his thumb on the peep hole and rapped at the door. No answer. He knocked again and heard the sprang of a broken guitar chord and the shuffling of feet coming toward the door. There was a pause as the person on the other side of the door tried to look through the peephole. The door opened.

"Dad," said Charlie. He was thirteen years old. Acne peppered the ridge of his jaw. His eyes were the same cold blue as Chuck's, but his hair was long and curly and chestnut brown like Janet's. He held the door open but he didn't move out of the way. "What're you doing here?"

"Is your mama here?" asked Chuck, looking past his son, down the hallway behind him. He'd lost all his nerve; he hadn't figured Charlie into any of this, and seeing his son looking at him this way made him feel like a blank flag waving in the wind.

"No. She's at work. It's like two in the afternoon, dad," said Charlie and the accusation in his voice ignited a match in Chuck's belly that blazed quickly then fizzled out.

"What're you doing home? No school today?"

"I'm sick," said Charlie and then coughed dryly as if to prove the point.

"You look fine to me..." started Chuck and then he changed course. "Y'all gonna let me in or not?"

And here the moment came, so quick and simple and complicated at the same time that it took fifteen years and a bout with supernatural sobriety for Chuck to finally start to unravel it. Charlie, his son, who Chuck could still remember holding on that first day of life, who Chuck had taught to ride a ∞-damn bicycle, whose life Chuck had saved when he was seven and he'd climbed to the top of a maple tree in their backyard and the branch Charlie'd been standing on had broken and Chuck had been there at the base of the tree (bizarrely, miraculously you might say) and he'd caught his son in his arms before he'd hit the ground from about twenty-five feet

up. And though he'd torn muscles in his arms and back, Chuck had held on and set his son safely on the ground. And now this very son, who looked so much like Chuck that he could almost not look at him, he paused and his grip tightened on the door and for a moment Chuck was certain Charlie wasn't going to let him in.

Then he said: "You been drinking, dad?"

Chuck grinned and he lied. Even worse than his son's question and barring the door against him was the lie, and even as he said it he knew there were some things you can't take back, some things just couldn't be erased.

"No, sir," he said and then he pushed past Charlie before the kid had a chance to shut the door, or call his bluff...

...Smashing glass and someone screams. Chuck's head hits the steering wheel because he isn't wearing a seat belt. There are stars and there is a red splatter in his eyes as capillaries burst. Someone screams. Or maybe it's tires. Maybe it's him. Maybe...

...the Rats came out of the ground first. He laid face down in the dirt under the dappled sunlight of the bushes and his peripheral vision swayed and roiled. They squirmed out of the dirt, one after another, and he could hear their high-pitched squealing, barely perceptible, so high that it hurt his ears, made his eyes water and his empty gums ring like tuning forks.

Then the bushes themselves became rats and they fell onto him and he could feel their little paws crawling all over him and their tails dragging behind their bloated, warm sewer water bodies, slick and oily, chittering, chattering. He could feel them burrowing into his pants and his shirt and their fur was like wet silk trailing over his skin. He tried to grab them but he had no control over his quaking limbs. He was helpless. His heart thudded in his chest so hard he felt sick to his stomach, and then Chuck shit himself. He was drowning and drowning and he just wanted to die. He shit himself again and vomited again and tears dripped into the dirt. He wanted to die. He wanted to die. He'd always wanted to die. There was just too much to go through, to sort through, too much pain, too much. Life was like this, shitting and puking yourself, alone, under a bush, always alone. Life was like this. He'd always wanted this. To stamp his ticket. To validate it. To melt into nothingness...

... "How long you been playing guitar?" asked Chuck, pointing at the acoustic leaning against the couch cushions.

Charlie grabbed the guitar and hastily put it back in its case, mumbling, "Just a few months. Mama got it for me..."

"Did she?"

Chuck looked around the apartment. There was a small pile of opened bills and unopened junk mail on a table next to a typewriter, magazines, VHS cassettes towering next to the small TV, a book flipped open and lying face down on a small end table next to the couch, a coffee cup with a ring of red lipstick. These things, these random things that were just random until you put them all together and drew a bull's-eye around them and then they added up to Janet and then they became something strange and heartbreaking for Chuck. He grabbed the book, and a small piece of paper fell to the floor like a feather. He flipped the book over and looked at the cover. It was a painting of a howling monster.

