

12 Steps

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For Charlie, who taught me everything...

Prologue

Rain, the young man is thinking. Of course it would be raining. Not a heavy, cleansing rain that leaves the streets steaming and the neatly sculptured yards lush and fragrant. This is a gray drizzling rain. A rain that makes him think of places like England and Scotland as they appear in those disturbing late night films on cable, the ones in black and white that weren't particularly memorable when they were made and are even less so now.

Still, it rains and the air is cool. All he has to shelter him is a thin nylon jacket. The jacket is soaked. It feels both chilly and coarse against his skin. His hair hangs in flat and sodden wings, falling into his eyes. It's long in the back, almost to his shoulders, and he thinks that the cars that pass him on the street, the occupants of those cars, might look at him and see only that he is wet and not that he is dirty as well. Can they tell that his hair has been unwashed for days? That his clothes are the same ones he's worn for more than a week? It doesn't matter. He's invisible to them as soon as they pass, taking any assumptions they might make with them. They might just mistake him for one of those hoity-toity college kids, one of those clean limbed and beaming have's who has happened to find himself caught out without his umbrella.

He makes a desultory attempt to straighten his shoulders, to lift his eyes from the buckled sidewalk. To look like he might have a purpose or a destination. It doesn't help. He has

become the day. He has internalized the environment. He did that years ago, in fact.

That's all I can do.

Not his words, of course, but he understands them. He is intimately acquainted with his limitations.

His entire body is telling him about his limitations right now. His stomach roils on acid and nothing else. He doesn't remember the last time he ate, but if his guts have their way, he'll offer what little may be left to the street before long. He walks with his hands crammed deep into the pockets of his blue jeans. If he pulls them out, they'll only shake like the hands of one of those fucking retard kids Jerry Lewis was always putting on television. There's more. His aching head. His shoulders and elbows and his goddamned knees that all feel like the joints have been rapped with a hammer.

That commercial: this is your brain on drugs. Fuck. They should talk about your body on drugs. That would have been something like a deterrent.

He shuffles along in his tired clothing, with his greasy hair and his palsied hands and his plugged up ass. Oh, he hadn't mentioned that one in a while. Not just constipation, the doctors said, but chronic constipation, and for it they gave you these little brown butt nuggets. Suppositories. Shove this up your ass, they tell you. Shove this up your ass and in a couple of days, you'll be regular again.

How 'bout you shove it up your ass? That's what he wanted to say, always wanted to say but somehow never did. Shove it all up your ass, doc. Everything you've got to say and offer. It doesn't help. None of it fucking helped.

I can be angry too, he thinks. Angry and disappointed and disillusioned. Except he isn't. Anger implies the capacity to feel, and he doesn't really have that anymore, not in any way he can identify. That's how it all begins, this life, this desperation. An attempt to feel, or an attempt to stop feeling. He can't say for certain. He no longer remembers, and the ghosts of his past are at rest. They don't call out from their graves.

Somehow, he's managed to reach downtown. This is disorienting. Turn right and fifteen blocks to the hospital. That might have been his plan when he started, for lack of a better plan, anyway. It was all he could do. It wasn't working out that way.

He can see the courthouse, it's bronze dome a shadow in the misting rain. Morning, not yet eight, and the sidewalks are barren places. He is alone in a city that would seem devoid of life except for the constant rumble and hum and scudding of cars as they pass. He peers at shop windows. A second hand bookshop on the corner. A high end sporting goods store with a kayak lurched at an unnatural angle behind the glass. A trendy women's clothing shop blatantly, obscenely targeting the eighteen and nineteen year old somebodies from the campus.

But he keeps coming back to the kayak. A fucking kayak! As if this wasn't God-fucking Indiana! This feels important to him somehow. And impenetrable. It's a symbol in a message encrypted beyond his understanding.

I'm hungry. I'm angry. I'm tired. Most of all, I'm tired. I don't get the kayak.

His shoulders sag and he no longer cares what he may seem to be. He doesn't know the people who pass, who might pass judgments on him. They don't get it, either. It's beyond their understanding.

He steps back from the store's display. One step, two. He totters with his heels hanging over the sidewalk's edge. His balance is precarious, not something he could maintain for long if he wanted to. He closes his eyes and he draws into his lungs the odor of a damp city. He swivels his head on the glassy joints of his neck, as though peering back the way he has come.

He opens his eyes. He sees what he wants to see. He doesn't so much fall back as he steps away.

From the kayak, he thinks. Always from the kayak.

It's a city bus, large and hulking and green. The windshield is flat and tall, and he can see the driver, a

nondescript and burly man. Burly in the way all bus drivers seem to be burly. He is poorly shaven. His skin is sallow. His eyes dark and small beneath a black buttress of Italian eyebrows. His mouth is small as well, probably not always, because a good bus driver needs a good mouth on him. But small now because it's sucked his lips into a pinhole O of surprise. Something unanticipated.

The bus seems very large now, just as the mouth is very small, becoming smaller by the moment.

Shush, shush, the tires say, unheeded by the wet pavement.

I don't get the kayak. Not at all.

The bus looms, becomes massive, grows to fill the universe.

And that, he thinks, that is all I can do.

Chapter 1

In his lifetime, Ray had done a number of things for which he was not proud, things he'd like to see just as well stuffed down a dark hole. Everybody had things of which they were ashamed. Everybody has committed their share of sins that they wish they could take back. But this wasn't one of them, and he resented the implication that it was—the implication that someone would dare to judge him for something they did not fully understand.

It was a good thing, a right thing, like the time he had given emergency CPR to the woman already ten minutes dead and gone, the woman whose mouth tasted of chocolate death and scrambled eggs, just to spare her horrified children the sense of helplessness while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. That had been a noble thing like this one was. Should have been.

Perhaps it was always less difficult to have things fail here, with the living, than it was with the dead. The dead had no opinions, no agendas. They weren't sensitive. The dead did what you fucking told them to do and didn't complain. Right?

The living simply did not understand that there were rules. They didn't want to understand something so banal. Someone who didn't take the time to understand the rules had no right to pass judgment on him. Not that it ever stopped them.

"I hear that you are unhappy," he said into the phone, then had to pull the receiver away from his ear so the woman on the other end could scream at him some more.

Conflict de-escalation technique number one was invariably *affirmation*. Make it clear that you are aware of the individual's feelings and frustrations, that you are at least listening to their side, whether or not you personally may eventually have the authority to validate or alleviate those feelings. People liked to be listened to. The illusion of having a voice was almost as good as actually having one. Isn't that why people still bothered to go to the polls on election day and vote?

And it worked on most people. This woman was not one of them.

"Your anger is perfectly appropriate in this situation. In your shoes, I would be livid."

Advancing to *commiseration* now, crafting his voice so she would believe he was giving the shit which he in fact was not. This was much more than conflict de-escalation technique number two, it was what people commonly called professionalism.

"Really, hey, I understand. I do. I'm on your side on this one, but as I said previously, we are a medical facility. I have both a legal and ethical obligation to protect the confidentiality of our clients. Federal law prohibits me from divulging any information regarding or even confirming or denying the existence of the individual to whom you have made reference."

Blah, blah, blah.

The co-lineation of the words "federal law" and any following set of polysyllables usually worked when all else failed, giving the caller the distinct impression of the big rock (prosecution, six figure fines and termination) and the hard place (i.e. the caller's desire to get him to ignore the consequences of the big fucking rock) between which he was caught.

Lawyers were the exception, of course, as they daily circumvented both the federal law part and others' deterrent polysyllables. Ray preferred not to talk to lawyers whenever possible.

The woman on the other end was not a lawyer, but as always just a mother or sibling or concerned friend, and in the absence of other weapons, would more than happily arm herself with simple stupidity for her assault. It was not an entirely ineffective approach.

“Look,” he continued. “What I can do--all I can do--is offer to take a message. If the individual to whom you wish to speak or about whom you are inquiring is a resident of this facility, I will post a note next to the phone and that person will contact you at his or her earliest convenience.”

It was a purely rote response. The exact text of the message was even scrawled on a smudged and slowly disintegrating 3 x 5 card thumbtacked to the bulletin board above the office telephone. He didn't need to look at the card. His mouth knew the shape and taste of the words by something akin to race memory. The seeming concession had a clear and simple purpose. It was designed to make the caller feel that he, the telephone gatekeeper, had made an exception, that he was surrendering something of value to their persistence.

It also had the very real benefit of getting him the fuck off the phone and away from the mindless, corrosive patter of the chronically concerned and certifiably obsessed relative with whom he happened to be sharing this conversation or one of the hundreds exactly like it in which he had participated over the years.

At last, the woman conceded and began to repeat her name, telephone number and the inevitable pleas to her loved one for a quick return call.

Ray hummed and nodded at the phone to display his sincere focus, conscientiously pretended he was writing it all down while he directed an imaginary symphony with his index fingers. He thanked her for calling, hung up the phone and shook his head.

Idiots. Every one of them.

*

Ray had a dingy little office in a large dirty building. Dirty not because the facility was poorly kept--on the contrary, he seemed to be calling the maintenance crews every other damned day to take care of one thing or another--but because a century and a quarter of more or less constant occupation tended to lodge dirt in corners where it couldn't be reached and warp walls beyond the true until everything looked vaguely ramshackle. That this sordid structure had housed a somewhat boisterous brothel in the roaring twenties, then the homeless and hapless in the fifties and had lately (in decades) catered to drug addicts and alcoholics beyond even the scope of AA's reasonable hopes did not help. People used to pissing in parks, sleeping beneath overpasses and drinking isopropyl alcohol when they could get their hands on nothing else were not naturally inclined--let alone hygienically capable--of assisting with the upkeep of any notion of decorum.

The regulars called it Last Stop Detox. In reality, it was just a warehouse for battered souls. A place for the fallen beyond redemption to roll in, dry out, stave off liver calcification for another day. There was no help here. To pretend so would be ludicrous. Instead, they offered "services", a generic and faintly mortuary term for a site midway between the chilly streets and the rigid consequences of jail.

They had a rotating roster of "clients" (a fine double-speak word for deadbeats and transients and career addicts who would look at you in an appalled and insulted fashion if you even mentioned the concept of a Bill For Services Rendered); Ray sponsored a monthly staff pool on which client would end up with the next obituary. It was the closest to compassion he could bring himself to feel. He made something over seven dollars an hour, but the benefits were good. He maintained as little contact with the facility's patrons as he could legally and ethically manage.

As jobs went, it wasn't so bad.

As workers in a job like this went, he wasn't either.

*

“Who was that?” the girl asked, even as she prepared herself to leave. Her shift was over. “On the phone?”

Ray made a show of attempting to recall the details. “Somebody. Some woman. Wanted to talk to one of the clients. I said I’d take a message.”

“One of ours?”

Generally, the chances were somewhat less than fifty-fifty that a distraught caller actually had located the landing zone of their desperately sought Susan. The call itself was often a last ditch effort aimed at any facilities that were not sponsored by the state and therefore barred, or sponsored by the good Lord and therefore very heavy, very dark and more than a little full of worms.

That these callers would have been relieved to discover their husband-boyfriend-son was only blasted way beyond coherency and slugged away in a third rate detox program where he would be, at best, miserable with withdrawal for the next several days was something of an indicator of the general mental health of the population to which the facility offered its services.

Still, he shrugged at her question, reluctant to answer her straight for whatever reason. She was young, twentyish and pretty, with dark red hair. Stunning green eyes. Breasts that practically stood up and walked about on their own, that made a man think of the word “perky” (though she, as a rule, did not conjure that image with the rest of her demeanor. Probably would have slugged you had she even thought you thought it). She had been clean for most of four years, he knew. About the staff average in terms of recovery time, and not an uncommon figure in this line of work. The resilience of her faith in the ability of others to recover (with a big ‘R’) was somewhat atypical after four years of service, at least when compared to other mental health professionals specializing in clients of this same socio-economic level, but probably still on the same planet.

She was two full years past being an annoying borderline codependent and probably a full half decade from emotional burnout. He was willing to give her a little more benefit of the

doubt with regards to her longevity and tolerance of this population than he would have given the average person. Recovering addicts in his experience were mostly full of one of two things: *hope* was the non-obvious one, and she was, in fact, loaded to the eyeballs with it and chipper as a woodpile nine days out of ten.

She had been a prostitute for awhile, purely to support her habit (though he forgot what precisely that habit had been. Cocaine most likely. Cocaine and hooking are flip sides of a whole pocket full of change. That's why they call them crack whores as opposed to Schnapps whores).

It was apparent that his lack of forthrightness had disappointed her. "She'll call back," he said. "They always do. Too codie not to."

She laughed, a sound like wine glasses tinkling. "You have such a big heart. Try not to save the whole world, okay?" Then she winked at him, and he thought about asking her for sex.

"Anybody on the verge of death?" he asked.

"Not immediately."

A nod. Good enough. He wished her good evening and watched her all the way out the door.

*

Cynicism is a way of life in the drunk and sober business. One learns to expect nothing, to doubt success as a temporary achievement, to assume failure. It isn't so much a defense mechanism as a result of years of anecdotal evidence. The few who succeed, the average odds being about one in thirty, vanish without a word. Mental health workers frequently (and with statistical safety) assume that the individual is dead. In AA circles, they refer to the newly sober idiot's feeling that he's got the alcohol demon whipped as "pink clouding." In the same fashion, addictions professionals do not pink cloud their prognoses. If anything, they dark cloud, they hunt in packs, and they look for shitty little parades.

Thus, when Ray referred to the sole value and purpose of the addiction and recovery milieu as "warehousing" and

nothing else, no better or worse than that, he had a decent epistemological authority for the label and the cynicism which the label suggested.

He'd stolen it from his superiors. Specifically, from the facility's director herself.

He had made the mistake one day of asking exactly what the hell they thought they were accomplishing after the same drunk had shown up for the seventh day in a row smashed out of his mind. That he had shown up was not the issue. That he had no pants on, was a gibbering schizophrenic perilously short of voice-controlling medications, and smelled of spoiled condiments from his latest bout of dumpster diving was close to the actual issue. That he was in this condition and it had fallen to Ray to do the admit was exactly what was going on. Jail, he thought, would have been a better answer. Hospital psych ward or some other non-voluntary commitment would have been almost as good. Long term cemetery visitation would do in a pinch.

Anywhere that wasn't a place like this one, like Last Stop, where the client could slip in for a few minutes, hours or days—as long as he damned well felt like staying—then tromp off to drink a bit more when he felt like it and start the whole desperate and pathetic round over again.

There were no bars to keep the helpless in or out. It was a voluntary program. *Voluntary*, from the Latin *voluntarius*: to will. Addiction in a nutshell.

What good are we doing?

His boss had looked him dead in the eye and said the magic word. "Warehousing."

For what the fuck for?

And the list began: for a family who has had to deal with this waste of life for forty years and deserves a break. For another anonymous family coming home from the grocery store or the movies or just a walk in the park who would have a better chance of making it home on this one night because this particular drunk was off the streets rather than behind a wheel. For a case manager who had done everything short of

pulling her hair out by the roots to convince this yahoo to take his meds, spend his disability check on something other than booze, and somewhen other than the first damned week of every month. Assuming the client hangs around for the duration, detox is a two week vacation, which gives an untold number of people the strength to carry on with the incessant bullshit this guy ships out the other fifty, ruining their lives, their happiness and their peace of mind.

Warehousing was a metaphor for making the world in general a happier place. Think, she said, of all the random acts of violence due to simple, mind-numbing, endless life frustration you prevent every time you show up to work.

It was, he had to admit, a pretty good answer.

*

Except then he had looked at the guy, strapped on a smile that felt halfway sincere and said, "So, Bob, what happened to your pants?"

Just as friendly (probably because the voices were as drunk as he was) Bob had replied, "I don't know, Ray. What happened to them?"

It had taken Ray six months to convince Bob that he hadn't stolen his pants as some kind of joke.

Some concepts worked better in theory than in practice.

*

Ray was not, and probably never had been, an addict himself though he frequently attributed the demise of his marriage to alcohol and cannabis. As in "once I stopped using, I realized she wasn't nearly as interesting as I had been led to believe." It usually earned him a few chuckles.

If asked (which he was not), he couldn't have given a reason why he worked with this population. He had no history of family addiction, no grudges to work out, no impulse to redeem--all of the usual reasons. He cared as little about the welfare of his clients as the average hotel desk clerk. It was probably just as well that no one examined his motivations. In fact, he had only taken the job because four years of half-time college attendance convinced him he needed

a job in which he could both work full time and attend school full time to wrap up his degree. Night shift had offered him that opportunity. The fact that he still remained some three odd years post-degree was not adequately explained.

Still, he was the consummate professional, notoriously competent and fully aware that if anyone was going to attempt to slide on the rules, they were going to do it on his shift. His determination that they adhere closely to the Community Agreements which they signed upon admission to the facility was not so much militaristic for his own sadistic satisfaction as it was symbolic of his realization that any allowance he made for a rules violation created hassles for everybody else.

He had never allowed anyone to die on his watch (drawn from the basic assumption that living was an implied stipulation on the Community Agreements for continued residence in the facility). He joked that there was simply too much paperwork involved to entertain the option of allowing a client to get stiff on him. On the other hand, he still insisted on calling garbage can liners “low rent body bags” whenever a client asked for one, and the dumpster was the “funeral waiting area”. He had considered that really funny until one of their clients actually did freeze to death in the dumpster behind the Kroger. It was still B-list material, though.

He was, however, the last person in the world who planned on informing the name-forgotten caller that her nineteen year old heroin addicted son had abandoned treatment two mornings ago and stepped in front of a city bus. That was more of a police matter, a coroner matter, or maybe even best left up to the local newspaper. The police, of course, were probably still trying to establish identification and locate next of kin. Ray himself only knew because the AA grapevine was that good, that efficient, and full of people who rode city buses for a living (practically) and knew everybody who had ever been at any meeting anywhere in the tri-county area by face and first name. The recovering community usually had a ten to twelve hour scoop on any other agency regarding information on their own people. Newspapermen really should give them their own beat.

Ray didn't really give a shit about any of that. His concern only ranged far enough to wonder if the mother would be stricken or relieved when the news finally came. The latter was a safe bet.

*

On most nights, he smoked too much, drank too much coffee and spent too many hours thumbing through his dog-eared copy of *Career Options for English Majors*. It was that kind of life. Night shift workers know entropy as an almost physical force, but they do not complain. They don't have the energy.

The phone rang at midnight, just as it always did.

"So there's this guy," she said. She never stayed, but called the moment she got home. Just to talk, which typically left him wondering if the relationship was then more complex than it appeared on the surface or so grindingly, platonically simple that he was the only one too stupid to understand it.

"What's his name?"

"Does it matter?" He supposed it did not, and she agreed. "He's here now. Asleep in my bed when I got home. I guess I gave him a key."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"Of course, but just a few times." She paused. "Or did you mean tonight? There's hardly been time."

"No, just in general."

"Why do you ask?" She was flirting.

That was, in fact, why he had asked, but he said, "Because I can't give decent advice without a concept of the relationship dynamics."

"Who said I wanted advice?"

"Anyway, go ahead." She never asked for his advice, he always gave it, and she never stopped him. He wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it felt like progress.

"Well, he wanted anal. I'm not into that, and I told him so. I said, how about you let me stick something up your ass? He

thought I was joking, of course. He won't settle for just, you know, doggie-style--which I'm not too fond of with him, anyway, because he tends to have both a problem with slipping north and knows virtually nothing about clitoral stimulation. I think I'm going to have to let him go, but he's still in that grace period when I'm deciding if he's *teachable*. I was leaning toward an extension of the probation, but he's here, and I find that bugs me."

"I believe a key implies an open invitation, unless you specify otherwise."

"I don't want to give him the impression that I don't like him, but I'm not going to let him do *that*."

"Which that, showing up unannounced or the other?" He couldn't blame the guy. She had a great ass (though, of course, his only evidence in support of that opinion was extensive visual surveillance).

"That *that*."

"Oh. Then sleep with him tonight, and dump him afterward. It'll make things easier and send a nice ambiguous message. As a gender, we're much more prone to suggestion after we've been laid."

He could hear her rolling her eyes. "That is so stupid."

"Guys are stupid. It's a thing. Don't ask me, but women seem to like it so we keep it up."

She laughed gently, faintly mocking.

"That call you took right before I left," she said. "Was it about--Jesus, what was his name? Ron or Tom or something."

"Don. Donald."

"Right. Was that for him? The dead kid?"

"Mother."

She was silent for a moment, looking for something to say, he supposed.

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

He closed his eyes, tight shut. Visualizing. "What are you wearing?"

She giggled, a young girl sound that was pleasant, almost innocent. A catholic school uniform sound. "Just my panties, Ray."

Then she hung up.

*

The facility itself had one regular nurse, an RN who supervised the paramedical staff, reviewed all of the clinical charting and only worked day shift (and even then only when she had the energy). Occasionally, they managed to scam down-on-their-luck LPN's who could have made more money at nursing homes, and frequently left to do so or to find other careers altogether. Ray and his counterparts were the uncertified equivalent of Certified Nursing Assistant's who ran around under the weighty nomenclature of Addictions Technicians. As with most titles, it sounded more impressive than the reality which it was supposed to reflect.

He could take blood pressure, deal with bodily fluids, understand the rudiments of withdrawal symptoms for a score of narcotics. He could handle being vomited on (or even pissed on in some circumstances) and had a very high threshold for aggravation in general. Above all, he could estimate that critical line between unassisted withdrawal and critical withdrawal. He had the skills to call an ambulance if necessary.

They were not a hospital. They were not even an adequately stocked triage center. There was nothing about the staff or the disposition of the building itself which even vaguely suggested a medical competency.

In business parlance, this situation is described as *getting what you pay for*.

Ray could honestly say that his pay was commensurate with his medical skills.

There was, of course, more to it than that.

During his initial training, the nurse had once told him: *alcohol withdrawal can kill. Everything else makes you feel like shit, like you want to die, but alcohol kills.*

Actually, sedatives as a class were capable of killing during withdrawal, but most of the transient, blasted scarecrows Ray saw day in and day out couldn't afford or wouldn't take pills. They liked whiskey and vodka, preferably by the liter. Not much beer by the time Ray saw them. Too slow, too expensive, too much pissing--pissing on the street being the number one cause of Public Intoxication arrests.

Alcoholics outnumbered the coke heads, stickers, pill poppers, huffers--everybody else--easily ten to one. Drunks consumed most of the staff's attention. Because they were loud, they threw up, they fell down, they had seizures, hallucinations, DT's. Above all, they could die. And there were always more of them. The others, the drug addicts, were merely miserable. Misery was something you could live with, that you (at least if you were a staff person) almost applauded--it was good for the addict to see what kind of grinder they had been putting their body through, to know how sick they were. It might (theoretically) keep them on the wagon a while longer (though, by that logic, women who had delivered one baby would be extremely hesitant to ever do it again. The human brain has an amazing capacity for amnesia with regards to physical suffering. . .which is good in terms of population growth, but not so good if one is attempting to enter the recovery community).

Misery was valuable, another weapon in the treatment arsenal. Death on the other hand, well. . .it was at the very least a lot of paperwork. In a business that extended a hand to all kinds but helped virtually no one, the squeaky wheel adage made for a good rule of thumb. There were, after all, funding issues. Grant agencies frowned on corpses, at least on-site corpses. Street deaths were more or less invisible and largely uncounted, even if they had been a client of yours earlier in the same day. It was felt that as long as no one actually perished in a way that was noticeable, prosecutable or involved the arrival of blaring sirens and staccato red lights, a given treatment center was doing its job well.

Ray's natural allotment of compassion tended to conform to industry standards.

*

Last Stop Detox (officially the Center for Addictions Treatment or CAT, which the bottom end methamphetamine camp viewed with side splitting irony) was run out of an old farmhouse in Bloomington, Indiana. The plot which remained of its previous acreage rested on a corner of two busy streets which formed the accepted "tracks" upon which detox sat on the wrong side, thereby setting the tone for an entire neighborhood.

The house had once been a depot for the Underground Railroad (so it was rumored). Ray had been shown the bricked up tunnel entrance. The dank shaft's terminus had been in a now absent barn which had once sat across the street--before there was a street--but lately replaced by an elementary school and its requisite playground. There was no terminus now. No other side to escape to. Should any slaves happen by these days, too bad for them. This depot, Ray had observed, led only to a dead end spur.

The mental health center's Board of Directors leased the property from the city for a dollar a year plus property taxes and upkeep in return for an unwritten agreement to accept overflow clients from the city jail.

It was ostensibly a not-for-profit operation. Even that assessment was probably optimistic.

Ray wondered sometimes if the former slaves heading for freedom in Canada or wherever had ever offered to pay the farmers, the original homeowners, even a portion of the cost of their redemption. Maybe the expectation of a free ride, of entitlement after suffering, of taking a handout from someone willing to offer it, had been seeded into the soil then. Could a site be poisoned by kindness?

He had no one to ask these things. The five years he had been the official night shift guy had been mostly lonely years, working by himself. Besides, it sounded racist to even think it and Bloomington, Indiana was a college town, which meant liberal politics, liberal social programs and entirely too much willingness to feel the plight of the poor and downtrodden with a sincerity that stopped just short of having to actually *see* those programs in action. A liberal public wants social ills and

loud mouthed drunks warehoused discreetly. Out of sight is, indeed, out of mind.

Ray didn't say such things. People would have looked at him funny.

Being the frequent receptor of funny looks was not a wise choice in the mental health profession.

*

At one o'clock, Ray worked room by room through the building's six client areas. Fifteen beds, all of them in use. Everyone seemed to be asleep. He carried his manual blood pressure machine, his oral thermometer and his clipboard on which he would write the readings he took and the complaints he was given by the four he had to wake up for vital signs. The three who had been there before and knew the routine grunted and flung their arms indulgently at him. The one who was new tried to hit him (which was why Ray always woke them up by shaking their feet), then got it together enough to ask if he was due for Ativan yet.

He even demonstrated a lugubrious if unconvincing case of the shakes to prove his case. Ray told him to shut the hell up and go back to sleep.

