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## **Connections**

**A NOVEL**

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Connections

SECOND HEADY BOOKS EDITION, JANUARY, 2010

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ISBN 978-1-450-53711-7

Printed in the United States of America

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents, my doctor and my brothers without whom I would likely be dead or else somewhere out on the road under the debilitating influence of my own delusional thoughts.

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## 1

What can be said about a man that doesn't show his face? What compels a man to hide from the world? Maybe it's the world itself having shown him nothing but hurt or maybe it's the man himself having only recognized the hurt, seeing it as the only thing that a man can truly possess as his own.

As I left the parking lot I could hear a faint humming. It could've been the belts but the engine seemed so far away at this point. Maybe it was my mind. I could picture the impulses jumping from one synapse to another as they churned out thoughts. I was lost among them but I knew two truths. First, they had been watching for quite a long time. Second, it was time to take action. I had not chosen the endeavor of heralding a new age of peace to the world, but I had been chosen. The media said so, even if no one else had seen the connections.

The van sputtered as I switched gears. Looking down at the gas dial I could see that I still had half a tank, enough to get me to Kansas. I had no clear indication as of my final destination but I knew I should head east. D.C. was east. I had been there once in fifth grade as part of class trip but I didn't know if I could still recognize it. That had been a long time ago and I hadn't paid much attention with the hushed ridicule of my classmates ringing in my ears. Still, I knew my experience as an outcast had served me well. I had become more of an observer than a participator. That was what allowed me to form my now valued opinions about society and the behaviors of mankind, perhaps that and the drugs. Either way, buried deep in the paranoia there was the truth that had the potential to end war. My day had come. Fucking finally.

The roads were quiet tonight. I could see the early March moon casting its gray light across the roofs of the houses, every so often caught by a tired bank of leftover snow. I had checked the weather before I left to make sure the added stress of a freak snowstorm would not hinder my mission. Still, at this point, I was riding on pure piss dripping faith. I turned the stereo on to the college radio station hoping that a perspective void of conglomerate agenda would be helpful.

"Some people think I won't make it but I know that I will,

Escape the emptiness 'cuz that shit is slow and it kills,

The flow and the skill

I made y'all believe that it last

You can make the future but it starts with leaving the past."

The lyrics burned truth, and reinforced my decision, truly the words of Immortal Technique. Hip-hop was a godsend and I thanked the heavens for the underground shit that the station played. As the song ended and the

announcers began I knew they were speaking to me.

"Some Immortal Technique for y'all," one DJ said,

"True 'dat, we need some change up in dis shit, wit' 'dis messed up administration yo and all the lies they perpetuatin," said the other,

"We speak the truth y'all, you CAN make the future but you got ta leave that past shit behind y'all,"

"They ain't no WMD's and they ain't no reason to be in Iraq y'all,"

"Truth man, we can change this shit, YOU can change this shit and we talkin' to tha listenahs yo, y'all out there in radio land got to be tha change yo."

I took this to heart. They were speaking to me and me alone.

"Thanks fellas," I said knowing the microphones in the van would pick up my voice. I couldn't be sure if they were listening but I knew someone was and I knew that these guys had my back.

I strained my ears for connections and messages for another few songs but the few I could make out didn't seem to connect well, so I turned down the volume and zoned out on the passing stripes in the road. I was still high. I had smoked a final bowl before I left the condo, making sure to leave the nearly full eighth and my pipe in full view on the kitchen counter as a message to my parents that my mission was not at all about or resulting from pot. This was a spiritual mission; I had been ordained by God to carry this one out. My parents had presented me a few days prior with a letter saying that if I didn't quit smoking pot and get a job they would evict me from the condo. In truth it had little effect besides an added element of stress, especially considering the severity of my current endeavor. I had been chosen to change the world and my blissfully ignorant parents were trying to ruffle my feathers with insignificant shit. They knew nothing.

As I passed the county line I thought about the past year, having been alone and ridiculed at a college of little circumstance in a farm town of little circumstance surrounded by simple minds of little circumstance. I thought about how my mind had been torn in half that quiet night as I let my hall mate's ridicule permeate the folds of my brain. I thought about how that single incident had thrown me into a pit of crippling paranoia that I had been fighting like hell to get out of for the last year. Fuck them. None of that mattered now. Now I had a purpose, a divine destiny to fulfill and even though I could still feel the peering, judgmental eyes staring me down and watching my every move wherever I went, I knew that it would end soon.

Over time I had learned to accept the judgment. I had learned to accept the fact that the condo, my car and everywhere I went had been bugged and wired with hidden cameras so small, and so well placed, that even tearing apart the condo's smoke detectors and appliances had yielded no results. I had learned to accept the fact that I was so important that constant scrutiny was now a fact of life. After all, the government, the people and the world had to know that God's choice for a leader was in fact worthy of the divine ordination. Still the constancy of paranoia had worn heavy on my shoulders. Constantly being on my best behavior in addition to proving myself as a strong, levelheaded man had made me tired. In all honesty, I wished I had not been chosen, but Spiderman was right in saying that with great power comes great responsibility. I had to be a man and I had to follow through. Far be it for me to go against the very will of God himself.

Houses had long since become sparse and Denver was now a distant memory as I drove through the plains of Eastern Colorado. The clock on the stereo said 10:34 pm and I knew was alone on I-70 except for the faint glimmer of taillights about a half mile ahead of me. "Be prepared" was a motto I had learned in the boy scouts and it had served me well even to this day. I had kept camping equipment stashed in the back of the van for nights when I was too drunk to drive home. There was a sleeping bag, a therma-rest pad and a tent for the off

nights during the summer when I actually did find myself camping. Perhaps this would be one of those nights although I planned to drive as far as possible before I crashed. I had also filled my backpack with the essentials before I left - a hooded sweatshirt, a flannel, wool socks, a pair of shoes, underwear, a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. It wasn't much but I only expected the trip to take a few days, two weeks at the most. Once I arrived at my destination, wherever it may be (I was running on pure faith at this point) there would be open arms, comfortable accommodations and most likely a good stipend to keep my needs met. Worries were as sparse as the houses on the side of the road. Worst case, I still had a few hundred in my wallet and a \$1700 credit limit.

I waded silently in a pool of thought among the smoke of paranoia that drifted through the dark water like blood. I had said nothing in the last two hours and I wondered if they were still listening. Chances are, they worked in shifts, sitting in front of the tape recorders and quiet monitors waiting for an indication of my nerves, watching my shoulders to see if they tensed, my hands to see if they jittered. I could feel them waiting for me to make a wrong move. So I sat silent, breathing deep to maintain a feigned composure.

The green signs by the side of the highway flew past blaring a disconcerting contrast that kept me alert. They had been my company and my only indication of progress on the lonely stretches of road. The Kansas state line had passed about a half hour ago and the signs had told me in their shrill reflective voices that Hays was still about 150 miles from here. Maybe I would stop there, maybe I would keep going. It all depended on what the voice of reason said. The soft whir of the road lapping my tires was calming. It was a constant that I had come to rely upon and it kept my thoughts of doubt to a minimum. But every so often I'd find myself dwelling on a blaring confusion, trying to decide if I was crazy or if I had justification for this trip even considering the lack of concrete evidence. It was a reality to me that no clear evidence was an indication of how extremely secret my mission parameters were and that if I talked to anyone I would most assuredly find myself in a mental hospital. It was either that or the idea that there were in fact, no mission parameters at all and that I was just batshit crazy but, fuck that, there had been too many signs, too many connections. This had to be real.

I was startled from my glaze by the sudden sputtering of my engine. "Shit," I yelled realizing I had neglected to stop for gas. I had recalled seeing an exit with a side of the road gas station about three miles back. If I walked fast, I could do that in forty-five minutes, an hour maybe. Whatever had to be done. I was a man now; I had to learn to sacrifice.

I reached for my backpack and shifted my legs so I could reach down and put on my shoes and socks. This was no time or place for the shoddy old slippers I had worn, thinking my only trekking would be a long ride on the tired wheels of my van. When I had finagled the shoes onto my feet and tied them with a double knot, I relaxed and pulled the hoodie and the flannel from the pack. I had read somewhere that at night the prairie can drop to temperatures well below zero, or maybe that was the desert. Either way, it was the middle of March and I'd be fucked if I didn't dress for the occasion.

I climbed out of the van with iPod in hand, in case I felt the ugly pulling of a jilted guidance or a desire for some entertainment if need be. I had figured out long ago that "They" had the strange ability to broadcast messages to me if I put the iPod on shuffle. I didn't know shit about how they did it but I figured it had something to do with satellites and computer chips. Despite all the betrayal on my family and friend's behalf I knew music, in some form or another, would always be there for me.

The road was quiet mostly. Every twenty minutes or so I would be assaulted by the wind coming off a car that raced past despite the display of my naked thumb pushing into the road. When they passed I was alone again, thoughts abounding like the WTO Seattle riots, the occasional conceptual couch burning mad in the streets of my mind. I could see the blankness of the prairie accompanied by the searing judgment of something, eyes maybe, which stared at me from deep in the corn and grass waiting to attack my delusion of safety.

The wind came in waves, at times tearing at my face in bitter raw shreds and at times brushing soft like a

mother's touch. I kept my hood up to protect myself from its cold bite and thought of home. I thought of laying warm on my couch in front of the indifferent glow of the television, trying to make connections as I smoked. I could work from my house. Why was I fucking around in the cornfields of Kansas on my way to a salvation I had no proof was there? If I had been chosen, I could surely direct the state of the world from the quiet comfort of my condo, what with all the cameras and microphones they had installed. I'd just need morning briefings, which they could air on C-Span if the idea of closed circuit television was out of the question. This thought resonated with me and as I walked, undeterred by the influence of corporate media, I cogitated. I was now switching back between this thought and the quiet realization that I may just be out of my fucking mind. Maybe it was time to go home. With a cautious jitter of my hand I selected the shuffle option on the iPod and waited for reassurance.

"You wanna ramble

To the break of dawn

You wanna ramble

To the break of dawn

You wanna ramble

To the break of dawn."

The words glowed as embers in my mind and terrified me. For the first time in my life I hated Bob Dylan.

By the time I reached the exit and the gas station, my mind had been filled with influence and connections, many of which I had no explanation for. But the hero's journey theme had presented itself far too many times for me to not take notice. Again I felt the uneasy truth that overwhelming responsibility was essential.

The fluorescent lights of the canopy lit up the night with a sickening garish glare, but seeing no other cars there I figured I was at least safe from judgment. I was not. As I entered the gas station the attendant, an old farmer asshole, glared at me with eyes that spoke volumes about his small town isolation insecurities. I wondered with an angry and nervous ferocity what the old fucker was looking at. All I could do was nod. My first stop was the commercial coffee machine that teetered on one of the side counters like a fat ugly beast of a woman. Coffee would give me some warmth and the spark I needed for the trip back to the van. I finagled the buttons for a minute or so trying to figure the piece of shit out until a large black woman jostled me out of my slumbering confusion with her abusive voice.

"You gotta put da cup in first," she said. "Den you push the blue button fo' coffee."

"Thanks," I mumbled, nervous under the invading guise of the attendant.

"Who you talkin' to boy?" he said.

"Uh...I,"

I nervously glanced around for the large black woman, seeing no one.

"Where are the plastic gas tanks?" I said, nervously changing the subject and looking around for the woman. The attendant pointed to the far wall where car repair products adorned the hooks like anomalous Christmas ornaments. I walked over, picked up a gallon tank and brought it to the checkout with my coffee while the attendant's eyes burned deep in a quizzical scowl. Why are you fucking staring at me you motherfucker! I

yelled in my mind. What does he think of me? I thought. Does he think I'm a fucking queer? I reached for my wallet displaying as much manliness as possible until his old smoke blackened throat let out a cough that startled me and I flinched.

"A gallon of gas too," I managed to blurt.

"\$29.53, the gas is at pump 3," he said abruptly. I tried to keep my hand from jittering as I passed him my credit card. He took it, then looked up at me in a scowl. My thoughts teetered between wondering what the fuck the dude's problem was and what the fuck he was thinking of me. I struggled with several deep breaths. My paranoia was screaming and I fought for normalcy. He handed me back the card and I waited in silent panic for the receipt to sign. When he presented it I struggled to keep my hand still enough to coax a signature. When I finished I grabbed my things and walked to the door as calmly as possible to not stir up any further commotion. As soon as I felt the cool night air brush my face I knew I was safe. Taking a deep breath I looked up at the sky and the quiet stars. I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger and took another deep breath to center myself. I walked quietly to pump three and filled the red tank, crouching down so as not to appear conspicuous. The thought that I would have to return to this gas station to fill up the car angered me so I shifted my mind to thoughts of home, the warm bed, the simple life of being a normal human being. My divination was as much a burden as it was an honor. I wished that life held simpler requirements of me but the thought that my journey would be the apex of my struggles settled me somewhat.

When the tank was filled I closed the cap, set the nozzle back onto the pump and turned my back to the station, walking into the night.

As I neared the van I tossed the coffee cup into the field and focused on the blinking of the amber hazard lights sitting alone and quiet. Cars had stopped passing now but the wind still fluttered and bit at the nape of my neck. My feet whimpered with a soft ache and the tingle of the shoes rubbing listless against my ankles. I opened the gas door and cap and fumbled with the red tank until I had the nozzle situated tightly. My hands held the sweet toxic smell of gas but I thought little of it, instead rehearsing my movements for the return trip to the station to fill up the van. I could feel the quiet pull of my eyelids and the slow lethargy in my legs as I finished up with the tank and closed everything up. I wondered if sleep was a possibility but I knew I still had at least a good hour or two left in me before rest could lay its muted hand on my head. Climbing into the car I graced the ignition with a quick turn of the key and glanced at the clock on the stereo, which sat blinking and mocking like the eyes of the farmer. 1:53 am. I sighed, maybe another hour and I would stop. First, I had to orchestrate the drama of normalcy as I filled up the van. I knew the farmer would be watching and cursing out of spite for his simple lonely existence.

By 2:20 am the job was done and I careened down the quiet highway with the pull of sleep and thoughts of paranoid reflection sifting like fine sand. I wondered about the large black woman and what miraculous power she held that she could disappear like that out of thin air and thinner minds. My mind like my body, I concluded, was rather thick.

The scowl on the farmer fucker's face was something that hung with me, a light confusion that boiled into discrimination. Still I knew better than to hold ill will for anyone, "they" would see that. The news stations would feed on that shit like badgers on a fresh deer carcass.

Again, my movements were rehearsed like a great work of masterful dramatic exposition as I drove down the road. For a time I wondered if the agents who were watching me had called it a night but then I remembered that they work shifts. At this time of night, chances were, messages would not be present on the radio. It was probably on automatic shuffle and influence was mute.

The thoughts wore on like the road ahead and as I passed Hays sleep started tugging. I figured just stopping by the side of the road would cause suspicion and unnecessary hassle by the authorities so I waited for the

next exit. As I turned and explored the side country roads, I found a dirt road that extended far beyond the reach of my high beams. I turned down, driving over washboard until I came to a turnoff a mile or two down with a large oil tank and pump that had been rusted to shit by God's ever forgiving hand. I pulled in and turned off the van, then climbed into the back to situate a temporary living space. The pad shed a few misplaced pine needles as I rolled it out and complemented it with my sleeping bag made inimitable by its duct tape patches. I lay down and stared at the ceiling. Every so often I caught a glint of an infernal satellite as it rode through the stars plotting my location.

Music from the iPod kept me occupied as I sifted through my thoughts and waited for sleep to come. Several hours of shifting my weight and trying to maintain a semblance of comfort brought me again to thoughts of home and the comfort of my bed. I missed the warm spike of smoke in my throat and the quiet haze that once enveloped me. I thought again of how, whatever they needed done, governance or guidance, I could provide from the comfort of my living room. I'd write my thoughts and philosophies in a blog or some shit which they could read and use to create legislation. If they wanted to keep things this secret they could at least grant me my comfort. Was this mission just to prove myself? And if it was, fuck them, I didn't have to prove myself to anybody. I'm strong and I've kept the secret this long. Nearly a year and a half of handling paranoia had to prove some kind of strength.

As light crept up from the edges of the horizon and the stars dimmed, I forgot sleep and climbed back into the drivers seat. I decided at that moment, perhaps to my detriment, that the mission had to be bullshit.

I was going back home and I could rest when I got there. Fuck them, whoever they were. No evidence, no mission. No parameters, no mission. Fuck this wild goose chase.

In the soft morning light I could see where my travels the night before had brought me. It was a simple road and the oil pump had long ago surrendered its services to the grace and wear of nature's hand. It had been surrounded by a chain link fence and locked up with a strong padlock made weak by rust. I could tell by the weeds and grass in the road that whoever found time to pay homage to the tired oil pump beast of American enterprise, did so rarely.

I plugged the iPod into the car stereo and selected a legitimate playlist of quiet, perhaps overly chill songs to match the tempo of the sunrise. This calmed my mind. No more messages here, at least not for now.

The engine was cold but it finally turned on the third try. I threw the gearshift into first and slowly rumbled out of the turn off and onto the dirt road with the occasional bump and weary rock of the van. My thoughts had settled down in the last few hours but I knew it was probably a combination of the wear of a sleepless night and the cold calm of the morning. Eventually, I found my way back to the highway, passing the trucks that had stopped for a rumbling rest in the turnoff of the exit. I wondered if the truckers saw me and then I wondered what they thought if they had. The morning gave new light to my situation. Wrestling still with the idea of insanity, I gave it strong consideration and decided I would let my parents know that I'd be willing to see a doctor. If insanity was a reality, there were in fact no cameras and microphones in the van. At this thought my shoulders loosened. Still, there was no way to be sure. I could recall a day a few months prior, shortly after I had discovered the possibility of the numerous recording devices. I had found a wire of some type in my garbage disposal, and after an arduous confrontation with my father about my house being bugged and the dangers of marijuana induced paranoia, I was alone in the condo. "I WANT THIS TO FUCKIN STOP," I had yelled to any and all recording devices within range. That day as I left to attend class at the college, a large white truck pulled into the condo parking lot, "Pest-B-Gone, Pest and Bug Removal" emblazoned across the side. I took this as a sign and waved to the driver to thank him and "them" for being cooperative. Of course, days later I found that I could still interact with congressional hearings on C-Span and was angered. But by then I had considered the possibility that it was probably for the best. After all, I was pretty fucking important. They had to keep tabs one way or another. At this point, my confusion was the only thing that seemed real and still I said nothing.

Back on the road to Denver, I found additional comfort, once again, in the constant sound of the road against the tires. The austere whirl of it gave me something to hold on to. The sun was peeking out now and I knew that in a few minutes its majesty would be blatant and unapologetic like the smug of a socialite. As I drove, other cars became increasingly present. This spiked my nerves slightly as I considered what they thought of me as they glanced into the large windows of the van as it lumbered down the road several miles below the speed limit. It hindered the forward progress of the assholes that drove like maniacs. Still, traffic was sparse enough to give me a couple minutes of respite between each confrontation.

Passing the infamous gas station that held the adventure of the night prior I raised my middle finger and said a healthy "Fuck you" to the attendant. I suspected he still sat behind the counter like a sad, insecure, judgmental shell of a man, broken by his own squandered talent and unrealized potential. Once again I thought of the large mysterious black woman and continued to drive.