"Grendel," said Chuck under his breath, and he looked into the red eyes of the monster, howling into the void, howling.

“Mama’s reading it for some book club,” said Charlie, and he seemed uneasy. He stood with his weight on one leg, then the other, then the other.

Chuck set the book down and saw the slip of paper lying on the floor. He grabbed it, and turned it over in his hands. There was a name, written in a curt script, a man’s hand. A man’s name, Mike. There was a phone number.

“A book club...?” asked Chuck and he looked up at his son for the first time, and he was shocked to see how tall Charlie’d gotten in the last few months. He was thin, and his arms were long and ropey, his legs inches longer than the last time Chuck had seen him. His face was gaunt, no more chubby cheeks, hollowed out now, nose sharp, the face of a fighter. But beautiful. There was only the thinnest trace of the child Chuck had known just months earlier. Soon there’d be nothing left. Chuck wanted to touch him, pat his shoulders or set his hand against those ridged cheekbones which would soon be sprouting hair, yet he couldn’t find the strength to lift his arms. He went over to the typewriter instead, and traced his fingers on the keys. “Your mama still writing?”

“Not as much, not anymore...” Charlie let the dangling sentence speak for him.

There was a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter, something Janet had done since college. She’d always said that when inspiration struck she didn’t want to have to take the time to load the typewriter. Chuck punched the keys with two stabbing fingers. One word. Howl. He pushed the bar back to ready. He’d never read a single word Janet had written, not in the fifteen years they’d been married, or the two years he spent convincing her to marry him, and not once had she ever asked him to. That struck him as strange now.

He turned back to Charlie, who was still dancing from one foot to the other.

“Well, I guess I’ll get on, then.”

And Chuck drifted to the front door, with Charlie following behind him. They resumed their positions from earlier, with Chuck standing on the threshold and Charlie holding the door open.

“Tell your sister I said hey, alright?” asked Chuck. Charlie nodded but said nothing. They stood awkwardly like that, neither one able to look at the other, but neither one moving to end things. Finally, Chuck said, “Alright, I guess...” and Charlie said, “Yeah,” and then Chuck shuffled off back down the hallway to the elevator. He didn’t hear Charlie shut the door until he was a long ways down the hall...

...The accident was Chuck’s fault, of course. He was wasted and he’d let his drooping eyes close for just the briefest of moments and then he heard the squealing tires and felt his entire world explode in a spinning rain of glass and screaming. The screaming was his. He’d run right through the red light at full speed and the 17-year old kid in the other car pulled out right in front of him and Chuck nearly tore off the back end of the kid’s old Dodge and both of their cars spun madly around until Chuck’s rear fender smashed in an electrical pole, and the kid’s car stood steaming in the middle of the intersection.

Chuck lifted his head from the steering wheel and half his world was red from the blood that seeped into one of his eyes. His neck was seizing up; the adrenaline and shock of the accident burned up the liquor in his system. His mind was as clear as a ringing bell. He spilled out of the car and landed in the street on all fours. He looked at the steaming car ahead of him and he knew the kid must be dead. The kid had to be dead. But then the kid opened his door and dumped into the street like Chuck. The two of them stared at each other like the last two people on Earth. The night was so still they could hear each other breathing. Then the sirens came out of

the distance, and the kid was on his feet, running at Chuck.

“What the fuck, man?” said the kid, stopping anti-climactically short of Chuck’s heaving, wracked body. “What the fuck’s your problem? My fucking car. What the *fuck*?”

And the kid repeated variations on this theme for the next half hour as first the cops arrived, and then the fire truck and then the ambulances, one for each of them, and then the spectators. They came to see the freakish tearing of the fabric of things, the brief glimpse at the chaos that teems just behind the wallpaper of civilization. They formed a ring around the intersection, drifting in and out of the shadows, their eyes glistening like those of wolves, watching Chuck and the cops and the tow trucks, everyone playing their part in stitching the tear back together. There would be scars, of course—the tire tracks would be burned into the pavement for weeks afterwards, the electrical pole would carry the glittering scratch from Chuck’s car for years—but all in all everything cleaned up pretty nicely. The darkness revealed was tidily stuffed back behind the walls.

