



This Unhappy Planet

Marc Horne

Chapter 1

For a while there, no one wanted to play on the beach in case bits of a Marine washed up. Then came some great weather and awesome surf and so people began to agree he had been swallowed by the sea and its creatures. Life got back to normal and that's probably just how the Marine and the ocean would have wanted it.

It was dawn in California and the sun was sneaking up on the sea. Pink feathers infiltrated past Pollo Loco, a peachy haze phased through the spokes of a beach cruiser bicycle and two men in their thirties were flecked with gold as they tried to free themselves from a deep purple, surprisingly warm sidewalk outside a bar that quietly twinkled.

"I can not believe," said one of them. And he had planned to say something else. It was something about the nineteen year old in hot pants whom he had bought drinks for all night. But in the end he stopped talking right there. Because he stopped there - his brain exhausted - some strange things would end up happening to these two men.

His companion smiled a rugged smile of warm cynicism. "You can't believe? Me neither, man. Me neither."

And then two brains started ticking and a big fuzzy ocean hush watched over them and let them do it. The bar... it was gone. Just the ocean hush.

"Jack! Jack, I've got it!" said the other guy, the drinks-buying guy, and he leapt to his feet impossibly. Like leaping direct to space or maybe more like a salmon leaping up a waterfall: only impossible until you see it.

Jack, inspired, pushed himself up to a (supported) seated position. "Spit it out then Drake-o!"

Drake's wavy mane of black hair had slumped over his face and looked quite dramatic.

"I've figured out why we married those lovely ladies. Those lovely, idle wenches. You know why?"

Jack was now sitting straight-legged with his arms back, like he was taking in a band at an outdoor festival.

"No, man. I mean... yeah, I know why I did and it has something to do with someone pissing on a plastic stick. But no... I mean... hit me."

Drake raised one arm, and staggered but not enough to ruin the effect.

"Because there is gold in California but not in the hills... it's in the air now. It's in the mind. And those occasionally still quite sexy psychos are going to be the god-damned divining rods that lead us right to it. Shit, man, I'm telling you... I'm going to get that man-servant after all and it's not going to be you because you're going to be my partner, man. You and me are going to be rich and... and... special."

Then Drake called for a man-hug and with his last ounce of energy Jack delivered.

And then time skipped and it was suddenly quite sunny and people were grudgingly circumventing them. So they stumbly followed the smell of breakfast burritos, staying quiet to avoid any mishaps on the way.

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The rest of that day was wrecked. Jack was woozy in the burrito place, admiring the way his short salt-and-pepper hair looked even better when it was all messed up. Drake was scribbling notes like crazy on a

pad of paper he had bought from a school kid on the street, but he didn't want Jack to look at it until it was ready.

"You don't walk in on your woman while she's cleaning up her box, right? I need to get this stuff just right before I drop it on you."

"Is this that barely-legal-RFID.com idea again because I wasn't buying all of that 'track that ass' shit."

"Screw b-l-RFID, man. That will be my side project when I'm bored on my yacht. Look, you go home, get some sleep, get your wits about you so you don't get shivved by one of your young offenders. We'll discuss all of this on 'bowling night' on Tuesday."

So, putting aside deep concerns about this power relationship, Jack slid off a self-cleaning stool that shone like a maraschino cherry and made his way home. There he lifelessly played with his dog and his son until he (apparently) fell asleep face down on the lawn until the little Chinese woman (definitely) came round and prodded him in the rear with a pointy garden tool and asked him where his crazy wife was. He didn't answer, because he couldn't exactly remember what she'd said when she left, or even if she'd left with a smile or a snarl.

Then it was time to eat... well... Chinese, why not, so he and Gavin picked that up, left some for Mommy and then crashed out again, this time under the watchful eyes of menacing Japanese robot toys.

Wrecked!

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The next day began with the joy of rebirth. The lightness of limbs that didn't tremble. Blood that slid rather than slammed through the veins. And the 'web in your face' feeling that followed a night of wholly inappropriate skirt chasing? Well that was gone too.

The magic of waking up five minutes before your alarm clock did: the sheer mastery of it! He slapped that damn clock before it could even open its fool mouth, then he slid out of his bed and into his faded Cowboys t-shirt. Alison was lying face down in a silky robe with her hair twisted round her head like a wispy burqa. She was thin and tan and the nasty curtains threw that same perfect tan hue across the room at this hour and that is why he would never want to get rid of them. The curtains.

He would make her breakfast today and go running after school.