I glanced at the clock, which read condescendingly 7:54 am. I had passed the Colorado state line about 20 miles ago and I started, to my chagrin, reconsidering the mission. I remembered the congressional hearings about the urgency of the situation, the liberal pundits clamoring for the necessity for proper leadership and the many commercials about flying Southwest Airlines from Denver to New York and D.C. for \$59. That was indication enough wasn't it? It was clear that my philosophies about unification, partnered with the need for the numerous cameras and microphones, partnered with my God given talent to make these connections made me the leader they needed so badly, right? It was only logical.

There was still the question of why Southwest had advertised for New York as well as D.C. I searched my meager knowledge bank for indications of New York's importance and was suddenly blindsided by the realization that the U.N. was in New York. Of course, why deal with the mess of an administration that characterized the U.S. when I had the option of helping those who ran the United Nations of the world as a whole? That seemed like the clearly better option.

I tried to put it out of my head as I drove, reminding myself that I had no clear evidence of any of this, but it reared back and constantly bombarded my consciousness like an angry pit-bull.

I played with these thoughts for an hour or two as I drove, taking deep breaths to calm myself from the pummeling fists of confusion. Denver was close now and I felt a seething confliction. I felt the pull of comfort in being among my things at home fighting with the pull of obligation and responsibility. I'd be damned if I turned back now and wasted another day driving back through Kansas. Driving was going to be arduous and time was running out. The songs had told me to go; the TV had told me it was time.

Denver grew closer and buildings and businesses were now a very real facet of the landscape. Before long, among the clutter of fast food restaurants and billboards that littered my field of view, a sign presented itself that spoke at me like God with an answer dependant on risk. "Denver International Airport, keep right" it read. I had to go, if for no other reason than to see if I was right. I swerved into the right lane with an abrupt resolve and heard screeching tires and horns as I weaved through traffic working my way to the exit. A momentary confidence allowed my shoulders to relax a bit as I reeled. This was right. It had to be. Music would never lead me astray. My mind was still bogged down with lethargy and confusion but I knew I had to man up and accept fate.

Nearing the airport I turned on the iPod and waited for any hint of validation from the secret control of the shuffled playlist. The first song started and I smiled as I heard the Grateful Dead sing.

"Truckin' got my chips cashed in.

Keep truckin',



like the do-dah man

Together, more or less in line,

just keep truckin' on."

2

"Maybe we're being too harsh with the letter," said Janine.

"Hon, as his parents we have a responsibility to his well being," said Bob.

"I know but I just think he doesn't need this added pressure."

"Jan, I'll be damned if I'm gonna support and house a drug addict."

"I just think maybe he's going through tough times or something. He told me the other day he wanted to see a therapist."

"Hmm."

"Maybe there's something going on we don't understand. I mean didn't he seem a little paranoid to you today at lunch?"

"Paranoia is a side-effect of the marijuana."

"Well I still think we are being a little harsh, I mean, we can't just throw our son out on the street."

"Babe, its our job to be harsh when it comes to this kind of stuff. It's for his own good. Either he chooses to keep living rent free in the condo without the pot or he chooses to ruin his life."

"I know but don't you think we should let this little phase run its course? I mean, we're not entirely innocent ourselves. Eventually he's gonna want to stop smoking pot,"

"I don't know if he is, Jan. He's expressed to me several times that he has no interest in quitting."

"He's said that to me too."

"Well I think that's a pretty big red flag, don't you?"

"Yes."

"He needs to get his priorities in order and realize that drugs aren't gonna do him any good. If we have to force him to do that then that's what has to be done. I mean, tell me you haven't had any difficulty falling asleep at night with the notion that our sons are drug addicts."

"Well at least Ben has a job and is paying his own rent."

"I know but those people he hangs out with, Mack and Allison, those dopers that spend their time smoking weed, they...they're our age, and did you see their house, the stacks of books and newspapers and the marijuana pipes laying on the coffee table? It sickens me that there are people out there like that."

"Ben says he aspires to that kind of life."

"It makes me sick,"

"Well we can't make them stop,"

"But we can limit their privileges and if Rob decides he cares more about dope than a place to live, there's nothing we can do. I think we did the right thing giving by him some time to think about it,"

"He's probably smoking pot as we speak."

"Or he's looking for an apartment."

"Did you catch what he was saying about the illuminati and government control on his iPod?"

"It's the drugs hon."

"I don't want to see our son like this."

"We'll see what he says tomorrow at lunch."

3

I parked in the long-term lot to diffuse unnecessary paranoia about having the van towed. It would be safe. Depending on the trip though, I'd have to arrange for someone to pick it up. There existed the uneasy notion that I would never return but I hoped that I would. Either way, once I had proven my "delusions" to my parents they would surely be accommodating.

Without the van, I would need to consolidate. Everything would have to fit into the backpack. That meant only the essentials, the food, the socks, one shirt, and the underwear. Everything else I would wear. I stuffed my cell-phone into one of the outer pockets and strung the tennis shoes to the outer straps. With everything together I slung the backpack over my shoulders like a burden and threw the van door shut. I could hear footsteps somewhere in the distance of the concrete garage and panicked for a moment as I considered the surveillance that was a very real possibility. They wouldn't be following me, would they? To be safe, I ducked behind an SUV and waited for the footsteps to pass. Several rows over I saw a young woman in business attire rushing toward the terminal and stood up, clearing my racing mind with a deep breath.

I was tired but my nerves were on edge, keeping me in a heavy alertness that I struggled to carry.

The walk to the sliding glass doors was long as I flinched at sounds, looking around to meet and challenge any critical eyes, my paranoia getting the best of me. "Come on Rob, chill the fuck out," I repeated under my breath.

I entered the terminal and nerves boiled in my gut seeing the lines and the masses of people. I glanced up at the ceiling and could see the bulbous conspicuously voyeuristic eyes of big brother. "Don't fuck this up Rob," was now the phrase that replayed in a quiet whisper. I had been here before, last month when the prospect of a mission was not yet at full force. That time my parents had talked me down. But, now in this time and place the terminal seemed new to me. "Different eyes," I thought. It was brighter maybe, more accusatory. I recalled a conversation between my brothers which I had perceived as secret instruction, "Don't be afraid to talk to people, they'll let you know what's up." Still, the paranoia burned.

I looked at the wall, ominous with its line of uniform ticket desks and I felt the evil in my stomach. The

corkscrew of my nerves wrenched tighter. I was startled with the invasion in my ears of the voice of authority, a shrill announcement over the airport loudspeakers.

"Welcome to the Denver International Airport, please find your appropriate check in counter and an associate will be available to help you. Do not leave your baggage unattended. Any suspicious activity will be reported to airport security."

I wrestled with possibilities and juggled my choices considering every circumstance. I had to stay one step ahead.

I could see the security personnel standing in the corners watching the large room with a lazy authority. One turned his head toward me and I averted my eyes quick so as not to make eye contact.

The paranoia took full force as I submitted to the least conspicuous course of action. Breathing deep, I headed toward the Southwest Airlines check-in kiosks lining the back of the room. I had come with a desperate notion of preparedness, keeping receipts and little papers for the last few months knowing that the numbers splayed across them would hold some kind of connection or advantage for me. "Please enter confirmation number," said the kiosk. I pulled wads of paper from my pockets and the backpack, then nervously fumbled through the papers and set about punching in numbers.

Fifteen minutes of paranoid work had exhausted most of the possibilities. Finding a parking receipt from my old job at the university, I punched in the numbers and was rewarded with an option for a flight to Wisconsin that had left an hour ago. "No! Wait, fuck," I whispered. Had I missed my flight? Maybe they wanted me to go to Wisconsin. There was no reason for that. I wandered into my thoughts trying to make a connection for Wisconsin but could find nothing. A blank anger on my face brought me back to where I had started. A notion of failure nagged at me like responsibility. Screw having to call my parents again. Their ignorance was their downfall and they would see that soon.

I submitted to failure and headed over to the American Airlines kiosks when a strong connection screamed for my attention. A group of men with guitar, banjo and mandolin cases stood waiting in the line for the Frontier Airlines counter. Recalling their reputation for low prices and my guilty penchant for bluegrass music, I knew this was right. I was thankful for the beacon. I joined the line and coddled the idea of speaking to the men in the prospect of finding some kind of guidance but decided against it. The connection was clear enough.

At the desk I explained my urgency to get to New York, being careful not to divulge any extraneous information, and waited for a response.

"We can offer you a aisle seat for \$546.57," said the obliviousness of the ticket woman.

"That's the best you can do?" I coaxed, my voice wavering.

"Yes. I'm sorry that's the cheapest we can offer on such short notice." The tinge of failure screamed once again through my head but I held an awkward determination like my sanity, close and careful.

"I'll try somewhere else," I replied.

Remembering the hassle of the kiosks, I tried my luck with Southwest, this time at the desk. "\$434," the chipper woman said. I could feel a bitter condescension but stopped myself from taking action. Again I was at a loss. Sulking was time wasted and desperation pleaded so I pushed through the crowd to another line.

At the SkyBlue counter I relayed my schpeal to a large black woman behind the desk. The connection didn't hit me at first but after clumsily climbing through the required banter with the woman, I was quoted the price

of \$314.15. Pi. A smile spread and I felt the warmth of rewarded effort. Shit was falling into place. I accepted the fare and snatched the ticket in a paranoid excitement, forgetting manners. My thoughts ventured into the notion of the woman's awareness of the entire scope of things and poured from my mouth unfiltered, "What should I do next?"

She replied courteously but obliviously with, "Next you're going to go down to your gate and wait until they start boarding." She knew they were watching, I could tell.

"Thanks," I said with a blatant wink.

I excused myself and headed down toward the main terminal. The structure was sterile but it reminded me of dreams. It held a feeling of hastiness but its architecture spoke of the majesty of adventure. I looked at the people with a nervous fascination, searching for any significant sign of awareness or information for the mission, but with every subject my hopes were distinguished by obvious ignorance. I walked, almost embarrassed by my seemingly insensible and illogical motivation. But I kept faith in the universe and in myself that whatever my mission would turn out to entail, and wherever it would lead me would be revealed when the time was right.

Arriving at the concourse, I danced onto the moving sidewalk and looked around at the place as I moved along. It was a strange daze. I saw the people and their baggage and the different gates and the flight attendants manning the desks. I knew I could interact with them but nonetheless saw them as part of a hilarious game they had no choice but to play. The scene held no attachment, no significance. I wondered if I should've laughed but I didn't want to seem crazy. For a few moments I wondered if I had been drugged with sedatives but I knew this was too real for that. An eerie serenity overtook me. I fidgeted in my pocket for the iPod and fished it out, selecting Radiohead and proceeding, equipped with the appropriate auditory stimulation. As soon as it had begun, the moving sidewalk ended and I walked back into reality and on toward the gate number 4C.

As I arrived I opted to sit away from the more populated mass of chairs at the gate. Here I was at least a little alone. At least for about sixteen or seventeen chairs around me. I closed my eyes attempting to trip out and guide myself to a place a little more serene and familiar than reality.

I was knocked back into normalcy as I heard the deep gruff voice of an older man. I opened my eyes, glancing at first at the clock, which revealed my nap had lasted only about 12 minutes. I then glanced over my shoulder at the man who, amongst an almost sea of open chairs had chosen the one directly behind mine. Through the ear-buds I heard the man say authoritatively "Listen up." I was wary so I kept the ear-buds in and paused the iPod to remain inconspicuous. I noticed that the man was speaking on his cell-phone, clearly a front.

"Now when you get to New York," said the man, "I want you to find appropriate accommodations." I made a mental note of this.

"Try to find something modest like a hostel or a cheap motel. We've set up an account for you at Wells Fargo Bank so use your credit cards until Monday or Tuesday when the bank is open." I remembered all of this but relished the fact that information was finally being presented personally instead of by the uncertain avenue of the television or iPod. I waited for the man to tell me the account number or give me some more information but I was left with ambiguity.

"We'll call you when we get to where we're going...okay?...bye" Said the man ending the fake phone call.

I needed more. My thirst for information had not been quenched.

Quietly I whispered, "I need more information."

The man sat there without saying a word. Ten minutes passed. With excruciating silence the man stood up, picked up his bag and headed off in the opposite direction. I could do nothing but heed the man's words and take them in stride. Still, anger boiled. I knew though that, like the rest of the ordeal, I would have to keep faith that a path would unfold.

Soon the time came to board the plane. Gathering gumption, I walked silently to the line to check-in. The crowd supplied a healthy apprehension. I expected a full flight. I could see the fake smile of the woman taking the tickets and cursed the unified apathy of the whole system but proceeded with the required politeness, knowing that people were the key to getting any farther.

Excited insecurity called from my chest as a slight tinge and a tingling in my neck. The line progressed and before I could say no and lead myself into another laborious line of questioning, I stood before the woman and smiled.

"How's your day?" I asked with a desperate feigned confidence.

"Oh it's complicated right now but it'll get better," She said.

I relaxed, recognizing the double entendre she had attached to the response in regards to the mission. Surely it would get better, it damn well better. I proceeded down the hall to the plane. As I reached the door I saw the same fake smiles from the flight attendants and found my seat; two rows from the front and next to the window.

Alone again. I prayed that I would have the row to myself but was interrupted by an Egyptian looking woman with an unapologetic scowl and clearly no regard for hindrance. I wanted to laugh again but I held it down. She wore a Bluetooth on her ear and gave no acknowledgement to the attendants that guided her to her seat. Dumb bitch. She sat down directly next to me and continued to yap on her phone.

I attempted to compact my large shoulders so as not to touch her and potentially disturb her but thought better and repaid her gross self-importance with a lack of respect for space. She would know what was going on. Nothing was said, although I could feel the electricity of discord. I remained calm.

Opting to reach into my bag, I took out my copy of Sagan's Cosmos and turned to the section on Egyptians and their extraterrestrial engineering feats and hieroglyphics. I knew she was looking. The bitch had to be an alien, or at least connected in to that circle.

I had once seen a site on the internet chronicling Egyptian hieroglyphs and how archeologists had found some pictures carved in stone of modern day helicopters, airplanes and alien aircraft potentially as a result from collaboration with super advanced alien forces; the same alien forces I deemed evil. It had become apparent in this moment that my mission was not only a matter of world peace but also universal peace combating all of space and time's negative forces. Why else would they seat a spy directly to my left on a crowded airplane? Regardless, I made sure she knew that I knew what she was all about. I knew that my passive aggressive maneuver would keep her at bay at least until we landed. I refused to have any of her alien bullshit.

A short time later the flight took off and I again plugged the ear-buds into my head. I closed the book and then my eyes, set the device on random and put my head back in the affirming comfort of the seat's headrest. I breathed heavy as I searched for guidance amongst the lyrics that cascaded through my mind, smiling every time something made sense but always catching whiffs of the simmering paranoia in my gut.

I thought about my circumstances and about the mission. With an effort I managed to rationalize my jilted actions and deem myself an important part of the process of combating the new world order. Everyone was involved in this crap, the aliens, world leaders, the freemasons, the CIA and even the Nazis.

A part of me screamed inside knowing my lack of qualification. At times I was overwhelmed and struggled to maintain my humility, trying not to think about the fact that I would be the one to bring peace to this restless world. I was the one, God damn it. I considered my philosophy, the universal balance, including the recognition of the negative and the action and change of the positive. I concluded that my first action would be to establish a set of guidelines for humanity in order to recognize their differences but come together under a common goal of peace. In doing so I would abolish ill will as a motivating factor in people's lives and would instate a common positive energy among mankind, allowing us to still make choices and to have free will but to have a desire to always pursue the good in every situation we were presented with.

In these thoughts, I found solace and what I deemed to be myself. It seemed my life had a purpose now.

I dozed, paying no attention to the alien bitch beside me and found myself in a dream.

I was awakened by an announcement by the pilot stating we would soon be descending into New York and the weather there was beautiful with sunny skies and a high of 66 degrees.

Waking up with the enduring negativity of the alien bitch beside me, I felt a momentary comfort and wondered for a moment if she had been sent to watch over me. but when I saw that same scowl as when she had boarded the plane I decided against it. I kept quiet, daring not disturb her any further for the wrath of the evil forces that drove her.

I could be nothing but positive as I kept in mind the universal peace that would be the result of this ordeal.

I stared out the window as the plane descended. The pillow clouds stretched across the ocean of sky and underneath I could see the model city island. I dreaded the bustle and the cold of the tall buildings and gray streets, wondering about where God and the connections would take me.

The city grew larger to my eye and soon the plane touched down. It slowed on the runway and the male attendant came over the loud speaker with a chafing effeminate voice. "Everyone remain seated until the plane has come to a full and complete stop. For connections to Washington D.C. proceed to gate 28B," My ears perked. "For connections to London proceed to gate 32C, otherwise have a great time in New York." This had to be a test; they were trying to confuse me. The bastards. Considering my dwindling funds, my resolve, and my lack of indication towards anything different, I decided it best to stay in New York. At the next thing he said, I jumped to attention. This was for me. "For those of you seeking transportation in the city we suggest one of the many friendly taxi services available at the exit of the airport." My mind raced as I juggled the prospect of taking any advice from an airline that had blatantly tried to confuse me, but I had to heed any and all advice. The question remained that if I did choose the taxi option, it was unclear which taxi service was safe. I made a mental note of this and pulled my backpack out from under the seat in front of me.

The plane pulled to a stop and I prepared my things, watching the alien bitch stand up abruptly. I expected to see an anal probe or at the least a dildo as she pulled her bag out of the overhead compartment but saw nothing. I hated her but I did the righteous thing and internally forgave her and wished her well, forgetting her ill intent. Soon, the plane cleared as people shuffled off ragged from the four-hour ride. I looked at the faces of each of them passing and wondered if they were judging me, but with a desperate attempt to keep good karma I wished each of them safety and good will as they carried on. I couldn't ignore the sting of compassion I held for each of them. Everyone has shit in his or her lives.

As the last person walked past my seat I stood up and headed toward the exit. The female flight attendant smiled at me and I stopped in front of her and worked to gather the correct words to convey my uncertainty. "What's the best cab to take here?" I asked with a slight wavering in my voice.

"I don't know the best one but I'm sure you can find a good one if you look," she replied. I wondered just what

exactly she meant and what kind of asinine clue that was supposed to be but I took it as an indication that instinct was right and the answer would be revealed. The response was frustrating, but I exited the plane and proceeded into the airport. I headed towards the nearest exit studying the signs and billboards for indications of my next move. Suddenly the answer revealed itself in a small overhead advertisement. "Freedom Cabs," it read "The SMART Cab Company". I smiled with the obvious implications. They were wise. The capitalization of smart and the historical significance of freedom were almost painful in their obviousness. After all, freedom was the basis for this mission. I sighed, thankful for the connections.

As the exit grew near I noticed the growing number of men in black suits and paranoia began to burn. "Just ignore them," I told myself under my breath. I kept walking and more of them appeared like Agent Smith in The Matrix. I passed one holding a sign that read "Blake" and freaked for a few moments. It was horrifyingly unclear if the sign was referring to my own last name Black or if the bastards were trying to throw me off. Everything had to be handled with suspicion. The cab seemed like a safer bet given the anonymity but the connection was undeniable. Mustering strength, I brushed past the man holding the sign to convey my stubborn unwillingness to submit to the suits and proceeded to the exit keeping a lookout for a Freedom cab.