At least he was better than the women. Most alcoholic women had been at one time or another victims of extremely vigorous and chronic sexual abuse (often because they were too drunk to effectively resist drunk men who thought resistance was a form of foreplay). Alcoholic women tended to scream really loud and go for the eyes with their fingernails when strange men came into their rooms at night.

One time, Ray had a client who had been military special forces for a very serious and very long time. That guy had at least warned him that if he had to wake him during the night, Ray should just say his name from the bottom of the stairs and the guy would come down on his own. Ray tried it, in a whisper, at two a.m. The guy came down. It was awe-inspiring in a *Manchurian Candidate* scary sort of way.

It was, the guy said, was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can do for you.

Tonight's experience was not atypical.

*

He had trained for six weeks with Hank, the man he was scheduled to replace. Hank had some unpronounceable Italian name and a mafioso body to go with it. He wore his long, black hair in a braid that reached the small of his back. He had a tattoo of a cannabis leaf on his left arm and therefore always wore long sleeves when at work or in the presence of officers of the law.

*

On Ray's first day, Hank had given him a pair of sound pieces of advice. He said, "Ray, guy, you have to do two things to succeed in this job. You have to smoke, number one. That's to kill time, of which you will find you've got far too much for your own good. This job is ten days of spreading your ass on the seat and five minutes of adrenaline. Your whole paycheck is that five minutes, so you get paid too good to fuck it up.

"That's the gravy. Point two and most important is this: avoid at all costs giving any kind of shit about these people. It's going to be hard at first, believe me. We've all had ground into us this Protestant schmeep line about helping the unfortunate and giving till it hurts. That's fine, I'm not saying it's not. Here you're going to find a whole class of shitholes with the sorriest and most unfortunate lives you have probably encountered. You've got your raped as children, you whored off to mom or dad's friends, your 'my grandma put whiskey in my bottle to shut me up', your 'my mom put cigarettes out on my arm'. It's a whole lot of sadness in very dense packages. It's gonna kill you at first to not give the shit your pastor told you all the time you were being reared that you're supposed to.

"But that is the fastest way to burn yourself out. Jobs like this eat people alive. Altruism flies in the face of a gazillion years of human evolution. Why? 'Cause people are spark plugs, Ray. We've got all this latent energy coiled up inside us to care about something. We go pop, pop real bright over all kinds of crap day after day. Then suddenly you hit fifty, sixty

and find you're all out of juice. Used up. That is, if you're lucky. You let yourself, and these turds here will suck up your caring, your energy, your capacity. A whole life of passion in what? A year or two, and they don't give nothing back. They can't, they got nothing. They used themselves up and just want to steal your fire.

"Don't let them do it, Ray. Ain't a one of them worth it. But that spark, it's worth everything. Passion keeps a man breathing. It is divine. Read the Gnostics, boy. They *knew*."

Of course, Hank hadn't bothered to tell him that the Gnostics had all been dust by the fifth century. Them and their sparks with them.

*

Hank had taught him the most about professionalism, what he called the Illusion of Caring. All show, no substance. Hank had made him read Machiavelli, then quizzed him to make sure he got it.

"They're pieces of shit," he said. "The one group of people about whom generalities always apply. They have the same histories, the same stories, the same experiences. They are variations on a theme. You go to an AA meeting--one guy yaps and everybody nods. That's what I mean. Only the faces are different.

"That's why I say don't care. The whole trajectory of their lives will be the same. The ones who get out, get sober and write self-help books do it in spite of guys like us and places like this. If we can take no credit, it's only fair that we accept no blame. But that means absolute neutrality in all things. We must be the moral equivalent of Switzerland.

"Put simply, we should strive never to drive anyone back to the bottle. That is our Prime fucking trekkie Directive. They should believe that we are rooting for them, supporting them, helping them. They must believe we are their best friends, but we must never actually be that friend. A friend is someone you lean on, and we try to get these idiots to stand alone, though they will invariably fail.

"The difference is exacerbation. You help kill anybody you befriend in this business. You cannot be their crutch without inflicting greater harm.

"Neutrality is the most harmless compromise. Recognize their humanity without touching it; listen to them without hearing; be kind without meaning it. Above all, pretend to care but do not do so. Follow these rules and they'll think you're a fucking saint."

*

Every day for the first six weeks, Hank would stare at him, stare hard with his eyes icy and bugged out until Ray looked back. Then he would say, "Ray, you are the man."

You are the man, every day.

It took him a week to answer. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you've got to hear it until you believe it."

"That I'm the man."

"*The* man, Ray. The only man."

Ray chewed his lip. "I don't get it."

"Look, above all--" Hank tended to speak in superlatives. Everything was *above all* without anything ever getting to the top, at least not that Ray had ever discerned. "You got to realize that you are alone. You are the cheese. We've got three shifts here. Three techs on day staff, two evening people, but only one night guy. On the one hand, that makes sense. Doors're locked, the folk are all sleeping. No trouble most of the time.

"Downside is little access to cops and docs and any form of immediate help in emergencies. They're on skeleton crews, too, which beats the hell out of their response times. That means *you* have to control any potential situations. *You* assess quickly and *you* decide what happens. No deals, no backing down, no wavering. For fifteen guys every night, you are the only structure, the only safety that exists in the world. If they see you scared, they're gonna be scared. If they see you as a pussy, they're going to treat you like a pussy.

“You are the god of their universe when you are here. You recognize no higher authority. No one can question you, and you better act that way. If they don’t respect you--the most vulnerable because you are alone--they ain’t gonna respect nobody.

“So, you don’t listen to cops, family, doctors--nobody. You make a decision and make everybody abide. Live or die with the consequences--it’s your ass, of course, but make sure you’re the guy who puts it in the sling if it ends up there, not some dumb fucker who doesn’t know the on-site situation and therefore has his head up his ass as far as you’re concerned. You have to be firm on this, I mean rock solid in your mind that you ain’t gonna let nobody bully you into backing down, because they’re all going to try. ER docs who want to dump some piece of shit on you, cops who wanna hand you the paperwork instead of doing it themselves, even our own emergency services therapists who want to play Dr. Feelgood over the phone. None of them mean shit to you, remember that, because if their fuck up gets somebody dead here on your shift, it’s totally your liability.

“You have these people’s lives in your hands. They’re trusting you to stave off the chaos they know too well so they have a legitimate shot at getting sober, even if they always and eventually choose not to capitalize on that opportunity. You’ve got to be the man and act like it even if you’re totally wrong. Believe anything else and you’re killing somebody.”

Chapter 2

“My personal life is a mess, Ray,” she began. She sounded as though she was confiding a secret.

He said, “Okay.”

“No, really. Do you have time to talk?”

Like he had anything else. “You haven’t told him yet.”

“It’s the middle of the *night*, Ray! I don’t want to get into it. I don’t think I’m up to it.”

“If you put some clothes on, you’d feel more competent.”

She laughed. “It drives you crazy to talk to me when I’m naked, doesn’t it? What’s the matter? Is it too honest? Or does your own clothing make you feel inhibited? Are you secretly a closet nudist waiting to be exposed?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then you’re jealous. It’s not that I’m naked, but naked with a strange man in my house. We could be doing it right now while I’m talking to you. That turns you on, doesn’t it? Turns you on and repels you at the same time.”

Ray cleared his throat. “I find telephones to be a distinctly dishonest medium. You can see a lie in most people’s faces, but telephones hide the expression and garble the pitch of the lie in the voice. It protects the liar while revealing the innocent. That’s why telemarketers have replaced door to door salesmen.”

“So who are we protecting, me or you?” She was teasing. “Maybe you’re just as naked as I am, sitting on the desk with the office door closed and the shades drawn. Are you, Ray? Are you naked?”

“I don’t like to be naked.”

“That has the ring of truth, even over the phone. I can believe you. I bet even when you’re alone you dress in the dark, you shower with your eyes closed. I bet there are parts of your own body you’ve never even seen.

“It’s funny. I have a vivid imagination. I can look at people in restaurants, on the street or shopping in the mall and beneath their tacky suits and polyester blends, I can see their swollen bellies and whale-white legs. I mean, I can picture them in perfect detail. Surgical scars, varicose veins, inappropriate tattoos. Women who have bruises from their abusive husbands.

“I can imagine what a man would look like in bed. It uses the same skill sets. When I was hooking, I did it all the time, a split second appraisal so I could set my rates based on a disgust surcharge.

“But I can’t see you, Ray. It’s like you have shadows everywhere there should be light. Your clothes are full of smoke. Sometimes I think that if you even unbuttoned your shirt you would suddenly dissipate, lose coherence. Your form as we understand it would cease to exist. Why do you think that is?”

“Because you don’t know me well enough. Or maybe too much. I don’t know--it’s your imagination, not mine. Maybe you’re spending your time making too many false assumptions.”

“It’s because you love me, isn’t it?” She said, laughing. Ray imagined her playing with the telephone cord, twirling it into knots with her long fingers. “Admit it. You manipulate me every time we talk because you don’t want me to see. You show me only what you prefer, and that isn’t very much. Are you afraid I’ll like what I find, or that I’ll be shocked by it? Are you trying to attract me or drive me away?”

He felt his face getting hot. He could no longer tell if this was teasing. "I thought we were going to talk about the shambles of *your* personal life."

"I already know all the details of my life. Admit it."

"I don't have any shambles that would be interesting."

"Not to you, because they're yours. Admit it."

"Admit what?"

"Admit it," she said again. "Admit you love me and I'll leave you alone. Unless, that is, you don't *want* to be alone."

The phone chirped at him, made him jump. He managed to bang his knee hard against the desk, and he grimaced at the impact. He bit down on his tongue.

"I've got another call," he grunted.

"Oh, all right."

She hung up.

*

"Center for Addictions Treatment, this is Ray." He worked both pep and syrup into his voice. He tried to sound eager to help. *Hi, I want to help. I would be pleased to help you. I'm very happy to help you, really. Nothing would please me more.*

It was difficult to be convincing in the middle of the night.

"I want to stop drinking."

There was music in the background, muted. Honky-tonk or maybe Jimi Hendrix. Could be Jefferson Airplane. It had that general background quality specific to bars. A music that denied definition, that you inevitably heard without recognizing, snatched up in bits and pieces without ever precisely noticing. Drinking music. Psychedelic funk; psychedelic *drunk*.

The voice which blocked the music was thick, tired, the speech pattern beginning to slur.

Ray felt both his body and his own voice stiffen in response. He massaged his bruised knee.

"You're looking for some help?"

“That’s why I called, isn’t it? This fucking beer an’ whiskey an’ shhhit, man. I got nothin’ but fucking shit from it. T’day I had two cases. Two. Then I came here, an’ they said I can’t have no more. I need help.”

There was nothing plaintive in the request. It was a demand--it was always a demand, though Ray was experienced enough to know that it wasn’t just a population thing that made his clients act this way. It was an alcohol thing. Obnoxious Drunk. The substance of that perception was so common, it had become a cliché. It should have its own dictionary entry.

The key to dealing with the intoxicated, especially over the phone, was to speak slowly. Use short sentences. Repeat everything at least once, and realize most of what you were saying just wasn’t reaching them. Ray hated callers from bars, and not just because they were demanding and annoying when a little broken down sincerity would have gotten them much further in the game of life.

He hated them, in fact, for a couple of reasons reasons.

He hated them because in response to their haranguing, howling, hedonistic environment he had to talk loudly to get over the noise. That was part of it. Shouting at someone over the phone when you’re more or less the only one awake in a house full of sleeping people makes you feel just plain stupid.

But even more than that, the weight of his significant disdain was purely a product of time and experience. When a drunk called, it wasn’t so much that one guy Ray was talking to, but every one who had ever called with the same complaints, who had gotten the same answers, who hadn’t then bothered enough to listen to what he had to say. Not any damned one of the four to six times he would repeat to them the information they had called to hear.

Stop drinking.

Check yourself into a facility like this one.

Go to an AA meeting.

Quit using and pay attention.

And take a cab to wherever you go when you decide whatever it is you're going to do so you don't kill somebody.

If Ray had been the meditative type, these phone calls could have qualified as a mantra.

The truth, of course, was that the calls were a waste of his time. The bars closed at two; the calls came between one-thirty and three. Pleas for help that either meant homelessness (though that was largely a winter phenomenon) or split-second assessments, drunken moments of clarity. *Well, hey, look at me! I am a slobbering drunk! I should stop my ass from drinking before it kills me!* Or some vaguely attractive six-pack worth of woman had pointed out the unnecessary *you drink too much* as a way of getting the guy to stop hitting on her and messing up her new dress, and the drunk perceived the intention of cleaning up as a way to gratify the immediate need of sexual relations. *I agree with you, ma'am. I drink too much, but I have given ver-ry serious thoughts to checking myself into a rehabilitation facility. After which time I understand that I can fully expect to locate your whereabouts and perpetrate really nasty sexual acts against your body. Ma'am.* (Tip of the hat).

Middle of the night callers had no staying power. Certainly, they viewed treatment with an obsession at the time, but come morning, come thirst, they'd wake up and scan the dingy walls and smell the alcohol sweat of their roommates and disappear. They believed they wanted help. Ray had no argument with that. When you're that drunk, you can believe anything for any number of reasons. But the truth was that weren't done drinking yet. It was not an uncommon occurrence, and part of the reason the average alcoholic did seven treatment episodes before they were able to string together any significant (measured in weeks) sober time.

Like all addictions professionals, Ray had learned how to evaluate a client or potential client almost instantly. By appearance, tone of voice, level of intoxication, content of initial communication, any number of other factors. The admission process to a detoxification facility took almost two hours with a sober patient, longer with those so drunk they kept passing out. Even longer with the vomiters, the seizers, the fallers down, and especially the drunk and just flat out

belligerent. *Why the fuck you need all this? Why do you ask so many damned questions? I just want to go to sleep. I feel real bad--look, man, I'm getting the shakes. I need some meds.*

They spent more time arguing about why they had to answer the questions than it would have taken to just answer them in the first place. But try to explain that to them.

They couldn't, wouldn't understand that the questions could be the difference between life and death, that they were the questions the doctor would ask again in the morning when he did his cursory exam. The doctor would not accept a plea of "too drunk" from the admitting staff. The two docs were, after all, on call half the year and twenty four hours a day for a measly 16k. Their goal was get in, get out, avoid glaring malpractice errors. Like drive-thru exams. *Would you like some Ativan with that hangover, sir?*

(Ray was aware that his opinions of the doctors contracted to the facility were unfair and largely incorrect. At 16k, they were practically, at least in a physician's universe, volunteering--which made him what? Wouldn't the underground railroad be ashamed of what was going on in one of their depots. . .)

They also couldn't understand that the more they resisted the performance of some simple paperwork tasks with an overnight monitor who wasn't exactly pleased that they were currently pissing on his shoes, the more intractable the night shift guy was going to become.

Point being: at nearly two a.m., it was Ray's prerogative to judge the motivation of the caller and encourage or discourage treatment as appropriate. Technically, he should always encourage. It was not just the facility's mission, but also, the drunk you send away is often the same one who wipes out a family of four while driving home rather than taking a cab to detox.

(Ray had recently come to realize that particular chain of events had become so expected, so moralistic, that it had been upgraded to fairy tale status. *Don't you let your friends drive drunk, children, or the wicked drunk drivers will come and take your very own family away!* The possible truth behind the cliché was

largely debatable, but he was generally not in the mood to argue the veracity of such claims.)

At the same time, there was nothing altruistic in Ray's seeming blithe acceptance of such an anecdotal argument. He didn't suggest this or that drunken lottery winner cruise down for treatment because he imagined he was saving some faceless family from auto-alcoholic eradication. His motives were much more pragmatic.

If in the aftermath of a fatal accident--whether any fairy tale family involved themselves in the tragedy or not--it were to come out that his was the last agency of contact and he had offered no services, he became (personally and corporately) liable for any felonies committed.

But tonight, with all the beds full, Ray's decision was easy.

"There's not much I can do for you, friend. I've got no beds tonight." He made himself sound sad.

"Huh?"

"I've got no beds."

The caller mulled over that information. "Then what good are you? You got no help when a guy needs it."

"We should have an opening tomorrow."

"Bullshit."

Which, in fact, it was.

"Hey, really." Ray put a little steel into it, a clang like a portcullis closing.

"What do I do, then?" There was a sneer, belligerence working its way to the surface. Addicts want (what they want when they want it), and fail consistently to appreciate the difficulties of the treatment milieu. They expect service when they ask. "You tell me, what am I supposed to do? They're startin' to close here."

"Go to the hospital."

Official referral. Recommendation for further services at a qualified, alternative agency.

Ray was now legally off the hook.

The caller flipped him a virtual finger. "An' get a fuckin' PI? That's six blocks."

"Take a cab."

"I don't got no money."

Of course not. He was calling from a bar, calling right before closing time, and therefore using the last bit of change he had in his pocket. QED. Ray had expected nothing else.

He said, "That's too bad."

"Why don't you call one for me. You got them vouchers. I know."

"I can't do that."

"Why the fuck not? I said I need help."

Those were normally the magic words, the incantation, the *open sesame* to all the vaults of social service and government program entitlements. It was all about liability issues, about who got money and did something quasi-productive with it, about who managed to hide their body count the best.

Career alcoholics were not idiots. They knew all of this. They knew they could not be denied services, by law, once those services were requested. Any facility displaying a pattern of request denials without justifiable cause could and would be denied funding (by order of Congress, no less). Thus, there were laws (which the addict knew generally) and entitlements (which he knew from experience) and the threat of funding denied to any agency shown to inadequately leap at the client's command to which this caller was quietly alluding with his repetition of the word "help".

It was, of course, largely a myth the community of non-recovering (or, more precisely, anti-recovering) addicts had convinced themselves was a reality. It sounded good, it made them feel like they had some sort of safety net from falling too far, and in some ways was actually legitimate. Except the skid row caliber addict tended to forget that no one in the legal or political bureaucracy was going to believe the testimony of a social loser. Especially when detox facilities made a community feel good, made them feel like they were doing something to help with "the drug problem". Better an

incompetently managed facility than no facility at all (not that Ray would have said in any way that the facility or its staff was incompetent; it was fully the clients who were incompetent. . .)

"I told you what to do," Ray said simply. "I've given you a plan. If you choose to disregard that plan, there is nothing else for us to speak about."

Plan. Recommended course of treatment specific to a client (or potential client). Ray's ass had now been covered. He was practically the *Merrimac* he was so covered.

The caller gave him a few moments of dead line, open line. Honky-tonk, Ray decided.

"Fuck you," the man shouted, then slammed the phone down.

It was not the first time.

*

Despite his presentation, there was one thing Ray made sure his co-workers understood. The appearance of spite was just that, an appearance. He did not hate the clients he encountered either in person or via the telephone while on the job. Not the ones who relapsed, not the ones who blatantly used them as a rest area between binges, not the cantankerous, cursing bastards who had been drinking longer than Ray himself had been alive and wanted to treat him and his recovery bullshit accordingly. He didn't hate them at all. He couldn't say he cared about them enough to have an emotion of that implied strength anywhere even vaguely in their direction.

But he could act the part convincingly if it helped to keep a client in line.

*

The next call, though he fully expected it to be, was not from a drunk.

"How are you doing, Ray?"

He recognized the voice at once. Sam Boler was a sort of co-worker in Ray's mind. Officer Boler to most people. A tall,

lanky cop with frighteningly red hair, but an easy smile and smooth, almost placating demeanor (which tended to obscure the fact that he had also once been an airborne Ranger). Two or three times a week he brought over slobbering pieces of human flotsam who had responded favorably to arrest, given little to no hassle, or seemed like generally okay folk. Ray could not decide if these gifts were given in lieu of a PI charge for those reasons or in lieu of paperwork Officer Boler did not himself want to do. This ambivalence should have made Ray suspicious of him, but as Ray just as frequently had to call Sam for drunken elopers (a highly technical term for those who decided to leave the facility while still above the legal intoxication limit--yet another liability issue), they had developed a sort of professional amiability.

Besides, the last thing a solo night shift worker in his field wanted was an antagonistic relationship with cops.

"I don't have any beds, Sam," he said.

"That's all right. I don't have any drunks. I'm off tonight."

"Congratulations. Suddenly I find myself feeling more secure."

Sam chuckled, and they shot the breeze for awhile. Not very long, and only generally. Ray was aware that he had little to say when Sam was out of uniform. It was odd. They had once stood in the parking lot for two hours while a passed out drunk slept off a binge in the back seat of Sam's cruiser and exchanged job stories, compared divorce notes, and argued about who got screwed most by the court. (Loser: Ray. The legal fraternity sticks together, even in personal matters, but even then it had come down to the month Ray had lived in his car while paying his exes lawyer fees).

"I broke department protocol when I called you this morning," Sam said finally. "I'm not apologizing for it, and I'm not sorry now. What I do on my own time is my business, right?"

"Except for that whole confidentiality thing." Ray was not going to tell him that his call had been little more than official

confirmation for the six other calls from AA sources he had received on the morning of the accident itself.

"There is that."

Ray's throat tightened. "Anyway, go ahead."

"That kid, the suicide. There's some trouble brewing. The lead investigator talked to a lawyer representing the family today. I think they're nosing around for some evidence of negligence on your part."

"It's a voluntary program."

"I know, and he was sober when he left. I assume, anyway. I don't have toxicology to confirm that. This is all grapevine stuff. Can you believe this shit? The kid's not even buried yet and they're trying to cash in. Figure he ought to be worth something dead; whatever he wasn't when he was alive, anyway. I just wanted to give you a heads up."

Ray thought about that, hesitated. "His mother called tonight. About midnight. She wanted to talk to him, so she said. I didn't have a release."

"Jesus, you didn't tell her anything, did you?"

"Of course not. No release of information; I said that."

Sam expelled his breath. "No doubt she was baiting you-- on the advice of counsel. It's slimy as hell, calculating, but a good way to show in court that you play fast and loose with the rules. That'd be a good step toward proving negligence. God, what a bitch."

"I figured she hadn't been told yet." Ray let out his own sigh.

"You're entirely too gullible, boy. How have you survived that job this long?"

"Just lucky."

Sam did not laugh. Instead, he became almost precociously serious. "I'm not kidding you, Ray. These people are hot for your ass, somebody's ass. I'd love to call it grief or even a smarmy lawyer's manipulations, but it sounds more like blatant profiteering. That's on the part of the family, mind you. Lawyers make a living on profiteering. We expect

that, so it doesn't touch us much anymore. But I tell you, Ray, because I've seen it before: when the family gets involved, when it's the aggrieved mother and crying brat siblings that want to make the quick buck, this kind of shit can get dangerous to anyone standing in their way."

"You're suggesting they would lie."

"They'll lie a hell of a lot more convincingly when it's their idea than when a lawyer is pushing them into something they're not really sure jibes with their moral fabric, you understand? And like it or not, the current justice system, by that I mean the jury of your peers system, often comes down to theatrics, Ray. Which side lies better and lies more convincingly. That's the side that wins."

"Like a *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* thing."

"Take this thing seriously, Ray."

"Of course," he said. "I can worry about it if you think I should. Spend a whole day or two on it."

Sam seemed to shake his head. "Don't jerk around here, Ray. I don't think they've got a case, but they're fishing. . .and these days, who knows what a jury is going to do? I mean, spilled coffee is worth two million bucks, for Christ's sakes! Who knows where a jury would go for a weeping mother with some acting skills? I'm advising you--very unofficially--to be careful who you talk to and what you say."

"I don't have anything to hide. I did my job."

"Sure, you say that now. I've seen too many of you soft-hearted liberals break down with guilt in front of the bereaved family. Admit everything from poor penmanship to single-handedly orchestrating the crucifixion. That business corrupts your sense of self-preservation."

"I'm a Republican, Sam. Don't worry about me."

He began to get angry. "Cover your ass, Ray. I don't want to see you take this fall. You do good work there, maybe even help a few people. One fucked up kid is not worth your whole life, and that's exactly what they're angling for. They'll nail you with a million or two, then go after detox for a few more. They'll shut you down without giving a shit about the void

they leave behind, all those people who can't afford a hospital. That bitch and that lawyer aren't the ones who'll have to pick up the frozen bodies come December.

"That woman lost her son. Big deal. He was nineteen on his way to twenty years in Plainfield, and that's assuming he didn't kill somebody trying to maintain his habit. He was a suspect in four home burglaries already. Probably the one shining, decent thing he ever did was step in front of that bus. Saved his momma a lifetime of grief. I'm trying to save you from her share of pain, Ray."

There was nothing else Ray could say after that. He thanked Sam for calling, for his concern, and excused himself to his job responsibilities.

*

Do I deserve to be saved?

*

Ministers are the world's only professional, paid codependents. The qualities which are shunned in the mental health field as being inappropriate, destructive, or disproportionate are the same ones preachers and pastors are expected to display on a daily basis. People want a codie God who burns to satisfy their whims. In the absence of a direct experience of divinity, they must take the behavior of the minister as evidence indicative of how much God gives a personal shit about them and their troubles. He is God's stand-in for the religiously inept.

The Bible calls the congregation sheep for a reason--they are a boiling, panicking bundle of nerves and stupid anxieties. They want to be told what to do, how to do it. How to be safe, saved, secure. How to be in the right place so the wolves don't get them. They are not, as a rule, big fans of existentialist philosophy. They find it to be absurd.

The Shepherd's job is to provide those services, to convince the sheep that all is well. If he fails, the flock scatters. The shepherd has to be a smooth manipulator, making the sheep believe he exists to serve their needs when they, in fact, are serving his--for food, clothing, future provision. They

forget that this is the entire reason herds are kept in the first place. Which is okay, because all of that uncertain, insecure unknowability would really fuck with their heads if they thought about it.

There is a parable of the shepherd who leaves his flock to seek one lost sheep. It goes a little something like this.

And he spake this parable unto them, saying, "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, 'Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.' I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." (Luke 15:3-8, KJV)

The popular interpretation of this story is that it demonstrates God's love for the individual. That makes people feel good, feel loved. But nobody thinks about the herd, the other ninety and nine. Who is guarding the sheep while the shepherd is off chasing the one idiot who abandoned the herd? How loved do they feel? While he's out saving the isolated lamb, they're having an ovine existential crisis without any recourse to help.