It was clear from the damage to the cars and their resting positions in relation to one another, that Chuck was the drunk ass who’d caused this mess, and so two cops accompanied him in his ambulance, sitting sternly off to one side while the paramedics wrapped his neck and dressed his head, and put needles in his arm and shined little flashlights in his eyes and asked him questions he forgot almost before they’d finished asking them.

They took a blood sample at the hospital and determined his blood alcohol content was somewhere around .25, so the cops handcuffed Chuck to the gurney, but by that point he was completely passed out, from spent adrenaline, from all the whiskey, from the exhaustion of so completely ruining his life in one blink of his eyes, so that he didn’t notice, not until he woke up about 17 hours later.

The kid was alright. He’d worn his seat belt, he was young and fit, but this was Chuck’s third DUI and the state of Georgia was sick of dealing with him so they took his license, sentenced him to three months in County jail, and required an additional year of mandatory counseling. Chuck served his time and went to every session, but he started drinking about three hours after he got out of jail...

...When Chuck got home from Janet’s apartment, he parked the car in the garage of the house he was renting. He left the keys in the ignition. He took a piss and then he grabbed a bottle of vodka from his freezer and he made himself a really stiff drink...

“Chuck.”

“Chuck. Wake up.

...He opened his eyes and the sun shone on the bedspread, making a box of white on white. He rolled to his side, and saw the imprint of Janet’s body on the bed next to him. He rubbed his hand where she had been just an hour before. It was still warm, or maybe it was his imagination. From the living room he could hear the clacking of the typewriter keys, the gurgling of the coffee pot, the hush of the wind outside the windows, the sounds of Saturday morning as he would remember them for the rest of his life.

He looked out the window at the street and it was empty. Trees lined the street, but his second story view wasn’t obstructed by them. A paper bag floated on a draft of air up and up and then down back to the pavement and then out of sight. Something about this view made him sad and happy at the same time in a way he hadn’t felt since he was a kid, when he woke up Saturday

mornings and knew that he was living the best days of his life.

But were these the best days of his life? These moments he was remembering, these stolen moments, with his wife of three months, who he'd pursued like a rabid dog, who never laughed except when the moment seemed particularly cruel, who sat in the living room of their small one bedroom apartment, their first apartment together, every Saturday typing her stories about ∞ knows what. These very small moments that were meaningless by themselves, weren't they? These moments. These moments.

Maybe that's why he'd been so sad as a boy. He'd known that these times were all he had, by themselves hollow but piled on each other, a life. Whatever that meant. Maybe that was why he was so sad now, looking out on the street and the drifting paper bag, alone but for the ghost of Janet in the bed next to him.

He got up and his head hurt from the bottle of wine he'd drank the night before, he and Janet staying up late to watch a movie and talk through the whole thing and swim through the warm bath of their new marriage. It was cozy, marriage was, and Chuck thought it suited him, the willing surrender of his self to another, to some ideal greater than himself. Two people. They didn't have kids yet; they didn't know. But for now he was content enough with the two of them and this new, third thing, the other, marriage.

He found Janet where he knew he'd find her, hunched over her typewriter, her strangely long fingers walking over the keys like spiders' legs, injecting whatever poisons fevered her into the steadily unblinking page. She didn't hear him, or at least didn't let on that she did, so he passed on to the kitchen and watched the coffee fill up the pot. He poured himself a cup. Two spoons of sugar, a dash of cream. He took a sip and went back into the living room.

"You're up early," he said. He said it every Saturday.

Janet's fingers froze just above the keys and she leaned into her typewriter as though trying to protect whatever was written there. She turned around and smiled.

"I couldn't sleep. Bad dreams, I guess," she said.

Chuck took another sip and nodded. Bad dreams.

"Well, I guess I'll leave you to it then," he said and she smiled again and turned back to the typewriter without saying anything else. He walked back toward the bedroom and sat down on the bed, stared out the window. He wondered what she was writing about. What dreams kept her awake at night, made it so that she had to get up early on Saturday mornings and write them down? What dreams could be so bad that you couldn't just keep them inside? It didn't occur to him to ask to see them.

He looked out the window and the paper bag was back in the street, flying up and up and then down...