As I stared down the sidewalk at the line of cabs my nerves caught up to me. Crowds of people moved past me but I continued to walk seeking the "Freedom Cab". I passed the mile long line of cabs angrily until I came to a shit looking vehicle with rusted edges that reflected a poor regard for the car. To my amazement the words 'Freedom Cabs' were written on the side with the letters in obscure mailbox stickers that could be found at a local hardware store. The car, although in poor shape, was an obvious fit to the humility of a future prince of peace. I thought of the Indiana Jones movie with the Holy Grail being the shittiest cup there and sighed in amazement. So many damn beautiful connections - this had to be the right car. As I got in I could smell urine but refused to be put off by it. The driver's hair was disheveled and greasy in a thick dreadlock hanging from the back of his head. A cigarette hung from his lips dropping ash as he turned to face me.

I smiled awkwardly and said, "I need to go to the U.N." The driver nodded and pulled out abruptly from the line of taxis. Silence ensued as I, nervous and paranoid, waited patiently for any further connections, finding none. Driving erratically, weaving in and out of the traffic, cutting other cars off almost violently, the driver also said nothing. The urine smell seemed to grow stronger as the ride continued but I maintained a peaceful energy. My hopes were fueled strangely as I glanced down at the driver's license hanging on the back of the seat. "Jesus Leon" it read. I quickly made the affirmative connection of Leon meaning lion in Spanish corresponding to my Leo star sign, and the word Jesus, which led to an obvious good connotation. The name illustrated and reinforced my ideas of a balanced world as it juggled mystical astrology with religion. I knew I was in the right place.

Flowing through the city, I looked out on the sculptures. The world to scale in front of the U.N. building was cold and I could see the other strange monuments that signaled the ongoing proliferation of alien energy. Soon enough, the ride ended and I handed Jesus a \$20 bill without hesitating for change. I climbed out of the cab and looked up at the row of flags. I looked down as I drew my phone out of my pocket, 12:54pm.

4

Jan and Bob sat quietly in the restaurant booth saying little until the tension broke.

"I guess he's not coming," said Jan.

"I don't really blame him," said Bob.

"He hasn't called either."

"He's probably pissed at us."

"I'm sure he is."

"Should we stop over there to see if he's ok?"

"If we don't hear from him tonight we'll stop by in the morning, give him a little space, he'll call us when he's ready."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea."

"I wish he didn't feel like he had to turn to drugs, I feel, you know, sort of like a bad parent."

"It's not our fault hon."

"Is he trying to escape something? I mean why does he do it so much?"

"I dunno hon, but I definitely think we are doing our part to keep him safe."

"What if he chooses to move out?"

"Then he'll have to grow up real quick. He'd have to be stupid not to accept our help,"

"Where'd you say you found out about this technique?"

"What technique?"

"I mean, giving him an ultimatum between our help and smoking pot."

"Oh, my psychiatrist friend from church suggested it. Believe me, once he quits the dope all this psychological shit's gonna go away too,"

"Paranoia."

"Mmhmm,"

"I'll give him a call tonight, maybe he'll answer."

"He's just considering his options."

"Yep."

5

The U.N. building was majestic and loomed with an intimidating dower over my head. The air smelled like ocean and musk. The place had a strange energy. I could feel misguided ideals in the air. The image in my mind, an influence of movies and TV, appeared more hopeful. Dark clouds loomed and I grew uneasy. I watched the occasional sorry flap of the flags on the cold poles. The eerie calm of the building fed me a tinge and I ran my hand along the fence as I considered my options.

Who should I talk to? Maybe I should just sneak into a tour group and then bust into the general assembly room and yell. "I'm HERE!!!" They'd set me up real nice. My ideas were crushed as I jiggled the locked gate. The guard station stood a few feet to my left.



"We're closed sir," one of the guards yelled tapping on the glass.

I walked over and spread a sham smile across my face, to prove to them that I was polite.

"When do you guys open again?"

The men in the booth had thick fur hats and wore military uniforms. They seemed Russian or Siberian but I couldn't tell. The anxiety still burned, but I fought through the conversation.

"We'll be open at ten on Monday," said the other man with a thick accent.

"I'm glad to finally be here!" I told them as they returned my fake smile.

"So you can't let me in until Monday morning?" I replied.

"I'm sorry sir, were closed," the man said, "We won't be open again until Monday."

My confusion manifested as a look of consternation on my face.

"Uh... ok." I said flashing another polite smile and turning around. These fuckers had no clue, but why would they? A couple of dumbass security guards most likely wouldn't be in the inner circle. My mission was too secret for them.

"Sir!"

I turned around and watched as the man slid a brochure through the slit in the window.

"Here's some information," he said. I looked at him quizzically and wondered if he was wise.

"Is this 'information' or just tourist shit?" I said,

The man shrugged, puzzled.

I opened the brochure scanning it for disguised mission directives and connections but saw none off the bat. Still, I stuffed the brochure into the front pocket of my backpack with the collection of papers and receipts. It might be useful later. I murmured a small "Thank you" and turned to head in the opposite direction. As I walked I ran my hand along the fence again looking for a place to climb over. When the guards could no longer see me I tested the fence a few times and stepped into a small foothold. Anticlimactically, I stepped back down, deciding against breaking international law.

I headed for the stairs that led me up to the street. I climbed with my mind on fire. Disappointment overtook me. Monday was two days from now. I felt a biting tinge in my neck, and closed my eyes for a second to maintain a grasp on sanity. This was just a part of the mission right? Insanity was becoming a very real possibility. Still, the man at the airport had said to seek accommodations. I realized I'd be here for a while.

At the top of the stairs I looked back down at the guard booth and tipped my hat for confirmation. The man looked up at me and touched his own hat as a makeshift 'yes'.

The gray of the streets was unforgiving. Looking around I could see several signs that I perused for connections. Seeing none, I entered a building I took as an apartment building and walked to the doorman's desk.

"I'm looking for accommodations," I said quietly.

The man's smile was refreshing.

"Okay sir, write your name and number on this and I'll have the landlord contact you." He handed me a "while you were out" slip and I eagerly complied.

"When are they gonna call?"

"I imagine tonight or tomorrow, Monday at the latest,"

"Is there a place I can stay for now?"

"Uh, uh...actually, there are many hotels in town,"

"What about for cheap?"

"I dunno man, maybe a hostel?"

"Where are those?"

"Give me a minute and I can look one up for you,"

I nodded my head and turned away. A bald man walked past and hurried up the stairs. I looked out to the street as I waited and watched a woman with a small dog walk past. The woman wore a blue sweater and I remembered a reference to the ocean planet. Earth. Mars was the red planet. Martians were evil. Therefore red signified bad and blue was good. I looked back at the doorman and noticed his navy blue uniform; clearly a good sign. The doorman waved his hand, signaling me to come back over, and he handed me a hand drawn map showing a grid of streets and a star.

"This is where we are now," he said circling an area on the map, "You wanna go north six blocks, west three blocks and north another block,"

"Alright," I said with a nervous refrain, "Thanks man,"

Walking back through the entrance I glanced at the sculpture work on the side of the building. I knew that the symbols meant something but I could only speculate.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity, I repeated the process with every apartment building I passed, encountering smiles and the occasional sharp attitude I figured New York was famous for.

Trying hard to ignore red and the judgmental eyes of any naysayers, I followed a noise and found myself stepping into Times Square. It bustled mad and I tried to catch the conversations of people as they passed to find a connection that made an inkling of sense. I paid close attention to those on cell phones as I walked but heard nothing concrete. Again in a daze, the people passed around me like cattle. I held the map in my hands, looking down every few minutes. I walked silently passing embassies and the idea came to me to seek refuge at one of them. Knocking on the locked doors, none obliged saying only that there were hotels down the street. A fierce line of questioning breathed in my head as my options dwindled and I wondered just what the fuck I was doing in New York, but I knew I had already come too far to give up.

When I arrived at the hostel I faced more disappointment. Asking the rates, I stood strong.

"\$89 a night for a single," the woman said,

I handed her my credit card and waited. She handed it back with an empathetic look.

"It's been declined sir,"

"Uh, can you try it again? Is there any place cheaper?"

"I don't know sir, we run pretty independently,"

I could tell this was a lost cause.

I roamed the streets stopping at every hotel, apartment building and hostel I passed. Facing a quiet desperation at my misfortune, I sought last resort as I saw a sign for a psychic and palm reader. Knocking on the door, a young woman came to the door.

"We're closed,"

"I'm Rob Black though, I came all the way from Colorado, and don't you know who I am?"

"We're closed sir," she said shutting the door in my face.

I wore a weary scowl. The walking had made me tired, and the constant focus and scrutiny for connections had made my thoughts run mad. Returning to the steps in front of the U.N. I wandered for a short time until I found a small courtyard and a temporary solace on the bench in the middle of a grove of young transplanted trees. I splayed out my legs to rest my feet. As I sat quiet, dusk came. Soon, a man joined me in the courtyard and walked toward me.

"What's up man?" the man asked.

"Just trying to figure shit out," I replied with a defeated sigh.

"I feel you man," the guy said, "We gotta close this place up though."

"Really, shit man,"

"Yeah dude sorry,"

"Where's a cheap place I can go?"

"Shit, I dunno man," The man replied. "There's a couple good restaurants and shit around here you could go sit at."

"Which one?" I said, reaching for directive.

"Dunno dude, you just can't stay here."

My hopes were sequestered. I sighed at the advent of another oblivious party in my endeavor. Submitting, I stood up and ambled out of the courtyard, passing the man as he closed the gate.

Venturing out again I found myself in a small quiet neighborhood nook off 42nd with several apartment buildings, one of which seemed to be an old church. There was a van parked in front of a small alley that read

'Jews for Jesus'. I smiled at the unification of religion and deemed this a safe place. Perhaps I would come back.

There was a small shop on the corner where I purchased some crackers and a Gatorade and checked my bank balance at the ATM. I couldn't begin to figure out why my card had been declined at the hostel but knew I was almost out of cash, only \$200 or so left. Sustenance refueled me. From what I could recall it was the first time I had eaten since dinner last night with my parents. Wrapping the food up and stashing it in the backpack, I started back toward the busy street.

My mind was in pain. A molten bullet of paranoia and disappointment cut through my heart and made my pace slow. I could feel the raw spots on the bottom of my feet and they stung with a sweet scream of pain, which kept me alert. Night had fallen and the crowd on the street had grown. I walked aimless and prayed for a sign, finding benches and resting when I could. My attention was focused intently on my surroundings and I burned for a semblance of justification. I searched the crowd for any body language, tips of the hat, pointing fingers, wandering eyes, anything that could lead me further. I saw them everywhere but I was lost in knowing whom to trust. As the connections and indications began to mount they contradicted one another and the types of people I thought were trustworthy discredited themselves. The indications they gave were constantly bombarded by their opposites and I had no idea where to turn. I looked at my phone to keep time and grimaced seeing that the battery icon was blinking and out of bars. Finding a quiet bench outside of a locked playground area, I sat and looked up to see if I could see stars. Maybe there was a connection there. The lights of the city blanketed the sky in a blurry haze.

"God, I need a fucking sign," I said into the sky, "Am I doing the right thing?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a light in a window flash on and off several times. It was a sign for sure but I'd be damned if I knew what it was saying. Maybe it was Morse code but I couldn't tell and even if it was I had no idea how to decipher it. Instead I just sat and watched the people pass.

A while later, I stood up and continued. I had given up finding affordable accommodations by now and instead just wandered the streets looking for help. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of a brightly colored neon sign in a store window that held significance in the form or shape of a guitar, a lion, or a crown, all things I had associated with at some point.

As I walked amongst the crowds with a complicated confusion, I'd catch somebody patting their head and would follow them until they noticed and gave me a dirty look. Then I'd see someone else, and follow him or her. Although I held a strange alertness and didn't feel tired, I knew that I would need to find someplace safe to at least wait out the night and continue in the morning. With a flustered loneliness I decided to return to the quiet neighborhood I had seen earlier and lay down in the alley behind the 'Jews for Jesus' van. There, in the shadow of an old church, with evidence of religious unification I could find a relative peace. My feet were the least of my worries but they ached as I walked back. I tried hard to pay no attention to the blaring infectious indications but getting sidetracked wasn't an option at this point. They screamed at me but I pushed them back fighting for my grip on normalcy. I knew at this point that I couldn't trust anyone or anything but myself.

Finding my way back, I set the pack down next to the wall in the alley to use as a pillow and I removed my shoes to relieve my feet. I lay down, looking up at the etchings and the carvings on the walls of the old building and the connections reeled. Their meanings were of a higher kind, probably placed there specifically for me. An hour passed as I listened to the sounds of the cars and people careening up 42nd street and I worked for a disturbed sleep or at the very least a brief rest. I was lost in a limbo between trying to decipher my connections into guidance and finding rest when the thought occurred that I should always trust my instincts. Still, among the haystack of paranoia, racing thoughts and weariness in my mind, instinct was a lowly needle. I remembered the guidance music had seemed to give me and pulled the iPod out of my bag but sighed with defeat as the low battery message appeared. "Fuck," I said quietly. I stuffed the iPod back into the

bag and lay my head down on the pack. My mind burned but I closed my eyes and searched. A few hours and an inadequate doze session passed and I opened my eyes. My mind had wandered too far to find peace and although I needed it, a telling rest would not come. I worried furiously and grasped at any and all intolerable ideas for refuge. Finally, I prayed.

Slowly time passed and the sound of the traffic became a familiar buzz. Thoughts rattling, I began to think about a girl I had dated in high school who had moved to Boston for college. I thought about my sorry attempts at moves and I regretted never doing anything more than kissing her. A memory appeared suddenly that I couldn't ignore. I had seen an advertisement for the Boston Amtrak on a bus a few hours earlier. At this the voice of reason screamed inside my head. "BOSTON BOSTON BOSTON!!" it said. Society had betrayed my trust and I had no inkling of sense about anything else. "Fuck it." I said, lifting myself up off the cold pavement. I pulled my shoes back on.

A plan gave me a taste of stability, which I liked. Once I got to Boston I'd look up Kimberly and crash on her couch. I had been to Boston years before on a trip with my parents. It would probably be the same. I would need to find out Kim's address though. I figured as long as I could find a phone book I could find Kim. A plan was good. I stood up and lifted the pack to my shoulders. My feet still hurt and the friction of the shoe on my heel made it raw. I expected it to bleed soon. The streets were still busy and I was still nervous but I pushed on. I walked with the same familiar daze into the busy of the early morning streets.

"Hey, where's the train station?" I mumbled to a man that passed.

"Uh, shit man, I think it's like two or three blocks down there, uh, you'll see it, it'll be on the left," the guy said. I could see the disturbed sleep in his eyes.

"Thanks."

As I walked, the connections smacked the back of my head like wooden planks but I did my best to ignore them. My new mission was based in instinct and it was clear that following the connections would take me nowhere. It had become too hard to distinguish between the ones that were real and the ones they had placed to throw me off.

The concrete was hard on my feet as I walked, glaring around and averting my eyes from pointing fingers, pats on the head and tips of the hat. When I saw the regional train sign fixed over an opening on the bottom floor of a building, I settled. I went nearer and my hopes were confirmed as I saw a man patting his head. Couldn't ignore that one.

I would come back to the U.N. on Monday with Kim's help. Everything would come in time. Shit was falling into place again. I entered the station, checked the times against the clock on my cell phone and after a few repeated attempts at a self-serve kiosk, found the only open window and bought a ticket. I walked through the station smiling at the two security guards who manned their posts. A man with a janitor's cart walked over to me with a jilted amble, his eyes were red and his face had welts and craters, dark circles under the eyes. He said something but I couldn't tell what it was. His outstretched hand said everything,

"Sorry," I said feeling empathy for the first time in my life.

I approached the waiting area and found a chair at the back of the room. Across from me was a man staring up at the ceiling with his eyes closed. He looked to be praying. My mind reeled at the prospect that the man was privy to my situation. He was thanking God for me, the one who'd restore peace to the world. My stomach was anxious for something and I realized energy was essential. I was already lagging. As I pulled the loaf of bread out of the pack I thought of the man and gave him a sign, breaking a piece of bread symbolically. I was Christ. Hope was here for the people of the world and shit would be right soon. These people knew it and I

knew it and I played the part well.

After the sacrament I closed my eyes and raised my head to the ceiling just as the man across from me did and thanked who or whatever ruled for the good will.

I rested my eyes while the minutes passed and soothed my restlessness with deep breaths. My purpose was real now.

I thought about my ordination and what would be required of me once I completed the mission. Peace was a strange thing. As a leader I had to represent truth in every aspect and facet of the word. That was the only way to unite the world. I had cogitated on this idea for some time prior to my trip and I knew I had to embody it if any progress was to be made.

My nerves popped and jumped at the prospect of such a notion, and I tried to relax my shoulders with another deep breath. The idea that I was falling deeper into insanity escaped me as, opening my eyes, I looked at the people scattered across the station and felt an unruly frustration. Their ragged and dirty clothes spoke of their despair. I stopped myself from projecting a loud reassurance that everything was ok. Instead I resorted to a quiet smile for each of them. Some looked back with a smile and others averted their eyes. Those were the spies. I could tell. I thought about taking my clothes off to show them I was human but thought better when I considered the consequences. Promising them salvation telepathically seemed like the next best thing, so I did that. I would return and bring peace.

Soon the train pulled in. I stood up and ambled to the platform. "Bless you all," I said under my breath to the people. As a couple looked up, I knew they had heard. I smiled. I looked up at the clock affixed on the tiled wall and sighed. It was 4:30 in the morning. No trouble, no rush. I had until Monday. Kim would help and help would be good. Peace would be here soon enough.

I boarded the train and found an empty seat near the back, dodging carefully the distraction of false connections. I was in control now.

My seat was next to the window. I relaxed, splaying out my feet to ease the ache. Pulling out of the station, the train lights dimmed and I fell into the blur of the passing lights dotting the dark landscape. Soon, sleep came. I could feel myself flying.

Twenty minutes before Boston I opened my eyes to the garish bicker of two teenage girls and a sliver of sunrise. The girls sat a few rows behind but the train was quiet so I could hear them clearly.

"Did you hear he's a virgin?" one of them said as the other interrupted with an incriminating giggle.

They knew. My story had probably been told on the news.

"I heard he's never even kissed a girl," the first girl said.

"He's probably gay," said the other one.

Anger was a strange emotion and it boiled in my gut. I thought about turning around to tell them off but sat quiet, absorbing the hate. Memories flashed in and out of the quiet in college when I was too stoned to think and those fuckers in my hall had called me gay. My first notion was to prove them wrong but I had no idea how. That night had torn my mind in half as I questioned myself with a quiet rage. I knew I wasn't gay but there was no quick way to convince them otherwise. In their defense I had acted pretty flamboyantly, but until that night, it was all a desperate attempt to get a laugh. Those fuckers were ruthless.

That was then, and right now I had to deal with these bitches. I knew they couldn't see me so I sat quiet trying to decide if I should tell them off or take it. Either way, it was for damn certain that not everyone would be so accepting of a savior to ease the world's crankshaft of fear. The voice of reason screamed that these girls were talking about someone else but my insecurities set my mind running. Word had definitely spread by now.