Frying eggs and half-rapping 'Sabotage' to himself, Jack looked at the side of the fridge and saw the crude sketches of dinosaurs/robots and a yellowed chart of how to get vegan nutrition and a picture of his legs wearing a tuxedo and Allie's feet in gleaming white shoes. On top of that a fresh portrait of a 2004 Toyota 4Runner in ocean blue with the optional bike rack.

You would also find this beloved vehicle in the bathroom, above Allie's little desk and pinned to the inside of the front door. And if you some how missed all of those, you'd find it taped to the driver's sun-visor of their '95 Volvo.

But it was the one on the fridge that usually caught Jack's eye because cooking time was his Zen time: the time when he turned off the engine and let his brain roll down the hill.

"Don't just look at it like that," half-barked Allie who was suddenly in the room, "Visualize it."

"How do I visualize something I'm looking right at?" he joked.

Missing that, she gave him a quick lecture. Visualize yourself in it. Visualize all the things you'll achieve in it. And most important of all, visualize all of the things you've done to deserve it: to be worthy of it.

"Are there people who don't deserve a 2004 Toyota 4Runner?" he asked as he handed her a plate of sizzle.

"Yes," she answered with a pout and a playful pivot out of the room, "Anyone who is not us."

What was it now... six years already? She hadn't really changed much, physically, other than the finest of wrinkles that you could sometimes catch sight of during a long, harsh frown. Twenty-seven.

He remembered twenty-seven because the band had finally been doing well and he had been starting to feel like the king of L.A. And, quite frankly, if you don't feel like the king of L.A., you should get the fuck out of L.A.

He remembered walking down Sunset at Sunset with his guitar on his back, when a convertible full of sluts braked to an unnecessary halt and they called out 'Superguitars kick ass!' And that was his band: Superguitars.

In the end Superguitars broke up because... well, he still was thinking they broke up as a kind of rock and roll gesture that went too far.

Man, they were tight. But not like this new band he played with (occasionally.) New band was probably a bit too tight, a bit too clinical and exclusive. A mesh of tight guitar strings that other people couldn't really get into. They only played about six times a year, and when people came they had fun. But you could see that even as they were leaving they were forgetting. Not even a beat was carried home in their hearts.

And he was thirty-five now. There was that.

"Are you working tonight, babe?" he asked as he took the car keys off the hook.

"Yeah," she said, kind of frostily actually, "Like I always do on Mondays. I mean... get a fucking clue."

"Ok babe, catch you later."

He stepped away from that Improvised Emotional Device and just went to work. [He'd already kissed the boy and, he thought, her too.]

Then he drove to work, to teach kids who really had a shitty life. Traffic was slow and itchy. Grumpy. Red lights and middle fingers flashed in your eye for 35 minutes and you were sure you saw the same pedestrians again and again: beating you. And you hated your car and you hated California. Then the traffic lightened up you saw a tiny glimpse of the sea and The Byrds came on and you were feeling just fine and would happily accept another day.

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"So let me throw one quick question at y'all then... who freed the slaves?"

I mean, why not? After a ninety minute lesson on the Civil War, it was worth a shot, right?

Marcus ticked his head to one side, indicating quiet confidence and then subtly raised his hand; almost so you

couldn't tell. Jack had been having a good feeling about Marcus! He gave him the floor. "Marcus, you got an answer for us on who freed the slaves?"

"Yeah, Teach."

Pause.

"Deeeez nuts!"

And that was the end of that.

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At the end of the day - a day which was full of moments like that - a half-hour run at the beach felt twice as good. The ocean was just hammering the beach today, with - as usual - little noticeable effect. He could identify.

His shoes bit in the wet sand where it edged the dry. Friction was just perfect on that line.

Five hot beach-bunnies whizzed by in a single breath. Yet he could still catch a spread of freckles on the chest of one that particularly tickled his fancy. Push on, feel the burn, away from the domain of Frisbees and man-trap bikinis.

Crumbly cliffs topped by millionaires' mansions scrolled slowly past. There was no social justice in America but if there was, it was on the rare occasions that one of those mansions devolved into the ocean. But then a hurricane would strike New Orleans.

A puff of speed: he was still strong even headed towards forty. That was his edge, even when most of his friends made five to fifty times more than he did:

1) he was an 'educator,' a modern-day saint

2) he was strong but they were flabby.

It was quiet now... there were no parking lots near here. Only the hardcore, gray-haired surfers were on this beach, paddling out, looking like seals. Surfing for pure pleasure, pure rhythm, all the fight and sex gone, stripped down to what was needed to get up.