Jesus says something about that, too. Should they bother to pay attention, the ninety and nine would not find themselves amused.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. (John 10:11-14, KJV)

Should they pause to think about such things, the rest of the flock might just realize that while in the care of the preacher, the hired hand who's all hot and bothered to go after the wandering sheep, they're on their own. Especially when the shit really starts to rain down.

There is no mention in scripture of wolf-killing badass motherfuckers locked and loaded to keep an eye on the flock.

Existentialism being not only beside the point but way beyond the attention span of the average flocked-up sheep, as God's agent, the minister is then applauded for rescuing the lost lamb. The herd forgets its pen terrors because nothing so bad happened after all in his absence. Even if something had occurred, the minister's judgment (since he wears the protective mantle of God's appointed guy) goes unquestioned.

Why do the sheep tolerate this blatant inequity of attention? Because everybody in the herd knows they could be that one lost sheep at any time. They will endure the times of terror in exchange for the knowledge that someone has their back; someone cares enough to come looking if they get lost.

Ray knew this because his father had been a minister. He knew the other part, the flip side, because he knew addicts and the dynamics of early recovery group relationships.

Like sheep, the newly sober treatment group is stupid, stubborn. It is biologically driven. It is want driven. It frequently, as an organism, pisses down its own leg in terror. And like the herd from the parable, any group of addicts braving the wolf-weary pastures of sobriety, knows that they could be picked off at any time. The herd likes the notion that someone is watching over them individually. But because the addict herd is a bit more savvy about survival than the religious herd, the converse fact, the serrated edge of all that existential panic, is just as valid.

When it's the same damned idiot sheep getting lost time after time, the same one always causing their personal internal crises while the shepherd is off hunting for him, the herd gets pretty fucking tired of the whole thing. They start to feel like the lost ninety and nine and the one found sheep parable. They start thinking about the laws of evolution and the idea of

survival of the fittest and wonder if maybe the whole sheepy gene pool wouldn't be better off without a sheep with poor directional skills.

They perceive that the shepherd's attention has become consumed by that one to the exclusion of all else. He's always off saving the shameless, lost little bastard, while the rest of the herd are getting methodically pulverized by the wolves, drowned in the freak high pasture rainstorms or simply starving to death on ground that's been grazed one time too often.

Ultimately, the wandering lamb has only so many mulligans before his allotment of grace is expended. Perhaps not in the eyes of a loving God, or even those of a codependent minister, but definitely in the perception of the flock at large. In the end, the flock will always advocate for the abandonment of the weak, the stupid and the recalcitrant.

Any yahoo shepherd who decides to ignore the clearly stated mandate of the flock on this score does so at his own peril. Sometimes sheep revolt.

As a result, going after the lost sheep at all in addiction circles was anathema, the ultimate expression of codependency. Individuation of that sort was dangerous to the pacification of the herd. And you would much rather have a quiet ninety and nine holed up in a secure pen where they couldn't think of wandering into trouble. One lost sheep can't hurt much but himself; ninety nine could devour the spring crop of an entire community if allowed to run loose.

It was a utilitarian argument, not always kind. But the shepherd in this case is aware that his livelihood depends on the herd, on managing the majority and keeping them in line. The absence of one is no big deal. It costs him nothing. This is an advantage addictions professionals have over ministers in terms of job security.

And if the lamb does not return, who the fuck cares, anyway?

*

At two-thirty, Ray woke up three of the clients he'd awakened earlier to take their blood pressure (again), assess them for withdrawal symptoms (again) and ask them how they were feeling (again). They all dutifully complained about the right things; they all trooped down to the office to receive the one milligram dose of Ativan the doctor had ordered for them and to which they knew they were entitled. In addition, one guy complained of muscle aches resulting from his opiate dependency and demanded the sixty-five milligrams of Darvon he knew he had coming. Ray wrote down everything they said in the appropriate charts and sent them back to bed.

Everyone was more or less happy with the entire exchange.

He used the excuse of a VSG--visual surveillance of grounds, that is, searching for hidden bottles or other contraband--to go outside and smoke.

Chapter 3

The parking lot for the Center for Addictions Treatment was in the back of the building, as was the front door. The entrance opened on the only addition to the original farmhouse, a smallish room where the receptionist sat at one of two desks. The area was called the secretarial pod. The entrance to Ray's office, both medication and technician area, was right behind the secretary's desk. To the left was another door, kept closed, which led down the hallway to the client sleeping rooms, the dining room and the kitchen.

There was a phone right inside the front door (or the back door, depending upon who you asked). When Ray wanted to smoke, he would lean out the front door, propping it open with his back in such a way that he could see down the hallway if he propped that door open as well and answer the phone should it ring. Smoking was prohibited inside the building, a policy which grew increasingly unpopular with both the staff and the clients as the course of the year wore on. By December, Ray would have to do weekly fire drills around three a.m. as a way of politely reminding his anti-social and policy impaired population that any building more than a century old was actually little more than well formed kindling. After enough of those, any problem he had been having with people smoking in the building usually went away. Given the right incentives, even this population could be relatively self-regulating.

The telephone rang before Ray was even half-finished with his cigarette.

"Admit it now, Ray." She sounded petulant.

"Fine, I admit it. Do I get the booby prize?"

"That depends on whether you intended a double entendre or not."

"Of course I did."

"Then you lose. Get your mind out of the gutter."

He took a drag on his cigarette, then made himself sound insulted. "I'm not the one sitting around naked and calling strange men in the middle of the night."

"I'm not naked."

"Oh, I forgot. Panties."

"And socks and bathrobe now, thank you very much."

"Extortionist! You led me to believe we were still having an honest conversation predicated on the fact of your nudity. I take it all back."

"We're on the phone. I'm allowed to lie."

Hung in his own noose. He liked that. It pleased him to be caught by her in such a way.

She continued. "So what happened this morning? Everyone said you had a meeting, but no one's talking about details. You know how I love mysteries."

In fact, he did. He knew she carried three paperbacks (and little else) in her purse at all times. She was reading often when he arrived at work. When she had been new to the job, she had been plowing through the collected works of Sherlock Holmes. It had given him an excuse at conversation, though he was not normally a big fan of detective fiction. He did, however, like Doyle.

"Detectives," she had said at the time, "have a quality I admire, at least the Golden Age ones. Poirot" She had used the correct pronunciation. "Holmes, others, they practice their craft in an ordered universe. The mystery is a logical puzzle that depends upon perspective. The clues are only

kaleidoscope glitter which, when turned, reveal meaningful patterns. But this only works because order is assumed as the foundation of human and social life. Crime is an eruption of chaos into that order, an aberration the detective rectifies. It's a very comforting universe to escape to. A little counter-Darwinian it seems to me, but a nice place to visit.

"The detective is only good at solving the mysteries, though, because he understands the way the chaos functions; he understands the mind of the criminal. Watson talks about how Holmes would have been a delicious criminal, uncatchable, if he hadn't chosen to be a detective. That's what I like. These men are capable of embracing chaos, crime, ugliness--they are perfectly comfortable living in that terrain. They can thrive there in the darkness, but something inside them, some critical element, turns their heads toward a restoration of order and normality and good.

"And even then, society marginalizes them. Did you ever notice how the idiots at Scotland Yard don't like Holmes? Of course, he's stealing their thunder, but it's more than that. They don't trust him. It's like they know he could be their worst nightmare if he only chose to be. The tenuous nature of his connection to ordered society terrifies them. But I look at them and all I can think about is the titanic struggle it must be to be good when being evil would be so much easier, so much more fun, so much more profitable. It seems to me the definition of nobility."

Ray had known then, at that moment, that she was a recovering addict. It was easy to read between the lines. He began to read a few mysteries himself after that, mostly volumes she had recently discarded or mentioned that she particularly liked. It gave them a common reference for conversation. But unlike her, his natural tastes ran toward the post-modern. Pynchon, especially Pynchon.

"So what was the deal with the meeting?" she prompted him.

"We reviewed the last contact with the client, made sure the chart was in order in case a review is called. Standard

stuff," he said. "I didn't have much to say. I mean, he and I didn't really connect before he took off."

She hummed in his ear. Ray could almost imagine her rubbing her chin, pretending she was that Marple broad. "He didn't state an SI or anything?"

"No suicidal ideations, at least not to me. Definitely no mention of a plan. I'd have called Emergency Services or shipped him off to the hospital. You know that."

She gave it up with a verbal shrug. "It doesn't really surprise me. He seemed troubled from the start, but withdrawn, too. Whatever was bugging him, he wasn't going to talk to us about it."

"And he shouldn't," Ray added.

The totem pole of mental health bureaucracy had lodged them both very near the bottom under the label "psych-technician". They were prohibited by professional guidelines from dispensing treatment advice. If a client even wanted to talk about addictions issues, the tech's singular duty was to refer him to somebody with letters after their name. This was not a condition about which most technicians complained, though it was frequently inconvenient for clients who had trouble understanding the necessity of scheduling their crises between nine and five when there were professionals deserving of the title on the premises.

But they adapted or didn't stay long. The suicide had lasted less than seventy-two hours. But, as she had said, the kid was noticeably withdrawn, isolated, and probably wouldn't have spoken to the counselors even had he hesitated until after nine to elope.

"You're up late," Ray said after a time.

"There's a guy in my bed."

"You've got a couch."

"I feel creepy going to sleep when I haven't even spoken to him. It's like having a stranger in the house."

"Or a white elephant at the table."

He wasn't going to advise her to kick the guy out again. It was her problem. She'd figure out something or fall asleep trying. He had given what he considered the best solution to the problem, and frankly, her ambivalence about pursuing it bugged him. The guy bugged him, and her impenetrable feelings toward him bugged Ray even more. His cigarette had burned down to the filter. He tossed it on the ground and put his heel on it, but decided not to go back inside just yet.

"You could come back here, hang out," he offered, though it sounded pathetic to him to do so.

"No thanks! I wasted enough of my evening there."

The alacrity with which she dismissed his offer—dismissed without even a hint of playfulness—disappointed him.

"Go have sex with him. At least you'll get some sleep."

He had wanted to say *go fuck him*, to make it sound dirty, disgusting, even a little bestial. His head filled with the image of this stranger as a chiseled and olive adonis, pushing his wide salami cock up her asshole. She made a grunting noise, on her hands and knees, looking back at him over her shoulder, part pleasure, part surprise, part pain.

He kept imagining her firm, round ass and the sound that was both pain and not pain. A mimicry of a feeling she thought she was supposed to be having when she, in fact, was having it not at all.

A sense that she secretly liked the thing that repelled her, horrified her. That she had become something she hated or was doing something she hated, and finding it not so bad after all.

Ray wondered if he felt that way only because he had heard addicts talk like that about using. Loving it and hating it at the same time. Being fascinated by your hatred and powerlessness until the fascination became a kind of love, a way to abrogate the self-hatred that came along with the shame of impotency.

Addicts thought that way whether they realized it or not. Even years into sobriety they kept up the pattern, often

substituting a “safe” thing for the destructive. Sex was a popular substitute. Ray knew, had seen, had heard, and all manner of warped and dysfunctional relationships blossomed in early recovery as a result. Because the pattern of thinking took longer to eradicate than the behavior. It was always easier to control what your body did than what your mind wanted to do. In AA, it was said a man could be sober his whole life without ever being in recovery. Ray had come to understand it in this way.

Four years was not a very long time. She would have been the first to say so, in fact had said so. She once told him, “Every day the twenty-four year old addict in me has this big argument with the four year old sober kid inside me. They have it out over who’s going to get to run the show even just for today. But the kid, she’s no dummy. She knows if the old girl gets to hold the reins of the chariot, she’s not going to give them back for a very long time. And so far, the kid has always won.”

Four years. Not a very long time at all.

Substitution. Prostitution. They kind of rhymed. Jewish mystics had perfected a system for analyzing the content of the Torah based upon substituting number values for the letters in the alphabet. It was called Gematria. The idea was that any two words which added up to the same value had the same meaning. Thus, God equals love. Same number value. Ray wondered if in Hebrew substitution and prostitution had the same value. Maybe only if you took them out of the Hebrew translation of the Big Book rather than the Torah.

Ray winced at himself, regretting his own thoughts, what felt like his own insight. He had crossed a line, seen too deeply into her. The penetration—and his willingness to penetrate—disturbed him. It made him feel dirty, like a voyeur or a purveyor of secrets. She had become, for that moment, an object. Objectified. Non-individuated. She had become a story in the newspaper of an earthquake in Nepal that killed four hundred kids in an orphanage. Tragic, but without any personal impact. Something sad, but which did not touch him.

Ray lit another cigarette. He did not want to think of her as just another addict.

*

As Hank had frequently advised him, Ray had adopted the habit of caution. On the filing cabinet in which the current client files were kept under lock, there was a bumper sticker which read *Cover Your Ass*. Hank claimed he had put it there. It was, he said, the official night shift motto, passed on to green schleps like Ray to remind them that they worked alone, and therefore possessed no recourse to corroboration for their version of events. Though a staff member's word was ostensibly worth more than that of a client, especially in a legal proceeding, the only guarantee that justice would tip its hat in a tech's direction was adequate documentation.

It's not what you say, but what you record that matters. You can get as creative or retroactive as you want to back up your position, as long as you write it down. After that, it doesn't matter what anybody says, because the accepted truth is there in black and white for the clinical world to see.

And the clinical world will always believe the chart, the documentation, regardless of its source. Because the beginning of doubt is akin to the opening of Pandora's box. It would be the death knell for a profession one step removed from pseudo-science status.

For this reason, when Ray had received the first AA call about the suicide kid, he had immediately taken the chart, trudged to the back office and photocopied every goddamned page. For his own reference.

If he was going to have to cover his ass, he was going to make sure his narrative was consistent with everyone else's.

*

With a practiced eye, a clinical chart can be a revelatory thing, a way to piece together, tile by tile, the mosaic of an entire life. Their traumas, their medication histories, the secrets they thought were just between themselves, their therapists and the walls. The availability of this kind of information is not a closely guarded secret. The average

counselor or therapist in the mental health system has to do a reconstruction of this type every day so they'll have an idea what the hell to talk about to the total strangers who stroll into their offices eight hours a day. Any professional worth his salt learned long ago that their most valuable skill is not listening, caring or even intuitively grasping the murky core of their client's problem, but rather haranguing the living fuck out of his screening staff so he doesn't end up looking like a complete idiot in front of the customer.

Even drunks do not respond to obvious fools with immediate trust.

It would be a good idea, Ray had realized, if he knew something about the suicide kid before somebody started asking him questions. There wouldn't be (and as it turned out, was not) much in the chart, because the kid was nineteen and had never received addictions services before. Ray had been hoping he had been the receptor of some other branch of service, though he expected no better than he got.

In one sense, the dearth of documentation was good, because it gave Ray more latitude in establishing the actual events--no one else would have the benefit of knowing any more about the kid than Ray did. No one else would be able to contradict the pattern of events and the implied psychological framework upon which those events were built which Ray himself would project.

Still, the rankling anorexic look of the chart troubled him. The only paperwork in it was that done at CAT. Good in the sense that no one in the mental health universe knew the kid from Adam. Bad in that Ray would have to go searching for fabric if he was going to start making shit up out of whole cloth.

What he learned as a result was basic. Don Ackerman had come in at roughly nine o'clock in the evening, some eight odd hours after his last use--an eighty dollar speedball taken IV--and had more or less given his name, address and phone number. He had signed every form from the Consent to Treatment to the Eating Disorders Contract. But to every question, every form of inquiry which would have given

concrete information about himself or his history, he had simply said a *yes* or *no* in such a way as to not have to say anything else.

Have you ever had any other incidents of substance abuse treatment? No.

Do you have any history of mental illness, either personally or in your family? No.

Did you ever try any substance other than heroin? No.

Have you ever been arrested? No.

How about broken bones, surgeries, hospitalizations? No.

Ever been physically abused? Sexually abused? No.

Have you been through withdrawal before? Yes.

Just on your own, then? Yes.

Any serious physical problems during those times? Seizures, convulsions, violence? No.

Do you mind if I just make some shit up so somebody will believe you are actually a real person?

When the standard admission questionnaire failed to provide the relevant data (which was not extremely uncommon—the incoherently drunk often aren't conversive, and the guys who have answered the same damned questions a dozen other times become recalcitrant about one more go around), the admission note prepared by the admitting staff usually filled in the salient details. How the client seemed, how they reacted to the process, to the questions. Sometimes silences were as informative as outright lies.

This note read: *The client appears guarded.*

No, Ray had thought, shit.

Similarly, upon admission, ninety nine out of a hundred new clients asked one of two questions: Will you have to tell my PO I'm here? Or, How soon can I use the phone? Because both inquiries were keys to understanding a given individual's motivations for treatment, both in terms of content and sincerity, it was standard procedure to include a comment on which one they asked.

Don Ackerman hadn't bothered with either. He had, by all available evidence, gone straight to bed. A couple days later, he had gotten out of bed, utilized the same level of communication skills, and slipped away.

In the interim, his vital signs had been good, his perceived withdrawal trajectory was normal, his physical complaints minimal to non-existent. Piecing together every available resource, Ray could definitively conclude that Don Ackerman, the suicide kid, was just as determined in death to hide what the fuck had been going on with him as he had been in life.

And that he was fast becoming a rather large pain in the ass to have only marginally existed.

*

The impromptu chart review session to which Ray was summoned as a result of the suicide and for which he had copied the chart to prepare, was not the official review. That one would be conducted in depth by the mental health center, an independent panel of therapists and the center's lawyer. The CAT meeting was a localized phenomenon responding to tragedy, a Red Cross triage for the chart. It was, in fact, just what Ray had done with his own kidnapping of the chart, only on a larger scale.

The only invited guests were Ray (because he had no choice) and his boss (because she had been through this process enough times over the years to know just what squeaks needed tweaks).

In the meeting that morning, Ray had given a narrative account of events which concluded with the suicide kid's departure. The facts according to Ray. In relating his gospel account, he had, by and large, said just what he was expected to say based on his memory (both actual and enhanced) of the events of the day the kid had eloped.

One moment the kid was there, the next he was gone.

Shortly after the event, Ray had followed standard charting procedure and crafted an innocuous discharge note, written in such a way that it both protected the facility and himself as well as betrayed no knowledge of the client's

subsequent actions. This had been easy, since during the point at which he'd written the original note, he'd had no knowledge of subsequent actions.

However, he'd kept in mind that in the event of subsequent actions, that is, should actions which would be deemed objectionable to legal representatives of the recently eloped client happen to occur, it was always a good idea to have written the average discharge note in such a way that no suggestion of knowledge or premonitions relating to those general classifications of actions was hinted at.

Something like: *I don't know nothing except that he left.*

You shouldn't say: *Bob really wanted to go drink again. He got into his car saying he was driving straight to a bar where he was going to get really loaded, then drive home so blitzed he couldn't even open his eyes, where he was going to stumble inside the door, grab his loaded .38 pistol out of the nightstand and fire six consecutive shots into the head and body of his domestically violence wife for having him arrested a couple of weeks ago, sent to jail and subsequently sentenced by an officially recognized and duly elected judge of the Monroe County Circuit Court two weeks in an addictions treatment inpatient program. Staff believes the client may have been just pissed off enough when he left to do such a thing.*

The logic behind this disparity between the actual or suspected events and the manner in which things were recorded might be confusing to folks mired in a sane version of reality. To mental health professionals, it made perfect sense.

And as confusing as the logic might or might not be, the notes themselves were not confusing at all. Mental health professionals understand that in most cases, they cannot afford to be misunderstood.

In the case of the suicide kid, Ray's original discharge note was not much different in form or content than any discharge note written for any other client. It had conformed to the accepted industry standards.

Technically, he was assured after his boss had reviewed it, he had done nothing wrong. Just, in delicate situations like these--suicides and mass family executions and whatnot--

everything right was preferable to *nothing wrong*. Documentation had to reflect a certain chain of events, an argument that both Ray and the facility in general had done everything within their power to prevent the kid from leaving. To prevent bad things--which, of course, they couldn't predict, because everything had seemed fine at the time--from happening. They had done everything legally required of them to protect the victim from himself.

It was determined that Ray's original note--which was shredded as he wrote its replacement--had simply been too general in its non-betrayal of knowledge. It was innocent, naïve about the future, anticipatory of the lamb wending its own way home without a shepherd's intervention.

The second note *was* crafted, Machiavellian, byzantine, loaded with implied intrigue by stressing certain things which before had gone unstressed. It was *post facto* and anticipatory in its own way. A very measured statement of what the first note had only assumed would be understood.

We spoke briefly, and he stated no plan of intention to harm himself.

Both stories told, the original and the revised, were more or less true. The nuances might have been contradictory, but both held accurate accounts of the incident. Only the perspective had changed.

For all that, the note which actually appeared in the chart was fairly short.

5/17/99 Unauthorized Discharge Note: The client elected to leave the treatment program this morning at 8:00a.m. Other clients report that the client had expressed dissatisfaction with the trajectory of his treatment progress. He had declined to approach the counseling staff with his concerns. Staff spoke with him briefly around 7:30a.m., but the client stated no intention of leaving the program at that time. The client did not approach staff a second time before terminating his treatment episode without consulting staff. Clients on site at the time reported observing the

client leaving on foot. Staff received this information at 8:30a.m. A search of the facility and grounds revealed the client was absent. Staff's assessment based upon the evidence of client behaviors and documented medical assessment data is that client was in acute opiate withdrawal and was unwilling to receive treatment at this time. Should he return, addictions services should again be extended.

That was fine. It placed the responsibility squarely on the client's shoulders, it reiterated the program's mission statement of providing access to the tools necessary for early recovery. (Ray personally thought the last line about extending services again was laying it on a bit thick, but other, more legally minded individuals had insisted upon it). The note also restated the next part, the unofficial part of addictions treatment philosophy, the part about horses and water troughs. If they don't get it, fuck 'em. It's their own fault. We've got ten people on the waiting list all ready to snap up their spot. Somebody who really wants recovery should get it anyway.

Once, Ray had talked to a friend who worked at a halfway house on the other side of town. She had told him that they were having problems with a guy on their waiting list who was so desperate to get in that he had taken to putting chilled six packs of beer on the porch every morning for the current residents. He figured it would speed up their discharge rate and consequently his own arrival date. Ray and his friend had only chuckled about it. How clever, he had said, and she had agreed. He must really want in.

*

Business concluded, chart in order and adequately girded against scrutiny, Ray's employer had turned her attention on him. It never occurred to her that he should not find this incident disturbing. It did, however, occur to him that he should allow her to keep her illusions on that score.

Gladys Fuller was a mammoth figure. Not in terms of her physicality; she was actually quite tall, thinnish, graceful in an

earthy sort of way. She was old enough to be his mother and had been “doing addicts” (as she called it) longer than Ray had been alive. She was so grounded, she left furrows wherever she stood from dragging her roots behind her. But she exuded energy. Her hands did not move when she spoke so much as they windmilled. She acted the way the word “frenetic” felt. On her desk in the Director’s office, she had a plaque which simply read “Change”. Her passion alone held the disparate strings, drives, motivations and troubles of the entire program in some approximation of cohesion. What she called a comfortable level of chaos.

“How are you, Ray?” She had asked, jabbing her finger at him as she spoke. Loud. It was the only volume she had.

“I’m okay,” he answered.

This was less than two hours after they had been officially informed of the fact of the suicide. Ray decided he could appropriately act numb. He had to relax his shoulders by pure force of will to keep them from shrugging on their own.

“Good. Stay that way. This is not your fault.”

She had offered a reassuring smile. And so it had gone.

*

“Are you still with me?” she asked.

Ray continued to smoke for a moment or two, his third cigarette of the conversation, as he attempted to frame some response that would lead him back to where they had been before, to see her as he had previously. He did not want her to know what he had been thinking. He did not want himself to remember what he had been thinking.

“I’m still with you,” he said finally, mostly certain.

“I thought maybe there was something going on there, except you didn’t seem to be screaming at anybody.”

“I’m outside,” he said. “Distracted.”

“You’ve got to get a handle on this, Ray. It’ll eat you up if you don’t.”

He realized she was still talking about the suicide. Why did everyone assume it bothered him at all? The kid was not

the first to have kicked off. Ray read the obits every morning, looking for client names so he could post them on the bulletin board in the dining room. Object lessons for the current clients. The kid was not even the first suicide, just the most recent.

“I have the handle firmly in hand,” he said.

“Over the telephone, at least.”

“You think I don’t? Do I look like I feel guilty? Have I been acting grieved?” He was hissing at her, as if he was angry.

“Who could tell, Ray?”

*

“Some people can do this job,” Hank had told him, either as a warning or as a challenge. Ray couldn’t say for sure. “Some people can’t. Nothing bad there, nothing wrong with them. I don’t mean to imply anything like that.

“And I don’t just mean handling the drunks, either. I’m talking about the shift itself. You have to leave your humanity at home. It’s a matter of native capacity. It can’t be learned. You either have it inside you from the start or you don’t. It is not an acquirable taste.

“Both the job and the shift, but especially the shift, are exercises in isolation. Always alone, you have to learn how to be self-sufficient in everything. You have to know how to answer your own questions, how to objectify, how to depend on yourself. When you get to that place, that zen place, where nothing in the world matters to you, nothing touches you, except the moment--the here, the now, the what you are doing and the who that you are, then you’re set to do this job forever. But you’ve got to get there or you won’t last. You’ve got to be able to spend time with yourself without singing. To share the silence with your own mind and find the camaraderie comfortable. It’s not so easy as it sounds, to become a universe of one. Most of us just aren’t that interesting when we start out, at least not interesting enough to amuse ourselves forty or so hours a week every week.

“My point being that things tend to happen all at once here. One crisis spawns a dozen others unless you clamp a lid on it as soon as it erupts. All of these people are emotionally vulnerable and physically ill. That is a compounding dynamic. A threat to one of them is perceived as a potential threat to them all. You wait and see how when one guy decides to jump off the wagon the rest of them go like dominoes. His crisis is contagious. It’s like a lemming thing, believe me.