"Fuck you" I muttered. Knowing I faced a massive barrage of judgmental quips with the media's attention, I felt a desire for home. The anxiety built silent and sinister alongside my paranoia and I closed my eyes to find my solace breathing deep.

I thought of the warm buzz of a girl's lips and the soft supple round awe of cupping a tit in my hand. With this I relaxed and loosened my shoulders.

I cursed discrimination. I didn't want to hurt and I didn't want anyone else to hurt. Hurt was like a knife in the eye being twisted around and scraping against the skull. Hurt was like the smell and the pain of searing flesh against a branding iron. Hurt sucked. Blocking the incessant noise of the two girls, I beat down the pain in my mind and looked at the passing early morning landscape. There were raindrops in the corners framing the window and the sky was gray. A dull pink ribbon sat on the horizon and the tall grass and the forest growth were wet with dewy rain. Boston soon followed.

6

"Hey Matt, This is Jan, Rob's mom,"

"Hey Jan, how's it going?"

"Not so good actually. Have you seen or heard from Rob in the last few days?"

"Uh, he's gone?"

"Yeah, we've tried calling him but he won't answer and you're the last friend of his we could think to call. We've tried everyone else."

"Jeez, sorry, I haven't seen him,"

"Has he talked to you about going anywhere?"

"Uh, I mean he always used to talk about how he wanted to go to California but he's been different lately. I mean he rarely comes by anymore."

"Matt, do you have any idea where he could be?"

"Uh, I, I'm sorry, No,"

"Ok Matt, thanks,"

"Good luck"

"Thank you, mmm ok bye,"

"Bye."

7

The city was gray but the buildings contrasted with dirt red. The morning settled my nerves a bit more and before long the train pulled into the station. Boston had a slower feel, much slower than New York. The air was cool and peppered with moisture. I knew I was close to the ocean. Vision blurry, I wobbled out of the train depot and thought about the fact that I had never really done anything crazy in my life.

The colors meant something here. Green was the color of plants but it was also the color of money. Plants were good but money was bad. I didn't know what green meant. Blue and red were clear though. Blue was the color of ocean and sky, both good things. Red was the color of Mars and it was manly but mars meant aliens and aliens were bad so red was bad. This is how I navigated. I followed the colors.

I was lost in a daze of exhaustion and moved my feet slowly. They were dead and raw with pain and blisters, and I shuffled out into the city.

My eyes darted from color to color, sign to sign, connection to connection. I floated like a ghost and thought about crying. There were few people out so I found a relative ease in that but my mind still jumped around reckless. I needed to find Kim.

I saw a silent pay phone with a dangling phonebook and headed towards it until I remembered that phone books don't normally list cell phones. Kim wasn't the type of girl to list herself in the phonebook either. I had no leads but I knew I could go to a library and maybe find out her number if she had listed it on Facebook, so I kept walking. Stopping at benches, I would rest until I could muster more energy. Every passerby held information and I pried for it, maintaining a dazed politeness. Several ignored me but those were the fuckers and bitches too high on their horses to help a divine soul out. I would pat my head to signify a crown allowing the case that they didn't know who I was, but they still ignored me. Eventually I found the library. I also found it's doors locked because it was Sunday. I rested on the bench outside and looked at the few people who passed. I was lost and ready for a semblance of mercy sitting quiet and alone. My plans had died. I wanted to go home.

Eventually I stood up. Defeated by my tired mind and forgetting to the pain in my feet I began to walk, pushing indications aside. I had to follow my gut. Still, I searched, focusing intently on any connection. A blue party cup lying dead by the side of the street, a blue newspaper sack dancing quietly in the breeze. I needed this ludicrous guidance. Good colors in succession indicated a trail, which I followed with a religious fervor, until I lost my scent.

Soon I found myself in a park. People were up by now and I could see them scrambling like rats to get where they had decided to go. On the far side of the park I could see a line of yellow tape and people running. Getting closer I realized it was a road race. I wondered if it was staged for me but I couldn't be sure, it didn't seem entirely real. I followed the racecourse for a few blocks until I saw another blatant blue. They had placed these indications for me, but which "they"? Were they trying to throw me off? Entering a neighborhood I saw red milk crates strewn on doorsteps. This was a bad street. I walked fast until I rounded the corner and saw steaming jets pouring up from the street. The vents surrounded a nondescript building but the indication was clearer than anything I had seen thus far. That was the building; they had marked it for me. I grew excited at the prospect of finding my destination but died again as I was welcomed by locked doors. My mind was numb and I found an indifferent, apathetic wavelength. I was too tired for this shit.

I remembered Kim again. Last resorts were now a fact of life so I wandered the street until I found another pay phone with its dangling phonebook, aloof like me. Approaching, I took a closer look. The book was wet and ragged like a meth addict. I had no choice though. I pulled the phonebook up on its cord and inspected it further. My heart sank seeing whole sections missing T-X. Kim's last name was Wilcox.

Lost. I needed a plan. I asked for advice in a mumbled jargon. People who answered did so in an esoteric jumble of connections and double meanings that made me lose focus on their actual words. The fire in my gut



was ember now, lost beneath a numb glaze. In between bouts of distraction from possible connections I grasped desperately to pieces of a plan. My neck ached and my body told me to rest but sleep was a sacrifice that had to be made. I carried on, shuffling my whimpering feet.

As I neared mid city my eyes grabbed hold of whatever they could. Any small meaning could mean my salvation.

I moved around the Boston cityscape finding myself resting anywhere. I liked the dirty benches. They had character. Checking the sores on my heels, I attempted relief by pulling my ankle socks higher up. I knew it wouldn't help.

I kept thinking back to the building with the steam jets. Why would they lock it and go to such trouble to mark it so blatantly? Maybe they wanted me to break in, but that would be breaking the law and as a leader I had to remain just. Again the concept of insanity slipped into my mind, but fuck, the messages were so clear. There was no way. I knew in my soul that others were aware of my mission. I had seen it in the pits of their eyes. I had felt it in the vibration of their souls. They wanted so badly to help but they just couldn't. Top secrecy meant shit to me now.

Betrayal burnt badly. I knew they had sent me on this mission to make me a man, a sort of accelerated boot camp and spy training rolled into one. I couldn't see it ending though, at least not any time soon. As I walked, my weary mind cogitated on this and started to burn. Anger was something I had forgone out of peaceful necessity but failure was making it breathe. Any government that required their most valuable asset to undergo an endeavor littered with so many struggles and loose ends didn't deserve the respect they commanded. The embers in my gut had begun to glow with a different kind of spark but my cold bones and tired body contradicted it with a silent force. Finding another bench to rest my feet, I leaned my head back and rested my eyes. My mind raced like a grass fire. I could hear the people talk about me as they passed. They talked in code but I knew they were judging me, calling me a failure and a pussy. I took it with a humble peace and fought the urge to yell or use force. "Fuck them, fuck them, fuck them, fuck you motherfuckers," I whispered quietly.

Hours passed as I wandered the streets. I marveled at the amount of people that seemed to increase with time but it was still quiet given the Sunday morning gray. Lost in the anger, I caught a glimpse of a woman carrying a red bag with Chinese letters dashed across the fabric. Red was evil but blue had led me astray. Maybe blue was evil. Yeah. It all made sense now, "they" had made me think red was evil because "they" were blue and they were evil. Yeah. Blue sky, blue earth was evil. My mind converged and imploded as I let my legs lead, they followed the red. The woman walked brisk so I had to forget the discomfort of my feet. I followed at a small distance for several blocks until she walked into a parking lot with a basketball hoop and disappeared into the adjacent building. There were children playing on the court, mostly of Asian descent. In my ignorant mind I tried to form a connection. I knew that Buddhism was from Asia and Buddhists were peaceful. Peaceful was good. The thought occurred to me that the different nations of the world were in desperate pursuit of my allegiance but I had to doubt that word of me was that widespread. I wasn't sure of anything anymore though.

I was still curious about the color red though so I carefully passed the children smiling, walked up to the building and disappeared through the beige double doors.

As I entered, I was greeted by the worn-out smile of an old Asian woman. Despite her lack of English, her warmth made me feel welcome. Taking my hand she guided me down the dark hallway. I noticed a bulletin board with a large construction paper crucifix surrounded by cutout letters that said God in English letters on the left side and Japanese lettering on the right. I assumed that was the word for God.

The woman led me into a large room and eyes darted about until they landed on me. Smiles erupted like

applause and I stared blankly. "Hi," I said.

They reciprocated by bringing me a cup of juice and a handful of candies and strange snack foods with labels I couldn't read. I indulged, welcoming any opportunity to show these people that I could be trusted. In the hustle I was introduced to a teenage girl who spoke broken English. She had a warm soft face that I wanted to touch. It was comforting. I expressed my thanks with a smile to her several times and attempted to make light conversation with her. She was a cutie but words awkwardly lurched as we stumbled clumsily over the language barrier. Before long the conversation was over.

Eventually, I grew weary of smiling. It was time to go. Again I thanked the old woman and the girl and everyone else I had encountered and quietly excused myself from the room, walking down the dim hall. I took a deep breath as the door swung open and the cool air hit my face.

As I walked away I wondered if they thought I was homeless. The haze led me back into the center of town and my heart jumped as I saw the freemasons symbol etched into the wall of a building. They were the leaders of this conspiracy shit. Everyone knew it. It was about goddamn time I found someone that could tell me what the fuck was going on. I ambled to the doors of the building despite the pain in my feet and cursed as I jiggled the locked doors.

I slumped down and splayed my legs out on the sidewalk. There was a pain in my back that matched the pain in my head. My feet screamed too, making me ever more aware of how tired I was.

"Fuck this," I said.

As I neared the bus station I heard a soft jazz in my head, slow and controlled like a lullaby. My feet kept moving. Eventually I arrived. From all the stories I heard, Canada didn't really give a shit about weed. They had universal health care too. Before long the world in my mind overcame reality and my plan was set, I would find some 'friendly' folks up there and start my own business in the herb industry. Eventually I'd have enough money to buy an RV and travel the miles of road across North America. Shit was gonna be alright. Fuck this mission shit.

I thought about my mom and dad for a while as I waited and, seeing a pay phone, I considered calling them. Then I remembered the letter. They had betrayed me too. Knowing full well I had been chosen, they had said nothing. They had done nothing to prepare me for my divine purpose. I wondered if they really cared about me. I wondered if I had really been adopted, a product of immaculate conception kept secret by big brother. I wondered how they felt about bringing up a prophet. I had run out of quarters anyway.

I got excited as the line at the ticket window shortened. Canada was a good idea. Yes. Fuck this mission; if the government wanted me so badly they would have to come get me. I didn't have the time to walk around all day in complete obliviousness and solve puzzles to find the connections of all this crap. Plus the concept still plagued me that I had never had real, actual proof that I had been chosen. It seemed a wild goose chase and for this I resented the establishment. What kind of a fucking country would promise something so unbelievably impacting and then string their leading candidate along into a ridiculous line of obstacles? Bullshit. I wanted peace and I wanted nature. I wanted to escape the American mindset and get "out of the box".

I was a man now. I could make my own decisions.

The station was crowded with a smattering of dirty and ugly people, so I fit in. The place smelled like a mixture of body odor and motor oil, and I was oblivious to the fact that part of what I smelled was myself. My eyes were carefully scanning the landscape and going on high alert to anything they deemed suspicious or significant. My ears also paid intent attention to everything they received. I could hear the nice couple a few

yards to my left talking about my trip and how they were proud I was now doing my own thing. I smiled at this.

The line dwindled and soon I found myself at the ticket counter looking into the scared little eyes of the clerk. The man was timid as I had been but the look of frustration overtook his aura. I knew upon being rejected for a ticket to Montreal, due to my lack of a passport, that the clerk was surely not privy to my prophet status. I stood at the desk, further telepathically begging for some inkling of sympathy but received none.

Glancing at the destination price board that hung above the desk, I saw the words "Woods Hole". I was relieved at this knowing there was a reason. The meaning here was blatant - a hole, through the woods, to Canada. I bought the ticket and walked towards the buses in awe that such a step would be revealed so simply. It was obvious that Woods Hole had been named for its claim to fame. I just didn't know where in the woods that hole would be. Thank God for the gift of communication.

I thought fondly of my comfortable couch back home. But, I had come too far. Somehow I knew I would be comfortable again soon.

I boarded the bus and walked carefully down the aisle. Finding a seat in the back, I noticed a cutie sitting next to the window with mussed blonde hair. Talking to her was an option but her attention was focused out the window. My nerves were flaring at the idea but I thought better. I sat and waited, looking out the window at the grey concrete which matched the sky. Every few minutes I would glance at the back of the girl's head to see if I could lull her telepathically to at least acknowledge me. She remained focused on the scene outside the window. Taking a deep breath, I muttered "bitch" under my breath.

The bus had a musky smell like a mixture of gasoline, mold and piss and the stains on the seats kindled suspicions of homeless toilets. A part of me wondered if that would be the behavior I would eventually have to resort to. I was close. After the bus ticket, I had only seven dollars.

My thoughts darted and eventually the bus pulled out of the station. Woods Hole was a last hope for me. I cogitated on the very real possibility that the said hole may well entail a long trek down a back woods physical and metaphorical trail of uncertainty. I hoped at least that I would find some sort of refuge when I got to Montreal. I entertained myself with the idea of being greeted at the end of the hole by high-ranking Canadian officials but a part of me knew it would likely never happen. Like the rest of my trip, I would have to make my own way. Either way, I knew this trip was not soon over. Again, I stared out the window and looked at the houses, mailboxes and shrubs as they passed. I felt the grey of the sky in my extinguished hopes. I hoped it wouldn't rain.

Soon, the bus had lost the dense populated landscape. It was now traveling through heavy coastal brush and forest, and I held my attention at the awe of the twisting brambles and fallen trees in the forest lining. Occasionally I would steal a glance back up at the girl, waiting for her to turn and lock eyes and be my salvation.

I had no real sense of time but I figured that it was about 2 or 3pm judging from my early arrival in Boston. I knew I had spent a good amount of time lost in the city. Staring back toward the window, I mentally prepared myself for the prospect of having to spend a night or nights in the woods. I tried a desperate attempt to create comfort telling myself that it would be a short trip to the border but I knew I had to be prepared. Eventually I closed my eyes and rested my head against the seat, letting my thoughts wander.

I could hear the air brakes as the bus jolted to a stop. Opening my eyes, I saw a small parking lot with a backwoods restaurant and gas station. There was a small decrepit house across the road that spoke of years of life and abuse. I marveled at the sparse set up of the area, but thought differently as the girl stood up and looked at me quickly before turning her head and proceeding off the bus. I wanted more. As I watched her

walk away I quietly cursed myself for being such a pussy. Fuck it.

I looked out the window again, this time noticing the sign that hung above the parking lot. "Fitzgerald's." The connection was screaming. I thought of my fifth grade teacher Mr. Fitzgerald who had held obscure philosophy tests every Friday citing the relationships between Sartre and Nietzsche. It was clear I was taking the right path, but I panicked, wondering if the connection wanted me to get off here. I stood up and ambled to the front of the bus asking the driver in a half mumble if this was Woods Hole. With an asshole retort the driver looked back and said "No". Fuckin' dick, I thought.

"Can you tell me when we get there?"

"Yeah, I'll announce it," said the driver.

On the way back to my seat I wondered about the load of personal problems the fucker had that made him so insecure. I forgive you, I thought. Back at my seat, I could hear the expelling air from the closing bus door. It sounded strangely like the word 'relax'. I took a deep breath to loosen the tension in my shoulders. The bus started up again rumbling around me and vibrating underneath my feet. Quietly, I sunk back into my seat.

A few minutes later the bus pulled back out onto the road, bumping over a curb and shifting its massive weight. The engine whirled like the consistent growl of a nervous dog and I looked out on the peeping heads on the bus. For a few minutes I searched the air for any indications. A woman near the front scratched the top of her head and I knew I was on the right track.

My mind wandered for a while until I took another deep breath and noticed my gut rising and falling. I thought back on what those weight loss commercials had told me. I had meant to address them by losing a few pounds before I took off but hadn't had time with the immediate and imperative tone of all the news anchors. They wanted my ass gone. Thinking about the diet, I reached into my bag and pulled out half a sandwich. The bread was mashed and the moisture of the peanut butter had soaked through but the texture felt good in my mouth and it satisfied as it fell down my throat. I wish I had some water, I thought. Fuck it, sacrifices had to be made.

8

Jan walked through the double doors of the red stone building; the lobby was dark, illuminated only by the quiet light of the window on the back wall. As she stepped up to the desk, the indifferent gaze of the attendant greeted her.

"I want to report my son missing," she blurted between panicked breaths.

"Calm down ma'am, I need some information," said the attendant glancing up periodically from the glare of the computer screen. "What's your son's name?"

"Robert."

"Last name?"

"Black, Robert Black"

"And how long has he been missing ma'am?"

"Uh, um, 2, 3 days I can't be sure. He left his apartment, we think after we told him we wanted him to stop smoking marijuana. He hasn't called in three days and there's nothing missing from his apartment."

"Okay ma'am, and can you give me a physical description?"

"5'11", 250lbs. uh.. uh.. blonde, dark blonde hair, blue eyes,"

"Any tattoos or piercings ma'am?"

"No."

"Ok, please have a seat and we'll have one of our officers come out and talk to you."

"Thank you."

Jan sat in one of the chairs lining the wall and wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve. She struggled to hold back her tears with deep breaths as she attempted to swallow the lump in her throat. Her phone rang.

"Hi,"

"Yeah I'm here now, I'm waiting for an officer to come out and talk to me,"

"I just gave them a physical description,"

"Yeah,"

"Uh huh, I will"

"Yeah, ok, I'll see you at home,"

"Bye."

Soon a man in business attire stepped out of the door next to the window, the badge on his belt flashed against the light.

"Mrs. Black? I'm Lt. Daniels," he said as he sat across from her.

"Hello,"

"What can you tell me about your son ma'am?"

"Uh, he's never done anything like this before. I've called all his friends to see if they've seen him but he just disappeared.

"Has he ever talked about going anywhere by himself?"

"Um... California maybe," Jan snorted to keep back the tears.

"Specifically ma'am, we need to focus our efforts,"

"Nowhere specifically,"

"Okay Mrs. Black, now I need to ask you personally, is there any trouble at home that might motivate this behavior?"

"No, not at all, there has been some strange behavior on his part though."

"Okay, what's been going on?"

"A lot of drug use. He's been acting really paranoid lately, been talking a lot about conspiracies and stuff."

"Marijuana?"

"Mmhmm,"

"Anything else?"

"I don't know, I don't know"

"Have there been any really stressful events lately?"

"Well, my hu..husband and I gave him an ultimatum a few days ago to either stop smoking marijuana or move out of the condo we're letting him live in. He said he'd go home and think about it and we haven't heard from him since,"

"Ok, is there any history of psychological distress?"

"No, not at all, why?"

"We have to consider all the factors ma'am, we have to make sure he didn't do something drastic,"

Jan burst into tears.

"Chances are he's okay, Mrs. Black," said Lt. Daniels, taking hold of Jan's hand.

"Can I get your son's age, birthdate, automobile make, model and year, Your son's license plate number, cell phone number and last but not least a photo?" said the lieutenant.

"Of course," said Jan as she began scrawling words and numbers on a slip of paper the lieutenant gave her.