And the yogi was there: the buffed up, flop haired ascetic who was often there, like a statue in a white t-shirt and khaki shorts, in full lotus on the sands: untouchable.

Jack had not bought into much of the koo-koo stuff of SoCal, but he could feel this yogi was the real deal: that he really did have some kind of pact sealed with the ocean that meant he had to make his devotions here.

Also, that was one hard-ass looking yogi.

Pounding stronger now, passing a young dude with white headphones. No music when running for Jack. Music was for nighttime or in the car and not when you were doing your only bit of honest-to-God living of the day.

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Meanwhile...

Drake, the ideas guy, was scribbling in a new Moleskine notebook in between yelling at people on his cell-phone and giving little speeches to his large shed full of code-monkeys.

Allie, the wife of Jack, was ironing her nurse's uniform and thinking about Mavis, the lonely diabetic who had been admitted with badly burned fingers.

Gavin, Allie's kid, was watching her from a shady bedroom and frankly I have no idea what kind of pseudo-ideas were frothing in his head.

The dog either.

The guru was thinking, "How would a wave feel if it knew about the ocean." But he was trying not to think.

Chapter 2

How do days begin?

A sun climbing over mountains?

Or two sticky flaps of wrinkly eyelid wrestling apart with a celery crunch and a flash of unwelcome light. Then flashes of age-pain.

Too negative!!! Get beyond that instant. All things age and nothing is permanent. And time is an illusion. So... things... don't age. And what's a thing, anyway.

Zen? Or not quite getting it?

Anyway, Hannah was now awake surrounded by the smells of a busy bar. A bundle of aromas tapped a telegraph message from the night before: furtive cigarettes, clinging teenage girls, multiple hot-dogs, and strangely expensive tequila.

And as she climbed out of bed, trying not to wake him, she wondered if her husband would remember half as much of his night as she had just inhaled.

Because he had staggered home at about 4:12 a.m., she'd got to sleep in her comfortable pajamas last night rather than stark-naked, so she just had to shuffle into her slippers and do a light hair de-frizzing to get herself ready to move around the house.

She looked down at him. Her eye landed on his well-trimmed beard that helped preserve a hint of a smirk even on this comatose face. Imagine what CSI SoCal could find in that beard to contradict his implausible accounts of restrained and respectable male bonding. What strands of DNA, what threads of protein, foreign hairs, narcotic herbs.

The thing they couldn't find any trace of was the hundred-thousand rocket-powered words of bullshit that had scraped across it in that "one quiet little bar" down by the beach.

Blink.

As well as the facial hair, there were his charming eyes: almond and agile. When awake they showed the powerful intelligence that allowed him to see truth and to see money and to seduce struggling designers and then trap them in expensive homes. When asleep, they were like a little boy who managed to sneak intact into the adult world.

At this high point of appreciation, she whispered her mantra "Thank you so much Drake for working so hard to give us this lovely life."

Actions make feelings.

That was her most important learning from her studies. She couldn't quite remember where she read it.

She tucked Drake in and went down to the kitchen. On the verge of that room, the light started to flood in and the blue light of congealed sky caught your eye and after a few seconds you saw it was the ocean.

Drake had this joke that Hannah had to make sure she enjoy the sliver of ocean at least five times a day because then - assuming they stayed in that house for five years - it was only costing \$20 a pop which he

found reasonably reasonable.

That was one of those 'recurring jokes' and in fact if she had \$20 for every time she heard it, that would practically cover her shoe budget.

Over to the stainless steel fridge, a gently humming milestone of peace before Drake and Violet woke up. Close up, enjoying the moment before she popped it open, the smooth door was her Ryoan-ji garden, her mirror that reflected nothing... so that she could see nothing.

Pop.

Out came the little glass bottle full of Luna's home-brew kombucha. Given Luna's somewhat dismissive attitude to domestic hygiene, Hannah had never dared ask exactly where she cultivated the mushroom required for this sparkly, fermented, Chinese, vinegary, tea-ish drink full of strands of obvious goodness.

She sat at the breakfast bar and there was still the regret that they hadn't gone for the darker marble. This regret belittled her daily in the face of the person she wanted to become, and yet it could not be squelched. In her defense it was in some ways a rocky crystallization of the way the decision had been made, which in itself was just a chip from a vast seam of resentment at how power was apportioned in her life.