“You have to exist in a vacuum. You cannot get caught up in their crises. You cannot afford to connect to the situation or the cast of characters emotionally. Your role is to embody the rules, the procedures, the protocols. Even as you are reacting, making it up as you go along, you have to project an illusion of standard operating procedure. Tell the clients you’ve seen this before, dealt with this situation a dozen times, whatever. Make them believe you, even if it is a lie. No, check that, especially if it is a lie. They want to believe your competence. They need to, so the job is half done by them. All you have to manage is not fucking up the illusion. You get all tied up trying to save somebody from some bullshit crisis because you’re reacting to them on an emotional level--and the impulse to help is nothing more than a glorified way of describing the emotion of pity--and you’re causing yourself a whole world of problems.

“Embrace isolation and nobody dies, nobody gets hurt. Everybody goes away happy. Sure, some of them split to use because they’re all torn up or been talked into it or bullied into it or whatever the hell, but they’ll nearly always come back. You just got to not care about that. I’m not saying this is the best way to do things, Ray. I would love to have real doctors and real nurses here around the clock to handle medical emergencies and an individual counselor here at the same time for every yahoo in the facility, but us and most of the treatment places on this level and with a target population this far down and gone do not have that luxury. Hell, nobody does. We can’t afford that quality of care. All we can offer are solid people acting with a little common sense in uncommon circumstances. Most of the time, that’s going to be good enough.”

Cynicism, professional cynicism, has all the features of cruelty in the beginning. As a wide-eyed trainee, Ray had simply believed Hank and the others were flat out mean. Everything was rigid. The rules had no exceptions. There was no such thing as extenuating circumstances. Hank said frequently to clients who had fallen on the wrong side of the rules, "Only God can give second chances. I am not God."

That was right before he kicked them out in the rain at two thirty in the morning with no place to go, no way to get there and no hope for the immediate or distant future.

It took less than a month for Ray to understand. Chaos is porous. It's edges seep, forming and reforming. Its surface is plastic and moldable. Structure is rigid. It has to be to contain the darkness. There are doors, but chaos, because it is liquid, floods the exits as they open. Better that the doors never be open than to have all the compartments fill and founder the entire vessel.

Ray's boss called their work *being on the frontlines*. A military metaphor, like they were soldiers in a secret civil war, fighting against an amorphous enemy. It often seemed that the clients themselves were the enemy. They were the faceless, unindividuated Them. Frank Capra's "identical prints off the same photographic plate." It seemed ludicrous, counter-productive.

But really, it was all about discipline. Hank called it transcending the limitations of human compassion, but sometimes it felt more like dehumanization.

There are two kinds of cynicism: that which expects nothing but hopes for everything, and that which expects everything but hopes for nothing. Both are surprised by anything out of the ordinary. Success is always a shock because it is rare. It is an aberration. As such, it can be a dangerous manifestation of chaos.

In the recovery community, addictions professionals like to say, "Our goal is to put ourselves out of business." The idea is that everyone can be saved, should be saved. But at the same time, everyone is stunned when someone actually

succeeds. It is an industry which designs methods it fundamentally believes will not, cannot and do not work. Still, they call what they do "help".

Help. A contextual word, either plea or mission.

It was a paradox Ray had never interested himself in resolving. It was, after all, outside the parameters of his job.

*

During his first week on the job, a client had decided it was appropriate to ignore Ray's advice because Ray was not a recovering addict. Generally, he later discovered, addicts are not interested in the suggestions of people who have not shared their experiences. Non-addicts have nothing valid to say in the addicted or the recovering community. Having lived a normal life was not considered adequate credentials indicative of expertise for those aiming to achieve a normal life.

The non-recovering professional then must either lie about his substance abuse history to gain credibility or must simply give no advice or assistance at all.

This also had always seemed odd to Ray, but he used either technique as appropriate, when he had to talk to the clients at all.

*

She was still on the phone. He was still outside, leaning his shoulder against the door frame, though one of them--himself or the door--had gone numb several minutes before. He thought about getting a chair.

"You were married once, weren't you?" she asked.

"Some time ago."

"But you still wear your ring."

He looked at his hand. White-gold band. After the divorce, he had moved it to his right.

"It's a reminder," he said, "of all the lousy things I'm capable of when I stop paying attention."

"You sound like you still miss her."

That made him laugh, a sarcastic, barking sound. "Not at all. I don't even remember what it was like being married to her enough to miss it. We only lasted a couple of years. I was nineteen."

It should have been sufficient explanation. A trite story of stupid youth and decisions rushed.

"So you had an affair," she offered.

Another trite story which he confirmed. "Typical tale of growing apart, self-absorption, being bored and not noticing any of it until too late. That's my side, anyway. I couldn't tell you hers. I don't think I ever asked."

"Sounds like an ugly split."

"I don't know that I'd even say that. Maybe she thought it was. Again, I didn't ask. I didn't care enough to think about those types of issues."

"But you wear the ring."

"It hit her out of nowhere. I couldn't believe it. We'd been drifting--I knew that, in some ways agonized over it. But I didn't do anything to rectify it. Frustration feeds on itself, builds walls, atrophies your ability to care about finding the root of the problem. It all seemed so obvious. I mean, how can you not know your marriage is falling apart? When I told her about the affair, she seemed to just crumble. It was like watching her implode, like watching a mountain cave in. Clueless, she was that clueless about everything. I was ashamed that I had seemed to know about it all along without bothering to tell her.

"It was the most disgusting and destructive thing I'd ever done in my life. To shatter another person's reality--love them, hate them or be indifferent--there is nothing worse you can do. The ring reminds me to walk lightly, to do as little harm as possible."

"I didn't know you were such an asshole."

Ray frowned. "I hear the sound of my pedestal crashing."

"At least you still had one," she said. She sounded acrid. Or arid. "I lost mine a whopping two years into recovery. A

guy asked me to marry him, a nice guy, but he had problems taking a retired hooker home to meet his mother. That's what you get for being honest."

"Once an addict, always an addict."

"The same applies to assholes," she said, and it was her turn to laugh. "Secret for secret, Ray. We're getting honest again."

It was a good time to hang up. They weren't telling stories they hadn't heard a hundred times before anyway.

Chapter 4

Another phone call at just after three. He answered on the third ring.

"Is this Mr. Ray--uh. . ." The sound of shuffling papers.

"Yes."

The voice brightened perceptibly, strapped on a mask of friendliness. "My name is John Donovan. I'm an attorney representing the family of Donald Ackerman. I'm sorry to be calling so late."

"It's not late for me."

A laugh, intended to sound nervous or flustered. To Ray, it only sounded false. "That's right, of course. Only late for me. Do you mind if I tape record this conversation?"

Smooth segue, meant to catch him off guard, startle him into acceptance.

"Yes, I do mind. Can I help you?" You fucking bastard.

John Donovan paused on his end of the line. Ray imagined him reaching for a legal pad upon which to take notes (just as he was supposed to imagine), though, of course, the tape recorder was still running.

"Um, I was wondering if I could get some information?"

"Sir, federal law prohibits me from acknowledging either to confirm or deny the presence of the individual of whom you have spoken or his participation in our program."

Ray grinned.

“Very well done,” the lawyer said. “I guess that sets the parameters.”

“I guess it does.”

“Were you working two nights ago?”

“Sir, I am bound by Center policy and state law from discussing with you the work schedule of our employees at this facility unless you are an officer of the law or bearing a subpoena, in which case, I am only authorized to refer you to my supervisor.”

Ray grinned again. He was enjoying this.

“What if I told you I have possession of a subpoena?”

“Have you spoken to our attorney?” Ray countered.

“In fact, son, yes I have. This afternoon.”

Ray grunted. Standard level of communication. “That’s good, because I haven’t. Which means, of course, that I’m not prepared to talk to you at all until advised on my statement by legal counsel.”

“Ray, there’s no reason for us to be adversarial. This is just fact finding.”

“I thought it was an adversarial system?”

Donovan was confused by that. “Well, yes.”

“They why not be adversaries? You’re taking me away from my job duties, Mr. Donovan. If you aren’t interested in seeking addictions services for yourself or a member of your immediate family, I’m afraid I’m going to have to terminate this contact.”

“Ray, hey--”

Hanging up on a lawyer felt very good.

*

Donovan called right back.

“I had hoped to avoid getting that subpoena we talked about, Ray. I’d hoped you would be cooperative. Don’t you have any compassion for this boy’s grieving mother?”

"Which boy and mother would that be, Mr. Donovan?"

"Fine. Can I speak to your supervisor?"

"I am my supervisor at the moment. You can call my boss if you want to get screamed at. I'm sure you have her home number."

"Let me speak to someone else there, then."

"I don't think I can accommodate that request."

Ray could feel Donovan smiling. "Because you're the only one there."

"No, actually, because I don't like you. I don't want to foist this burden off on anyone else. I have the highest threshold for aggravation of all the people I know. And I am not, for the record, the only person here."

"You are the only staff person present."

That narrowed things. Ray could see the walls of the canyon he had slipped into.

"I don't think I have to answer that question. It could constitute a security risk to my clients. As a matter of fact, let me give you my fax number so you can send me a copy of your law degree and membership to the bar, just so I can be sure you're really a lawyer and not just an asshole."

Donovan was relentless. "What are *your* degrees, Ray? How about certifications and qualifications?"

"CPR, common sense and 98.6," Ray said. "In no particular order. Ask our attorney to furnish a written job description."

"A child is dead," Donovan barked back. For once, Ray could not tell how much was an attempt at manipulation, a hard sell, and how much was legitimate outrage. "Nineteen years old and he jumped in front of a bus. Not before drug treatment--no one is arguing that he was an angel--but only after. It took your program two days to make him actively suicidal.

"It was not an instant death, Ray. Did you know that? A bus moving at thirty miles an hour doesn't kill at once. It crushes, it drags, it shreds. It slammed him to the pavement

then kept on going, Ray. He lived for almost half an hour. But his back was broken, his pelvis was shattered. He was drowning in his own blood all the way to the hospital. Don Ackerman suffered for thirty minutes in a way we all pray we will never suffer.

“Someone is responsible for that pain. Someone let him down when he needed help. Help he had grasped the courage to ask for. He deserved better than failure from you and your program, Ray. He deserved better than slipping through the cracks.

“And if your facility was negligent, it has a moral obligation to make reparations to that boy’s mother for the suffering it has caused her. Surely you can understand that, such a basic, primal justice.”

“I understand, Mr. Donovan, that justice is what everyone deserves, and maybe even that justice is your sole interest in this matter.” Ray frowned. Whatever he was, Donovan was not an idiot. “As soon as our attorney explains to me what our version of justice is, I’ll get back to you. But I imagine he’ll object to reparations as a legitimate form. That sounds more like extortion to me. It sounds more like you need a new BMW.

“Do you mind if I tape record this conversation, Mr. Donovan?”

This time, it was Donovan who hung up. Ray, strangely enough, found that just as satisfying.

*

For many years, the popular model for the treatment of addictions was the Disease Concept. At its core, the disease model is very simple: addiction is a product of genetic and environmental factors which interact in such a way as to predispose a given individual with the proper genetic background toward addictive behaviors. You inherit alcoholism from your parents. It is a condition over which you have no choice, any more than you can choose not to have sickle-cell anemia. The only way to effectively avoid the onslaught of the addiction disease is to never be exposed to the “alcohol pathogen”. It is not a very Martin Luther,

Protestant Reformation, or even American fundamental free will way of thinking.

Increasingly, the disease concept was being replaced by the idea of behavior modification--teach addicts that their behavior was destructive, that it had unpleasant consequences for themselves and others, then offer tools for managing those behaviors. The assumption was that addicts did not get the behavior-consequence connection.

Despite this usurpation, the disease concept was still in some ways fundamental, even though the structure which had been built upon it had been essentially razed, at least in the clinical community. Therapists are much more progressive in understanding the landscape of their field, in making the necessary adjustments to new ideas, than the general public.

Addicts on the other hand, loathe change in general, and changes away from the disease concept specifically. They like having a disease, especially as opposed to having a behavior problem. It is liberating to have a disease like alcoholism or drug addiction. You cease to be responsible for your failures to transcend the addiction. You have a disease, suggesting an independent entity which has invaded your psychological and biological space. Like the Borg, resistance is futile. As a consequence, the addict accrues no blame for relapses any more than a cancer patient can accept blame. And like remission, they expect sobriety to occur spontaneously, largely as a result of the efforts of professionals on their behalf. They are passive participants in the recovery process.

The AA slogans: One Day at a Time. Stop Using, Pay Attention. These are active voice statements. The Big Book and its disciples say *go to meetings*, not *be taken to a meeting*. It is about taking responsibility. Working a program. Working, rather than experiencing. Activity implied. Effort. An immense amount of focus, concentration and daily, constant attention to battle a lifetime of urges. No one who has not experienced the massive, draining tedium of building recovery or working a program can appreciate the reality. It is a grinding, dehumanizing experience that paradoxically leads to the resurrection of a life that was lost. But it is constant in its demands. There are no vacations from the job

of recovery, because there are no cessations in the body's urges to use once those neural pathways have been burrowed, forged, activated.

The disease concept endorses passivity, a sense of entitlement to the best efforts of everyone else but the addict in finding a solution to that which ails. It is the Welfare system of the mental health structure, even though it has been largely rejected by everyone who knows anything about the treatment of addictions. The disease concept produced the one in thirty lifetime recovery figures.

Regardless of such glaring inadequacies, the disease concept lives on, at least in the popular psychology mythos, poisoning a culture with comfort, with irresponsibility, with always seducing addicts and their families with the temptation to make someone else responsible for their own failures.

This is only one of the many levels upon which the addicted community and the legal system tend to intersect.

*

The doorbell rang at four. Ray groaned inwardly and set aside the charts he had been reviewing. He saw that it had begun to rain. Middle of the night admissions--walk-ins--were not uncommon. Rain tended to exacerbate their arrival. In an average week, Ray could expect two walk-ins without any kind of referral agency behind them. People who just chose to show up without calling, without saying anything, and carrying only mute appeals for assistance with them. Half the time he had to turn them away because he lacked space. He had long ago ceased to pity them (even in December). In Ray's way of thinking, part of the legitimate decision to get sober, to rejoin the real world, should be conforming to the standards of professional contact with strangers. That meant making appointments or being prepared to be disappointed in the absence of one.

Every time he turned a walk-in away, he saw it as handing them a recovery tool.

But at the same time, rain bothered him. A sodden week would raise his walk-in average from two a week to one or

more a night. If he was ever tempted to regret turning anyone away, it was when it was raining. They always looked forlorn, hunched, broken. He did not like the way rain made his professionalism feel.

He looked out the window by the door once more, before he framed his denials and settled his weight against the bar. At least it wasn't raining very hard yet. He would only manufacture a little guilt.

He pushed the door half open, a guarded invitation.

The woman was maybe forty, looked younger. She was pretty, he thought, in a worn and tired way. She had dark circles under her eyes and frown lines around her pale lips. She had no umbrella, no coat, but Ray could see now that she had a car in the parking lot. She wore a dark knee length skirt and white button up blouse. She appeared clean, kempt.

For a moment, Ray just looked at her. He wasn't sure what to say.

Fat drops of rain had already begun to flatten her hair, stain her blouse.

"Can I help you?" he asked finally.

The woman only stared. He thought she seemed lost, maybe even a little scared. He realized with some embarrassment that he could see through her shirt where the raindrops had struck her. She had on a floral print bra. Little purple flowers.

"I'm sorry I can't invite you in," he said to fill the silence. "We have no beds, and I have to observe confidentiality. If you need directions somewhere, I can probably help you. Or I could let you use our phone."

That about covered the list of possible things she could want.

"Federal law," the woman said quietly.

Ray began to nod, started an involuntary smile, then let it freeze on his lips, midway between greeting and wariness.

"My name is Jennifer Ackerman."

Of course it was.

"You spoke to me on the phone earlier. Your name is Ray." She looked at him directly, more intently, her eyes searching his face. There was a nakedness in her supplication which disturbed him.

But his instincts kicked in there, his trained caution. He reminded himself of Donovan's smarminess, and the fact that someone, probably this someone, was behind it. Trying to catch him in a mistake. He wasn't immediately certain if he should even go so far as to confirm his name. Given the way she had screeched at him over the phone, he wasn't sure he wanted to cop a plea to his identity. No, no, Ray left several hours ago. . . That, however, had nothing to do with lawsuits and everything to do with minimizing personal pains in the ass.

He braced himself for abuse, imagining for some bizarre reason that he would deserve it this time, or at least he would accept it. There was something in this woman, something in the rain, that made her seem small to him, beaten down, fragile. It was more than just the grief he knew he could expect from her. It was something beyond that, crushing, as if she had a right to re-evaluate her entire existence in his presence and expect him to commiserate.

But she said, "I'm sorry for the way I treated you. I was. . . overcome. It was wrong."

She shivered and hugged her arms over her chest. Because of the lawyer and Sam's warning, Ray resisted the urge to invite her inside anyway. It was a struggle all the same. He was sure that, had his mother seen him now, she would have whacked him over the head with something hard, something with the proper disciplinary weight. He stepped out into the rain as a form of penance and closed the door, put his back against it.

Obviously, this was not going to go the way he expected.

"Come stand under the eave," he offered. Even that did not seem enough, so he extended what he considered the ultimate gesture. "Would you like a cigarette?"

"Very much." She came and stood beside him. She colored a bit, embarrassed. "I quit almost ten years ago."

He lit the pair and handed one to her. Their fingers touched and she shivered again.

"You're younger than I expected. Not even thirty, I'll bet. The phone makes you sound old."

He recognized her comment as the extension of an olive branch, a temporary truce.

"I still can't talk to you," Ray said.

"I know that," she snapped, then softened at once, apologized. "I understand. The lawyer explained it to me. I called him right after I talked to you. Confidentiality. You have to protect your interests."

Interests. She said the word with a sneer, as though it was a curse.

She puffed on the cigarette and made a face. "This is terrible. Terrible in a good way. I don't like enjoying it."

"Why are you here, Mrs. Ackerman?"

"Miss, or just Jennifer, please."

"All right, Jennifer. Why are you here?" As if it wasn't completely obvious. He just needed to hear her say it to know how to feel about her, to know how to set his mind to deal with her.

She spread her arms. "I don't know. . .to see, maybe. To connect to the last place he was. To look at the last faces he saw, see the same things. I thought maybe it would help. To understand. And partly, I guess, to meet you, to see what kind of man you were. I'd never met someone who could be so mean over the telephone in this kind of situation. I don't mean to insult you."

Because he couldn't, Ray said nothing. He smoked. He tried to blow smoke rings, but the moisture in the air made them look like jellybeans. That she thought he was being cruel did not surprise him. In her position, he would have felt the same way. That fact as a given, however, did not suggest to him that he should apologize. He was just doing his job whether she understood that or not.

"It was stupid of me," she continued, though the statement was defiant. "There's nothing for me here. It was senseless. I don't know what I had a right to expect. What do you think, Ray? Does someone when he dies leave any part of himself behind? Something you can sense if you want to badly enough?"

"I wouldn't know. You'd need a parapsychologist, or a psychic."

"Parapsychologist. Is that anything like a quasi-psychologist? Not good enough to be a real one?" If it was a joke, or intended to be one, it fell as flat as her hair.

"It's someone who goes looking for dead people. Ghost hunters." Not an entirely accurate assessment, but good enough for this conversation, he thought.

"That would be me then. And I thought I was an Accounts Manager." She chuckled, dry and empty, then shook her head. "I'm not handling this very well."

No shit, he did not say. It seemed obvious enough to go without comment.

"You don't seem cruel in person. I want you to know that. Not cruel at all. . . just, I don't know, restrained. You're nicer than you led me to believe, even though I'm wasting your time."

"You're not wasting my time." He said that for his mother's sake, so she could hold her head up in whatever ladies meetings she attended, not because it in any way resembled the truth. "I'm here all night to listen to people who need to talk."

"You know, I hadn't spoken to Eric in almost three years. He ran away when he was sixteen, gone at first, then went to his dad's house after."

"Eric?"

"I'm sorry. You know him as Donald, Don--" She smiled at him, wry and a little sad. "Or not, I remember. That was his grandfather's name. Everyone called him Eric."

A tear or raindrop rolled down her cheek. She sucked on the cigarette. It was almost gone and Ray offered her another. She accepted.

"I'm already chain-smoking. God. Do you detox for nicotine?"

"No."

"That's funny. I read somewhere that these are harder to kick than cocaine."

"I always thought so."

She probably wasn't even forty, Ray decided. Out of the cool rain, her color was beginning to return. She looked less drained, less pale. Her face was more full than his initial impression had revealed, and she had, in fact, quite a nice tan. Her clothing was both professional and youthful, designed Ray suspected, in such a way as to intentionally accent a figure which did nothing to betray its age.

He was close enough to realize she smelled like strawberries.

"Does this confidentiality thing always make it so difficult to communicate?" she asked.

"Frequently."

"It's making me feel awkward. It's like I'm worried about stepping on broken glass in a dark room." She laughed nervously.

Ray only nodded. It was a difficult conversation in which to find that *line* he couldn't cross. His continued toleration of her at all had probably crossed it several times over. There was nothing he could do about it.

She turned toward him, then, flicked the cigarette away. She was tense, grim. She looked as though she had been abused. The sudden shift presaged an explosion. Ray could only steel himself and wait for the conflagration.

"You're not going to tell me anything, are you?" she hissed. The abruptness of it all was stunning, should have been stunning. But Ray was familiar with mood swings, with schizophrenia, with a whole slew of mental illnesses that acted a lot like mind rattling grief. He still did not know if the performance was calculated or just there.

She continued because he would not interrupt her. She had a right to explode if she wanted, a right to hate him as a symbolic factor in her son's death, as long as she didn't expect him to act the part. Still, in her voice, he could hear the mother she had been, and that was worth the price of his indulgence.

"You're not going to break down." It was not a question.

"No, ma'am. I am not."

"You're inhuman."

He inclined his head toward her. "Not at all. I just don't care."

"About my son?" Outrage.

"Or your grief. I don't know you. I'm sorry for your loss, but it doesn't touch me. It means nothing to me."

She made a noise in her throat, like a stifled scream. Her eyes went wide, appeared wild. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, harshly. She had folded her small fingers into hard fists, and they shook under her restraint. Ray decided he was on the verge of being attacked.

But just as quickly, the woman wilted, shrank into herself. She let out a guttural, defeated sound and slid down the wall until she sat on the ground. She stared at her hands and sobbed. On the sidewalk, like that, grieved to the point to shattering, she reminded him of his ex-wife. She had looked just like that, just as empty and devastated.

"I am not some monster," Ray told her, watching her rock back and forth, continuing to weep. "I just can't help you. I can't grieve with you or for you. Even if I could admit your son had been here, I didn't know him. They all look the same; there is nothing to distinguish them in my mind. I cannot, could not help you, even if I wanted to.

"But I see that you are hurting, and that means something to me. I'm sorry this happened to you, even if your grief isn't real to me. The only comfort I can offer you is to remind you it's late, Ms. Ackerman. Go home. Go to bed."

He bent to help her to her feet. Strangely, she accepted his arm, allowed him to pull her up. She stood for a moment, straightening her blouse, trying to brush the dirt from her skirt but only smearing it. Ray walked her to her car and opened the door.

Jennifer Ackerman started the engine, then rolled the window down, less than an inch. The interior was dark, shadowed. Ray could no longer see her face. He was glad for that. It would have been a mask of ruin.

"You don't understand," she said. Rigid, dead, controlled. "You don't, and I can't blame you. I didn't know him myself, not in the last three years. My Eric was sixteen. Or he was eight, or two. My Eric had these bright, curious blue eyes and had lost his front teeth. He had chubby fingers, too chubby to tie his shoes for years. My Eric drew pictures of turtles.

"This other one, the drug addict. I didn't know him at all. I never saw him. Even if I had, I would have denied his existence. That is not the boy I'm mourning. That was not my son.

"And the fact that I didn't know him, despite what he may have done or may have been, is what I cannot forgive myself for. I have no access to him now, and the fact that someone like you had that opportunity and chose not to take it kills me inside. I would like to think that if mine had been the last face he saw, I would at least have been able to let him know that someone cared for him. That he mattered to me."

In the glow of her dash lights, her eyes looked like glass. Shiny, empty, blind.

"Believing that makes me feel like a better mother than I really was. I don't expect you to understand."

The headlights came on. She turned the car around and drove away. Ray let himself back inside and went in search of a towel.

*

A stricken relative of an addict, Ray thought. How very odd.

*

“Why in the name of God are you still awake?” This is how he answered the phone.

“I did it,” she said cheerily, his reception notwithstanding. “I got him to leave.”

“Without police intervention?”

“They just left, too.”

He glanced at the clock. 4:37. “What happened?”

“I couldn’t do it, what you said. It’s raining.”

“But you could have him hauled away by the cops?”

She giggled, half-pleased, half-scared by the sound of it. He could hear her quivering. “That was his own fault, and Mrs. Batts, the old woman next door. He should have known better than to start yelling.”

Yelling. “Are you okay?”

“Of course, don’t be silly.”

“Certainly.”

She made a sound, like the opening of a soda can. Pfft. “Just yelling, Ray. He wouldn’t have put his hands on me.”

“You sound awfully calm.”

“I can be calm in retrospect. During, I was just cold.”

Ray could believe that. “Tell me.”

“I went into the bedroom, taking care to be loud. You know, to wake him. Then I started stripping. Not whore stripping, but that pragmatic stripping. Panties over the lampshade and all. Just getting ready for bed like he wasn’t there, but I knew he was watching.” She laughed again. “Sproing! That’s how I knew.”

Ray listened, watched, thought of the word *pink*. “Go on.”

“I got in bed, stayed on my side, of course, and just ignored him. He gets all touchy-feely, so I started snoring. I don’t get this guy thing about always expecting some kind of erotic response from a woman, even when we’re asleep. He seemed to think the only reason I had come to bed in my own damned apartment was to screw him. My apartment! He

went from dirty whispers to dirty shouting in about three minutes. After that it was just shouting. I knocked over a lamp getting back up and the cops were banging on the door inside ten minutes."