"I think we have everything we need. We'll put the word out to the authorities in the area and let you know if we have any developments,"

"Okay thank you,"

"We're here to help."

9

Before long the wooded scenery slowed down and I could see the water approaching. The bus stopped in front of a small compound of white buildings. Looking out I realized I had been here before. It was during the same church choir trip I had taken a few years back. I was happy knowing that previous events in my life had pointed the way for my destiny. Shit was making sense finally. The buildings were the ferry port for the boat to Martha's Vineyard. I was tempted to buy a ticket but I knew work had to be done, and an island would be a dead end at this point.

Apprehensive, I stepped off the bus and took in a deep breath of the ocean air. I was happy with the close

proximity of my goal and I knew that if I just asked the right questions and found the right method, I would soon find myself in Montreal. I stood on the edge of the parking lot for a few minutes gazing out on the water and the gray sea sky. It calmed me and gave me the simple energy I had been seeking. Looking around I saw a general store that had tie-dye t-shirts in its windows and I took them as good vibes. I knew that if I kept the ocean to my right I would be heading north and eventually I'd find the infamous hole through the woods.

I started up the sloping road and neared a small bait shop that stood quietly with its energy reserved. It was closed and looked as though it had been for years. A blonde girl came jogging towards me. I could feel the nerves coming on but I sucked it back and projected my confidence towards her. Before I could think what to say, I blurted the words "Excuse me." She slowed down and came to a half fast gait to meet me and match my eye. As she stopped, I forced a smile and collected my remaining confidence.

"What's up?" she replied.

"I need some help," I said, "Where do I go to get out of the box?" The girl raised her eyebrow and then a small smile cracked across her face. We stood there for a moment in gawky silence and then she answered simply.

"I guess just keep taking this road,"

"Cool, thanks," I said with a jilted smile. She knew what was up. I wanted to talk more just to be with someone but I'd have time later.

I was worried that the road was leading away from the ocean but I figured I could trust the girl. I walked on, seething splinters of pain burning deep into my feet. My heels had tenderized and there was hot pain where the skin had rubbed off. The air was humid and cool though, a nice contrast. I suspected it might begin to rain soon but I kept walking. My mind wandered and among the tired depression I returned to the notion that I was losing my mind. No. I was called to come out here. I had sacrificed plans for world salvation with the U.N. but I wondered if I might still be able to have an impact in Canada and bring a quasi-peace to the world. That was the only way. Only then would people stop making judgments about me. And fuckin' ay, how else could have all those connections fit together so nicely? Things had made such perfect sense, but ever since I started this journey it had been a shit storm. Nothing had gone the way it was supposed to. Maybe there was a lesson in that. Either way, I knew I'd need help soon. I was out of money and almost food.

As I walked I revisited my plan to become established in Canada and live simply among the community of "cool" people. It was a loose plan and I knew I had no real idea of where exactly to go or even who the right people were, but that was fine. I could just key myself into the scene somehow. Maybe I could find some info on the Internet. There had to be Internet cafes in Canada, or libraries at the very least. Shit, when you live life on the flow, you've got to think on your feet.

I continued walking up the road, my shoes dragging and slapping against the asphalt. They rubbed raw at my heels but I put it out of my mind. I wondered how far I had walked since the bus stop, probably a few miles by now. The roads were backcountry, rural, and I hadn't yet seen a conspicuous trail through the woods. It would probably take some work to find it. My legs shot with a sore pain every step, thighs and feet burning. I caught a strong whiff of myself when I raised my arm to scratch my head. I could also feel the greasy hair. My hands were dirty too, dirt lining my fingernails. I shrugged it off as a side effect of life on the road but it was clear that a hot shower would do me good, impossible now though. Fuck this shit.

Another several series of walking 100 yards, sitting down for a rest and then sucking it up and walking again brought me to a point of exasperation with the road. I climbed up from the street into the woods and pushed my way through a rather thick brush with an assortment of brambles, fallen limbs and obstacles at every second step. Progress was fleeting in these conditions but I had to find the telltale trail. The woods were wet and my feet would sink an inch or two with every step into the carpet of leaves. I would sit to ease the pain in

my feet every few minutes on a rock or stump. Accompanied by a small whimper I could hear the drizzling rain as it hit the leaves on the way down. "I want to go home," said a voice I didn't recognize.

About an hour into the woods, no concept of direction, the rain started down heavy. I considered attempting a shower in the cool rain but thought better, instead pulling on my hooded sweatshirt and the flannel shirt. They were damp but still warm. I grabbed the pair of heavy wool socks I had brought and slid my feet into them creating a little extra cushion and protection from the friction at my heels. I was confounded why I hadn't thought of that before but as I stood up I could tell the socks were helping. I was sore and moving stiffly but I gathered my strength and continued climbing through the woods. Soon, I lost myself again and wandered with abandon.

The words 'keep going' ricocheted around and around in my head and my feet moved until I stumbled out onto a rocky beach. It was a small cove and there was a decrepit dock with the paint chipped away. The gray of the wood spoke of its years. There was a no trespassing sign hanging on a rusted out post but I couldn't see any signs of life so I stayed. I fell down by a large rock and closed my eyes, listening to the roll of the small waves. There were no connections to bother me here. I relaxed my feet and my toes and stretched my legs out so the soles of my shoes made contact with the creeping edge of the water. I would let my eyes open periodically to gaze out at the open water. I could see the beach and the edge of the water, extending out to the north and south, curving like a child's squiggle. As I sat I lost myself in thought. The mission had been a failure. Why hadn't anything worked? I did what the connections said and followed my instinct but it had all fallen to shit. Insanity was a very real possibility to me now but I still refused to believe it. Soon, a Bob Marley song reverberated from my memory and took over my mind. I whispered the first verse to myself.

"No sun will shine in my day today; the high yellow moon won't come out to play,

Darkness has covered my light, and has changed my day into night, yeah. Where is the love to be found? Won't someone tell me? 'cause my life must be somewhere to be found. Instead of concrete jungle, where the living is harder."

I sat for about 20 minutes trying to catch sleep until the cold wind started to bite at my face. The chill air that had been friendly before was starting to revoke its welcome. The burning in my feet came back the moment I stood up. My body was limp yelling surrender but I ignored it and climbed back up to the woods. Ambling slowly I stepped lightly in an attempt to avoid the pain but it rang loud with every movement.

Catching any clear area I would follow it with a blind conviction until it disappeared. I'd follow any feeling I got surrendering to my instinct. I was gone. The only thing left of me was the pain and the desperate hope that my next move would mean salvation. I was unaware of time but I could see the gray sky. Tonight I would be sleeping out here. I whimpered when I realized I had made very little progress. Soon, I climbed through a gap in some bushes and found myself in a clearing. There was dry creek bed and a very small hill that grew to the side of it. I noticed that the land on the other lip of the creek was flat and clear of trees and as I climbed up out of the creek bed I caught a glimpse of a small grown over trail and I smiled.

Following the trail, time passed slowly. It led me to an eerie idyllic driving range where there stood a group of crows that remained silent and sinister through their small powerful eyes. They glared at me as I passed. Crows were an omen right? I couldn't remember if it was good or bad but they were definitely an omen. They seemed to be paying me a strange respect but I couldn't tell. The notion occurred that they had been sent for me but they did nothing as I passed.

Soon I got to the other side and disappeared once again into the woods. I found the path again and followed it until I got to a wire fence and wooden gate. There was a house to my right but I ignored my qualms about trespassing and opened the gate.



"What's up man?" a voice came from nowhere and I glanced around until I saw a guy walking towards me. He was woodsy, not much older than me so I figured he could be trusted.

"I need to get out of the box," I replied with a quiet resolve.

"This is my yard man," he said.

"Uh, I need to get out of the box," I said.

"Shit man," he replied, "Follow me." The guy led me across the yard to another gate and jiggled the handle violently to free open the latch. Finally, he pulled it open.

"Go over to the driveway and follow it up to the road," the man said. I nodded, wondering if he was wise to the situation. Either way, I was gracious that I finally had some form of guidance. I walked through the gate passing the man and halted, blurting, "What do I do after that?"

"Shit man, I dunno, the road's up there though," he replied. I thanked him with a lethargic wave and he turned and headed up towards the house.

"Fuck," I muttered hobbling up the driveway. The dirt was muddy and my shoes stuck in the ground with every step. Soon enough I found myself staring down the dark asphalt of a rural road. The paint of the stripes was worn off and there were violent cracks in the road. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," I repeated no closer to the proverbial hole. It had become apparent to me that I had no fucking idea what I was doing but I kept going. With every shooting pain of a step it was obvious to me that this was bullshit. I wanted to go home, I wanted to sleep in my bed and I wanted to smoke a joint. I wanted to forget the world and I wanted peace inside my fucking head. Fuck this. I shuffled down the road, stopping every 30 feet to rest my damp body on a soaked stump or rock. Then I'd get up again, fight the pain and walk further, sticking out my thumb at the few passing cars. This was bullshit, what was I doing out here? This seethed and gnawed on my mind as I walked. "No concrete evidence, no mission," I muttered. It occurred to me that if I placed one hand on my head to signify a crown along with my protruding thumb people would know that I was the chosen one, that is, if there was any chance whatsoever that my mission was real. Everyone that passed got a healthy smattering of obscenities that poured from my mouth like water from a pitcher. I'd flip them off as they drove by and then look up at the sky, crying to God to ask desperately for help. I cursed myself knowing that only girls and faggots cried.

I was lost.

There were houses every 100 yards or so and, dragging my pain like a dead ox, I would approach each one and knock for dear life, never receiving any answers. Part of me wanted to break in but I thought better. My discouragement had become unbearable and my body needed rest. I had been walking and traversing the country aimlessly for the last four days and the gray clouds were reminiscent of my spirit. I knew I had to get shit figured out but I was too tired. I had to keep going though, no matter what. Fuck the mission, Fuck my thoughts, and Fuck the connections. It was at this point that I realized the significance of home; I had taken that shit for granted. The phrase, you never know what you've got 'til it's gone, echoed in my head. Now was not the time to whimper though. I remembered what my Dad used to say about setting small goals for myself, and eventually reaching the light at the end of the tunnel. I took that advice, setting my next goal for the turn off I noticed ahead through the trees about 200 yards. The road was hilly and rolled along the land like a ribbon of damp black.

My mind was too tired to race but it still jumped aimlessly from one notion to another and I fazed out.

Before long I came around the trees to the turnoff and slumped to the ground. There was a large sign that indicated USGS and the Science Center for Coastal and Marine Geology. The connection here was a sign

from above and I almost cried at the joy of finding such a gem. My brother had had an affinity for geology for the last three or so years and had always talked about the healing power of crystals and stones. It was undeniable. I had been brought here for a reason. I looked down the industrial road to the science center and knew I'd get help there. It was still about another 200 yards to any building on the road but I gathered my strength and shuffled...slowly. I could barely move my feet but the cars in the lot told me there were people there. I could hear the cars passing on the main road and I worried I was missing an opportunity but I had to follow the signs. Nearing the first building small tears began to well in the corners of my eyes. It hurt so badly. I wondered just how in the fuck I would manage to find my way home. I just needed a ride somewhere, anywhere. I needed to get to a place where my options weren't so limited.

"I need a goddamn ride," I whimpered, practicing my desperate speech for anyone that would listen. I needed something or someone to tell me everything was OK. My mind stopped jumping for the first time in a long time as I thought of home. I wanted my bed. I wanted my mom.

Finally I rounded the first gray building and felt calm as I saw the name posted on a sign above the door. "Black" it read. Another connection. My last name was glorious as it jumped from the sign. I knew it now. Without a doubt, I was on the right path. Every fiber in my being told me to rest but I scaled the wooden stairs with a painful shuffle. At the top, I reached out my hand to try the door. Despair grabbed my heart and ripped it out of my chest as I realized that it, like all of the other doors, was locked tight. I fell down against the wooden banister and shut my eyes. My mind drifted in and out and I felt strange, disconnected like I was tripping acid. The rain drizzled quiet on my head as I sat and watched my mind stop.

I wanted to cry but I was too tired so I just sat and breathed. Death could come now if it wanted. I was ready.

10

"John, could you call your brother for us?"

"Why are you crying mom?"

"Here's your father,"

"Hey John,"

"What's going on dad?"

"Your brother's been missing for the last four days,"

"Jeez, Rob or..."

"Yeah Rob, we think he took off on Friday or Saturday after your mother and I had a little intervention with him,"

"He hasn't called?"

"No, the only thing we can figure is that he's angry with us and won't answer our calls. We've only been able to reach his voice mail. We think he turned his phone off,"

"I could call him if you want,"

"Would you try?"

"Yeah I can try,"

"He might answer if he sees it's you calling,"

"I'll definitely see what I can do. What'd you guys say to him anyway?"

"We just gave him a letter telling him we'd have to kick him out of the condo if he didn't stop smoking marijuana."

"I don't see why he'd run away because of that."

"We don't either, he's been having a lot of paranoia issues lately and he doesn't see that it's the pot that's doing this to him,"

"Hmm, like what kind of paranoia?"

"I don't even know John. He's been talking about conspiracies and how the media is talking to him. We can't even have a normal conversation with him anymore without him going on and on about aliens or illuminati or the Da Vinci Code or something."

"That's really strange."

"He's been saying he's afraid to go out in public because people are staring at him."

"God."

"It's the pot. We're just so worried about him, he could be lying in a ditch somewhere."

"Well I can definitely try to call him."

"Would you, it'd mean a lot to your mother and I."

"Yeah definitely."

"Alright John, thanks."

"Yeah dad, I'm sure he's fine, don't worry too much."

"We'll call you with any updates."

"Alright Dad."

"Bye."

11

Finally, I stood up. The resolve was there but I didn't know where it had come from. Giving up was a choice but I knew that as long as I could take it, I should keep going. Maybe they were expecting me. Maybe, inadvertently my feet had led me here for some reason that was beyond my thinking. Either way, trying was the only choice I had. I had to get home.

I moved painfully across the wooden walkway and rounded the building when hope caught my eye. There was

an old bike resting against the side of the building unlocked. My hopes had long since drained into cynicism with all the false promises so I walked over carefully and was awarded with a set of flat tires. Typical. I was too tired for anger. I fell again into my thoughts, wondering how any source, spirit or god who had ordained me as a prophet could consistently hinder my progress. Maybe it was all a series of tests and lessons to make me a man before the serious work could begin. No, fuck the mission; there was no such thing. The bike had to be slightly workable though. It would be tough but I could still ride on flats, anything to get me off my feet. I realized I'd be stealing the bike and wondered about what the media would say but looking around, I couldn't see any cameras so I caved. I was in need, the public would understand. As I climbed on I wondered why nobody had done anything to help if they had been watching me this whole time. No such thing as a mission... or still top secret. Fuck. Regardless, the bike would be suitable for the ride back to the bus stop, if I wasn't too lost already.

I pushed off and rode awkwardly up the driveway back to the main road. The bike wobbled nastily but the pain in my feet had calmed. I climbed the hill of the driveway and began to realize the futility of the endeavor as I struggled to maintain a stable ride. Nearing the top of the hill I almost fell off. Finally, a few feet from the road, I gave up throwing the piece of shit down across the grass and yelled "FUCK" into the cool gray air.

Standing silently by the road I stuck out my thumb and cursed, then prayed desperately to whoever would listen. Several cars passed and I patted my head saying, "Please stop, please stop, I'm a prophet." Then I'd flip them off as they passed. My options dwindled and I stood wearily, unwilling to walk any farther. I could feel dusk coming. Soon, I heard another engine careening down the road and my thumb pierced the wet air one last time as a dark blue Audi slowed to meet my distress. I smiled knowing this car had been sent for me. The connections buzzed clear, my favorite color was blue and I had always overheard my brother speaking of his affinity for Audis.

I expected to see a man in a black suit as should have been customary with the cookie-cutter image of a secret government official. But as I opened the door I saw a middle aged woman with black hair and a beat down smile that spoke of a hard life. I peered in and felt a calm vibration in her that told me she was trustworthy.

"Hey," I said.

The woman just smiled.

"Where you headed?" she said through a tired calm tone.

"I don't know," I chuckled wearily, "maybe back to town?" Of course she knew the whole story but I was confused by her theatrics and wished she would cut the top-secret shit. Regardless, I was happy for the ride so I said nothing about it.

Her energy was tired but serene, and her face and voice were comforting to me for some reason. She was good people.

"I kind of want to go home," I blurted.

"I can take you to Boston," she said.

"That'll be fine," I said as I climbed into the car.

"Aren't you going to get your bike?" she asked. My alarms sounded for a moment. Maybe she was testing me.

"Uh, well... it's not really my bike," I replied giving in to the act once again. "I kind of borrowed it from that place."

"Jeez," she said, "I thought you just had a flat tire or something."

"I was going to ride it back to town but both its tires are flat."

"So you're just hitchhiking?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you get out here?" she asked lightly.

"Uh... it's a long story," I replied. A moment of silence elapsed as I considered the prospect that she hadn't really been sent to retrieve me.

"What's your name?" the woman asked.

"Rob."

"I'm Sharon," she replied as we awkwardly shook hands.

The silence once again took over until the air got uncomfortable. I knew I had to say something.

"Thanks for the ride."

"Sure, I don't normally pick up strangers but you seemed kind of desperate."

"Uh... yeah,"

"What brings you out to Woods Hole?"

I was reluctant to say anything but I figured I should tell the truth.

"I was trying to get to Canada."

"Canada's like three hundred miles from here."

"Are you serious?"

"Are you delirious or something?"

"Uh yeah...I guess, I've been on the road for the last few days now."

"Really? Well, where are you from?" she asked.

"Colorado," I said, noticing as she raised her eyebrows in a sort of impressed disbelief. "Did you run away?" she asked.

"Sorta," I said, "I like to think I was sent by God to come out here but like I said, it's a long story."

"Well, we've got plenty of time," she said. "You want some food? I have some apples and nuts in the back."

"Yeah I'll take an apple," I replied. "You're probably going to think I'm nuts if I tell you everything that's happened."

"No..." she replied.

"You sure?"

"Tell me."

"Okay," I said psyching myself up to tell a version that wouldn't freak her out. "Have you ever felt something so strong... that there was no other choice for you than to take action; so strong that every fiber in your being told you that that was the only way?"

"I'll have to think about that one."

The car fell silent for a few moments. I wondered if I should tell her. I ran my finger across the stitching in the chair nervously. I wondered what Sharon was thinking about me. I could smell my strong pungent odor in contrast to the clean leather smell of the car and apologized for it timidly. Another few moments passed before I gained enough courage to tell her what happened.

"It was like God was telling me I had a mission to accomplish," I blurted. "Everything I saw or heard directly involved me or was intertwined intricately with my life. It still is."

"What do you mean intertwined?" asked Sharon.

"Like, I would be feeling like complete shit, like no one cared about me. In one of my classes with 300 kids and the professor, a guy I'd never really talked to, would put on a CD with a song that said everybody loves you," I explained. "It was like he put on the music just for me and I'd never even talked to the guy."

"That's kind of strange."

"I know," I replied. "How the fuck could he have known what was going through my mind?"

"I don't know," said Sharon. "If it makes you feel any better I feel that way a lot."

"Yeah," I said. Silence ensued again.