Drake had wanted the lighter top, despite the fact that there was little reason why he should care. For a man who said "Honey, I'm just a bit too busy to think about that now," every single day it was surprising how often he would appear in the middle of a household decision, make an arbitrary choice and then insist it be so.

This decision would then typically be aired in front of other couples at a cook-out type of event. He would describe the two sides of the dispute, at first with self-deprecating "I'm just the dumb husband" humor. But the end result would be a full blooded and humiliating cross-examination, after which he would disappear and get drunk and over-familiar with one of her friends.

Perhaps, Hannah thought, they should just start playing tennis instead.

Violet was stirring. You could hear a kind of grumbling noise coming from her room, but it wasn't totally clear if it was her voice or just the sound of stuff being tossed around in the room. Either way, she was announcing to the people of the world that they should get ready to receive her.

Hannah knew she had at least five minutes before she was summoned so she opened up her organizer and checked her schedule. Couple of things lined up.

Violet came from her room with a mad brow on her. But she was still a treasure, full of surprises and bursts of deep joy. Hannah swept Violet up in her arms and for no reason that you could really put your finger on she felt her future as an old woman and the joy of a surprise visit from her daughter, all grown. As the spare key turned in the door, Old Lady Hannah looked out on a black field of cold soil full of skull-like tubers.

Ever since she was young, Hannah had occasionally flown to the future. Or maybe, ever since she became an old woman her mind had flown vividly back to her youth. When Drake was still alive. When she didn't yet understand Violet but was working on it. When California was her reality.

That was a very defiant look on Violet's face right there. Her sharp frown was square as her shoulders. She was clearly determined to win the battle... whatever battle it might be.

"I will not play with that boy again!" she spat out, disgusted to even have to mention 'that boy.'

Now Hannah tried to force her mind back: who was Violet talking about?

While Hannah spooled through an assortment of play-date memories looking for one that was more unpleasant than the rest, Violet walked over to the patio door, neatly hopping over the step and approaching a small pyramid of well-rounded, almost identical pebbles that she'd spent the previous afternoon gathering, sifting and stacking.

Both Hannah and Drake had been extremely impressed by the pyramid. Drake had joked that an ant version of Erich Von Däniken would be wondering what strange god had assembled it. He was noticeably disappointed that Hannah got the reference. Because she was from the Midwest, he assumed she knew nothing about anything more sophisticated than 'Manwich,' forgetting that her parents were hippy dropouts and that she had been to art school. She knew all of that 'Chariots of the Gods' stuff.

Now, Violet took the stones and with extreme precision hurled them like missiles over the fence and with tiny splashes into Mrs. Kandinsky's swimming pool.

"Violet, dear."

Splash.

"I see that you are throwing stones into Mrs. Kandinsky's pool." [Observation]

Splash.

"When you do that, I feel anxious and worried." [Feeling]

Splash.

"Would you be willing to throw those stones somewhere on our side of the fence? Then I'll feel joy." [Direct request]

Splash.

Had she forgotten a step... she thought there were four?

"Drake said it's okay if Mrs. Dinsky steps on the stones because she never feels nothing under her waist."

Splash.

"Oh.. ha ha! That was just one of Daddy's... Daddy jokes. Now, let's have a spot of breakfast and then we can do some painting or..."

Crack. Grinding crack of glass from beyond the fence. Red blood rage. Big yells and arm pulling just below the threshold of pulling the skinny little thing right out of its socket. Kicking the pyramid of rocks into legend. Slamming the sliding door with a shoom!

Breathing. Calm. Gulping tears off in another room. Minor self-loathing.

"Sweetie, Mommy is okay now. Let's have a lovely day."

Bang bang bang bang.

Oh God, was she banging her head again? It didn't say anything in the Indigo child book that along with fierce independence, unusual perception and creativity came an addiction to brain damage. Maybe it came under the heading of Enhanced Tactile Awareness?

A huge fart flew down the stairs as clear as a bugle.

"Sounds like Daddy is up, sweetie. Let's go give him a lovely surprise!"

Little Violet stayed under the bed where she had once seen the ghost of a pueblo Indian and sucked on her thumb. Her face was empty and she finally popped out five minutes later doing cartwheels to make her dad laugh.

"It's bowling night tonight!" he announced.

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There was this couple they all knew that had 'date night' every week. Nothing would dislodge date night, other than a medical emergency. They all joked about the couple's date night at first: jokes about making first base, getting a blow job in the car, etc. But the thing was, the date night couple were noticeably, glowingly, unavoidably happy. And Jack'n'Allie and Drake'n'Hannah were in only shallow denial about their own daily dissatisfaction. So they started to feel like they should be doing date night too.