She giggled again. "Here's a secret for you, Ray. A confidential woman secret: answer the door naked and a cop will do whatever you want. You don't even have to cry. If you could get over that whole macho comparison thing long enough to give it a shot, it'd work for you guys, too."

"Only for totally different reasons, my dear," Ray said. "Most of us would do anything a naked guy wanted just to get him the hell away from us."

"Results," she responded, "are all that matter."

"That was very cold. Borderline Personality Disorder cold."

"No, no. It was effective. It was a means of achieving a desired end. Before you totally condemn me, please have the decency to remember that I said nothing to them. Mrs. Batts made the call. The cops came, looked, assumed. Any mistake they made was their own fault."

"Jesus."

"That first cop said the same thing."

"You could have explained."

"Why? Then they would have left him. This way, as the cop said, state law requires they take him away and hold him for a few hours. I have to call to press charges."

"Which you won't," Ray said hopefully.

"Unless he becomes a nuisance."

Ray grunted. His mouth tasted like stale tobacco. "I think he got any or all of the messages you were trying to send."

"Maybe. I think it depends on whether he finds an outlet to satisfy his butt fixation while he's in lock-up." She sounded as though Ray had somehow insulted her. "There was a logic to it all, Ray. There always is. It's not just being bitchy. Nobody who isn't one of us--a member of the female gender--can understand it, granted, but we always have a logic."

"The softer sex."

"Right, soft like the palate of a Venus fly-trap."

"They call that a palate?"

"How should I know?"

"I mean, it's a plant, right? Animals have palates, not plants. That's creepy, calling it that."

She sighed. "Shut up, Ray."

He complied, at least on the question of palates. "So, does this nude thing work on chicky cops?"

"Domestic abuse alone, or the suspicion of it, works on female police officers. And that entire male thing you're doing, Ray, is part of the justification for our logic."

"Right, we're all sexual predators and glass ceiling builders just waiting to shed the bonds of human society. Want me to bang on my chest?"

"You have your stereotypes about women which allow you to oppress us; we have our stereotypes about men which allow us to get devious and devastating revenge. You know, I hope, as well as I do that those pigeon holes are not accurate because of their generality, but they can be used in day to day interactions effectively enough."

Ray whistled, only partially in humor. "There's a whole science to this naked gender manipulation thing, then. Textbooks and shit."

"Unihersity training."

"Ah. More like a cult, I suppose."

"Sorority."

"Same difference. It's still that whole feminist routine. 'Look at me, I'm weak and helpless! Defend me large man!' That is, until the danger's gone, then it's 'Stop oppressing me, you bastard! I can take care of myself!'."

"That's an offensive generality of the feminist movement, Ray. All we're doing is utilizing the existing system of male domination. Your impulse is to rescue us. We can use that."

“Divide and conquer.”

“You catch on quickly.”

In Ray’s insensitive male brain, this seemed like a logical transition to the events of his own evening. “That Ackerman kid’s mother was here a few minutes ago.”

A pause, apparently for switching gears. “Jesus, Ray. What happened?”

“I called the cops.”

“Shit, really!”

He thought about it. “No, not really. She was very nice, actually. She cried, we smoked, she left. In between she tried to get me fired, fined and incarcerated, but she handles rejection well. All in all, it was one of the better family interactions I’ve had in this business.”

“Was she pathetic?”

“Not any more than you would expect a grieving mother to be. Not any less, either. I was surprised at the weirdness of it.”

“Did she cry because she was grieving or because you were an asshole?”

“That is an offensive generality of the masculinist movement. I was the image of professionalism.”

“Same difference.”

“She was pretty hot for an old lady. I mean it. The professionalism was more of a stretch than you’re giving me credit for here.”

“I’m sure it was. I’m going to bed now. Goodnight, Ray.”

She hung up, leaving him with the sense that he had disappointed her in some way other than the obvious.

Chapter 5

Shortly after five, the hospital called. More precisely, the emergency room phoned to ask if Ray had a bed. Ray pretended to consult his admission log, just as he always did. The nightly hospital call meant one of three things: the chemical dependency floor was full (highly unlikely), the individual in question had fallen under the hospital's "one treatment episode every three months" sanction (also known as the Black List, and only moderately unlikely), or the prospective client had no insurance (in Ray's experience, very likely).

The folks at the hospital knew, as did Ray, that federal law prohibited him from turning away individuals requesting detoxification services if he had an open bed. The hospital was generous enough to spring for a cab voucher for the intoxicated.

In Ray's experience as well, overnight admissions were less interested in detox than in free food, a free bed and complimentary meds. For his two hour paperwork investment and aggravation, he would receive the benefit of knowing the client slept until noon then slipped out the side door and into another binge. Any bills for service generated for the brief stay would return in a week or so stamped "No Such Address" or simply "Return to Sender". On average, the clients of addictions services managed to muster a raging 25% of them who would ever pay a dime toward their bill. The night shift admission payment percentages were a quarter of that quarter in good years.

Thus, the frequent calls from the hospital. They had little better luck in getting good addresses (or even with those, a client who stayed sober long enough to give a shit).

No one relished treating the uninsured and uninsurable. It was fiscal suicide. The hospital was perfectly willing to let the local experts in deadbeats handle the workload.

Tonight, Ray could tell them no. He liked telling them no, especially when it was the truth. It did not bother him that the hospital's backup treatment was a one milligram shot of Ativan to control the client's shakes and get them through the night until the liquor stores opened, then a security escort out the door and to the edge of the parking lot.

The reality was that overnight admissions, Ray's or the hospital's, would not and did not stay to complete programming nine times out of ten. The hospital's backup treatment modality was simply an accelerated route to the same end. Whether the client chose to end up back on the street or the hospital chose for him, chose the time or the hospital chose for him, really made little difference in the grand scheme.

Ray hummed into the receiver, put his feet up on the desk and played the game.

"What's the name?" he said.

The voice on the other end--Ray knew it, but could never remember the name--was black, sly, experienced.

"Uh-uh, man. If I tell you, you're gonna say you're full."

"I might say that anyway."

"He's not one of the bad ones."

"They never are," Ray said. "At least from your perspective. The last guy you sent me had a gun."

"No shit, man!"

Actually, the last guy had said he had a gun, which Ray had not bothered believing because a) he knew the client too well, and b) knew the client would hock a gun had he ever owned one for snort rather than use it to hold up night shift

techs. Ray had threatened the guy with an aluminum ball bat until he ran away.

Ray continued, "What's his DOC?"

"Alcohol."

"BAC?"

"Point one oh two. Just barely legal even. Coherent."

"And undoubtedly on the verge of DT's by the time he would get here. Sorry, guy, I'm full."

"Aw, we'll give him Ativan before he comes over."

"You'll give him Ativan, anyway. We're full."

"You're just being a lazy bastard."

"Sure, and you're not. Call my supervisor."

"Whatever." There was nothing acrid in the response. The guy just made the calls; he didn't have to handle the client. Most of the time, he gave up a long time before Ray did. "We'll do something with him. Probably just piss him off so we can call the cops, have him arrested for PI or DD."

"It's a place to sleep," Ray said by way of encouragement.

"Night, man."

"Talk to you tomorrow."

*

Predictably, the doorbell rang twenty minutes later. The hospital was, after all, only eight blocks off and all down hill. That any prospective client would choose hospitalization over the efforts of the local mental health center was not particularly offensive. The outward appearance of Ray's facility was not designed to inspire confidence in its medical capability (nor was the fact that it had no doctors except the one on call, and an assurance that you were not going to get any medication you wanted when you wanted it). The appearance, in turn, of a largely twenty something staff further exacerbated the lack of esteem. This was, Ray believed, the way it should be.

It was the others, the regulars, the ones who willingly chose a ramshackle alternative who worried him. There was something of desperation in that decision, or surrender to the inevitable. It was like the ultimate manifestation of the internalization of the shame of addiction. They had ceased to believe they were worth the hospital's time. They had fallen too far from grace to be saved, which meant they weren't worth saving, which meant, of course, that there was ultimately no motivation for them to stop drinking because they had already pissed away everything of value in their lives. The decision to choose CAT was a little sad, a little scary.

Ray peered out through the thin slab of wire meshed glass in his steel framed back door. By the streetlights, he could see the man standing there in the pea gravel border between sidewalk and parking lot. Not large, not small. Definitely thin, possibly malnourished. Ascites belly bulge over his belt, a first trimester alcohol pregnancy. With nothing to lean on, the man swayed gently.

Unsteady on his feet, Ray began. Unkempt in appearance. Visibly flushed. Apparent motor skills impairment.

Ray pushed the door open, no more than eighteen inches and blocked the gap with his own body. He kept a firm grip on the bar.

"Can I help you?"

Slight pause. *Flighty, disordered thoughts, possible disorientation.* "I jus' come to prove you was a liar. From the hosspital."

Slurred speech. Disconnected or obsessive thought patterns. Individual seems to have forgotten the use of basic grammar rules learned in elementary school.

Ray sniffed, winced. *Definite odor of alcohol.* No tremors, though--he could thank the hospital and the makers of any number of depressants for that. Add also, no perceived immediate risk of DT's or withdrawal related seizures.

Diaphoresis, agitation, fresh abrasions to the knees and heels of palms.

Preliminary assessment, acute alcohol intoxication.

Ray said, "Excuse me?"

"Liar." The guy said it like one long word, a sigh of exhaustion.

"And how is that?"

"You said you got no bed. On the phone, to them guys at 'mergency. You got a bed in there and I'm gonna find it."

The man took a tentative step forward, but Ray was certain that he was not as physically threatening as he intended to be. The difficulty of re-establishing a firm and reliable connection between feet and ground which he was obviously experiencing tended to deflate his projection of peril.

Still, Ray stiffened, set his mouth, pulled just a bit on the door. Obvious and almost lugubrious gestures of resistance designed to penetrate a thick (normally) and drunken (currently, but also normally) head.

"I can't let you do that, Tom. Confidentiality. You know the rules. They haven't changed since last week."

Tom stared, scratched absently at his ratty, two-week growth of beard. His shoulders seemed to fold, his whole body to shrink. He had given up any ideas of breaching the walls with force.

"I don't have anywhere to go."

Another tactic, an attempt to elicit sympathy. Tom knew better than to cry, because Ray hated that. He did a good impression of hopelessness, though.

Ray said, "I don't have anywhere to put you."

"The hospital wouldn't take me, either."

"Three strike rule, you know that. You're blacklisted there until June. You can try again here tomorrow, if you'd like. I've got three I expect to walk out before noon."

That seemed to perk him up (though it was a flagrant lie). "Can I jus' wait here then? I won't bother nobody."

"No."

"Come on. I'll hide by the dumpsters where nobody can see."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you're drunk and it's my job to make sure you don't corrupt my clients. Because you're trespassing and it's my job to make sure you don't harm any of my clients. Because if you fall over and die on my doorstep that has nothing to do with the clients, but everything to do with liability for me personally. You need a longer list?"

"You can pretend you didn't know I was here."

"And you can pretend I'm not calling the cops if you don't get going. You are publicly intoxicated, Tom. I'm giving you a break by even letting you walk away."

He nodded involuntarily. "I know. I know."

"Go down to the Waffle House, get some coffee. Hang out awhile. They won't care."

Tom's head came up, giving a sidewise glance. "That sounds okay. I can come back later. You got any money, man? For the coffee? Three or four bucks is all I need."

"Seventy five cents is all you *need*. For the coffee. Get the hell out of here before I stop being generous."

The man threw his hands up, borderline aggressive again. *Mood swings, rapid*, Ray said to himself.

"Whatever, Ray. Motherfucker. Cocksucker."

Muttering, cursing, weaving, Tom walked away. Ray watched him go down along the side of the building. When he hit the sidewalk, Ray closed the door. He picked up the phone and dialed the number for the city police night dispatcher.

If they bothered to pick him up, it would be at worst a PI (unless Tom did something stupid, which was not out of the question). At best, he'd have a place to sleep, minimal but adequate healthcare and a probation officer to pinch beneath his thumb until the city took charge of manhandling Tom's

passage into the detox and treatment program of his choice, all at the taxpayers' expense.

For Ray, this scenario was preferable to believing he was just being an asshole.

*

Almost six. The sky was looking pink and flabby. Clear to the east, a cellulite bank of bruised clouds rolling in from the west. Ray pushed up the window by his desk and leaned his head out through the rent in the screen. The wind had picked up. It smelled like ozone, like more rain coming. He pushed the window back down and went to work on his charting notes.

His job was to stretch the word "fine" into a minimum of four lines of informative text, preferably without obvious obfuscations. Anything less than four lines made the RN suspicious of your attention to the client's condition. This was not difficult when Ray had clients who were actually in need of his attention.

This group was not. They were mostly half a day away from successful graduation from the detox portion of programming, and ready to begin the intensive group therapy that would occupy the rest of their ten day to two week stay until they were ready to go on to state hospitals, halfway houses or simply home to wives, children, families who knew damned well that it was only a temporary surcease. Everyone would, of course, pretend to be hopeful (when really, despite themselves, they were bitter and spiteful). Except for those families who had been through the whole treatment followed by failure and relapse cycle too many times before--they would just pretend to be bitter and spiteful (when really, despite themselves, they were hopeful). It was that kind of profession.

Knowing this did not make Ray's task any easier. It wasn't his job to make a prognosis on their recovery. Only to encapsulate all the truth he had gleaned in the three to five minutes he had seen them awake in the last few hours in one all encompassing note. He was not, when it was absolutely necessary, above making shit up.

In treatment lingo, *FINE* was an acronym. Fucked-up. Insecure. Neurotic. Emotional. All the time people said to him while he was checking their vitals or giving them meds, "I'm fine." Ray was invariably able to agree. In such spirits, he could write actual charting notes, accurate notes, for the RN to review. "Client stated he was feeling emotionally off-balance, moody and overly sensitive to the comments and actions of others."

Bob was fine.

Very much true, chuckles from the gallery. *FINE*. He-he. On the other hand, a bad display of professionalism if you hinted in any way that you knew about the acronym. The rule of thumb, of course, was that each note should be written in such a way that it could be viewed in court and easily understood should a client's chart at any time come under a subpoena. So you added more words, more layers, each round of the onion skin further insulated from the true kernel of fineness. Each succeeding layer a little less true, each word creating a bit more obscurity so that by the end the actual experience was unrecognizable. A billowy white sheet over a moth-eaten sofa. Bob was no longer a sick, puking, manipulating, bitching fuck trying to scam medication, but a highly agitated client requesting increased medical intervention for vomiting, anxiety and general malaise. Bob sounded like a decent guy, a guy who had made a few mistakes and now just needed a helping hand to get himself back on track.

Ray knew very well that charting was a form of mythmaking, disguising the kernel of truth with abstract and metaphorical lies that no one would fully understand. Or maybe not mythmaking itself, but definitely contributing to the whole treatment and recovery myth of sincere and generous mental health professionals extending the warm hand of help to a noble class of the chemically addicted willing to work for a better life. Addicts who had said "Give me the tools and I'll build a monument out of the raw materials of my life."

Except the reality was that they were all *fine*. They really meant "Give me the fucking tools and I'll dig a pit so deep

with your psychobabble, inner child, disease concept bullshit that I'll have a whole lifetime of rationalizations for why I'm such a stupid, lazy bastard."

Of course, that was another myth. The jaded myth, the treatment Qillipoth myth. The one that said the problem with addicts who fail at sobriety is that they expect us to do the work for them. They want a magic pill, magic cure, magic bullet. Sobriety as something that happens as a result of what is done to them rather than what they do.

One day at a time doing first things first--the top agenda item being to climb upon somebody else's shoulders so they can drag your dead ass.

That wasn't true, either. It was the treatment worker's rationalization for the thirty who don't make it, come back, die. Believing anything else is codependency. We don't fail. They fail. All we can do is give them the tools--they have to use them or not. We have no blame.

Right.

Except, try to convince any product manufacturer in any industry you choose to name that every item which rolls off the assembly line works perfectly. That the same techniques used on every problem with every machine yields acceptable results. Convince them that the day Annie B. came in so hung over after her husband had beat the living shit out of her, when her eyes were so swollen up and puffy, when she was bearing those stupid, fat, broken fingers and that throbbing head. . .on that day, all of those factors didn't take one percentage point of performance potential away from her accurate tightening of whatever bolt she's been assigned to for twenty years. Annie is just as up to it and focused and giving a goddamn about quality assurance as ever, right? Pride in workmanship. Quality control. The whole cookie cutter approach, assembly line argument for increased production works just as well on a day like that as on a day when everybody gets big, fat bonus checks. Right?

All our staff is *fine*. Whatever the conditions, the headaches, the intrusions. The staff is always *fine*.

Yup.

The phone rang, and Ray picked it up before it could ring
– or not -- a second time.

Chapter 6

“Hey, guy.”

“No, this is Ray.” He smiled, leaned back in his chair.

It was, of course, Pete. Pete was the night shift guy at Crossroads Detox across town. Ray called it the Jesus Shop because it was wholly supported by a contingent of local churches who saw addicts as a potential ministry.

Apparently Jesus saved--not only from sin and hell, but also from Dark Eyed Jim Beam.

Pete was a relatively innocuous born again fundie who volunteered his time two or three nights a week. When he was not saving the world, his Clark Kent was actually a steady CPA job with the local H&R Block. He'd been pulling shifts for about six months, knew nothing about drugs beyond that bad people used them to escape their problems and that they were tools of Satan, and he always needed Ray's advice about one thing or another. This arrangement was not problematic as Pete had long ago given up trying to convert him. Pete was also the only guy in the city who was, as Ray figured it, making less money than he was at such an hour. In return for Ray's magnanimity, Pete had done Ray's taxes for free last year.

They had never actually met, though Ray had faxed him the tax forms and Pete had faxed back a photo of his two pre-teen daughters and his geriatric Lab.

“What's the problem?” Ray asked.

"I have a recalcitrant."

That's what he called them, the drunk and definitely disorderly. Pete's vocabulary did not include the word *shithead* either in its singular or plural.

"Pete, they're all like that. Alcohol is bad medicine. That's why places like ours are in business. To make them calcitrant."

"I know that." Pete sounded a little annoyed.

There was some commotion in the background, a knocking on doors.

"This is a little different, Ray."

"How is that, Pete?"

A garbled shout came over the line. Pete made a distinct *ek* noise.

Ray put his feet on the floor, listened.

"Where are you exactly, Pete?"

"I'm in the office here, with the doors locked. Just like you said."

At the very beginning, his very first night, Pete had called Ray in a flurry of panic because one of his clients was in the process of simultaneously vomiting all over the walls and promising graphic incidents of bodily injury because Pete seemed to be doing too little for him. Ray had thought, at first, that it was a joke and consequently advised him to close himself in his office, lock it tight and sing the entire score of *Les Miserables* until the idiot went away. That is, he had said, what you do in this business when you feel your life is in danger.

Pete was not currently even humming, but Ray was prepared to accept two out of three.

"Have you called the police?"

"Three times. They're not here yet."

He had probably called twice in the span of five minutes, Ray assumed. He had done that himself once, early on in his

career, and wondered what the hell was taking them so long. Panic stretched the seconds into hours.

More banging, some random shouting.

"I think he has a knife," Pete said. Ray noted that he was making an admirable effort to stay calm. Just a quaver in the voice. Not too bad.

"You *think*? Either he has a knife or he doesn't."

"He said he was going to cut me if I didn't give him some drugs." Finally, Pete's voice cracked, but just the once. "Ray, I told him we don't have any medications. I mean, some Tylenol, yes. But. . .he won't believe me!"

Offer him Jesus, Ray thought, but said, "Look, here's what you need to do. Hang up on me. Call the police again—"

"I've done that!"

"—Tell them you have a body on the floor. You think he might be dead. Then hang up."

"But he's not dead."

"You might be by the time the cops get there."

"What!"

Ray rolled his eyes. "Seriously, Pete. A rampaging drunk is not news. A possible homicide, though—that's newspaper stuff. It looks bad if the cops don't reach the scene before the police beat reporter, and that guy does nothing but sit around all night listening to his scanner for shit just like this. The cops hurry then, believe me."

"Tell them there's a dead body. . ." Pete still sounded uncertain.

"No. Tell them only a body that you think *might* be dead. You say dead and that's false reporting. You say *might be* and you can slide on the fact that you're not a qualified medical practitioner capable of making such an assessment. Understand?"

Pete said, "Yeah, Ray," and got off the line.

*

To some extent, Ray found the idea of the Jesus Shop and its doppelgangers ludicrous. They tended to have an enormous lost sheep mentality, largely because, honestly, they didn't have much damned choice given their mission and affiliations. They didn't have the option of turning away the unmotivated because Jesus didn't take no for an answer and saw the good in everybody. If they were technically full, they just parked 'em on the floor until the fire marshal said *enough* (and then resented him for getting in the way of the harvest).

They had no psychologists, no licensed and NADAC certified counselors, no one who knew anything about addictions theory. They avoided AA like it was a hotbed of Catholicism or a secret arm of the Tri-Lateral Commission. They had a leaner budget than even a local mental health center, borrowed their building and guilted their congregations into donating time rather than actually paying a real staff. They gave no medications (unless you counted prayer) to get some sorry bastard through withdrawal and consequently called more emergency ambulances than an old folks home full of Alzheimer's patients.

All they really had was a desire to do something nice, what they perceived as a calling straight from the Almighty, and a Director of Services who had once been a serious biker and narcotics pusher (as well as serious user) who knew more than a little about what it meant to be fucked up when you were trying to go straight.

But they kept their beds full and their waiting list bursting because they hawked the *Jesus likes you and wants to help* angle as well as Madison Avenue pushed disposable goods.

All you need, after all, is Jesus. Deliverance from the sin of alcoholism and addiction. The colineation of addiction and sin (both having well documented moral consequences and therefore logically connected) sat well with the average alcoholic, who by the time he was thirty or so had elevated guilt to an art form.

But Jesus saves.

Except, as Ray looked at it, Jesus hadn't made anybody take the first drink and was under no obligation to stop them

from taking their last. To lay all your drunken burdens at the feet of Jesus was just another form of denying personal responsibility, foisting the work of recovery off onto somebody else.

(Though the argument could be made that Jesus, at least, had shoulders broad enough to bear the weight, it was still a form of cheating. Ray did not believe Jesus was that codependent, despite the Sunday morning pulpit rumor mill.)

The fact that most of Ray's clients had attempted the happy Jesus high doled out at the Jesus Shop attested to its popularity. The fact that they were still Ray's clients attested to its clinical and psychological bankruptcy. The fact that, at least according to Pete who had a fetish for keeping numbers on this kind of thing, the Jesus Shop had the same one in thirty lifetime recovery rate as the rest of the industry either attested to something very admirable about its efforts or something very depressing about the industry at large. Ray had declined to form an opinion.

The problem was that the addict dependent on the disease concept for his relapse rationalizations only felt bad because he had let himself down. The addict who found out that Jesus had not, in fact, kicked the hell out of his demon of addiction, felt like he had managed to let God down.

And that was a whole other league.

It was after all, one thing to completely fuck things up in this life. After you had screwed the pooch of the next one--really, what was the point of trying after that?

Believing you have let God down is some pretty high caliber sluggage in the shame weaponry of the addictive cycle.

*

Ray gave Pete thirty minutes by his watch before he called the Jesus Shop to check up.

Pete said, "The police were not amused by the body thing."

"But they got there."

"They did. Thanks, Ray."

He shrugged. "Who else would I have had to share my accrued wisdom with if I let you get whacked?"

"They took him to jail," Pete said, and sounded strangely disturbed by that. "I have to go in the morning and swear out a complaint. The officers said they were going to charge him with assault."

"What did you expect them to do?"

"I don't know. . . calm him down. But assault, that's pretty serious, isn't it?"

"People who carry knives have that happen to them, Pete. It's one of the risks of being armed and obnoxious at the same time."

"I think he would have calmed down. I mean, maybe I over-reacted."

"Jesus, Pete. Do they give you guys classes in codependency? 'How to be a professional doormat--the advanced lessons'."

"Ray--"

"Look, Pete. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt here because you have a real life. You're stuck in this mode that the customer is always right. They gripe with a reason. But in this field, you have to make a transition. The customer is always wrong here. The customer only wants things that are bad for him."

Pete sighed at him, heavy and depressed. To an extent, it was normal, this second guessing of your performance once the level of adrenaline had subsided.

Ray said, "Pete, that had better not be the sound of you re-evaluating your life, your manhood or your mission. Because if it is, I'm hanging up and getting caller ID."

"The grace of God extends to the lowliest of sinners," Pete said, in that same sing-song voice Ray used for his arsenal of rote responses. Ray wondered if they had that written up on a poster on their wall.

"But he wouldn't listen to me, Ray. I tried to tell him that if he'd just open himself up, Jesus would help him deal with

his pain. Ray, they taught us to reach for the soul beyond the addiction, beyond the cloud of narcotic haze to touch the child of God within them.”

“Sounds more and more like bullshit when the nut has a knife at your throat, doesn’t it? Makes all of those saints and martyrs that much more amazing when you think about how stupid that shit sounds in real life.”

“But I still thought he’d listen, that he’d see my sincerity and listen. I was trying to plant a seed.”

“Pete, they don’t ever listen. If they did, we’d have to spend all our budgets on advertising to attract a dwindling clientele.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“We’re contributing to the delinquency of mental and emotional minors. We’re facilitating their ability to get healthy enough to go back to whatever poison it is they prefer. How’s that?”

“You’re just being glib.”

“I’ll tell you what, Pete. You find a better way of reaching them, one that actually works, not just works in theory or in textbooks, and I’ll stop being glib.”

Exasperation. “This is *supposed* to be a better way.”

“And since Jesus never fails but frequently your program does, or seems to, you want to know just what we’re all doing wrong. What they say on Sunday morning about how it’s really just people rejecting the overtures of God, or it isn’t the right timing, or God just hasn’t moved on this idiot’s spirit yet to convict him of his sin--you’re thinking that sounds pretty damned lame right now.”