"There was this other time in another class when I came in and I was so fucking stressed and worried what people thought of me that I was afraid to, like, say a word or even move the wrong way," I said. "My shoulders were so fucking tense, and it was impossible for me to relax."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, I come into my class and there's this unscheduled guest speaker talking about post traumatic stress disorder...and I realized he was describing exactly what I felt. It was like..."

"Like he was there for you personally," interrupted Sharon.

"Exactly," I said. "Anyway, it kept happening with everyone I met, with everything I heard and everything I saw on TV."

"That's crazy."

"Haha, I know," I said. "And, eventually patterns and messages and shit started to appear."

"What do you mean?"

"Like through these connections, it was like I was being told to come out here. It sounds fuckin' crazy. Sorry,"

"So are you a psychopath who's gonna kill me and eat me?"

"Haha," a nervous laugh, "I don't think so. It was like "they" were telling me through the media what needed to be done."

"That's pretty out there."

"Yeah, I fuckin' know. Sorry, you can let me out if you want to."

"Uh, no, I can take you, you're probably tired of walking, aren't you."

"I have blisters all over my feet, so yeah, thanks."

"No problem."

Silence.

"I actually used to have a boyfriend that always talked about that kind of stuff," she said.

"What?"

"Subliminal messages and stuff."

"It's crazy stuff... pun intended," I said.

"He'd always tell me to turn the TV off because they were poisoning my mind with subliminal messages and stuff."

I sighed and reached out to turn up the radio.

"Maybe I can demonstrate, it's some crazy shit," I said.

"So how'd you get out here then?" she asked again.

"The messages in the media said I should come out here."

"So the messages told you that you needed to come to Boston?" asked Sharon.

"Actually they told me to go to the U.N.," I said.

"Wow."

"But the U.N. was closed when I got there."

"So how'd you get here?"

"I have a friend in Boston and when the shit in New York didn't work out I figured I'd go visit her and see if she could help," I said. "When I got there I... shit didn't really work out either," I sighed. "I was so tired and

just fuckin' pissed about all the loose ends, so I was like fuck this, I'm going to Canada."

"Well you've still got a long way to go," she replied.

"Jesus." I said, "There's no hole, is there?"

"What do you mean?"

"WOODS...HOLE, I thought there was a secret hole through the woods to Canada."

"Oh, ha ha, no, at least not that I know of."

"Fuck."

I was tired but I held up my end of the conversation through the daze. I was in heaven seated comfortably where I could rest my feet. Occasionally, I would look over at Sharon and notice her slender tired fingers and the conservative white polo sweater she wore and wonder what her malfunction was. If she had one, she hid it well. There was a hint of uneasiness in her voice but she contradicted it with her sweet and lowdown attitude. I hoped she wasn't too off put by my considerably unkempt appearance and lack of mental clarity but I figured I had done a good job not revealing too much about the mission. I wasn't crazy. I was enlightened.

"Where are you coming from...or uh, going?" I asked as a break in the momentary silence.

"Actually, I'm just coming home from meeting this guy I met on the Internet," Sharon replied. I was surprised by her strange honesty. Maybe we were in the same boat.

"Oh... cool. How was that?" I asked, without considering the sensitivity of the subject.

"He was an asshole," Sharon replied. "He kept writing about how rich he was and how privileged he was on-line and then when I got there he wouldn't stop talking about how many problems he had. And he kept making these, God, just these like subtle insults about me."

"He sounds like a douche bag," I said.

"Yeah," Sharon replied, "it was like he thought he deserved to be a dick and he always made me be on top to do all the work."

Taken aback, I laughed nervously. What the fuck, why would she tell me that? This bitch is nuts too... at least I have some company. I suddenly wondered if she was saying this as some sort of attack to me. Was she making fun of my inexperience? An awkward silence took over the car for a few moments as it hummed down the road.

"Do you do that a lot?" I asked.

"Every once in a while," she said. "I live alone so it's nice to have some company from time to time."

Although the conversation was smooth, the awkwardness was dense like stone. I was relieved when Sharon made the decision to kill that thread and move on to another topic.

"So these messages," she said, "Tell me more about that."

"Uh... well I pretty much decided to say fuck it after nothing worked out," I said. "I feel like if I told you any



more about it you'd think I'm completely out of my mind."

"Don't worry," she said. "I've done some pretty crazy stuff myself, I won't judge you."

At this I knew first, that she was most likely on my level and second, that she, in fact, was trustworthy. I took a quick deep breath and scratched my head, hesitant.

"It's just shown me that everything, fuckin' really, has a reason, every movement, every word, and every tiny action that you take affects the world in an incredibly significant way," I said. "Whether we realize it or not, the impact that, that we, you know that we have and every fuckin' thing we do changes our world entirely, every person that we meet and every person that they meet and so on. There's a reason for fuckin' everything."

"That's pretty deep," Sharon replied.

"Haha, shit, tell me about it. Have you ever heard of the butterfly effect?"

"No."

"Basically, what it says is that uh... if a butterfly flaps it's wings in California, it could cause this like hurricane on the other side of the world."

Sharon expressed her interest with a slight "Hmm".

"If you do something, anything, you never know who, like, might see you do it and, like, what kind of effect it could have on that person," I said. "If you do something good, you might inspire someone to, you know, do some good too."

"Yeah."

"And eventually it might trickle down to the next Martin Luther King Jr. or the next Gandhi, you know?"

"Totally."

"And if you do something bad, it might eventually lead to someone's death. You never know, like, what kind of affect you have on people."

"I agree with that."

"Also, it's like, you never know what the universal energy, you know God or whatever, is making you do to carry out its plan."

"Jesus," she said, "you've thought about this a lot haven't you?"

"Fuckin' A."

"I have a question."

"What's up?"

"What's this universal plan?" she asked.

"Uh, I don't really know but I'm pretty sure it's ultimate unification," I replied.

She looked at me inquisitively.

"Uh, in the words of John Lennon, Imagine all the people living life in peace," I smiled and continued, "Imagine this totally good world where nobody was separated by class, belief, color, mentality or their decisions and, like, where everyone lived in this fucking total and complete peace and harmony."

"What does this have to do with your mission?" asked Sharon.

I caught my thoughts before they skewed into paranoia and carefully formulated an answer in my head so as not to freak the woman out.

"It's like, everywhere I go I see these signs and these like, crazy indications," I said. "They've like, and this is gonna sound fuckin' nuts, but they've guided me everywhere and told me where to go and what to do."

"What do you mean?" the look on her face said everything.

"Like signs from God, giving me direction, like connections to my life in regular signs on the street."

"Like what though?"

"Like uh, well, there was this neon sign in New York of a guitar over this like candy shop and it made perfect sense that it was there for only me alone because I play guitar and have a wicked sweet tooth. So it made sense and so I stopped there and asked for help."

"There are a lot of people who play guitar and have a sweet tooth though."

"Yeah I know but I was desperate for some kind of help so I'd try anywhere that stood out."

"I see."

"And that building where I found the bike was called the Black building, which is like, my last name, and they put that bike out there so I would find it and try to ride it and eventually you'd pick me up."

"Whoa, slow down."

"And it wasn't just signs either. People would pat their heads or point their fingers that would give me direction, because a pat on the head meant that yes, I was going in the right direction."

"I see."

"And who said that that's what a pat on the head meant?"

"I did, before I left."

"What?"

"Well, the TV was sending me all these messages telling me I had to leave and save the world and I tried it a couple times before and since there's a camera in my apartment, I told them that if they really wanted me to go I would need guidance and I could ask yes or no questions and I decided that a pat on the head meant yes, no pat meant no."

"And they agreed to this?"

"I know it sounds fuckin' crazy but they did... I don't know. I'm sorry, you can let me out here."

"Whoa, I'm not gonna abandon you now, don't you want somewhere to sleep?"

"Yeah I just...I dunno."

"Don't worry."

"Ok."

Silence.

"So tell me more," said Sharon.

"Jesus, I'm fucking crazy, even though I like, ran out of money, I'm still following the signs. I know those signs and indications were meant specifically for me because they related directly to my life. I can't tell you every one though because I've been kind of distracted."

"That's pretty far out," said Sharon.

It was a simple response that did the job.

"All I know is that the Gods or whatever the fuck there is brought me here for some reason," I said. "Every fiber in my being told me that I had no choice but to make this trip and I'm still completely in the dark about the exact reason why, but I HAD to come out here."

"Crazy."

"I thought it was so I could be of service to mankind or maybe it was just to meet you but I had no other choice but to come out here."

"Weird," said Sharon. The car fell silent once again and the paranoia screamed in my head. Still we continued down the road, trees passing by in a blur. Eventually it broke with the cold soothing water of new words.

"So what's your part in the plan, like what's your service to mankind?"

"I think God or some shit wanted me to alert the world to the error of their ways and show them the power of stuff like balance and compromise."

"Balance and compromise?"

"Yeah, you know, like the middle ground between light and dark, between every disagreement where each side has equal footing, equal standing, and equal power. Essentially balance and compromise is equality."

"Sort of like the middle path in Buddhism."

"Fuckin' exactly dude, shit."

"I think there's a lot of truth to that."

"Truth is important too," I said, thoughts racing. "Complete honesty leaves, like, no room for deception... but a lot of people are, like, too afraid to face the music so they lie to get out of a tough situation. Plus it ends up

biting them in the ass later on down the road."

The car again seethed with awkward silence and I knew I had hit a nerve.

My mind began to wander and question the lies this woman was holding back. After a minute or two the silence broke again.

"So you came out here with no money, no food and no place to stay?"

"Uh... yeah, it was kind of a leap of faith," I replied. "Last night I kind of slept in an alley in the middle of New York,"

"Jesus," said Sharon.

I knew what she was going to say next but was reluctant to accept the offer.

"Do you want to stay at my house tonight?"

"Uh, you don't even know me," I replied.

"Well, you seem... normal." she said, "It doesn't seem like you have it in you to do anything violent."

With that comment, I didn't know whether or not to take offense; did it make me less of a man to not have the capability to cause violence? I wasn't some fucking weak queer. Catching my thoughts, I dispelled the paranoia.

"How about I order some pizza?"

"That's the best damn idea I've heard in a long time," I said. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you."

"I do," she said with an abject seductive tone.

"Um... maybe you should let me out here... How old are you?" I said.

"40...shit, I'm sorry."

"I'm 20."

"Yeah, I misspoke, sorry."

The silence was harsh; I knew I had discovered the woman's malfunction.

"I'll still put you up if you want."

"Yeah definitely, thanks."

"Just consider it my favor to mankind."

"Thanks."

The car ride continued on in quiet for a while until Sharon expressed her limited thoughts on Iraq, spurred by my sparse and uneducated comments about the U.S. being a disaster and about my desire to find Canada and

my plans for when I got there.

The banter was awkward and I could sense the nerves in her voice as well as my own. Still, the topics stayed light and the conversation proceeded askew having already established its boundaries.

As the sky and the blur of green grew dark, Sharon explained my miscalculations about where I was and detailed how Canada was still a very long way off.

I told her I was tired and asked if I could take a shower at her house. I smelled bad, and although we were used to it by now, the odor had overpowered the car and I wanted nothing more than to get clean and rest my feet.

An hour of silence later, she spoke, "We're almost there."

She took out her cell-phone and made a call to place an order for pizza. A part of me wondered if it was a guise and if she was speaking in code to her governmental superiors.

I considered asking her to see the phone to make sure but I let the idea drop. I then thought about asking to use it to call my parents. I knew that there was no way they would understand and so eventually I pushed that idea out of my head too. They didn't care about me anyway.

About a half hour later we pulled into a dumpy side-of-the-road building and she disappeared into the night. I grew paranoid until I saw her returning a few minutes later with a pizza box in her arms.

"Almost home," she said.

I took a deep breath and sighed.

"My dogs will be happy I'm home," she said. "They always go nuts when I'm away."

I smiled and said simply, "I love dogs."

"Yeah, but it's weird, they always tear up the house when I'm gone. I don't know what's wrong with them."

"That's weird," I said, tired and ready to relax.

She pulled the car out and began to drive again. Soon, we were off the main road and headed down a densely wooded drive that showed no sign of activity, the headlights shown blindly on the passing trees. I could see nothing but forest. It seemed remote and I wondered if she was going to take me to some backwoods cabin and kill me but I could still feel the car riding smoothly on concrete. My nerves began to swell again and paranoia returned with full force.

"Where are we?"

"Oh we're almost there," she said, "don't worry."

Silence.

Soon, I could see lights and several colonial style houses surrounding an open park type area with a lighted gazebo in the middle and a sign that read, West Northhaverbrook.

My worries subsided with this and I relaxed my shoulders.

"Damn, this is a small town," I said.

"Yeah" Sharon replied chuckling.

I felt comfortable in the quiet town. I knew it'd be hard for evil to find me here and the connections wouldn't be so strong. Here I could find, at least, a small slice of peace of mind.

Before long, the car pulled up in front of large square Victorian house. I could see through the headlights the dark red paint that covered the house. I sighed as I slowly threw open the door and climbed out of the car. I looked at Sharon as I stood up and was soon reminded of the pain in my feet. Sharon still moved with a nervous jitter as she pulled the pizza and a couple brown bags out of the back seat of the car.

"Thanks again Sharon," I said. She just looked at me and said, "Just promise me you're not a psycho and we'll call it even."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not," I joked.

I could hear barking coming from the house.

"Those must be the dogs," I said.

"That's them," she responded, "I just hope they haven't gone nuts."

I followed her up the steps to the majestic white door and looked around at the forest and the surrounding houses.

As the door opened two large dogs jumped up almost knocking her down. They barked and bounded out into the front yard. I attempted to pet them and show them I was good but they ignored my hand and ran past. Sharon and I stepped into the house and I could feel a deep heaviness on my chest with a slight tinge of dread. Looking around, I saw the furniture in odd askew positions and a couple rugs thrown around recklessly. I could see a puddle on the wooden floor and the drapes in one of the front windows that had been torn down and ripped about.

"I'm sorry, these dogs make such a mess," said Sharon.

"Jeez," I said, "why do they go so crazy?"

"I don't know, but they do this every time I leave."

I took a deep breath and attempted to ease the heavy feeling on my chest. I was reminded of a show I had seen about ghost hunters where they had often complained of a heavy feeling as they entered a building that had been known for spirit activity. The connection was clear but I shrugged it off as a figment of my blatantly overactive imagination.

Sharon set down her bags and the pizza and said, "Ok, you can use the upstairs bathroom. The pipes are kind of old though so it makes a lot of noise and it takes a little while for the hot water to come on. There should be some soap in there but let me know if there's not. As soon as you're done I'll get you some clothes and put those dirty ones in the washer." Her speech was hurried and again I wondered what caused the anxiety but thought little of it and thanked her. She smiled and disappeared into the kitchen.

I kicked off my shoes and set down my pack. Pulling my last pair of clean underwear out, I headed up the stairs. They creaked under my feet and I couldn't escape the reality that this house was clearly worn out.

I got to the landing and peered into the rooms, still feeling the dread. Eventually I found a bathroom with old fixtures and light rust around the edges. Stains from years of use crawled up the side of the tub. At this point anything would do. I took off my clothes and found a crusty bar of soap sitting next to the sink in a ceramic soap dish that sat quiet and lonely. I could now smell myself unapologetically. The mixture of sweat with mildew shook me but I threw the clothes in a heap on the floor and stepped into the tub. There was a single bottle of organic shampoo situated in the corner. It would do. I turned the handle on the faucet and the pipes screamed for a few moments before a river of lightly brown tinted liquid trickled out. The stream turned hot and the water cleared and poured smoothly as I felt out the temperature. I took a deep breath. I turned on the shower and felt ecstasy pour over my shoulders. So hot, so nice. I had never been so relieved to step into a shower and it reminded me of the shower I had taken after dropping acid. "Aaaaahh Godddd" I said. I stood with my eyes closed for several minutes breathing in the steam and although my feet still cried with my weight, the water soothed me. The aching in the back of my neck and shoulders eased away and I sighed deeply as I collected my thoughts about the mysterious woman.

Washing away the dirt and the sweat, I spent a good 30 minutes under the hot water knowing joy for the first time in a while. As I stepped out I felt calm and refreshed. My feet still ached but I stood comfortably drying myself. I reveled in the cleanliness or rather godliness that I now felt. Pulling on the clean underwear, I looked at myself in the large mirror on the wall. I stared at myself with a lack of expression and slowly dazed out as I stared into my eyes. Suddenly, a loud bang startled me out of the daze and I looked at the ceiling, trying to locate the source of the noise. I wanted to believe it was a problem with the pipes but the ghost hunters show made itself known once again in my head. I rubbed my eyes and took a deep breath to soothe the spiking nerves inside me. "Fuck it, everything's fine Rob," I told myself.

After another deep breath I opened the medicine cabinet above the sink. I noticed various ointments and hygiene products strewn about when something caught my eye. Quietly sitting among the wares was a full bottle of Oxycontin and a package of razor blades. My eyes widened and my mind tightened. For a moment I wondered why they were there but then jumped to my own selfish motivations. I might need these things. It was entirely possible that everything I believed about myself and my mission was in my head and in that case, because fuck going to an insane asylum, I could see no other point in continuing my own existence. Plus what if somewhere down the road, shit got real bad and I'd have no choice. Feeling a surge of excited despair I picked the pills and the blades out from the cabinet and slipped them inside the pile of dirty clothes.

I slowly opened the door to make sure there was no one outside. The coast was clear and I stepped out to see a pair of gym shorts and a white t-shirt folded in a neat pile outside the door.

"Thanks for the clothes Sharon," I belted. Back in the bathroom, I pulled them on. They were a little tight but they would do the job. I gingerly ambled back down the stairs, careful of the pain in my feet and running my hand down the railing until I was down. I held the load of dirty clothes under my arm and quickly slipped the pills and blades into my backpack sitting at the front door. Looking around I could see that everything had been straightened and there were no longer any signs of chaos in the house. Sharon emerged from the kitchen. I smiled and said a hearty thank you for the hospitality. My thoughts reverted back to the ghost hunters show as I could still feel the dread as it set its heavy hand on my chest. It could've been my imagination but something seemed to be here besides us. Given the last year or so of my life, I wondered if my feelings were a reputable source of information. Still, a haunting would explain all the nervous energy around here.

"Do you ever feel a sense of dread?"

Sharon was quiet for a moment. "Why?" she answered.

"I think I know why your dogs keep going nuts when you're gone," I said.

"Why?" she responded.

"Have you ever considered a spiritual energy in your house?" I said hoping to not freak her out by dropping the word 'haunted'.

"You think my house is haunted?"

"Well, I mean, it would explain a lot."

She looked at me with furrowed brow but quickly opened her mouth to combat the nerves.

"There might be some truth to that, I mean, it's a really old house, and you never know what could have happened here."

"I just have a heavy feeling on my chest," I replied, "and I heard a loud banging when I was in the shower."

She quietly affirmed, "Yeah, I hoped that wouldn't happen."

They continued the uneasy banter as she led me into the laundry room. The washer and dryer were placed haphazardly in the middle of the large room. I immediately felt the dread get heavier into a pressure on my chest and the trigger to get the hell out.

"There's nothing in here because I hate the way this room makes me feel," she said.

"For sure."

There was a large patch of concrete in the middle of the floor and my mind started running with thoughts of someone, maybe a little girl, buried below it.

"You know how to use a washer and dryer right?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, I'll be in the kitchen," she said, abruptly leaving me alone with the paranoia.