But the thought of the husband turning up at his own front door with a bunch of flowers to go and see a chick-flick had been ridiculed just a bit too much, so instead they found another way to turn the clock back: Tuesday night double-date bowling.

It was fun at first, with pitchers of beer and peanuts and stuff, but being as artificial as the 50s diner they bought their hot dogs from, it didn't take long for a Styrofoam taste to build up. The girls started to flicker in and out and then they were gone.

But the tradition went on with just the boys, simply relocated to a 'Hooters' that was close enough that you could occasionally hear the distinctive hollow clash of pins while the juke box was spinning to a different Country CD.

A drop of bar-sweat dripped down a pitcher of beer between the guys. They both sort-of were watching it, although they didn't know. When it got to the coffee-brown wood of their table the moment of silence was gone. They started drinking, and after very little small talk Drake said... "So here's the idea."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but neither of our wives and very few of their friends were born here in California. Here's something, though, that I'm thinking you have noticed. Each year that they're here, they get a little more... I'm looking for a word that's between 'spiritual' and 'weird'... anyway, you catch my drift.

"Like Luna -- possibly not her real name -- she was over at our house the other day telling me about her regression therapy and how she, after two years of concerted effort can now remember the moment of the last time she was conceived, including the overwhelming smell of SPERM! I mean what the fuck, man! Remember when she was this loveable, salt-of-the-earth, always-carries-a-fruit-knife Eurotrash girl? Don't get me wrong... I'm confident that she knew the smell of sperm full well even then but I don't think she attached religious significance to it."

Jack took a sip and he still couldn't quite unfurl his brow.

"So what... was she like an egg or something? How could she smell anything...?"

"Maybe she was the ghost of her mother's vagina, buddy. Frankly, I couldn't stay on board that conversation much longer... we were planning to have oysters for dinner.

"But anyway, let's not get off track. It's not just her: all women who come here and have enough free-time on their hands are picking up some weird ideas."

"Guys too?"

"To a lesser extent, but the married guys... well look at you. You're visualizing stuff still, right?"

Jack adjusted his Buddy Holly hipster glasses.

"Goin' through the motions at least."

"Well, manifest us a waitress and let me keep going... I'm going to cut to the bullet points. 'Kay?"

"There's at least a million affluent or leisure class women in major West Coast cities that are buying pseudo-mystical literature or attending classes etc. They are crazy for this shit... whether it's The Secret or Indigo Kids or whatever. And the guys who come up with this stuff are doing good, but listen, the whole segment has too much churn: I asked myself, why do our wives stick with us when they are still fairly hot and we are, they say, fairly bad husbands?"

"Well, in your case I think it's the money. For me it's probably guilt about the kid."

"Dig deeper, man. They have settled in. They need stability, even the stability of our erratic ways. That's the need these pseudo-religious fads are missing out on: you buy the book once and then what... you're on your own. No new episodes, nothing more to buy. Move on to the next new gimmick. But the real way to win in this pyramid scheme is to have your own pyramid.

"Okay, I need to tighten up this spiel: I need you to PowerPoint me up.

" California women are crazy

" They seek ready-made but fresh spirituality. Like pre-washed bags of salad.

" They also crave a sense of community and belonging and predictability

" They have disposable income

" Existing churches, even the weird ones, don't mesh with their need to be in control

" If two cool guys started a 'church' in SoCal that took the best of the self-help genre and gave it a bricks and mortar presence, and then franchised that up and down the West Coast with a clear membership structure, walk-in schedules and no pretensions at all of being a non-profit, they would get rich

" Not a church: a spiritual fitness club for the new millennium."

Jack ordered Chili Rellenos and didn't say anything for a couple of minutes.

"Put that last bullet point first cause that's fuckin' genius!"

High five!

"I knew you would get it... I knew we were going to be soulmates. You're right: that's the first slide 'Spiritual Fitness Club.'"

"With all of the sticky membership schemes that implies."

"xactly... after all, I think we'll have a high burnout rate because we are not going to go too deep with this meaningless bull we'll be slinging, so we'll need two-year upfront contracts to lock in revenue."

Jack was thinking fast now. He'd wanted to be a business-man ever since he read the first half of "Rich Dad / Poor Dad."

"So what's the next step?"

"Well, I get to work on the business plan and you get to work on the bible."

"The fuck?"