... The levels to this pain were infinite, like an elevator that just went down and down, until you wanted to fly just to go upwards for a little bit. Chuck was at least four feet in the ground, looking up through the levels of dirt and mud and worms to see *the Rats* pacing back and forth on the surface, searching him out. The sun had set and it was night now. Chuck had been shaking and quaking and dreaming for hours, but time might as well have been an advanced level of calculus for all the interaction he had with it. It drowned him in infinity, and he opened his mouth wide to get every last piece.

"Chuck."

"Chuck. Wake up."

Chuck opened his eyes and the man who called himself Gabriel stood over him. He had wings, brilliant white and glowing, and they spread out, both blocking the moon and supplanting it. Chuck squinted and he leaned up, all the pain and terror of the last hours fell away from him and he felt as whole as he'd ever felt in his life. He held his hands up to shield his eyes.

Gabriel said, "I need to start by saying that none of this is real. You're dreaming right now. I'm not really גַּבְרִיאֵל. I'm a mirage, a projection, a ghost of the real thing, a shade. But the truth doesn't need reality to be true. Not exactly at least, so I don't want you holding my unreality against me. This is the truth. For what it's worth, at least. I'm not trying to trick you, I'm not. I'm merely a recording of the real thing, played back in your mind.

"Listen, I like you. You're so *human*. You don't see the *big big* picture. Glimpses maybe, but mostly you just put one foot in front of the other. I've always admired that about you, the way you can keep your focus so fucking narrow, the way you can see only what you want to see..." Gabriel's wings retracted and pulled in tight to his body, as his face became severe. "I know the next few days are gonna be pretty rough for you but they're necessary. You've kept everything so narrow for so long, but it's time to widen your view a little. It's time to grow up."

The angel knelt next to Chuck and he pressed an overlarge palm on Chuck's forehead. "But I can't just sit back and let you go through this without some warning."

A warmth spread from the point of contact throughout Chuck's whole body, his fingertips curled and tingled.

"Modeh ani lifanekha melekh hai v'kayam shehehezarta bi nishmahti b'hemla, raba emunatekha," said Gabriel. "Farewell, my friend."

Then he pushed Chuck backwards and Chuck was released into the darkness that awaited him.

He saw many things then, some of them the craziest fucking shit he'd ever seen in his life.

First: There were earthquakes and civil unrest and bombs and soldiers firing into crowds. He saw these things as news reports and headlines, and he saw them as little flashes of images and suggestions of emotions. He saw them as impressions.

Then: He saw very large shadows spreading out and over him, making his body cold. They were shadows of creatures, or beings, or things that had shape, that were real, nightmares made real. They terrified him.

And after that: A shiraz sky, dripping down onto the blackening horizon. Clouds skittered like streamers of smoker's phlegm. The sun, a peeled eyeball rolling into the abyss. And Chuck watched it all, with lots of other people (grandmas, papas, mamas, babies all in their Sunday best) in an Atlanta he only recognized from photographs. They all watched the sky like they'd never seen it before. Their mouths were agape. They looked ridiculous. Then something glinted in the East, just over the disappearing sun, a diamond turning over and over. It grew and swelled and blackened as it did so. It looked like it would swallow the entire sky as it fell to the Earth, the way a really big firework can look like it's going to fall on your head as it blooms and drizzles. And the people watching (the grandmas and mamas and papas and babies) all started to scream and run away, but Chuck couldn't bring himself to move. He needed to see this. He needed to bear witness. For once he needed to just watch the damn world fall apart and not put his head between his legs. So he did, bore witness. He watched as that which is called Wormwood collided

with the ocean and killed about 300 million people. It was beautiful the way all great things are beautiful, no matter how terrible.

And lastly: He saw two things at once, superimposed over one another like a double exposed photograph, happening simultaneously and yet separate. He saw his son's face, set in darkness, and gashed down the middle by the light of a cracked open door. He is afraid but worse than that he isn't surprised by the fear.

At the same time Chuck sees the moon, a pale orb rising over the blackness of the world. It howls for the horror it sees. And then, in the middle of the moon, a silhouette appears, a head with horns, wide shoulders, glistening eyes. The head laughs at him and laughs and tells him to wake up.

Wake up.

Wake up.