The corner of the room was dark and upsettingly ominous. Quickly, I took care of my business and escaped from the room. Getting back to the main hall I took a deep breath and attempted to calm myself.

"Sharon?" I called.

She stepped out of the dimly lit kitchen and said, "What's up?" I took comfort in the friendly face. She led me down the hall and into the living room where I noticed a slight ringing in my ears and a noticeably lower temperature. Again, I matched the characteristics to the presence of ghosts. I had seen all this shit on the ghost hunters show.

I said nothing but I could see Sharon growing more nervous.

"Do you hear that?" I said.

"What?"

"That ringing."

"Sort of like buzzing?"



"Yeah, what is that?"

"I don't know, it's always like that though."

"You should get that checked out. That's probably what's freaking out the dogs."

"You want anything to drink?" she said.

I wondered why she had changed the subject.

"Do you have any beer?"

"Yeah, I'll be right back." She said, disappearing through a door to the kitchen.

The room was eerie but offset by the large television and the comfortable couch that gave me a momentary solace. I decided to try to relax and picked up the remote, fiddling with it until the large screen blinked on. I turned up the volume to mask the ringing in my ears and flipped through the channels looking for some kind of message or indication. Chances were, the government knew where I was and even if they didn't they'd still probably broadcast messages in hopes I would see them. I hated that they praised me so much that they devoted their programming to me but I accepted it in my gut. I turned the channel to Comedy Central just in time to hear Jon Stewart say, "This new guy is an idiot, and he hasn't done anything for the cause."

"Fuck you," I whispered, lifting my middle finger to the screen and quickly changing the channel to something with less ridicule. I was doing the best I could.

I perused the news channels straining to make some sort of connection, but I was tired. Soon, Sharon emerged with a beer and a bottle of wine. I rubbed my eyes and took a deep breath greeting her with a smile. I just wanted answers and although I was thankful for her hospitality, I knew Sharon was in the dark. I wanted to be alone again, I wanted to be in a place where I had a relative control of my mind without the influence of the ignorant people or media, and I wanted to plan a revolution. But I was tired.

As she handed me the beer, she quickly pulled her sleeves down as if she was hiding something. Her motions were stunted and maybe it was the lack of sleep, but it all had meaning. What lay beneath those sleeves? Scars? Tracks? It was beyond my welcome to ask but I felt for her. She seemed secure enough. At least I knew she was real.

I strained my ears and eyes to keep up with the indications and interpret the messages that every interaction and word held but could find little.

As she sat down on the other end of the couch, she placed a pillow in between us to separate us. I almost laughed at this but kept quiet, turning my head back toward the television.

"I'm warming the pizza up in the oven," she said.

I sighed at the return of simple conversation and said quietly, "Okay."

I scrolled through the on screen guide on the television and found the movie "Alien vs. Predator". Recalling the trailer I had seen in theaters about the ancient alien temples, I made the connection immediately and figured that the movie may be able to offer some answers.

"I hope this is alright," I said pressing the select button on the remote.

"Whatever you want to watch is fine."

"Cool, you might wanna watch it too."

"Why?"

"You never know, there might be some important stuff in there."

She said nothing. The insight was clear though, aliens had always had a hand in the ancient Aztec, Egyptian and Druid cultures. It was unmistakable.

As the movie proceeded Sharon disappeared once again into the kitchen. When she was gone I was reminded of the ringing in my ears and the cool temperature in the room. I closed my eyes and said, "Go to the light." Before long she re-emerged with two plates of pizza. As we sat and ate, time passed and we watched the TV, occasionally making off hand remarks about the movie. I struggled with the piercing eye contact she maintained when she spoke but fought through it. When the credits began rolling on the screen, she left.

"I'm gonna go up to my room now," she said. "You're welcome to stay down here and watch TV as long as you want."

"Okay."

"Your room's gonna be upstairs on the right. I'll be across the hall if you need anything."

"Okay, thanks again for everything."

"Don't worry about it."

We smiled at each other and she proceeded out of the room.

Finding some arbitrary documentary on the history channel, I let go of my alertness and took a deep breath, relieving myself of the numerous signals she gave.

Turning my mind again to the ringing in my ears, I closed my eyes and focused on the presence in the room. Setting myself into a trance state I continued to scream telepathically, "GO HOME! Why don't you leave this house and go to the light? It's nice there. It's peaceful, you'll love it." I hoped restlessly that the presence would pick up these telepathic messages. I continued for nearly an hour making sure to consider the feelings of the presence. Eventually, the ringing lessened and I figured I had done the job.

Sharon's laptop sat on the coffee table. The thought occurred that I should show her what was up but I hesitated, knowing that I didn't have permission to use it.

I yawned and picked myself up to my still aching feet and started the arduous journey upstairs. When I finally arrived at the room I climbed into the bed and was overwhelmed with comfort. Soon, sleep came and I was gone.

12

"Hon? You still awake?"

Quiet.

Jan pulled herself out of the bed and stood up, looking around the dark room for anything. She needed something, something that she could grab onto, and hold, hold until it hurt, hold until blood made racing red lines down her arms, until her hands were raw. She left the room and walked quietly into the now guest room that had been Rob's. Opening the closet, she found the teddy bear that Rob had once confided in and held it in her arms tight as she slumped down on the bed. A quiet sobbing rang through the house accompanied only by the chime of the grandfather clock in the living room every fifteen minutes. As Jan lay on the guest room bed she soon resorted to deep gasps, knowing that meager tears would never be forceful enough to express her worry to those that listened. "Just bring him home, bring him home, bring him home," she mumbled over and over, each time changing the tone slightly in a desperate attempt to make her pleading sound more real.

She could hear the occasional snore of her husband and she hated him for it. What kind of person could find sleep at a time like this? Why wasn't he awake worrying? Why wasn't he with her? Her thoughts became dark like blood, evil little monsters eating at her sanity. If her son was crazy and not just a drug addict she could see how easy it was to fall over the line. "Please God, please God, please God, please Rob, Please Rob, Please Rob, Please Rob." Soon, a sleep came but it was peppered with demons. And as the sliver of sun peeked through the window, she held her false self-control tight and said little.

13

As I opened my eyes I could see out the small window that was adjacent to the bed. Looking out I saw a Poland Spring bottled water truck circling the block. It was rainy outside and the droplets on the window somewhat obscured the view. I hadn't noticed the night before that the sheets smelled like a mix of patchouli and fabric softener. It was a comfortable smell and it reminded me of my bed at home. I rested my head on the starchy pillow and sighed, looking at the room I had slept in and recalling the events that had brought me here.

Once again the water truck circled the block. My best instincts told me that they were probably lost but somewhere in my narcissistic mind I wondered if they were there for me. They were spies from Poland sent to bring me, in all my majesty, to a safe place of refuge. Or, perhaps, they were just circling the block to put the idea of Poland as a good place in my mind. I had always loved being around water, lakes and oceans growing up. They knew this. They knew everything about me. Poland might be a good place to go, I thought. The fact that the message had worked horrified me for a second as I wondered what other subliminal dictation they had captured me with. Canada first, or home, we'll see what happens then. I wanted to go home.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to filter out the constant bombardment. A few minutes later when I had found a semblance of control, I chose to face the inevitable and opened my eyes, glaring out the window and waiting for the truck to pass again. This time I would make them aware that the message was received, that they could stop. The truck soon circled the block once again. I couldn't make eye contact with the driver so I whispered into the air, "Okay Poland, I get the fucking message." Surely there were microphones here as there had been every other place I had been. Again I sighed and attempted to regain control. I calmed myself and pulled the sheets up over my head to get some peace and privacy from the possibility of hidden cameras. Eventually, I dozed back in.

Sometime later I opened my eyes and sat up in the bed. It was good to feel refreshed. I brought my hand to my eyes and rubbed out the crumbly yellow crust. I caught some of it on my finger and tried to cut it in half with my thumbnail. I looked glaring out the window for a few minutes to see if the truck would come back and when it didn't I sighed, sliding down to the floor from the high bed. My feet still ached but not nearly as bad as they had. I lifted my legs up to check the condition of the blisters on the bottoms of my feet. They still puffed out; tender, and several were black and purple. I walked across the wood floor as it creaked and wondered if Sharon was awake yet. It was probably still early given the dark grey sky.

I quietly opened the door and made my way to the bathroom. When I was finished I walked down the stairs, avoiding Sharon's door so as not to wake her. I would just put on the TV and wait until a reasonable hour.

The stairs cried lightly, creaking with years of worn out pain. I wondered if our spirit friend was still around roaming through the halls of the old house. The house felt almost alarmingly more warm and calm. The dread of the night before was replaced by a sweet soft calm. My lips cracked into a small grin as I saw the sunshine pouring into the front windows. The clouds had split and allowed the grace of the heavens to pour through. The rays of light caught some of the floating dust and dander in the air and it brought a peace. "Chill," I said under my breath.

I walked into the living room and strained my ears to catch any ringing sounds but couldn't hear any. The dogs were noticeably calmer as well. They lay as lazy bags of bones on the carpet in the middle of the living room floor. The TV was already turned on to CNN and I took this as a sign that Sharon was awake and about somewhere. I wondered what the newscasters would have to say about me today and out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the tiny clock in the corner of the screen. 5:17pm. Damn. I was amazed but unsurprised that I had slept this long.

Sighing, I slumped down on the couch and waited for the pundits to criticize me. Again I rubbed my eyes and relaxed in the sunlight that snuck in under the drapes.

"I think the president has done an incredible job these last few days and I'm sure if he's ready to go back home and relax, he's more than welcome." Said one of the talking heads on the television. "I agree, although I would've liked to see him do a little more. He has surely taken care of some long overdue business," said the other. I smiled, but I hated that they referred to me as the president. I thought I had been clear with them in my intentions of not accepting the responsibility. I just wanted to be normal. Nevertheless, I was glad that they agreed I could go home. It tugged at me though, had Sharon's ghost been the mission the entire time? What about the U.N.? Had all that shit just been to get me here? What would my parents think when I got back? What about Canada?

Sharon appeared through the kitchen door. "How was your sleep?" she said.

"Nice," I replied. I reveled in the relaxed energy that now enveloped the house.

"You want some food?"

"Sure," I said feeling the hunger in my stomach. "The dogs seem chillier today."

"Yeah, it definitely feels more peaceful today," she said leading me into the kitchen.

I sat down at the table and took a deep breath. I noticed the large new restaurant industrial stove and the large sink. "Are you a chef or something?"

"Haha, no, I just remodeled the house a year or two ago."

"Cool."

"Yeah, I haven't done all of it yet but I got the kitchen done, the bedrooms done and new paint and a couple other things."

"Now that I can see it in the light I can tell," I said, "It looks good."

"Yeah, it was one of my parent's houses but I bought it a few years back and decided to fix it up."

"So you're a house flipper?"

"I guess. I've always wanted to get a bunch of real estate and do that. But right now I'm hoping to get this place started as a Bed & Breakfast."

"That's awesome."

"Yeah, I just wish I could've done it without my parents."

"I hear that," I said. "Parents can be tough. They're good to have though."

"I guess that's true."

"I'm glad I'm not an orphan."

"Yeah, that'd be tough. I'm still sick of them though."

"Hmm..." I said.

"They're always on my back about everything."

"That sucks," I said, "that probably means they care about you though?"

"Yeah I guess, but I'm a fucking grown woman. I can take care of myself."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

My mind began to wander. "I guess that's the thing about parent hood," I blurted, knowing nothing about what I was saying. "My dad says that us kids are his life's purpose, that he felt, like, lost until the point when we were born and he realized what his life's work was to raise us and care for us and shit."

"I can see that," she said. "Kids are a lot of responsibility though."

"Well, you know, maybe that responsibility is what people need to, like, feel whole," I said as I played with the saltshaker.

"That's a weird thing to think about," she said. "Everyone I know who has kids is so absorbed with the thing that they never, you know, even talk about themselves. It's like the kid is like, the only part of their lives they care about."

"Yeah," I said "well... kids are like a combination of the two parents so I guess... you know, when you have a kid it's like taking care of yourself, maybe that's the answer to feeling selfish and depressed and shit."

"That kind of makes sense."

"I don't know what I'm talking about though."

"Yeah," she said.

"Yeah," I said with a chuckle.

"I think it's good to not worry so damn much about yourself," I said, "it'll just drive you nuts."

"Yeah."

"I think everybody feels shitty in some form or another whether they're aware of it or not."

"That's probably true. "

"Everybody wants something, everybody has problems."

"For sure... and other stuff too probably." She said as she stood up opening the stove.

"Fuckin' stuff," I said.

"Fuck stuff," she said.

"Material stuff too," I said. "Stuff is just junk that we've been programmed by the media to believe that if we, like, buy, we'll find peace and happiness."

"True."

"The same goes for money. We think if we have it we'll be happy and peaceful but we won't."

"You can't not have money though, society runs on money."

"Fuck society," I said. "Society thrives on greed and negative energy and crap. It's true what they say about money being the root of all evil."

"That's the way things are though," she said. "You can't change it."

"I know," I said considering her statement. As she portioned out the food onto plates and carried them to the table, I wondered if my mission had any real merit.

"I hope you like pork chops."

"Sure, thank you so much for all your hospitality."

"Maybe I'm doing my part for the world."

"I think you are," I said. Part of me knew she'd be repaid for her assistance to me.

"I think if everybody helped people like you helped me and we could just make, like, this whole sense of peace and understanding, then everyone would be good."

"We should start a charity or a non profit," she said.

"Haha, that'd be perfect," I said. "One that could bring like, world peace."

"How would we do it?"

"We need to find a truth, like a singular fucking absolute truth," I said. "Every single war has been fought merely on, like speculation and false belief stemming from, you know, like, personal motivation. Nobody really knows what religion or, like, philosophy is the absolute truth," I said. "If there was something nobody could question we wouldn't have false belief or religion in something nobody's sure about."

"I never thought about it like that."

"We just need to find the absolute truth in everything and, like, base our lives on that."

"Damn," she said.

"Look at the increasing suicide rate," I said. "All these kids, all these people are killing themselves because they feel pressure from the machine, from the system."

"That's true," she said quietly.

"They're so overwhelmed by shit, by trying to succeed and trying to fit in and it becomes so much, the pressure is so much that they feel the only way out is to give up on life."

"Yeah," she said quietly. It didn't occur to me at the time, but I was striking a chord.

"Clearly there's something wrong with the system."

"That's a good point," she said in an almost fearful tone.

"And it's not just suicide; everyone does fucked up shit to feel better and a lot of times they don't even think twice about it."

She said nothing and I wondered if I said something wrong.

"Everyone has their fucked up habits and sometimes it's stuff that they don't want to tell anyone about. Everyone's just so confused and lost in this existence we call life."

And the really fucked up thing is that the most common fucked up things people do have become socially acceptable and are considered the fucking norm."

She still said nothing.

"Everyone judges everyone else as if they're fucking "normal" themselves and nobody's fucking peaceful with anybody else."

I waited a moment for a response and she nodded her head.

"The people are the victims. Clearly there's something wrong with the motherfucking system. Nobody feels good even if they say they are. No one has truth, no one knows the absolute truth about anything so we're all running around confused and depressed."

"That's true."

"Think about the multi billion dollar alcohol industry. It's based on fucking escaping from life."

She chuckled a little and I took it as a good sign.

"We all want what we don't have."

"You're right."

"The key is to find the peace and happiness in our lives."

"How?"

"We just have to be happy with what we already have and do the things which make us peaceful and happy. We need to find peace and it starts with inner peace. If everyone had inner peace there would be no conflict, no wars, no greed, no evil. Just do what makes you happy." I said, "Just be, like, happy. Put out positive vibrations. That's all we can do until we figure out just what the fuck life is all about."

"Do you have any theories about that?"

"I think it's love, not fucking but real true love. I think it's the law of attraction. I think Gravity is love. It's who we are and where we come from."

"What do you mean gravity is love?" she said.

"The fucking perfect gravity from the sun and the other planets combined is what has created the conditions for all life on this planet."

"Wow."

We sat and ate as I continued spouting off about the Illuminati's grasp on society and the prospect of a new world order that would lead to the onset of the apocalypse as described in Revelations. Occasionally, the thought would occur to me that I was scaring her with this talk and, as such, I would level it off and hold my epiphanies to myself. Surely by now I had established myself as delusional.

I had learned by now that my connections were probably not as apparent to others but such was to be expected with my prophetic gift. The look in Sharon's face was one of trust and amazement as opposed to the nervous awkwardness that had been there before. I wondered for a moment what kind of effect I was having on this poor woman, but she seemed astonished and accepting of my philosophies.

Eventually, the conversation lulled as I prodded at the vegetables on my plate. Standing up, I brought the plate to the sink, thanking Sharon again for the meal and her hospitality. I then excused myself to the living room to consult with the media about my next steps. CNN still blared and the words of the correspondents dug into my psyche. Taking place was a debate between bipartisan opinions of talking heads I had become vaguely familiar with over the last few months and I listened carefully as they discussed their views on the war in Iraq. I waited patiently for any connections that presented themselves and was delighted when the two parties agreed that the president had taken the appropriate steps to ensure the safety of the nation after the September 11th attacks and that I had made great strides in the last week.

"I think it can be seen that through his endless work and sacrifice that the president cares deeply about his people and the nation and wants the best for it," one said.

"Yes, it's clear that he cares about his people," said the other, "but his policies are incredibly unorthodox." I was happy that they had noticed my work. "One step at a time" I said to myself under my breath. I switched the channel to a satellite music channel having had enough of the blabbering mouths and sat down on the couch. I saw the laptop I had seen the night before sitting on the end table next to the couch. I wondered what extra clues I could get from my email and from Facebook. "Can I use your computer Sharon?" I yelled into the kitchen.

She poked her head into the room and said "Sure, but be careful, it's been acting up lately."



"Thanks."

I pulled the computer onto my lap and lifted the screen to reveal a mess of icons for chat programs and useless shit. I opened up the Internet browser and was bombarded by pop up ads and the homepage for an amateur sex personals site. I remembered the conversation in the car. I proceeded to work the mouse, careful not to unduly judge my gracious host. I logged on to Facebook and was discouraged when I noticed the lack of messages I had garnered since last week. Searching for indications, I opened up the profile of a girl I had been infatuated with for the last few months and perused her information. Her status still read, "loved New York, you have to go." She hadn't changed it in the last two weeks. "I did go," I said under my breath. "Nothing happened."

Having seen her profile many times I looked to see if anything had changed. Among her interests were the words astrology and conspiracies and I deeply suspected that she knew about the mission. But citing her lack of an email address or a phone number I knew I had no way to reach her. Going further I looked at the favorite quotes section of her profile and smiled as I read over and over the one quote that sat there "Everything happens for a reason." I took a deep sigh of relief. If I analyzed enough and exposed myself to enough information, I would find the reasons eventually for the trip. On top of that, I knew everything was intricately connected on more levels than were apparent to everyone else. This was justification for the mission and I knew that if I looked deep enough I could find the cause and alternately the effect of every decision or action that I made. I kept looking at the profile despite the fact that I knew this girl would have nothing to do with me.