"You heard me, farmboy."

--

The news said that a boot washed up at Cardiff-by-the-sea: Marine issue.

There was a crab in it, sheltered in the bloated cow-hide and transported from the deep to the light. It blinked, so to speak, in the media flashes as it headed away.

There was no foot in the boot, not even a toe, but it was wet and fleshy enough to disgust a little anyway, especially as it was an emblem of a run from justice for a horror: a killing in a far off world that had the audacity to have a name and a face and even a law against it.

The boot would be looked at. Then the page could be turned.

The crab's moment of glory was done and he enjoyed the beach for a reckless second beneath the gulls' eyes before heading back to the abyss.

Then the boot was bagged.

Chapter 3

It's interesting to watch your wife. Getting a little notebook, furtively capturing phrases, doing little sketches of her. Combing through her web-browsing history.

Jack had had a sense of this before when he had noticed how much pleasure he took in catching sight of Allie from afar: like when they were going to meet outside a store or whatever and he would see her in the crowd before she saw him. Her big sunglasses, floppy tied-up hair, swan neck, the way she carried her handbag low like Peter Hook's bass. It was enchanting: a mix of flying over your own house in a plane and of remembering the exciting early unfamiliar days of a relationship. Cynically, also, she was not talking.

This was different, though. She was a case study and he was an anthropologist. That could be sexy too. A mud hut, the Nile Delta. She comes from the river... still wet, the drips glistened on her tribal markings.

Or, she's driving the car and a homeless guy is at the light and instead of wasting a five on him like she used to, she instead looks in his eyes for a good ten seconds and says, "You need to figure out what you really want. God bless."

Hmm. Hoboes are just not sexy... unless possibly if you're a serial killer or something.

The notebook was getting quite full in the "Manifesting" section. In a nutshell, it was quite simple. The individual determines their own reality. Not just the perception of events but the events themselves. The individual attracts events to himself via his mental attitude. Most individuals are full of unorganized, mediocre, fear-based thoughts. The universe notices this and delivers a suitable reality to them. Focused visualization can change this tragic state of affairs.

The human mind can only handle a few such visualizations at a time, but if you want it and can imagine it, it will flow across the unfinished realities and come to you.

If...

You think you deserve it.

Because, look, we all have crazy ambitions and dreams and we sometimes get obsessed with them, so why are there still stinky hoboes everywhere?

Until you believe you deserve it, it's a form without energy, a mold without metal.

And that is what would make this a killer California culture for the 21st century. Jack had it figured out: in the 60s, 70s, whatever, it was about equality. Now it was about how you could make it to the elite. More than that though: how to live in an elite universe through... what? The will?

The triumph of the will.

His beautiful wife.

Time for an hour of guitar, then off to join her in bed.

Save.

--

In the middle of the night, Jack woke up. His room was the deep purple of background radiation. Someone was in their room. Watching them sleep. Some being,

He heard a light breath just an inch from his ear.

"Oh... hey buddy, what's up? Wanna get in with us?"

No reply.

"What is it, bud? It's the middle of the night?"

"When are they going to find that man, Daddy?"

"I... which man? Look, can we talk tomorrow... I'm a little tired."

"Violet was saying they found a man's shoe on the beach and she saw it. The police were all looking at it and they were looking for the man too."

"Violet? She went to the beach and found a shoe?"

"No she didn't go to the beach, Dad..."

"Come on, get in."

--

Next day, Jack called Drake and asked him if he was into doing some stuff with Indigo Children as part of the "Bible."

Drake said that it was a great idea, because people love to spend money even more if it was possible to disguise it as being for their kids. But he was worried that possibly the Indigo guys had trademarks on that, so they might need to "white label" it.

"So D, Violet is an indigo kid, right?" Jack asked.

"Big time, per the wife. She has all the characteristics. Rejects guidance, self-confidence, learns through doing, visions... and I'm assuming a big-ass purple aura although I don't think even Hannah is actually claiming she can see that thing... yet."

"Yeah... I guess Gavin is too but it's been a while since Allie brought it up."

"That's the thing that I think is going wrong with this Indigo Kids project. I think the original idea was to be like 'Okay, your kid SEEMS to be an asshole but that's just because he is evolved beyond you - like Spock from Star Trek,' but I hear that now they are saying, like, 85% of kids these days are Indigo. Where's the fun in that??? I was buying the pitch when I thought I was at least getting an elite level kid.