“Yes.”

“That, Pete, is the million dollar question. Find the answer, write a book, go on tour.”

Pete was silent for a time, which Ray took to be a bad sign. He cleared his throat to indicate that he was still present, still listening.

"I don't understand you, Ray. The way your mind works." He sounded tired. "It must take a very special person to do your job. This job, I mean. Ours."

"Right. Like MR/DD special. Like tard farming special."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Ray could not say how many times he had heard that line. Special person. He'd heard it from people who seemed genuinely impressed, from people who had been clients at one time or another but still held on to the delusion that Ray or one of his counterparts had actually done something for them. From drunks so far above .40 they should have been by all accepted standards stiff in somebody's morgue, but at three a.m. came across as more alert and coherent than Ray himself.

It was that diversity of backgrounds which convinced him the belief was pure crapola.

The truth was, people thought that *special person* business in the same way Ray supposed he thought about cops, doctors, spies. He couldn't imagine himself doing any one of those jobs, but had a sort of admiration for the type of person who could. But as he had never been a cop, doctor or spy, he didn't know if the stupidity of the comment held as equally true for those professions as it did for his own. Maybe they *were* special people.

But the tech position (whatever you actually called it) was not one of those types, not in reality, or at least any reality Ray had discerned. It required a high school diploma, access to your own transportation and a working knowledge of the English language. Nowhere in the newspaper advertisement had it suggested they only accepted "special" applicants. Really. There were not throngs of breathless, aspiring technicians waiting to mud wrestle over the first available opening. More likely, there were long armed, thick necked italian guys hanging out at the unemployment office waiting to snap up any unsuspecting vagrant they could threaten with bodily injury until he agreed to take the job.

It wasn't that there weren't people who wanted to help address social ills, just not enough people willing to jump on the long, slow slide to penury to help at this particular place and in this particular way. If they wanted to feel good, they could donate time to Jerry's kids and still keep their day jobs (where generally they didn't have to worry about getting screamed at by undermedicated sociopaths, cried on by crack whore mothers who were having their kids taken away or thrown up on by pretty much any random individual you might come within five feet of). Ray had that kind of job.

Certainly, it took a special person, he wanted to say. As in fooby special. Arkansas IQ special.

But special in terms of divinely inspired compassion or Assisi-like obedience to Lady Poverty--that was pure bullshit. If you could last six months, you had the innate skills basic to all human creatures to get jaded enough to do the job. After that, you had seen it all, done it all, been taken advantage of enough and degraded out of your humanity to the point that nothing could surprise you, dismay you or bug you in the least.

Then, they were no longer clients, no longer people, just commodities, more or less intransigent machines (depending upon their attitude and motivation levels) which required your attention.

Nobody looks at maintenance guys and says: Jeez, it takes a special person to do your job. Ray pretty much felt the same way about his own, about Pete's. Pete would see it too, if he got over this whole helping the beleaguered soul business. And Ray told him so.

"I don't think I should talk to you anymore, Ray," Pete said slowly. "At least for tonight."

Ray accepted that, even understood it. Addicts and codies didn't listen to anybody. Besides, the realization that you could not save the world, and that maybe Jesus wasn't all that interested in it either, was undoubtedly a serious central nervous system depressant in Pete's universe.

"Read some Calvin," Ray said to him, then hung up the phone.

Chapter 7

“Did I tell you about my dream?” she said.

Ray glanced out the window, figuring to view gold rimmed clouds of dawn (or maybe the muggy, bruised purple thunderheads of dawn, either one was good enough). “Did I tell you that you have to be at work this afternoon?”

He heard her stick a fat raspberry tongue out at him. It made a dry click-click sound in his ear as she licked the mouthpiece.

“Are you going to listen to me?”

“Okay.”

She was, she believed, ragingly psychic, at least when she was asleep. Ray supposed that if there were degrees of paranormal talent in terms of usefulness or even legitimate conversation piece value, the psychic dreamer would be the squished fat bird at the base of the proverbial totem pole.

He rolled his eyes (which she, of course, did not know as she was at least reportedly awake).

“It’s very Gnostic,” she explained.

“Everything is Gnostic these days,” he said. “It’s a fad.”

“You’ve read the Nag Hammadi manuscripts?”

“I liked the dots. Better than a picture.” She was silent on the line. He prompted. “A thousand words. . .you know, the ellipses they used to indicate the missing or untranslatable

stuff. It seems to me that what isn't said is much more interesting than what is actually there. I've spent much more time thinking about that." The explanation was simply not worth it. "I was being sardonic."

"Sarcastic."

"Anyway, go ahead. How was your dream Gnostic--as opposed to, say, Coptic?"

"You mean like Egyptian?"

He shook his head. "Nevermind. Let's just call it firmly eastern mediterranean philosophico-religious and be done with it."

"You're cranky, Ray. Drink some coffee."

The cup, halfway to his mouth, smiled at him, or seemed to. Ray set it down. Spooky.

"You know all about the Gnostic hierarchy as it pertains to the pleroma, right? The hypostasis of the archons and all that?"

Ray shrugged. "Who doesn't?"

"You're just teasing me."

"Samael the fool or god of the blind or whatever you want to call him. That hypostasis."

"And the world as we know it was created from chaos by this chick named Sophia, who decided she didn't need the Big Kahuna God to do some creating. So she popped into the plastic void and seeded it with divine light just by looking at it and made Yaldabaoth who mistook himself for God."

"Your interpretation sounds so very non-feminist. Your gender should be ashamed." Ray laughed. "Everything was fine when a man was running the show." She did not laugh. He said, "Keep going."

"So I had this dream--"

"When exactly was this?"

"Tonight."

"You've been up all night."

“No, I dozed between calls. Before the whole cop scene, and while I was sleeping, I had a dream.” She was beginning to sound angry, or defensive, Ray could not say for certain. He decided to lighten up. “Once, I used to date this really heavy crack hound--he was a dealer, fairly big time. He’d come south from Detroit and was really just getting started when we were hooked up, but it was still some shit. He made a lot of money, screened it through this lame occult bookstore. You know, laundered it, but the store itself was just a front. Nobody worked there but him and me sometimes, or some stoner he could scam into it when we wanted to take a few days off for snorting or fucking or whatever.

“This store. . .He would never sell anything out of because of the paperwork and re-ordering and shit. The aggravation, you understand. One lady came in and offered him six hundred bucks for this dragon etched table he used to hold his ashtray, and he still said no. It was crazy.

“Anyway, one day he gets this wild hair to go to England. No destination, no ideas, no plan. Just up and went. The only reason he took me was because I was there the day he decided to split, and he hated to fly by himself. Besides, I was less of a crack whore than some of his other betties. Kept costs down.”

Ray said, “This is a very uplifting story.”

“Just outside of London, we stayed in this run down hotel. I mean, it was one of those places that gave you the impression it had been nice like a few hundred years ago, but somewhere in the Middle Ages somebody decided that upkeep was just too much of a hassle.”

“Ah, kind of like this place.”

“Only worse. Much. It was a creepy old place. The walls were almost gangrened. The must or mold or whatever actually woke you up sneezing. We’d been there about a week when this lady who was a maid or cook or something stopped us as we were going out for dinner and told us their ghost story.

“You have to understand, everybody over there has a ghost story. It’s as much as a fixture of any given house as the coat of arms. There are the murdered ladies, the drowned

virgins, the knights that took a knife in the back while they were schtooping the lord of the manor's wife. It's generally some pretty gruesome stuff. But the place where we stayed had a pretty tame specter, at least by comparison. Something about some old colonel from the Indian wars who had kicked off in the room we were staying in. He'd show up, sit in a chair by the fireplace. Maybe smoke a cheroot.

"We told the lady we weren't planning on using the fireplace, anyway, so we went on out and didn't think much of it. But about two that morning when we got back and went to bed, it got really creepy. Max had this gold cigarette case he'd carried with him for like forever. He'd gone to bed and put it on the bedside table just like always. About three or so, he got up and decided to have a smoke, which he did. Then he goes to the bathroom. When he got done, he comes back out and his damned smoke box is sitting in this puddle of water. He picked it up, opened it, and it's just full of water. His cigarettes were all soggy.

"Well, he slapped me on the ass and wanted to know what the hell I had been doing, and why I thought it was funny. But I'd been asleep. Knew nothing about it at all. He didn't believe me at first because I'd been trying to get him to quit for his health."

Ray grinned at the phone. He couldn't help himself. "Because cigarettes and coke are just too much, right? One vice to a customer."

She ignored him. "We yelled at each other for about fifteen minutes, and he finally realized that I wasn't joking. I really didn't do it. We were so creeped out, we threw on our clothes and checked out right then. Middle of the night. We grabbed the first flight out of Heathrow, which sent us to some dive in South America, and came straight back to Indy from there. It was weird."

Ray said, "That's it? That's not very creepy. I've seen creepier shit here."

"Says you. It was bizarre."

"Or it was LSD. How exactly is that Gnostic?"

"That's not Gnostic, you dope. My dream was Gnostic. That was true."

"I thought you were telling me about a dream."

"I'm getting there. I told you about the hotel, because that's where the dream was. The story was only marginally relevant."

"You were trying to establish the context," Ray said. "I understand. Go on."

"I was at this same hotel in the dream. And I was talking to that same lady, the maid. She was telling me this story about the dead colonel again, and in the dream, I'm thinking, 'Christ, now I'm going to have to leave and fuck up my vacation'. It was kind of scary in that way that dreams sometimes are when you know that everything works out in the end, but if you don't do things just so, they could get really screwed up. The potentiality is scary, the idea that you could go messing up a future that has already, it seems to you, been written. The opposite of Sartre's leap of faith."

"The question stands. How is that Gnostic?"

"Well, I got to thinking about that old lady. See, while I was in London, I was giving serious brain time to the idea of sobering up. I'd been hooking for Max and for myself on the side for about six months. I was feeling degraded, having one of those moments of clarity, but I'd talked to enough people in the business to know that that feeling eventually went away. The problem was, I didn't want it to go away. The going away, the getting used to it was terrifying. It was a path from which there would be no return for me. I could see that.

"It occurred to me that nobody knew me in England. It was like an opportunity for a fresh start. I could ditch Max, ditch my past, check into a rehab center. It was a chance to get back on line with my life. I was thinking about that all evening while Max and I were out. That was the first night in two or three years that I didn't use anything. Nothing at all. I was testing my resolve.

"And then the cigarette case happened. Now I tell you, if I hadn't heard that old lady talking about ghosts and shit, I

would've just assumed that Max was so fucked up he had done it and not realized it. But she had planted this creepy idea in my head, and Max and I took it and ran with it.

"Back in the states, I fell right back into the old scene, the familiar scene with its lack of exits. It took me another two years to get that moment of clarity back. I burned up two years of my life, and sometimes even awake I blame that old lady for it. Sometimes I hate the fuck out of her, even though it is totally irrational, because I have two years of memories of things I did that I am to this day ashamed of when I let myself think about it.

"But you know what? She was just being nice. That batty old broad was just trying to make our stay more interesting, more exciting. Maybe she was just trying to make up for the collapsing shithole she worked in by adding a little charm with their very own ghost story. She probably made it all up on the spot, wrapped it up in a little bow like a gift to Max and me. She didn't know that she was fucking up my life for another two years. She didn't know that maybe her little amusement was the reason Max coked himself right into a heart attack seven months later. She thought she was doing something good, something precious."

She paused, and Ray finished her thought. "Like Sophia. She thought she was doing something okay, too. Bringing order to chaos, doing something constructive with the void. She was just being nice."

"And look what the hell it got her. Look at what the hell it did to the rest of us."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I thought about you when I woke up. The dream reminded me of you. You and the suicide kid."

Ray put his teeth together. "How is that?"

"Sometimes bad things happen, even when motivated by the best of intentions. Sometimes, very good people trying to do the right thing only manage to make a big mess, to really fuck somebody else up. But just like that old lady, it's not

anybody's fault. In an imperfect universe, bad things happen."

"But even Yaldabaoth thought he was doing an okay thing. When he was created from the material of chaos, he thought he was the Creator, the true God, because he was alone. God had shut the gates of heaven against him. He just didn't know any better. In some ways, he was deceived rather than evil and doing the best he could with a fucked up system somebody else had handed him. That, of course, does not change the fact that the Gnostics and Sophia herself still regarded him as the embodiment of evil."

"I was trying to make you feel better, Ray," she said. He was aware that her voice had grown thick, brittle. She was about to cry.

He put his head on his hand. "Did it ever occur to you that I don't feel bad in the first place?"

"You did your job."

"Just that."

His confirmation seemed to only make her more sad. She was quiet for awhile. Ray thought about transferring her to the phone closer to the door so he could smoke.

Finally, she said, "Ray."

"Yes?"

"When you get off work, why don't you come over."

He thought he would fall out of his chair. "Why do you say that? You need your apartment painted or something?"

"I thought we'd have sex."

There was nothing he could say to that which would not sound stupid.

He said, "Did you ever feel like you've been in this business for too long?"

"Because I want to have sex with co-workers?"

That flustered him. "Because it leaves you feeling hollow inside. Or rather, unfeeling. The awareness of not doing

anybody any good, but showing up every day to maintain the illusion.”

“No. I never feel like it’s been too long. I felt like I was an addict for too long.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“That place is like a daily meeting for me, a beginner’s group. All those people looking just the way I used to look, to think, to feel. It’s an object lesson, a reminder to me.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“What?”

“You use them to stay sober. They use you to get sober. Seems like a lousy recovery plan, despite the fact that it seems to work for you and everybody else around here. It’s parasitic, Makes you look weaker than even these people.”

She hissed at him. “This is the way you flatter a girl who just said she’d go to bed with you?”

“No. I’ve just been thinking about what you said earlier. The part about good intentions. I’m just wondering if there’s a connection there for these two dots.” *I’m wondering why the hell you’re propositioning me*, was what he was really thinking, but he was sane enough to not ask that question.

“You think my offer of sex will be some kind of therapy for me?”

“You get to be nice to one guy after being really catty to another guy. It restores your image of yourself. At the same time, you get to give me the tools to deal with feelings that I don’t seem to realize I have. That seemed to be the trajectory of the conversation.”

He expected her to get angry with him this time. He deserved for her to get angry with him. Ray wondered briefly if he was manipulating her into a rejection to pay himself back for the penetration of her psyche he had practiced earlier. Since he did not have letters after his name, he realized, he would never have an answer.

“Did you ever notice,” she said, “that ministers seem to be the best Christians? Sure, you’ve got your Jimmy Swaggert’s

and Jim Bakker's, but they're big news precisely because they don't fit the norm. In general, ministers are exactly as sincere as they seem to be. Why do you think that is?"

"Practice."

"Practice every day. They have to walk it constantly. They have to pay attention to where they go, what they do, what they say all the time. They have to be constantly focused on the appearance of their Christianity, because if they screw up, it's going to be big news. People are going to notice. One slip and they can destroy an entire career, an entire lifetime's worth of reputation.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm sure it is very hard. Probably as hard as getting sober and staying that way. But at the same time, they have an advantage over the average joe. They're human just like the rest of us. They have the same urges, the same drive to have fun. I read once that something like thirty percent of men are really into pornography. I mean, like almost pathologically into pornography. If you took a cross section of ministers, I'd bet you would find that thirty percent of them struggle with pornography, too, even though they perceive it as a sin."

"Sure."

"Their advantage is that they have a job that is only peripherally in the world the rest of us have to live in. They can do some serious reality creation to exclude frequent contact with all the temptations the rest of us face. They have a control over their spiritual access environment that the rest of us don't have. They only have to get distracted from the capital-w walk if they want to. Point is, I don't think they'd be any better than the rest of us if they were plumbers rather than pulpiteers, do you?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it. Every Sunday they get to see the same pathetic, lazy pseudo poser Christians they saw drunk on Saturday night or slapping their kids around on Tuesday in the grocery store. They must look out at their congregations and realize what a joke it all is. That all those pious faces are stupid sacks of shit.

“But at the same time, the preacher also has to realize that they must want something better. They must want to have some control over their base impulses or they wouldn’t be there in the pew. Consequently, he gets to look at them and think that he’s both really glad he’s not in their sorry state, and that he needs to remind himself a little more often to stay on the straight and narrow.

“Meanwhile, they’re looking at him and thinking that they just wish they could get their God package as together as he’s got it. In the process, the preacher and the preachees are motivating one another toward a higher plane.

“It’s the same relationship in places like this between the old post-addicts and the wannabes. You call it parasitic, I call it symbiotic.

“One of us is reaching down into the muck to perform a rescue and the other is reaching up out of the quicksand. If we can keep it up, if our twin strength doesn’t give out before it’s all over, everything works out fine. Sure, we both get a little dirty. Some of the shit clings to you, but in that moment, you realize how close you came to the edge. You were right there with your toes planted on the edge of the morass. It would have been easy to give up, let them drown in the mud. But you didn’t. You stayed and pulled, and in the process of pulling, you tumble further back from the pit than you would have been otherwise. You are cognizant of the morass in a way you might not have been before. You see it, smell it, feel it.

“Without that awareness, you might go toodling through the jungle and fall into another hole because you thought the only one was the one behind you.”

Ray said, “That is very deep. You should be doing this for a living.”

This time, she did laugh.

*

After they had said goodbye, Ray realized he had an erection. It made him feel ashamed.

Chapter 8

The doorbell did not ring. Ray was only aware that facility security had been breached because the front door made an unmistakable thunking noise when it closed. He shot out of his chair and threw open the office door to the receptionist's pod. The man who stood in the doorway was not a client, he knew that at once. He could not, however, place him other than that.

He was older, maybe fifty. Balding, graying. But there was a sense of athleticism about him despite his age. Someone who kept fit. That was Ray's first clue. The man wore a gray suit jacket and matching pants, but no tie. He had on loafers. He also stood with his back to the door as though he was aware he could not or should not proceed further down the hall into the client areas.

Ray started to say something by way of greeting when the phone rang. He held up a finger to his visitor, indicating the man should wait and picked up the phone on the desk nearest to him.

"Ray, this is Bob Jenkins."

"Yes."

"I'm the attorney for the mental health center."

"Yes, sir."

"I wanted to call early to let you know that a representative from the police department will be coming in

this morning to talk to you. A detective--" The sound of shuffling papers. Ray supposed it was a lawyer thing. "Caldwell. Detective Jon Caldwell. You are authorized to speak to him. He's the case detective in the Donald Ackerman fiasco."

Ray looked briefly toward his visitor. The man smiled at him. It figured.

"Yes, sir."

"You can talk to him honestly, Ray. I've worked with him before, or at least around him. He's a straight shooter."

"I understand that."

Bob Jenkins appeared to pick up on his tone. "Christ! He's there now, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

For a lawyer, Jenkins managed to sound genuinely apologetic. "I'm sorry, Ray. I was hoping I would call early enough to let you get your thoughts together. I didn't expect the PD to be so accommodating to your schedule."

"Nor would I, Mr. Jenkins."

"All right then. You know the drill. Tell him whatever you want, but stick to relevant information only. Stay close to the facts unless he specifically asks you for your impressions or your opinions. Under no circumstances should you allow him to view the client's chart if it is still there on the premises--which it should not be, but you know how things are. If he wants to see that, he'll have to produce a subpoena."

"Okay."

"And if he has a subpoena for the chart, call me and stall him until I get there. Is all of that clear?"

"I believe so."

"A hell of a mess, Ray. Hell of a mess. Just do your best."

"I'm sure everything will be fine."

Jenkins hung up and Ray straightened himself. He tried to smile at the detective, but was sure he only managed a grimace.

“Detective Caldwell.”

The officer took a step forward, his hand extended. Ray clasped it firmly. Caldwell poked his head toward the phone.

“I’ll guess that was your warning that I was coming.”

“Elementary deduction, my dear Watson.”

Caldwell laughed and released Ray’s hand. He produced a badge, let Ray get a good look at it, then slipped it back into his suit coat.

“For my protection and yours,” he explained. “No tricks here. I’m not on anybody’s side. I’m not here to get you to slip up and help the other side prove that you were somehow negligent. I’m just trying to get the facts. You may assume that I’ve already heard their side, and I have a preliminary sketch of yours from your superiors.”

“You work fast.”

“Actually, Donovan--their lawyer--works fast. He’s been a regular mite in the prosecutor’s ear trying to get this case criminal to improve the outlook for civil litigation. I’ve been given the task of establishing whether or not the high and mighty should give a shit.”

“And currently you’re trying to make them look as bad as possible so I’ll think you’re really on my side in all of this. That way I might tell you more, say in the role of confidant, than I might otherwise.”

Caldwell whistled. “You’re pretty swift yourself, Ray.”

“Just experienced with manipulation, detective.”

“You’re going to make this hard on me.”

“No, sir. I’m going to answer your questions as I’ve been instructed by my attorney.”

“But you’re not going to volunteer any information my questions might miss.”

“That depends on how much it seems you might be trying to manipulate me.”

The detective nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Have you checked my background yet?”

Caldwell produced a black leather notebook from the same pocket which held his badge. Ray noted that he did not seem to be carrying a gun. He wasn't sure what that meant about Detective Caldwell, or what it meant about the community in which the detective operated. It seemed like a positive sign either way.

“Let's see. Graduate of Indiana University with a BA in English three years ago. You've been here for five years, did some restaurant work before that. A couple of speeding tickets when you were nineteen. You have religiously filed your taxes. No criminal record. You have been divorced. That's about all the data the county records could muster. Pretty spotless.”

“What do you want to know about Donald Ackerman?”

“First of all, I want to know if anyone else has tried to contact you regarding this incident. Attempted to influence your testimony in any way.”

Ray noted that the notebook did not disappear as the badge had done. He thought about the chart organizational meeting the previous morning. He thought about Jennifer Ackerman. Very briefly, he thought about Sam and wondered if Caldwell would bother to get a copy of the phone records.

“Donovan called me early this morning. But he was just fishing, I think.”

The detective seemed satisfied with that. “Tell me about Donald Ackerman, then. Do it in your own way, whatever makes you comfortable. This is not an interrogation. I'm only going to ask questions if there are points I need clarification on.”

Ray told him essentially what he had written in the discharge note. He relied heavily upon the narrative as it appeared in the second one. It took all of about five minutes.

Caldwell wrote as he spoke. When he had finished, the detective scratched the top of his head with his pen and seemed to read over what he had just written.

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

Ray pulled out a chair from behind one of the desks. He sat down himself at the desk right next to it.

"Heroin, right?" Caldwell said.

"As far as I know. We didn't urine screen him or anything that I'm aware of. We're willing to take the client's word about what they have been using. It's a safe bet most of the time. If anything, they're going to err on the more side rather than the less. That way they get more drugs."

"You'll have to forgive me, I don't know a lot about this side of the dope system. On my end, they tend to err on the less side."

"Understandable."

"Was it your impression that Mr. Ackerman was in withdrawal from heroin while he was here?"

"Yes."

"What does that look like?"

"Ugly. Heroin is an opiate based narcotic. Withdrawal usually begins three to ten hours after the administration of the last dose. The peak is expected within forty eight to seventy two hours and will generally last anywhere from three to five days thereafter. An individual experiencing opiate withdrawal can expect to suffer incidents of insomnia, anxiety, night sweats, tremors, cramps, nausea and diarrhea. In addition, they have to deal with chronic muscle and joint aches, fever and runny nose. It's a lot like having a really nasty case of the flu. In severe cases, the individual can be at risk for convulsions."

"And what do you do for them? Hand them some Dimetapp?"

"In some clinics, the recommended treatment is a methadone protocol to wean the addict. We use a propoxyphene protocol that lasts about six days. It gets them through the worst of it. I couldn't tell you why one over the other. That's a doctor thing, which I'm not. My sense is that our med intervention is solely to ease their physical discomfort so they'll give treatment a chance. But that's purely a guess. They are not going to die from opiate

withdrawal. Successful detox could be performed with rest, fluids and vitamins. . .and maybe some of your Dimetapp."

"So when the kid split from here at seventy two hours or so, he was feeling pretty lousy."

"That's a safe assumption."

"Did he seem depressed at all? Mentally ill?"

"No more than most. I couldn't give you a clinical diagnosis, even second hand. We don't have the budget to order psych evals on everybody who walks through the door."

"Was he on any medications that you're aware of?"

"Other than the heroin?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't say."

Caldwell blew out a long breath, like that answer had disappointed him. "Had he been here before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"You see much heroin withdrawal?"

Ray shook his head. "Not in this area. We do mostly alcohol. It seems to be a regional thing. Cocaine occasionally. Cat is picking up, but still not serious. We get a heroin addict maybe six times a year, and they're invariably transplanted from Indianapolis. They get down here, can't seem to find a line on any supply, and decide to go straight. A desperation decision."

"Did Donald Ackerman seem desperate to you?"

"I couldn't say."

"Did you talk to him while he was here? I mean, other than the brief conversation right before he left. How did he seem?"

"Quiet, agitated, tense. That's what I heard, anyway. I'm not sure how much of that is my personal impression, and how much is what I was told to look for from day and evening staff. I don't generally see very much of the clients."

"I suppose not."

"As I said earlier, when he spoke to me the morning he decided to leave, he seemed a little anxious. I referred him to his counselor."

"Yeah, but didn't you, I mean, talk to him then?"

"No. That's not my job. In fact, it's a violation of professional guidelines. It would be like you giving legal advice as part of the Miranda rights."

Caldwell accepted that with a nod and a brief smile. "Would you characterize him as troubled?"

A vague question. Ray immediately did not like it. "No more than most."

"Did you expect him to harm himself?"

That was more to the point. "No more than most."

"That seems to be a running theme."

"Detective Caldwell, our population is a variation on a theme."

"I understand that. Okay, no--what do you call it--suicidal ideations?"

"No plan stated, either. He presented no affect consistent with someone intending to harm either himself or someone else. In fact, he presented the affect consistent only with those who have the need to use. It was my impression that he was leaving treatment at that time to do just that."

Abruptly, Caldwell flipped the cover on his notebook. He slid both it and the pen he had borrowed from the secretary's desk into his pocket. He rubbed his forehead as though he suspected the approach of a migraine.