Eventually I moved on to a mystical website explaining sacred geometry, aliens, and astrology, and perused the articles about freemasons and the Kabala tree of life to find answers. With every piece that I read I found connections between numbers and beliefs, and I filled the gaps in with speculation for the things I could still not explain. Numbers were the most apparent with their connections. I noticed the number 12 as having great significance being the number of tribes of Israel, Christ's disciples, hours on a clock, and colors on the color wheel. It was enthralling to reveal these things to myself and I browsed the articles for nearly two hours until my eyes had grown weary. Eventually my thoughts turned to home. I wanted to sleep in my own bed. I remembered the song "Night Train to Zion" by the Ethiopians. Maybe I could take the train and stop in Mt. Zion National Park. Somewhere in my mind I had made the connection that there was a godly presence at Zion given the lyrics of many of my favorite reggae songs. Maybe there I would find salvation. Still, I wanted to sleep in my own bed. Either way, a train was the best bet.

Entertaining the idea, I logged on to the Amtrak website to check out ticket prices. As I plugged in the destination of Denver and my departure in Boston the price of \$183 displayed itself on the screen. I looked desperately for a connection in the price but found none. Finally, I added them together. 12. A divine number. I shifted my weight to pull out my wallet and get the credit card. When I plugged in the numbers and pressed submit, an error screen popped up. The card had been declined. My worry grew and my mind began to race with fearful distress. I tried the card three more times each getting the same result. I stared at the screen, and let my thoughts run. I wondered where Sharon kept her money. I wondered if I could sneak onto a train and stowaway but my ethics once again cut off the selfish thoughts. I knew that if this whole shit was real I'd be setting a damn poor example for my people. I closed my eyes and searched my mind for alternative ways before finally gasping a deep breath and sacrificing what remaining dignity I had.

"Sharon?" I called.

She walked into the room and looked at me with a small smile.

"What's up?"

"I wanna go home."

"Okay"

"I need a little bit of a favor."

"What's going on?"

"I need something big."

"You need some money?"

"I swear to God, the second I get home I'll mail you a check."

She looked at me for a moment and said only two words, "How much?"

I passed her the computer so she could see for herself.

"You're gonna take the train?"

"Yeah."

She said nothing and walked into the kitchen. I wondered what she was doing and began to grow restless until she emerged again with a credit card.

"Seriously?" I said.

"Rob, don't even worry about it."

"I swear to God I'll mail you a check," I said.

"It's good karma," she replied.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, I'll pay you back the second I get home. I swear to God. Thank you so so much."

"So your train leaves at ten tomorrow so we'll have to leave at 9 to get to Boston in time."

I was astonished by her graciousness and repeated my thanks several times. She said nothing each time and gave me only a friendly smile. I thanked her again as she took a seat next to me on the couch. She was closer this time. Her vibe was suspicious. I stayed away reminding myself that she was twice my age. Her hand brushed my leg and my eyes widened. I kept my arms crossed awkwardly; I grabbed the remote and switched the channel to one of the movie channels knowing I would be safe from any connections there. My mind screamed as questioning stimulation bombarded me. The movie played itself out and my mind burned and I told myself to just watch, no matter what.

"Are you, you know... gay?" she said.

"No, what the fuck? I uh... I just, I, I have people at home I care about. How old are you again?"

"40,"

"I'm 20."

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm so fucked up, I'm sorry."

"Uh, it's okay... uh, sorry to mislead you."

"I'm really sorry," she said.

"I just figured you could repay me."

"Let's just watch the movie," I said putting the pillow between us.

Finally, the movie ended. I had done my best not to look in her direction for the entire excruciatingly awkward two hours but I had to look now.

"I think I'm gonna go to bed now," I said.

"Oh, Okay," she replied with a sweet smile.

"See you tomorrow," I said backing out of the room. A deep breath. Silently, I went up the stairs and found my way into the room and into the soft bed.

That night, sleep was hard to come by, my thoughts raced about the vibe downstairs and even more about why the government had decided to let me go home. I thought about what exactly I could have done to accomplish the mission. I wondered if it had been in the conversations I had had with people along the way. Maybe they were operatives or spies. Perhaps I had portrayed an overwhelming sense of truth and justice that would perpetuate itself out further as each person I had met paid it forward. I knew my only real conversation had been with Sharon but I suspected that the others had seen it in my demeanor. I thought about Kimberly, disappointed that I never found her. My mind ran and I could hear the flow of blood through my ears. Eventually I found calm and sleep came and my dreams were of worlds where the outlandish was conventional. Soon, the sun peeked out from behind the trees.

As I climbed out of bed I felt nervous. Sharon would be downstairs and memories of last night were still fresh. I took comfort knowing I would soon be on my way home.

I stood up, pulled on my now clean hoodie and pants and headed downstairs. I could hear the TV on and I knew Sharon must be awake. Passing the living room, I desperately tried blocking out the words I heard from the TV. Nothing could stop me now. I was going home. The few words I did pick up relayed the asinine opinions I heard many times before that criticized what was being done. I knew now though, I could only trust myself.

"Sharon?" I called nervously.

"Hey, Good morning," she said walking out of the kitchen. "You ready to go home?"

"Hell yes."

She touched my arm and looked at me sweetly. I pulled away.

"We still have about an hour, if there's anything you want to do." I wondered if she meant sex but my mind was reeling. Was I losing my shit again? This wasn't really as it seemed, was it?

I shrugged it off and said, "Yeah, I want to get some breakfast."

"Alright," she replied quietly.

We walked into the kitchen and I sat at the table as she stooped into the refrigerator and pulled out some eggs.

"Thanks for everything," I reiterated.

"Like I said, I need some good karma."

I chuckled under my breath. No shit, I thought.

Soon, food was on the table and I ate in silence as Sharon sipped from her coffee. We stayed mostly silent and although awkward, it was what I wanted.

Time passed quickly and we found ourselves in the car. I dozed off once again watching the passing trees, this time in the sunlight. The new age music Sharon played matched the flow of my thoughts and after miles of rural forested road the city began to appear. Thankful, I longed for some sweet herb and my brown leather couch. As we drove I was reminded of the razor blades and pills I had stolen and wondered if train security would be strict. I might need those things.

I looked at the clock and my nerves jostled realizing we would be cutting it close. Sharon sped through town matching the passing minutes with her progress and soon we were downtown. I recognized the architecture. With seven minutes to spare Sharon pulled up through urban streets to the front of the train station. She parked and we climbed out of the car. We walked up the stairs and found the automated ticket station where Sharon took charge and printed out the tickets in a hurry. As she passed me the tickets she looked into my eyes and smiled. She stretched out her arms and they embraced me in a deep hug.

"Thank you," she said, "Get home safe,"

"Thank you," I said

I boarded the train and looked out at the sea of seats, ambling down the aisle, feet still tender. I saw a seat near the back of the cab next to the window. As I passed the people in their chairs I longed for some kind of eye contact as reassurance but continued on. Blinded by my thoughts, I came up on an old woman with a book in her hand. I glanced down at the book and almost gasped with a relieved disbelief. "Homecoming" it read. I smiled and found my way to my seat.

The next two and a half days passed by quickly like the American landscape outside the window. Mostly a mix of dozing and shifting my weight on the seat in between bathroom breaks. I'd look out the window at the bad parts of town and the woods that passed, littered with old trash. I'd think about my mission and wonder if I should really be headed back home. With every stop I'd see indications that I should get off, pats of the head, pointed fingers, the tone of voice of the conductor, but my will had strength now. I also knew how good it would feel to climb into my own bed.

At some point in the trip I talked to the girl who was sitting a row behind me. We talked about my trip and how she was doing a variation of the same, backpacking across the country before she left for college. She commented on the flag I had made from a piece of fabric I found on the train, A white cloth that read, "What Do 'They' Think?" I kept quiet about the fact that the 'they' I referred to were the aliens, that and every other fragmented thought I had had that led me out here in the first place. As far as she knew we were both just travelers. She stayed with me the rest of the way home. She watched as I used her cell phone to call home numerous times, hanging up when I heard a voice and only hanging on when I heard the message machine.

"Hey Mom, it's Rob... I'm Okay... I'll be home in a couple days."

That was all I could force myself to say.

Every so often the girl would sleep and I, pretending to doze, would catch a few glimpses of her as she slept, mind running with possibilities. The thought occurred to ask her to come to the large handicap restroom with me to christen the friendship but the thought never came out of my mouth. Soon the morning came when we pulled into the Denver station, 6am. The girl and I hugged and walked away from each other without thought of talking again.

14

I was thankful to be home and although tired, knew I would have to find a way back to the condo. I mulled it over for a time, considering my options. I could hitchhike to Boulder but my feet were still raw and walking along the road sounded painful. Finally, submitting my dignity, I stepped up to one of the pay phones that lined the far wall and dialed my parent's phone number.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mom, it's me, I'm home."

"Oh my God, thank God honey!" she answered panicked. "We were so worried about you."

"Yeah, can you pick me up?"

"Of course honey, oh my God we're so glad to hear from you. We were so worried. Where are you?"

"I'm at the train station in Denver."

"Train station?... Where did you go?"

"I had a mission to do but I'm done now, it's over."

She paused for a moment, "What mission honey?"

"The mission God sent me to do."

"Okay, honey, we'll be there soon. We love you."

I hung up the receiver cursing myself.

"Poor choice of words Rob," I said under my breath. Still, honesty was imperative. I knew my parents would be angry with me for leaving but at least I was home. They would probably be more worried than anything. That was good. They needed some excitement in their lives.

As I shuffled my feet to a seat on the enormous wooden benches that occupied the station lobby, the design of the structure mesmerized me. The trim was laden with miniature sculptures of Christ and the devil that I knew were there for some deeper spiritual reason. Curves in the stone shook me like ocean waves and I recognized the themes from the old church in Boston. Although the U.N. and the prospect of Canada still danced about in the back of my mind, I felt an affinity with this place and suspected that I was meant to be here. Perhaps it was the idea that I'd soon be home in my bed with some good music and the bittersweet comfort of Mary Jane that did it, but I didn't know.

I lay down on the bench and zoned out on the pattern of the marble tile on the walls. The uniformity was

comfort in my racing mind and every once in a while I would let my eyelids fall and take a quiet moment or two in the dark to gather my thoughts. When I heard footsteps I'd look up at a person passing, desperate for a slight connection of friendly eye contact but never got it. I then would avert my thinking and puzzle myself as to why unfamiliar eye contact made people so uncomfortable. Didn't they want to make a friend? I wondered if people were afraid of me. Every once in a while I would glance back over to the main doors looking for the silhouette of my parents and before long, they emerged.

I stood up and walked slowly toward them wondering what to expect. They matched my pace as I headed towards them. My dad raised his hand as if to wave hello and I half smiled and nodded. As they drew closer my mom hurried her pace and held me forever in a deep hug. I hesitated but eventually fell into it. I wondered if they had been sabotaging me this whole time. Quickly, common sense made itself known and as I looked into the eyes of my mom I reaffirmed my sanity, telling myself that my parents really did love me and would never sell me out. For a few moments I considered walking away but I knew I had already come too far and I wanted nothing more in the world than to go home to my warm bed.

I followed them out to the car and silence ensued like a cool breeze across a rural town. I knew they wouldn't question me, but I waited for it anyway. They had to have known about what went down. They had probably been watching my every move from closed circuit television fed by the ravenous hidden cameras placed along my route. Right now though, no explanation was necessary. In the parking lot I caught the eye line of a child that stared at me like I was holy. I looked away quick.

Loading my pack into the backseat of the car, I climbed in after it. I looked down at my dirty hands as my parents got into the car and shut the doors. The engine started and the car pulled out of the lot slowly. I cracked the window and felt the cool air blow across my hair and my face as we started down the turnpike and back towards town. After a few minutes my dad said something and I closed the window to hear him clearly.

"So I guess you had a nice little vacation, huh?" I knew that my dad was in no way attempting to sound condescending but something about the tone of it made my alert system go off, so I replied with nothing.

"We're glad you're home honey," said my mom. Her voice was sweet but held a wavering uneasiness.

"We were really worried about you," said my dad. Again, I replied with silence.

"Where'd you go babes?" said my mom.

"I had a mission," I said quietly. I wondered what my parents were thinking.

"What kind of a mission?" my mom said.

I chuckled. Surely they had known.

"You know," I said.

"No, we don't Rob," said my dad, "what are you talking about?"

"The government and God and all that shit told me I had to go."

"Is this about that thing in your sink?" said my dad.

"That's just a small part of it," I replied.

"Where'd you go Rob?" my dad pressed.

"They told me to go to the U.N. through the messages on TV," I blurted, fearing what they perceived. "I know it sounds like I'm crazy but it's true," I said with a wrought iron conviction.

"What do you mean the messages on TV?" my dad asked quietly.

"The commercials and the shows and C-Span," I said, "They all talked directly to me and I'm not crazy!"

My parents looked at each other.

"Why would they be talking to you Rob?" my mom asked carefully.

"Because I was chosen."

"By who?" she asked.

"God." I said, "I know I sound insane but, damn guys, I'm not!"

"We're gonna get you some help honey."

"I don't need help mom, I'm fine! I just wanna go home." I said raising my voice.

The car fell silent.

"I need to get my car from the airport," I said.

"We don't have time for that right now," said my dad.

"Where are you taking me?" I said quietly.

"We're taking you to the hospital," said my dad.

"Fuck you, I knew you couldn't be trusted," I retorted.

Again, the car fell silent.

The thoughts raced in as I jiggled the door handle to no avail. My parents had locked me in the car. There were no unlocking mechanisms back here and I hated it, I hated them. I just needed to bail out. I wasn't crazy.

I sat silent. I would have to prove that I was chosen and then this whole thing could be cleaned up. I just had to prove it to them. The cogs and gears in my mind turned as I planned my course of action. The one thing this trip had taught me was the power of patience and flexibility. They were incredible tools and I knew the only way I would get out of this unscathed would be to submit to my parents' will and go to the hospital. Then I would either prove them wrong in their diagnosis or pretend to be well in order to get out as soon as possible and continue on with my divine calling. Fuck them. I would show them. I could beat this. I could beat them.

15

The doctors told me I would be placed on a seventy-two hour hold for observation. Knowing this was the only way out, I obeyed and diligently signed all the papers. I hated my parents but still felt the inescapable drive to prove to them that I was worth something. I had to show them I wasn't crazy. As the hours passed, I was shown to a blank room with plastic sheets and plastic pillows, which caused me to wonder what kind of distant confused souls had been imprisoned in this sterile place. There were bars on the windows and the only

door out of the unit was locked 24/7. I knew my only refuge for the time being would be through the hour a day art therapy class and the smoke breaks I could take at will. They had given me a legal pad after my parents had told them of my affinity for writing. With it I set to work on the flow of words and the river of thoughts, both dark and hopeful that careened through my tired mind. Instead of sleep, I would write. I expressed my vicious frustration for the place and thought constantly of the passing hours, counting them down as they went. Because of this I was thankful for the eight to ten I would use up easily in my escapes to the world behind my eyelids. There I was free and could experience a life unhindered by limitations of ethics or gravity. When I'd awake I'd write what I could remember of my escapes on the obtrusive legal pad. I had the suspicion that the attendants would come in and read my thoughts as I was eating meals or watching TV and I wondered if this was hindering my ability to get out. I wondered what kind of opinions and judgments they were forming about me. I had bared my soul on those pages explaining desperately how the thoughts would not leave even in this place, where it mattered most that they were gone. The fuckers would never leave. Maybe I was crazy.

I thought a lot about the pills and the blades I had stolen from Sharon. The attendants had confiscated my bag so that option was mute but I still looked for different ways I could end it. I would disassemble the pens they gave me and hold the points to my stomach but always fail at the devastating task that I wanted desperately to complete.

There was death in those halls. Death you could smell and that you could cut like warm butter. It wasn't death in the physical sense but death of the spirit and death of the soul. The faces of the people were blank and lacking any hint of life. Perhaps it was the loss of any glimmer of hope. I knew there was nothing left here, nothing of the real world and I knew no good could come of this place. I would bide my time between sleeping, meeting with the doctors and sitting in the rec room watching TV. I could no longer stand being subject to the glaring eyes behind the glass in the observation room. Every move I made would be subject to analysis and I hated the eyes. I could feel them staring at me always and when I would face the fuckers and stare back at them they would avert their eyes and pretend to be doing something else.

When I was alone in my room with my thoughts I could hear them screaming at me to find a way out and I would pry at the screws that held the bars on the windows. My agitation grew with every pill they gave me but I knew I would have to comply with their rules if I was ever going to get out of this place. When I did this, the rest of the crazies looked at me puzzled and I'd explain to their fucked up minds that this was clearly the easiest way to get out as soon as possible. Give in to the fuckers and they'd let you out. I wondered why this hadn't occurred to them and then told myself that I was smarter which, in turn, was another reason that I shouldn't have been there.

Slowly the hours passed and turned into days. The seventy-two hours flew by and I found myself still trapped in the cage for the crazies. Every other day my parents would visit me and I'd scream at them for shutting me in this hellhole. I'd plead with them to talk to the doctors and get me out with no avail. I'd explain over and over how I didn't want to be with these nut jobs and that there was no reason in hell why I should be considered to be part of that community. My mission was real, goddammit. I was chosen. Little by little, with the help of the drugs, the boredom and anxiety of the place took hold. My spirit was gone and I no longer fought it. By the end of the second week I had given up. I felt gone. I was dead. The despair of knowing that your life's mission, the one thing that made you important, unique and special was all in your mind, had no comparison. It was all a delusion, they said, and slowly, I accepted it. The doctor's term for it was schizoaffective and I wrestled constantly with the idea that I was in fact out of my fucking mind. What would my friends think? How would I be treated once I got out? Who the fuck was I? Deep breaths turned to sighs, which dominated most conversations I had in therapy sessions. I was lonely here. I hated the judgment of the eyes.

Slowly, routine found its way back into my life with my art sessions at 3pm and my smoke breaks. I counted on these. There would be activities during the day and then at 6pm everything settled down and they turned on



the TV in the rec room. Meals were at 8, 12:30, and 5 and therapy was every other day. Eventually I found solace in the prospect that I could stay in my room all day if I wanted to and some days I did. Most other days I would go with the flow, not saying much and keeping to myself until I could write on my legal pad at night before bed.

My mind persisted and every day I tried to do better than the previous day but I felt sick. There was no real comfort in the writing or in the smoke beaks or in the art sessions but I obeyed. The days became a blur until one afternoon, I didn't know what day it was, how could you in a place like this? My parents dropped by with a postcard, did their allowed 20 minutes and then left, leaving me to my devices. I didn't bother to read the postcard and instead stuck it in my pocket and went about my day in the cage forgetting about it. Finally, the day wound down and I found myself alone in my room. Standing over my bed I reached in to empty my pockets and pulled the postcard out. Holding it carefully I looked at the picture of the lion on the front and my mind called up the astrology connection I would have made some time ago. Turning it over in my hands I read the back out loud to myself and a long awaited smile cracked on my face.

"Dear Rob, Your parents called me to thank me and I'm sorry to hear about your troubles. I wish you luck and perseverance as you carry on through this crazy thing we call life. Sometimes our mission isn't always what it seems.

P.S. I noticed some things missing from my medicine cabinet and I want to thank you for saving my life.

Signed, Sharon"

Mike Hedrick lives and works in Boulder, CO. His work has appeared in a number of different publications. 'Connections' is his first novel. It is based on his own experiences with mental illness.

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