"So, I'm getting an idea: we need to trump them. Take it to the next level. 'Hey, your kid is a SUPER dick? That's because they are beyond Indigo.' What color is beyond indigo... super indigo?"

"No, violet."

"You're shitting me."

"Why would I shit you?"

"You're telling me I spawned my own little trademark! This is what They call serendipity.

"So, look, give Hannah a call and get a play-date going on one of your little teacher short-days. 'Violet Children!','The future is here and it is OKAY that it hates you.'"

--

So Jack called Hannah and she wasn't too surprised that he would ask her out and mentioned that she had a thing lined up with some school moms Wednesday and that would work fine.

Jack bounced a squash ball off the wall of his 'study.' Writers always exploit the lives of their friends and family, right? That was considered cool. And he was a writer now.

Of a bible.

--

Gavin hopped along Torrey Pines beach, singing. The sky was clear and the ocean impeccable. It brought all the surfers back. The warm of the afternoon was crouched contented on the sands and Jack crunched along barefoot on the rocks. Up ahead, he could see the impromptu camp of the moms; a flutter of paisley and tie-dye silks held down by high-end glass Tupperware full of organic salads.

As well as Hannah -- petite, pale and Irish looking as ever -- Jack could see that large German woman -- who was quite thoroughly described by just those three words -- and two tall, skinny (yet precisely large breasted) model-looking babes in arrogant jeans.

Jack threw some hugs around. And, hell, why not a couple at those two skinny girls.

Stretched out next to Hannah, just after placing his unimpressive box of sandwiches in the food zone, he asked where Violet was at. Hannah lazily pointed over at the abandoned lifeguard platform -- which sounded very Scooby-Doo -- where Violet was hanging passively as seaweed with nine feet of drop beneath her toes.

"Remarkable grip strength," he noted, half to his mental file.

"Yes. And I think she has hollow bones too, so we should be fine either way," Hannah said while popping a bubble-like grape into her mouth.

It was surprising that Hannah and Drake didn't get along -- she always seemed kind of laid back, good humored. Then again, everyone was cool on the beach: the trick was to watch them in the parking lot.

"Gavin's been talkin' 'bout Vi all morning," said Jack while checking out the two babe types. They had that pelvis-forward stance that was all the rage these days. He guessed it made your jeans ride extra-low. Those girls had abdomens made of molded plywood peeking out of there: mid century modern plywood diving into devil's depths.

"Yes, her too. They are such soul mates."

"You believe in soul mates?" [that sounded like a pick up line didn't it?]

Hannah sat up at that one. Jack half expected her to look out at the far away line that the whales would soon

swim along and say 'I used to.'

Instead she said, "Yes. I mean there can't really be six billion unique souls after all."

Jack sat up now. This really touched a nerve with him because, on the side, he had been brainstorming corporate taglines and quite a few of them were along the lines of 'enhance your uniqueness.'

Then again that was just spin since they were trying to get people to sign up for a commercial cult.

"That's an interesting point,"

She raised a narrow, curved eyebrow.

"Erm... would you care to expand on it?" he asked and she dissolved into giggles.

"Sorry," she said "you just had such a serious look on your face."

"I know... typically I just talk bullshit, right?"

"No! But okay, I will expand on it. Let's say that I don't think that there are as few personalities as, say, blood types," [descending to a whisper] "but there does seem to only be one for skate-board wives" and she cocked her head at the skinny girls.

A-ha! That's who they were! Drake talked about those girls... a lot. The one with the swoop of blonde hair that swirled around her shoulder and was unquestionably, unobjectionably and ubiquitously beautiful must be the one that was married to the guy that had jumped over Stonehenge and who had made a lot of money selling his name.

The other one had a more 'European' look, like her face had actually emerged from the chance encounter of two DNA strands, rather than extensive focus grouping (like her companion's.) She had an exotic Scandinavian hiss on her consonants. However, just thinking the word 'Scandinavia' sent a tingle up Jack's leg: maybe to others it was just a light speech defect.

So the jeans did not lie. These girls were loaded, and from what Jack had also heard, they were pack-followers and totally ignored by their husbands. Jack had seen these guys cruise up at picnics from time to time. They always seemed to glide in, even though when you looked down at their feet there was not a wheel in sight.

"Babes," they would say, with detachment, and kiss them quickly. Then they would go and sit down under a tree with their baseball caps low for about five minutes while their spouses carried trays of food from Audi station wagons. Jack had joined them from time to time because, hey, he used to be cool too. It was usually a weird talk like "Hey man, how's it goin'? You're Gavin's dad, right? Cool kid. Man, I'm working hard on the new kitchen: picking it I mean. It's tough... I guess; always something, right. Okay, later."