"Shit," he said.

Ray just watched him.

Caldwell appeared to realize what he was doing, what he had said. He grinned at Ray, a look of self-deprecation.

"What a waste, right? Nineteen year old kid. Who knows? He probably could've gotten it together eventually."

One in thirty, Ray thought, but chose not to disagree.

"How long did it say you've been doing this, Ray?"

"Five years."

"Five years. How do you stand it? Seeing all of these lives go to waste, every day, over and over."

"How do you do it?"

"Ah. But see, I get to put them in jail. You've got a rotating door of aggravations."

"I work night shift. Minimal contact. Talk to the day techs if you really want to know about aggravation. Still, there are good stories. The job tends to make me popular at parties. Drunk people love to hear stories about people drunker and more stupid than they are."

The detective chuckled. "Hell, I'm just trying to understand all of this. It helps, sometimes, if you can get inside people's heads, know how they were thinking. But this kid, I just don't get him. How does a healthy, happy midwestern boy in a relatively small town get into heroin? What's the attraction? What can be so bad that heroin is a step up?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, I talked to his parents. They seemed level enough. No major animosities from their split. No outrageous problems financially, emotionally, physically. What about you? Did you get any impression of this kid's background?"

Again, Ray thought of Jennifer Ackerman, of her grief. At least he tried to. The only image he could get in his mind of her was of purple flowers.

"None at all. But I think you're looking too hard, digging for some obvious reason that he was messed up. Addicts come from good families and bad, preachers and pimps, positive environments and negative. Some factors seem to increase the likelihood, but it's a toss up. Who can say? Twenty percent is what I know. Twenty percent of the human population is at risk for chemical dependency based on a variety of genetic and environmental factors. Addiction is the ultimate non-respecter of persons from what I can tell.

Honestly, I don't look at their backgrounds very much. I don't try to analyze factors. I don't ask and I don't care. I deal with addictions, not family therapy. By the time they get here, what got them to our door is a moot point as far as my job description is concerned."

"Not a very holistic approach, is it?"

"Sure it is, but that isn't my job. I baby-sit. I call ambulances, give meds, shuffle paperwork."

"So you don't know any special reason he might have felt suicidal?"

"Not other than the basic psychology and physiology of heroin withdrawal. I'm sure he felt like shit. I'm sure he felt like he wanted to die, but he wasn't going to."

"You get many suicide attempts?"

"No. Suicidal gestures are against the rules."

"Excuse me?"

"When anybody checks into treatment, it is explained to them that we are not a fully equipped medical facility. If they're feeling suicidal or homicidal, they have to tell us so we can take the appropriate steps. It's one of the community agreements, for what that's worth--the rules they have to agree to live by if they're going to stay here. We're a voluntary program."

"As in, 'if you feel like whacking yourself, you have to tell us'?"

"And if you feel like whacking someone else."

"What happens if they admit it?"

"We don't do suicides here, even potential suicides. No specialized training. It's purely common sense stuff. So, if they say they're going to kill themselves, even if we know they're just scamming to get meds or get whatever it is they happen to want at that moment, we have to believe them like it's the God's honest truth. They say the word 'suicide' and we call ES--emergency services--and get a licensed therapist here pronto or we ship them off to the hospital. I've got no leeway there. If they actually attempt a suicidal gesture, I

send them immediately to the hospital if they need medical attention. If they don't, as in they try and fail, we kick them out, hook them up with a therapist or something through outpatient services. I'm not real clear on that system. It's not my call. By the same token, they say 'not suicidal' and we take them at their word."

"You take them at their word."

"Yes."

"That, Ray, is the funniest thing I've heard in a long time." Detective Caldwell stood up, adjusted his jacket, smoothed his pants. He gave every indication that he was preparing to leave. Ray rose also. "Though now that I think about it, it's probably not any funnier than that dick Donovan trying to pin this on you. He makes it sound like you have all this power. That you make all these questionable judgment calls that put lives at risk. No offense, but it looks to me like you don't do shit."

Ray could not tell if that was a parting shot, or an attempt to bait him.

"I have very rigid job duties. I didn't create the system. I can't say I even dislike it all that much."

Caldwell was already at the door, pushing against the bar. "That kid left no impression on you at all, did he?"

"I'm sorry he made the decision he made, if that's what you mean."

"Not really. It's obvious Donovan doesn't give a rat about the kid. The Dad wouldn't know him on sight. The mother hadn't seen him in three years. Nobody would've been seen with him on the street from what I gather, but now he's a big deal, a moneymaker. As pathetic as he was, this all just seems pretty damned sad. I just thought maybe you'd manifest a little more compassion than the suits I've talked to so far. You being the last one to see him alive and all. Sometimes that gets to a person. Or maybe I was just hoping someone had actually cared about him before he kicked off, even if only a little."

Ray could only shake his head. He crossed his arms over his chest, a defensive gesture. "Detective Caldwell, in this

business, compassion is often a little too close to responsibility. You get wound up in other people's problems and you start to blame yourself for their failures. You start to wonder what you did wrong, how you screwed up. That can paralyze you when you need to be able to look beyond the suffering of one person and realize you've got fourteen or fifteen others with just as serious a set of problems who are just as dependent on you for support. We can't afford that type of caring."

"They will suck you dry if you let them," Caldwell said. "A sergeant of mine said that once. Protect and serve does not allow for therapy on the side."

Ray remembered Hank, briefly. He thought about spark plugs. "You ever read about the Gnostics, detective?"

"The who?"

"Gnostics."

"Can't say as I have."

"They said pretty much the same thing. Don't let the bastards grind you down. Stay vigilant. The world is a shittier place than you have heretofore believed. That sort of thing."

He grunted. "Meaning that compassion is not in your job description, huh."

"Not at all."

"Mine either, kid. You try to keep a level head through the next few days. If the lawyers keep hassling you, don't hesitate to make a few phone calls to the department. We handle harassment cases too, you know."

*

People were starting to move. Slowly, grudgingly. Ray's watch told him it was almost eight, almost time to go home. Someone was taking a shower upstairs. In a few minutes, he would have to go get the mop bucket and put it in the hall by the client pay phone to catch the drips that came through the ceiling. Three months, they'd had that problem. The building was beginning to fall apart.

He tapped his fingers on the front section of the local newspaper. Inside was the obituary for one Donald Eric Ackerman, 19, of Bloomington, Indiana. It had said nothing about suicide. Nothing about heroin. Only that he had died at the hospital. It didn't even say what had killed him, though that would have opened a debate on causal factors anyway, Ray supposed. A chicken and egg question. It was another form of myth making, that was all.

He elected not to post this obit on the bulletin board.

Chapter 9

The day shift arrived promptly at 8:00a.m. Ray told them everything they needed to know about the disposition of the clients in the house, which did not include the visit from the police detective, the arrival and departure of Jennifer Ackerman, or the call from Sam Boler. He did tell them about drunken Tom, just because they'd get a chuckle and roll of the eyes out of it, but neither of them expected to see him anytime soon even if he had gotten picked up by the police and jailed for a PI. They did not ask about the suicide kid, which allowed him to not feel guilty about not volunteering any information.

By 8:30a.m., Ray had completed the staffing process, shouldered the book bag he carried with him to work every night and pushed out the door. He felt rushed, though he wasn't sure if it was anticipation of his expected date or fear of that same date. It was, he thought, completely appropriate for him to be nervous. The feeling was somewhat intoxicating.

Ray went to his car, parked right outside the front door beneath the pine tree. He opened the car door, tossed his book bag inside. As he lowered himself inside, a car turned into the parking lot behind him. Black, sporty, convertible with the top up because of the rain. He did not recognize it, and he paused short of closing his door. The vehicle rolled to a stop, blocking him in. The driver's side window slid down eight to ten inches. Ray took that as a signal to get back out, turn around.

Beneath her sunglasses and blond hair, Jennifer Ackerman was not smiling. They watched one another for a moment. Ray said hello with a nod. If she had come to him again, it was not his responsibility to make the first move. He thought about the myriad ways in which his position could be compromised legally just by being seen talking with her.

"I'm on my way to the funeral," she said.

What did one say to that? *Have a nice time* seemed both questionable in terms of taste and unsatisfactory with regards to the response she was obviously expecting from him. More to the point, what did someone in Ray's position say, when he could not officially recognize that he knew her or the person to whom's funeral she was going. The logic of silent acceptance, of passive listening worked at four in the morning when she and he were the only ones awake and alert. In the light of day, with staff witnesses who might question Ray's judgement in fraternizing with an individual prepared to initiate a lawsuit against the facility, there were other considerations. There was less he could safely reveal.

She seemed to sense his discomfort, maybe even his dilemma. "I thought you might want to know that it was today. You may not have known my son, but as you said, you know me. I thought in sympathy for me you might think about coming along."

"I think that would be awkward for both of us." He said it loudly, too loudly, as though he expected the day shift to be eavesdropping.

"As a friend."

"I don't believe I qualify."

"Of mine." She made a bleak effort to smile, failed. Ray looked into his car, at the building, back to her. "I could use the emotional support from someone with your skills at neutrality. My ex-husband will be there. Him and his wife. We haven't gotten along in the best of circumstances."

"I have a previous engagement this morning."

If he expected her to break down again, he was disappointed. Strangely enough, he did not. She had gone

way beyond frailty since he had seen her last. Something in her demeanor suggested numbness, a numbness so profound it could easily be mistaken for strength.

"This should be brief," she said. "Perhaps you could postpone your plans. I would like you to be there with me. It will be a mutual adventure in discovery, and someone with your background is more familiar with the types of things I might encounter."

He stood there, waffling, wondering how it would look for him to be seen stepping into her car.

Very quietly, barely audible above her idling engine, she said, "Please, Ray. There isn't anybody else."

And that more or less clinched it. There was no graceful way to deny a grieving mother's request. Protocols for such things did not exist, either in one of those handy etiquette books or in the version of human race memory Ray may or may not have inherited.

He said, "Let me make a call."

*

Back inside, he slipped past the office, managing not to attract any attention because he did not demand it like the other six or seven people crowding the office door. He went down the long hall to the physician's examination office and opened the door with his keys. He sat down at the desk, picked up the phone. It felt strange to be the one dialing her telephone number for once, though he found he did not have to refresh his memory with the rolodex to get it right the first time.

She answered on the fourth ring, sounding muzzy. "I fell asleep watching a movie," she said. "I'm glad you called."

"I'm going to be late."

"Then I'm not so glad. Are you having second thoughts?"

"No." He had said that *way* too fast.

She giggled.

"Something came up."

"That's supposed to be the whole idea."

"Not that. Another tangle in the suicide kid saga."

Instant concern on her part. He found it gratifying. "Do you have time to talk about it?"

"Not right now. I have someone waiting on me. I shouldn't be later than ten thirty or so."

She shrugged. "I'll keep the bed warm and the door unlocked."

He whistled. "Are you always this forward?"

"Only when I want to be."

"Ten thirty," he said.

"Not much later, Ray. I don't want to be late for work this afternoon."

In Ray's experience, few people ever managed to effectively pass out when it was appropriate to do so. Nor did he this time.

*

Ray opened the passenger door and climbed in, strapped on his seat belt. Jennifer Ackerman neither looked at him nor thanked him, but busied herself turning the car around. They exited onto Seventh street, crossed the Rogers intersection and made their way toward downtown in silence.

He said, "This is different than last night."

She did not immediately understand.

"The car."

"Oh, no. It's my husband's, or rather, ex-husband's. The second one. He couldn't come today, a business meeting in Toronto, but he was gracious enough to let me use the car. I thought it better matched my outfit and the occasion."

People color coordinated vehicles. For funerals, no less. Ray could not but find that vaguely amusing.

"I think I'm hardly dressed for a funeral," Ray said.

In fact, he was not. Blue jeans, a Boston Red Sox tee shirt, a frayed at the collar button-up that only marginally matched

over that. He had on a pair of hiking boots that had seen better days, and only lacked a faded baseball cap to complete the impression that he had been prepping himself to work in the yard.

Of course, in terms of generally appropriate funereal dress, neither was she in his opinion. She *was* wearing black, which was better than his attire, but the silk blouse hugged the contours of her breasts too tightly, and there were one too many buttons undone at the top to have a stranger look at her and make the automatic assessment: funeral. Her skirt was no looser and rode well above her knees. Ray could see almost pornographically up the inside of her thigh when she lifted her foot to work the clutch.

She looked very nice, he had to admit, and very appropriate for, say, dinner and dancing, right down to the bright herring bone gold choker at her neck with dangling diamond solitaire and matching earrings.

But for a funeral, she was somewhat underdressed, or undressed, or whatever. Ray thought she should have a hat, maybe a veil. Even stockings would have been something of an improvement. The sunglasses made her appear cavalier, and Ray wondered if she would wear them into the service itself.

"You're fine," she said, but he did not find her assessment particularly reassuring. Then, as if it mattered, she explained. "It's a mortuary service. We weren't church goers."

"Which one?"

"Do you think I might be kidnapping you? I'm not that deranged with grief."

"Just curious."

"Gallagher's. Mike, the middle boy, was Eric's godfather. He went to college with Eric's dad. He made all the arrangements."

"Convenient for him, I suppose."

"You make it sound so mercenary. Can't you give anyone credit for being genuinely nice?"

“Not very easily.”

She sighed, then curled her lips into the closest thing he had yet seen to a grin. It didn't keep her from looking tired. “I suppose that's one of the reasons I brought you along. Are you always this detached and critical?”

“I was an English major in college.”

They reached Walnut Street by the Justice Building and turned right, south. Until she had mentioned it, Ray hadn't thought about being kidnapped, but her adherence to the quickest route to the south side of town was oddly relieving. He squirmed in the leather seat.

“You're nervous,” she said. “You can smoke if you'd like.”

“In a bit,” he answered, and squirmed some more.

They crossed Third Street, and she shifted into fourth gear, taking advantage of a break in the morning traffic. Her hand came off the gear shift nob and settled on Ray's leg, midway between his knee and hip. The interior of the car was a small, closed space, like the cockpit of a fighter plane. Ray could not determine if the action was accidental. He stopped himself from squirming and watched her hand. It was tan, soft, her fingers long with thin nails. Red. She applied no pressure to indicate any intent behind the placement, but didn't move it, either. No *Oh, I'm sorry*, and blushes on her part. Just there. Just a fact with no apparent meaning.

Ray retrieved a cigarette from his shirt pocket and cracked his window.

Thirty seconds later they rolled to a stoplight in front of the high school. She had to shift again, and the hand was gone.

Ray was aware that his hands were shaking.

*

The black sports car pulled into the parking lot of Gallagher's Funeral Home, two miles from state road 37 and the rural highway to the Monroe County Reservoir. The lot was almost empty at this time of the morning. There were

four cars in spots against the rambling, powder blue and limestone building. More cars with their asses hanging out from behind the corner of the structure, but those were quite obviously hearses. Jennifer Ackerman plowed slowly through the lot, drove past the glass front doors, and turned around the back of the building into the small employee lot. There were two other cars here, both empty, and she chose the slot between them. She backed in and turned off the car.

Ray put his hand on the door handle, but noted that she did not immediately move. She only sat there, both of her hands on the steering wheel, staring straight ahead at the loading dock door at the mortuary's rear. It was, Ray thought, not a sight that someone preparing to bury their only child should be in a position to see. But whatever she was thinking, he observed that she wasn't crying.

Then slowly, almost absently, she removed her sunglasses. She set them on the dash. Just as casually, she touched the buttons on her shirt and one by one began to undo them. She tugged the tails out of her skirt and kept on. At last, she turned to him. She had, he saw, changed her bra from the evening before. Just like the car, she had color coordinated in lace. She had no tan lines that he could see.

Her hands touched him, his hip, his thigh. She opened his pants as if it was something he had asked her to do. He was, as the romance novelists tended to say, firm in his manhood. Her lips, her mouth, circled his penis, and he jumped at the rush of sensation. She took one side of his ass in her free hand and began to knead his skin. Ray shuddered, caught his breath.

"Touch me," she whispered to him, though how she managed it in her position, he could not guess.

And he actually began to. He raised his hands, placed one on the delicate nape of her neck. Very gently, he traced a line with his finger from the space just behind her ear to the ridge of her spine, then back again. She had a soft, almost white, tracery of hair which glossed her skin. Ray leaned toward her, just a bit, put his lips against her neck. He smelled her.

She was, he thought, so very lovely.

He said her name, and she began to work more vigorously.

He said her name again and squeezed her neck. She moaned, a quiet and pleasant sound.

A final time, and he withdrew himself from her mouth, feeling her teeth scrape his head hard enough to make him grimace. He pulled her head up, pinching her to get her attention. She flared back, put her shoulders against her door and stared at him. She was flushed, her eyes shining, fierce.

It was not numbness he had seen, he realized, but bitterness.

“What are you doing, Jennifer?” he said to her.

“I’m trying to fuck you.”

“I had gathered that much. Why are you doing this? Why here, why now?”

“Because I need to.”

Ray put himself away, zipped. “Bullshit. What is that? Because you’re tense? Because you need to re-affirm life in the presence of death? God, that is so much psycho-babble bullshit. You don’t need to do this.”

Her nakedness made her defiant. “I want to. You want to, too. I know what you’re thinking, Ray. This has nothing to do with the lawsuit. I’m not trying to screw information out of you. I promise you, I’ll call John off as soon as the funeral is over. It was all his idea—he’s been my family’s lawyer since I was a girl. He’s just watching out for me, doing the only thing he knows how to do because he thinks it will make me feel better. He thinks it will fill the void if I have someone else to blame.”

Strangely enough, that had not even crossed his mind.

“I’m here as your friend,” Ray said.

“Then *be* my friend. Help me take my mind off this.”

“Christ, why would you want to?”

“Why would *you* want to, Ray? Tell me that. You’re able to do it. I talked to you enough last night to know that. Nothing bothers you. You’re surrounded by tragedy every

day. John said you've been doing what you do for five years. There's a strength there, in the ability to do that, to live with that, which most of us don't have. I want that secret from you, Ray. It's the only way I can survive this, even if I can only share it vicariously."

He shook his head. "Do you have any idea how sick that sounds?"

"Do you have any idea how sick this feels?" She jabbed her finger at her chest. "I don't have any other answers."

"I don't have any answers to give you, Jennifer. Least of all this one."

She closed her eyes, pressed the back of her head against the car window. "I'm getting old, Ray. Old. I was sixteen when I had Eric. I had to drop out of high school. I was lucky, I thought, because Eric's father was older, out of school. He wanted to marry me. But you know what I did? I had the baby, I went back to school. I went to college. I got a master's degree. I redeemed my life; I salvaged it from the wreckage.

"But somewhere along the line while I was trying to be a good student, a good employee, a good wife. . .while I was focused on proving that my life was worth something, my son was growing up. I was too absorbed in myself to notice. I didn't have your objectivity to be able to analyze my actions and see the mistakes I was making."

"I was a bad mother," Ray whined.

"Stop it."

"It sounds that pathetic."

"Stop."

"Fine. I told you, I don't have any answers for you. What can I say? Shit happens. People make mistakes. People suffer, and most of the time it's not even because of something they did or did not do. Come on, Jennifer, you're smarter than this. You know what I'm saying is true. You didn't make your son a heroin addict. You didn't put the needle in his arm. He's the bastard. He's the stupid mother-fucker you should be blaming. Not you."

She began to button her shirt. "You sound like an Al-anon meeting."

"And you sound like you didn't pay enough attention when you went. How many did you make before you gave up on them? Two?"

"Four." More defiance, more anger.

Ray said, "Four whole meetings? Or did you walk out on the last one?"

She glared at him, hard. Then bent her head down to tuck in her shirt. She was laughing. "You really are very mean," she said. "A real asshole."

"I hear that a lot."

Eric Ackerman's mother smiled at him. She leaned forward, kissed him squarely on the cheek. "But probably never from someone not wearing any underwear."

"You would," he answered, "be surprised."

"Tell me that this feeling will go away, that one day I'll be able to live with what I've done."

Ray arched an eyebrow. "What is it exactly that you think you've done?"

"I had a son, and when he started to slide, started to throw his life away, I ignored him. I didn't notice." She stopped herself there, as though that was the end of it. She lowered her eyes, then, with a visible effort, made herself lift them again. "But most of all, I found that when he had finally died, it didn't mean as much to me as it should. That it was a stranger who had died, and I've only been mimicking the emotions I thought a mother was supposed to feel. The problem was that I had started mourning my son three years ago and frankly, I'm just about all out of grief to spare."

"And you thought that if you did something to make you feel guilty, it might make it all real."

She nodded.

"I didn't know your son, Jennifer. Not in the way you would have wanted me to, but I think he would have been

amazed at the amount of punishment you're giving yourself to prove how much you loved him."

"Thank you for being my friend, Ray," she said, and let herself out of the car.

Ray attempted to follow her, but found walking more difficult than he had expected.

*

The casket was closed. The ceremony was very short and very sparsely populated. Heroin addicts do not tend to attract friends of the lasting sort. Nothing was said about heroin or suicide by the minister who appeared to do the service (probably because he knew neither Eric nor the family which had originated him, at least so Jennifer informed him). Ray accepted a few ugly but sidelong looks from Eric's father, a whole set of more obvious ones from the new wife and twelve year old daughter. He found them amusing. He sat next to Jennifer, their hips touching, but she didn't cry or do anything lugubrious which would require him wrestling around in his pockets for the handkerchief he didn't have. No one said anything about his mode of dress, not even Gallagher, who sat on the father's side of the room during the brief ceremony and hardly even managed to acknowledge Jennifer.

Funerals, in Ray's experience, tended to be surreal events. Since he didn't know anyone there, had only marginally known the deceased, and quite obviously wasn't appreciated in his attendance by anyone except the woman who had tried to suck him off in the parking lot, he felt perfectly comfortable in thinking that this one in particular had gone way past surreal and straight into weird from the very beginning.

The only person he actually managed to feel sorry for was the imported minister, who, since he hadn't known the kid at all--even less than Ray himself--had what was obviously the hardest time of all. Ray made a mental note to see a lawyer himself, draw up a will and name somebody who actually knew him to perform the eulogy. He figured that would be nicer all around to everybody involved.

On the way out, he made sure to slap the guy on the shoulder and say something about how moved he had been.

There are, after all, only so many ways to say "Boy, he sure was a good kid."

*

After Jennifer dropped him off back at detox, Ray let himself into the building. He waved at the secretary without speaking to her and went once again to the back office, to the phone, where his conversation would not be overheard.

She was, to his surprise, awake this time.

"What time is it?" she asked. "I'm too lazy to get up and look."

"Just shy of ten."

"You're early, then."

"I am."

"So, how did it go?"

He thought about telling her. Part of him wanted to tell her, knew that he should, or at the very least he would feel guilty about getting what he had gotten (but rejected, he reminded himself) before going on to get the other thing. The rest of him terminated the deal, though. Despite what Jennifer Ackerman had said about calling off the legal dogs, he wasn't sure that co-workers would view his actions as entirely appropriate. He was not in the mood for judgment.

"If I use the word 'innocuous' in my reply will you leave it at that for awhile?"

Of course, she didn't like that, but said she would accept his terms.

"I can't believe you're awake. I thought you were going to keep the bed warm."

"I was, but I got to thinking about one of our conversations last night. You asked me why I keep doing this."

"I asked you if you thought you'd been doing this for too long."

"But I didn't ask you the same question, and I think you wanted me to. I think for once you wouldn't have given me one of those glib answers."

“But I also might not have given you an honest answer. Just the lie that best suited the situation.”

“I don’t think you really lie as much as you say. I think the truth is that you don’t know the answer to your own questions. You’re afraid to look that deeply.”

“Or maybe I’ve seen the truth and don’t like it. Maybe the truth needs dressed up or obfuscated so nobody else gets as disillusioned as I am.”

“What is the truth, Ray?”

“The truth about why I do this? I think that’s a conversation that needs to wait until I can get there.”

“I want it now. I let you slide on your appointment. I do it again, and you’re taking advantage of me--not a good start to a relationship that’s already getting off on tenuous footing with blatant sexuality.”

“What do you want me to tell you?”

She purred. She was playing with him, but even the playing was just a game. Underneath it all, she was flat serious.

“Tell me something Gnostic.”

“But if I tell you, it won’t do you any good. Gnosis is all about revelation.”

“Is that what makes you so arrogant? Revelation?”

“I stay,” he said, knowing it was a mistake to do so, knowing it could potentially drive an irrevocable wedge between them. . .but at the same time knowing he could not but speak the truth. The why of it was still hidden, still in some ways inchoate inside him. Wending its way home. “I hang around hoping to be convinced that the system works, that we do something valid. In that, I suppose what I’m going to say is not a Gnostic answer. At least in the same way that Marcion was not a Gnostic, but shared parallel patterns of reasoning with the Gnostics but for very different reasons. It is, instead, anti-Gnostic, I suppose. I look at the system and all I can perceive is a great fundamental flaw of both the Gnostic and addictions treatment philosophy.”

"It is a massive and unsatisfactory paradox that I see, and I'm waiting to be proven wrong."

"Why do you say that?"

"I went to the suicide kid's funeral this morning."

"You what?"

"I went, and all I saw was the great failure, the grand paradox in action. How we failed, every one of us."

"Ray, you're not making any sense." There was concern in her tone.

"No. I'm making perfect sense. You're choosing to see through the glass darkly."

"Then explain it to me."

"The cosmology of both the Gnostics and the treatment milieu revolves around a simple belief that knowledge saves. Gnosis. Tools, we call them. Recovered addicts 'came to believe', and in that revelatory moment of clarity, of enlightenment, there was something salvific. The knowledge.

"If knowledge alone saves, if that is our model both as Gnostics and service providers, we are left with a position that the flesh and its behaviors are evil. They distract us from the attainment of clarity. Deny the flesh, the urges of the body, the craving for substances, and you open the door to a saving knowledge. This is what we tell our clients. The Gnostics said, be an ascetic, turn your back on the temptations of the world. It is the same idea in different eons."

"What is wrong with that?" she countered. "Sobriety doesn't occur at random. It's not maintained by luck. You know that."

"I know. Pay attention. But don't you see, this *is* the fundamental flaw at the same time. The dependence on revelation knowledge for salvation, both from an addiction and from sin, has the effect of objectification. It severs the connection between human beings on a basic human level, because on one stratum of experience, there are those of us who have this knowledge, these tools, but the nature of the experience is such that my clarity cannot be communicated to

you until you are ready for it. In short, we can't talk effectively until you are engaged in your own moment of clarity and at that point you no longer need my revelation--you have your own. Because I know, I can't relate to those who don't. Because they don't know, they can't relate to those of us who do. We're operating in similar but unconnected universes of experience.

"Which means, of course, that we're professing to help those we cannot help, and those who are receiving help are achieving it through some self-generated means which renders our contribution invalid. It isn't even that we're just trying to help and they're not listening. It's that the entire modality of our help is contradictory to the basic system we are arguing for.

"What we have done is to create a myth of a dichotomous spiritual, recovery universe of the haves and the have nots. We have revelations which we can't impart, because you won't get them because of your degraded, flesh-focused perspective. The haves despise those who don't have and don't seem to have the dedication to get in the first place.

"But again, this runs contrary to the idea of revelation knowledge which definitionally cannot be dispensed except via the mechanisms of grace, or capital-G Grace, depending on which system you're talking about. In fact, when an individual attempts to gain the knowledge for themselves, they end up with a Sophia caliber debacle. Because fundamental to the whole system is the idea that it is grace which saves, not works, not what you can actually do.

"The problem, of course, is that this is an existential argument, and it can be abused in the same way that the discarded disease concept was abused to justify destructive behaviors.

"And yet, at the precise same time, by the Gnostic philosophy, it is counter-productive to despise the have nots who haven't been given access to revelation. To blame them for failure or lack of effort is a denial of the entire philosophy of salvation by knowledge. It just isn't their fault. You can't rush clarity. No one is responsible for their depravity. Not us,

like they want to believe and not them, like we want to believe. There is no responsibility.

“Consequently, the have nots, the addicts, despise the haves, the recovered, because they seem to intentionally misunderstand the basic experience of not having. They seem to have forgotten what it is like to be human. Or, in the specific case of addictions treatment, the enlightened in recovery have forgotten what it is really like to be an addict, and all that remains is a set of empty platitudes.

“The problem with a revelation knowledge based argument or model for recovery is that one forgets the need of being human, flawed, dependent upon grace rather than our own efforts. Because all we perceive is the divine spark within us and neglect the fact that we still live inside the clay jar. We credit them with a clarity they do not have, cannot obtain, and which we cannot impart by sheer force of reputation. But we tell them that is the answer, increasing their dependence on us but benefiting the actual fact of their recovery not at all. But we tell them to go through the motions, as if those dry forms will bring them closer to the golden moment of revelation, as if they can do what we know damned well they cannot. We hold them to a standard they cannot reach.”

“God, Ray,” she said. “I think you need a meeting.”

“I think I need you. It’s been a very long day.”

“Then get over here.”

He didn’t know why he had expected her to get it.

Chapter 10

On their last day together, Hank had looked him over, grunted his approval as one would over a steak on the grill.

"You're done," he said. "I'm going home."

And he had collected his coat, the book he was reading, and made for the door.

Ray, justifiably or not, panicked.

At the door to the office, Hank stopped, turned around. He hung his jacket back on the wall peg and sat down with a heavy sigh right back in the chair he had vacated.

Ray just stared.

"Never forget that feeling, Ray. It's a scary thing to be abandoned in the world, to be on your own without access to support. Fear keeps you sharp, keeps you on your goddamned toes. You have to watch yourself.

"I've told you all I can about what you need to do for these people. You've got the training, all of it. The rest is just gathering experience and putting it into action. You'll make your share of mistakes, help a few people, maybe, but those will all be by accident. Things you did instinctively without even noticing. Little things you didn't even imagine were important will change some idiot's life. You have no control over any of that.

"But this you can control, must control. Understand this, Ray, above all, from somebody who has done this work longer

than you're likely to. This business, the treatment business, either makes you ugly on the inside or makes you beautiful. There is no middle ground. You either fall into a pattern of help or harm. It is instinctual. The choice is instinctual. It is a matter of how you elect to defend yourself from all the shit that floats in the air in places like this. You will defend yourself from them at their expense, or you will help them at yours. The balance is knowing when you've had enough--given so much of yourself that you have to back off while you've got anything left, or taken so much from them that you're sick of your destruction."

He held up a broad, brown hand. "Don't start with me, boy. I see your bright, shiny eyes all full of hope and help. You're so fucking naïve it's painful to look at. Quit with the helping people routine. I believe you. We're past that now and putting our asses right on the brass tacks of the hard truth.

"You will be irrevocably changed from what you were. You will spend your waking hours seeing only broken, blasted, lying, worthless human beings. They will be your reference set for your entire experience of the world. You will come to believe that everyone is this way. In order to defend yourself from absolute bitterness, you will objectify. Not just on the job where it is good and necessary and healthy, but in every facet of your life. You will become hard, uncaring. Even the lives and problems of those you want to touch you will not. You will have abandoned the habit of caring. And one day, you will be forced to confront that truth, that you have become a mean, arrogant bastard. When you feel that way, Ray, don't try to reform yourself. Don't try to be nicer or more helpful or more loving. That cheats the people who depend on you to be that way for an opportunity at sobriety. Don't do anything except this: quit the job.

"You'll have been used up. You'll have done your service, put in your time. You will have the credentials for sainthood. Know your mind and your time, and when you feel it starting to be wrong, starting to impair your ability to function in the real world, let it all go. The damage is temporary. You will heal. You will become a living, breathing, walking in the sun

human being again. Every bad habit can be killed given the right time and right environment. As long as you take that window of opportunity when it comes.

“That’s the pisser, Ray. Don’t miss that window. You miss it and you’ll be fucked for life. You will be a miser before you’re thirty, measuring out your turnip’s worth of blood-caring in ever smaller doses until your hands are full of shit and mush.

“Your position is worse than that of your day and evening shift counterparts. They live in the sun, Ray, they have a frame of reference outside the job. Ugliness is a component which makes them appreciate the beautiful that much more. Night shift compounds the ugliness. It cuts you off from human converse, leaves you feeling isolated, insensitive, uncaring, self-absorbed so that the only real world is that of the shift. All else is twilight.

“Then your dependence on yourself alone, your trained mental set to take only your own advice becomes the trap rather than a benefit. You won’t reach out for a helping hand when you most need it.”

Hank leaned forward in his chair, made the entire length of it shudder and squawk with his mass. He pushed his face to within six inches of Ray’s own and said finally, lastly, above all: “On that day, the one that should be your last, you will open your eyes or wake up or whatever the fuck you’re doing when clarity blasts through the rusted and tarnished doors of your mind, and you will suddenly ask yourself *Is this all there is? All there is to the world, to hopes, to me? Is it all darkness and loss and defeat?* The grime of hopelessness rubs off in the mental health universe, Ray, because you’re surrounded by it. First just on your cuffs, or your elbows and knees. But the next thing you know, it’s all over. It blackens, and in that blackening, it reinforces your own natural perceptions of hopelessness and entropy as the ultimate end of the human condition.

“When the clay jar is all that exists and the divine spark is gone from your vision, hang it up. Hang it up at that precise moment, and never put it back on again.”

In his car, Ray drove. Mentally, whimsically, he had traveled the route many times. From work to Walnut. Across Walnut on down Seventh street like he was going back to campus, back to school. Then a right turn, across Kirkwood, down past the post office. Further south, leaving the university behind and into the district of cookie cutter, ginger bread houses reserved once upon a time for professors. A parallel track to Walnut itself, much as he had gone this morning, earlier, under entirely different circumstances and to an entirely different destination.

And he found himself similarly thinking of Jennifer Ackerman. Not of her firm, round breasts and black lace, or even the soft experience of her lips enwrapping him. Offering him pleasure. But of her grief, and her friendship. A friendship he had offered with his mouth, accepted in turn with his mouth. But a grief which did not touch him. A grief that bore no revelation of pain, of shared sympathy. He had said so many things to her, all the right things, in fact. Noble things which offered her a perspective beyond pain, and which she seemed to have grasped with some success. Dead words he had once read in a book by someone whose name he had forgotten about codependence. Treatment language.

What had he said? Caldwell, the police detective, what was it? *I was just hoping someone had actually cared about him before he kicked off, even if only a little.* Him, the suicide kid. Don, or Eric, or whatever. A name is a contextual thing. It has a perspective, a meaning, a relevance to time and space and definition that goes beyond its use as a tag for differentiation. We give names to the things we care about so that we can individuate them in special or significant ways. Which had he been? In his mother's mind, he was an Eric, but that descriptor was a myth, and an aged myth at that. To Ray, to an entire staff, he had been Don or Donald, when they could manage to remember to call him anything at all. But those were themselves contexts which didn't encompass the actual experience of the suicide kid.

What had he called himself, Ray wondered. What name came into his own mind when he saw himself in the mirror?

You could reconstruct the entire identity of a person with only the referent they applied to themselves.

Names. There was something revelatory about names. Something intimate in the exchange. Ray's ex-wife had always used pet names. Dear. Honey. Jellybear. Others (worse than that). But even at the last, the end, up to the top of the courthouse steps, when she said his name, his real name, called him *Ray* in that simple, singular way that only she could speak it, his heart thrilled just a bit. It had made him ache with a revelation of loss that had previously been denied to him.

He called clients by their last name. Caldwell was utilitarian, as much so as simply Detective, implying distance. Sam Boler. Ray called him Sam, plain and simple, to his face. But in his mind, it was one word. Samboler. A tag, a cardboard cutout of a job both like and unlike Ray's own. It felt like, had all the emotional weight of, an address on a street in an unfamiliar town. Jennifer Ackerman. The same, but maybe in his own town, just not a part he was familiar with. John Donovan--Mr. Donovan, even heard in his own inner ear with a tinge of derision, said with a curl of the lip either real or imagined.

There was no electricity, no thrill.

In the Bible story, God's first big job given to Adam had been a difficult one. The first one. . .why was it first? Because it was important, it was essential. The naming of names. The individuation of plant from plant, beast from beast. God himself did not say *Let there be*. And light was. He named it, then called the light, day and the darkness, night. Differentiation. Simple names, this and that, but over time and experience by human beings, that which had been called day took on a connotation, a brilliance, an importance and parallel referents which imbued each correlation with a deeper and more profound meaning than each held alone. This and its opposite and its cognates all wove together to form an identity. An eternal spiraling webwork of experience which tied the perceptions of a billion billion human individual conscious minds into a shouting distance facsimile of cohesion.

The one, the wandering sheep, what had the shepherd called it? The ninety and nine were just the herd. Group. But the one, it was something else. Maybe even just *fucker* or *stupid* or something similar, but differentiated, singularized, and in the process, cast back into the shepherd's mind as a comparison with all the ones who had been lost before. Lost and found. And in the comparison of experience, there was both fear for those which had been lost, and hope for the equal number which had been found. A webwork of memory and experience which made the life of the one not insignificant, but referent of the entire mission and capability and usefulness of the shepherd. The skill of the shepherd was to maintain a balance of the lost lamb as one of a series of like circumstances and the individual relevance of the absent one.

The lone sheep, the name of the sheep, as a symbol for the tenor of an entire life.

The significance of a name. A new beginning or a repetition of a pattern.

*

He had to stop himself. He had arrived at her building.

*

She met him at the door to her apartment, as if she had been anticipating his arrival as avidly as he had been anticipating arriving. Ray found himself breathless, her flushed.

"I'm a little early," he said. It was just after ten.

"You're a little late."

She reached out, took him by the hand and pulled him inside.

"This won't be very spontaneous, I'm afraid," she said.

"I've found that spontaneity is often just another word for awkwardness."

Which, of course, was precisely what he was feeling, right down to shuffling feet and an inability to meet her eyes. Not her eyes, no, but the rest of her, the casual her, the her in her own private domain. The electric her. She was, quite simply,

stunning. Her hair was down, slightly tousled and tangled from her episodes of intermittent sleep. She was dressed casually as well, early morning intimate attire. A sapphire silk kimono, a pearl camisole. Her legs were smooth, bare, enticingly pale.

Her apartment was precisely what he would have expected. Bright, warm in beiges and blues. It emanated a hopeful brilliance from the crystal knick-knacks set in their alcove shrines to the carefully eclectic furniture pieces. Her pictures were all of landscapes, all the images serene. Mountains, meadows, streams. There were no signs of single slovenliness (of which Ray was too familiar). No randomly cast laundry, no half-empty glasses busy leaving rings on her endtables or growing cultures in their bottoms. The shag tan carpet had vacuum lines.

It was a cool space, and not just in terms of ambient air. It radiated a warm sterility, if such a thing was possible, both frigidity and heat rubbing shoulders in a wary cohabitation. A sense of cautious welcome, or potential barricades which had been withdrawn for his benefit alone. A manufactured home, a forced image. A concrete molding form for a substance which had not possibly yet arrived, but was prepared in advance because the arrival could be at any time immanent.

To Ray, it felt like a sacred place, his hand in hers a holy touch, she herself an icon. It was like walking flat into the pudding embrace of the pleroma.

"You are," he said to her, "an exquisite being."

"I am."

"I wanted you to know. I never told you."

"Not in so many words, no."

She turned to him and they stood, face to face, scarcely a foot apart. Ray could feel her breath, her small, rapid gasps, against his neck. She had to lift her head to look at him, something he hadn't ever noticed. In general, one of them was always standing to go as the other sat to stay, like interconnected pistons, a dance of oppositions. Her forehead just came to the level of his chin.

"Are you hungry, Ray? I could make some breakfast."

"That would be very domestic of you."

"I have compensatory domestic compulsions, for all the times they didn't stay long enough to even shower."

Ouch. "Is that honesty?"

Her eyes, so green, so wide. He wanted her to twine her arms around his neck.

"I'm sorry, Ray. That was inappropriate. An inappropriate anecdote."

Inappropriate. A work word. A treatment word, which Ray didn't want to hear from her. It made her feel distant from him.

"Don't apologize," he said. "Only farting in enclosed spaces is inappropriate among friends."

She laughed, and at the same time, she blushed. A pink corona covered her ears, lit her cheeks like cherry lanterns.

"I've never seen you like this," he said.

She leaned away, opened her arms, let him look at her. "I can't dress like this at work."

"You can't act like this at work."

She nudged him with her hip. "Look at us, Ray. We're both babbling like virgins. We're wasting time, putting it off."

"I thought you were being sweetly demur."

"I don't know how to be demur. Let's go to bed."

He stopped her, he had to, before they could go any further. "One question first. I have to ask."

She winked at him. "Because I like you, Ray, even though you've been too stupid to realize it. I like you as much as you like me."

"That's it?"

"And because you're not a stranger. I'm tired of feeling alone, and as obtuse as you can be, I think you have somewhere inside you the skills to cherish me."

Ray said, "Okay, then."

*

She said nothing about being nervous, nothing about being excited or attracted. Nothing about the fresh, crisp cotton sheets on her bed. Nothing about his fumbling with his clothes, or her liquid, cat-graceful shedding of her own.

She did not ask him to pause to admire her, not her firmness and roundness, her supple skin or her rosy areolas or erect nipples. Nor did she mention her limpid, stunning perfection, her strange, fantastic, outrageous ability to satisfy every fancy that had ever bothered to cross his mind (at least the ones in which she had been featured). She did not ask him to kneel before her and worship at the temple of her divinity, to kiss the jagged flame of her lightning spark.

But Ray drank it all in like water, drank all of her in her absolute wonder until he was filled.

And at the end of it all, in the moist heat of the early afternoon, they lay tangled and nude, chest to chest, playing the old wrestling game of whose arms go where. Between them, just as unspoken as the fun, the fantasy and the delight, Ray could sense the fullness. It swelled in his chest, rushed out from his loins like the mystic silver chord, touched her, enfolded her, filled and entwined her. It burned his lungs, scorched his villi as though he had breathed Egyptian sand. Heavy fullness, the weight of her perfection and paired desire, twin millstones on his chest.

She dozed, spent. He lingered in the twilight between floating pleasure and stygian sleep. She sighed the sound of echoes at him, distant, faint, scented with sandalwood.

In dreams, she said, "I love you, Ray."

His dream or hers, he could not say.

*

Ray dressed himself in silence, in the gathering evening, as she slept. Shirt, pants, shoes, just as he had been when he first came in. He did not check his reflection, only assumed.

He had slept awhile, as she had, still did, sharing a womb of warmth between her arms, beneath her comforter. Then he had awakened to gloaming. Her alarm had failed, no one had called to entice her to work. He did not know why. Rather than impersonate a stranger, he had unplugged her phone, let her rest. Lastly, he kissed her, once, on her unblemished shoulder, watched as she did not move beneath his lips.

He let himself out the door, locked the deadbolt with the shining copper key she had given him for his very own after the second time, or some time subsequent.

Down the hall, down the stairs, through the narrow lobby and out the door into a sticky Indiana dark. He found his car.

Of course, it did not, would not start.

Ray put his head against the steering wheel and closed his eyes.

*

There are times, he thought, when a man's screaming, naked soul fills the universe. When everywhere he looks he sees only himself, and in that moment of leaden clarity, he suspects the vast network of his formation. That which he makes, and from which he is made.

Then he sees himself for the first time. What he is and what can become, a dense, instant, entire understanding of potentiality.

And like Sophia, the Wisdom of God, he does not observe his creation as good, but he sees, he groans, he weeps.

But even that only if he is able.

*

Ray had been in the main hallway, just off the client's dining room when Eric Ackerman had come down the stairs. The kid was pale, his long hair stringy with sweat. He wore the same clothes he had been in when he was admitted. He had slept in them, Ray knew. He'd noted it in the chart after he had taken Eric's vital signs at five. Ray had encouraged him then, because he'd been having problems sleeping, to take a shower. Ostensibly to help him relax, but really because he

smelled badly and his roommates had come down earlier to complain about the odor. You all stink when you come in, Ray had told them. Don't hassle the kid. Still, he'd done his best. Eric had creases of dust grimed into wrinkles on his face. But even dirty, even prematurely wrinkled, he looked younger somehow than nineteen. It was easy to think of him as a kid.

If we can catch them before they're twenty one, Ray had often said, we've got a real chance. He had no evidence for that, of course, just a gut feeling. Catch them before whatever substance they used could mold their mind into a pattern of defeat, of failure, of powerlessness. He believed that.

Eric had stopped briefly as he rounded the corner from the stairway. Saw Ray with his clipboard of house chore assignments for the clients. Ray had been attempting to determine who the house captain was so he could wake him, so the house captain in turn could begin the ugly and thankless task of getting everyone else out of bed. It had been just a brief look, an appraisal, then the kid had started down the hall, brushed past him and through the dining room, out the side door to the smoking porch.

Ten minutes later, Ray had been in the office, lining up the morning medication boxes and figuring out who needed what as they got up. A shadow had fallen across the desk. Ray glanced up. Eric, intense, his eyes brooding, his expression sullen. Ray expected him to ask for medication for his withdrawal—medication for which the doctor had elected not to approve him. Nineteen, the doc had said. Only a three year use history, and only escalating toward the end, the last few months. He shouldn't need anything. Mentally, Ray prepared himself for that argument.

But he started off friendly. "How are you feeling?"

Eric only stared down at him. He leaned forward slightly, as if on the verge of speaking, then settled back on his heels again. He shrugged, a gesture that seemed to mean everything and nothing. Then he nodded, indicating the legal pad on the far edge of the desk.

"Is that poetry?"

Ray followed his eyes.

“What makes you think that?”

“I came down the other night. . . I think, the first night I was here. Came down to smoke, but thought I should check to see if it was okay. I saw you were writing on a pad like that. It looked like you were very into it, so I decided not to bother you. For some reason, I thought it might be poetry.”

“I’m not much of a poet.”

“You’ve been to college?”

“English degree.”

“I liked that in school. Literature. Not the grammar and research papers, though. That was all technical stuff. Rules to learn that I didn’t like. But stories, yeah. Sometimes I’d get all these ideas in my head for stories. I wrote some of them down, but I didn’t have the discipline to see them through to the end. You ever write stories?”

“A few.”

“All the way to the end?”

“Not as many as I started.”

“I’ve always had that problem. I start things, then can’t finish them. My dad said I was just lazy. I don’t know. It’s like I’d have all of these big ideas, so rich and exciting, every one of them new and fresh like a whole field of spring flowers. I couldn’t pick one from the other, they were all so beautiful. Most of the time I’d just lay back and dream on them. Day dream. Flash through the scenes as they came and see where the story took them. I mean, I couldn’t share them with anyone afterwards because they were still just in there, in my mind. But they were there. They were complete, whole.”

They had been watching one another as they spoke, both it seemed very aware that they were talking around the issue. But it was something marginally in common, an ice breaker.

“I think you understand me,” Eric said. “At least, more than some of the others. Those girls on day shift. . . I mean, they seem nice, but I’m not very good at talking to girls.”

“They make you nervous.”

“You?”

“Those girls make me nervous.” Ray laughed as he said it, though it was not actually true. Eric grinned faintly.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Like what?”

A look away, the budding of shame. Eric began to sweat. He licked his lips. *“I’m trying really hard. I don’t want you to think that I’m not. But I’m having some really bad cravings.”*

As expected. Ray was firm. *“The doctor didn’t approve any meds for you.”*

“I know that. He said so when he examined me. That’s okay. I just thought that if maybe I had somebody I could talk to about it, that it would, you know, make it easier to get through.”

“That’s what the meetings are for.”

A toss of the head, indicating derision. *“AA. They don’t like non-alcoholics to talk. I tried once, and some them asked me not to come back. They weren’t mean about it, not at all. They just didn’t want the group to defocus from their problem. They gave me a paper with some NA meetings on it, but I lost it.”*

“That happens. We’ll be going to an NA meeting tonight or tomorrow, I think.”

“That’s a long way off.”

“You should talk to your counselor, then.”

“I tried that yesterday. He didn’t even know my name yet. He said I should get back to him because he had four other one on one sessions today.”

“They’re very busy, I know. Sometimes you have to pester them, but they get around to you eventually.”

Eric sighed through his nose, almost a snort. Frustration. *“Can’t I just talk to you?”*

“You need to talk to your counselor. He’s a lot more helpful with these types of things than I can be.”

“I don’t need help or analysis or psychotherapy. I don’t need drugs or meds or whatever you call them. I don’t need

meetings or support groups. Not right now. I just need to talk. To somebody that seems to think a little bit like I do. To somebody who might understand.”

And that was the problem, though Ray could not tell him so. The first sign of co-dependency, of a lapse in professionalism, was getting hooked by a client. Hooked, like a fish. A reciprocal relationship. The client perceived in a particular staff member someone they could more easily relate to than others. The client’s tendency would then be to approach only that staff member, to only confide in them. In the client’s mind, the relationship was almost a form of friendship, and definitionally from a clinical standpoint, counter-therapeutic. It was not helpful to encourage the client to develop the illusion of friendship.

The other side was the staff member’s ability to be hooked, to favor one client over others, to individuate in such a way that the client took on a specificity of character not shared with the rest of the treatment population. Getting to know someone on a different level than all the others were known was a short step away from treating them differently. Preferentially. Giving them an unfair measure of attention, and thereby possibly disproportionately increasing their chances of treatment success at the expense of others. It happened. It happened frequently, usually beginning with the revelation of a shared interest. We have this in common. We like this thing in the same way. The danger was two-fold. It both urged you to treat the client differently, more individually, and therefore without the necessary clinical detachment to design or enforce an effective treatment regimen, and it tended to give you something else to talk about than the bare bones of addiction. It led you to assist the client in defocusing from treatment. In short, it cheated them.

Professionalism meant being able to recognize when you were on the verge of being hooked by a client, and having the fortitude to step back and objectify. For the client’s own good.

Ray said, “You’ll have to talk to your counselor. I’ll leave him a note indicating that you would like to speak with him today. That’s all I can do.”

“But I just need to talk to somebody, anybody.”

“Fine. Talk to your counselor.”

“I just need to talk. Can’t you just talk to me?”

“I can’t.”

Eric stared at him, not even fiercely. A sort of bewildered look. His jaw worked without sound for a moment or two.

Then, almost a whisper. “Can’t you just talk to me?”

Close. Almost. Ray had felt the desperation there, the almost visceral tug at him for something, anything, some form of attention. But it was personal attention that Eric wanted. He wanted Ray to cross that invisible line. He was obviously a smart kid, a sensitive kid. The illusion of caring that so many others took at face value was not sufficient. He could recognize the counterfeit.

Ray said nothing and bent his head back to the medications he had been working on.

“Can’t you just talk to me?”

Louder this time, demanding. Ray picked up a pencil and started making out the medication log, working methodically client by client. Name, medication, dosage, time.

“Can’t you just talk to me!”

Shouted at the top of his voice, his arms straight and rigid at his sides, his face fierce with supplication. In his peripheral vision, Ray watched the kid tremble, spend his outrage in impotence, then disappear out of the doorway.

He scratched a request for the kid’s counselor to talk with him on a post-it note and slipped it into the staffing book for the next shift to see.

*

If I could have one gift, it would be the ability to cherish.

*

Ray turned the key in the ignition one final time, listened to the useless whine. He had run out of curses to spend. He lifted his face to her window, the bedroom window which he

instinctively knew. It was dark, closed. He should not wake her from pleasant dreams. Across the lot, on the corner, he could see the telephone booth.

Two options, avenues of rescue from his condition.

Ray released his seatbelt, pushed open the car door, locked it behind him. Wavered between possibilities, variant futures open for his inspection. He scanned the horizon in all directions, seeing nothing. The snarling engines, blaring horns, vivid life of a thoroughfare just out of sight.

Still early enough, he thought. Still early enough. He wouldn't have to bother anyone.

He straightened his back and moved off, north toward the heart of the city, toward the glowing light and heat and thumping rhythms of campus.

Ray went off in search of a bus.

END