It all seemed a bit scripted, like they had attended 'Mommy conversation as a second language' class. Dude... I wanted to talk about skating, music or bongos, thought Jack as the skate dads slid away, checking off 'picnic' from their list.

Maybe it wasn't just the skate dads who did the quick in/out but they did it with the cold detachment of a sniper: 'Nailed the 360 wide dog, bro!' [High five.]

Jack made his way over to within hailing distance of the two wives. These women were textbook key influencers with alpha-networks. If he could figure the trick to flipping their demo to early adopters that

would be some serious gravy.

"Delicious vol-au-vents," he ventured, with the direct confidence he had learned selling Amway in Texas way back when.

"Oh thanks... I was so happy they didn't flop out," replied the Scandinavian. The Blonde gave off a weakened-down hobo-deflection 'tude still, though. She would be a greater challenge.

Candy checked out this guy getting in their space. He was good-enough-looking to not be hitting on them so desperately, so what was his story? Was he a skater looking for a contact? No... too old. Was he like that guy who had that scheme selling dehydrated tiger balls?

After ten minutes of chat she wasn't sure at all, but he seemed nice enough. It certainly must suck to be a nurse like his wife. It was so much better to be nothing, she reacted (bitterly) against her own thought. She pulled her merino-wool cardigan around herself and looked down at La Jolla off in the distance.

She was not nothing. She worked hard for the school finance committee. She was still specially beautiful. But what was this guy talking about now...?

"...I guess I think about my kids. I mean, I would never want to drag them off to church every weekend but I know it always meant a lot to me that my parents had that routine in their lives. Then again, now I think they were just kind of like sheep, you know... shutting their brains down when they went in the church door."

Where was Tommy, anyway? He could be doing something totally illegal with that awful Violet. He seemed to act extra bad to impress her. Like father like son.

Oh there he was, peering into a rock pool with little Gunnar. Watch out for genocide, rock-pool dwellers. Otherwise, low-risk activity.

Brunhilde was having a good chat with... Jack?... wasn't she.

"Ja, totally, totally. It's so hard to stay grounded when you are trying to do things differently. I mean I like to think I'm a very spiritual person but since the kids its, like... hard!!! Ha! Ha! Ha!!!"

Jack was pleased to be getting 50% response to his little fishing exercise anyway, although Candy did seem to be the richer of the two from what he had heard. Maybe the very top-end of the demographic was out of reach.

'Out-of-reach' had probably been a good adjective for Candy her whole life, right? You could tell that just by the way she shook your hand and set up a force-field at the distance of her arm with a single fluid motion. Also by the way her eyes turned off when Jack turned up... hey, stardust sparkles are not free, buddy.

Suddenly, she wrinkled her nose at him. Shit, was he staring? And what did the wrinkle mean? He turned his head around and yelled, "That you, buddy?"

"Huh?" came a young voice from behind a rock.

"Better check in on the little rascal!"

Jack clambered over the top of a small boulder and said, "Boo!"

Gavin laughed and Violet scowled, but perhaps less than usual. They were both squatted in front of a small pile of sticks, seaweed and fish bones.

"What you got cooking there, kids?" he asked.

"Dead world soup," they answered in concert.

"Whut?" he replied in his (fake) dumb hick voice as he hopped down.

Violet started stirring the soup. "When a world dies, the space gods come by and make a soup."

The soup was turning into a mix of shadows with white bits in it. Something was sticking in Jack's throat and stopping him from asking who the space gods were.

A bad vibe was bubbling up in the lava of the day. Jack stuck around long enough to make some notes on Violet and how she definitely had an aura of cold hard future about her. And for sure, if someone could convince you that was a good thing you'd pay them plenty.

Later, he found himself waking up in the warm dark next to Gavin in the boy's little bed with a crumpled-up comic book slowly printing negative super-heroes on his face. The little guy did a deep breath and then went quiet. He was planted in his bed face-down and looked as though he weighed 500 pounds. What color aura did he have? Violetish? Or was that just reflections in the atmosphere?

Creakingly tumbling out of bed with slow motion Chinese acrobat stealth, Jack could feel the light of a crackling TV off somewhere in his house. He found Allie lifeless in front of the screen, apparently poisoned by the huge Wendy's soda that lolled at her feet. She had a soft spot for Jay Leno of all things, and for big fountain sodas. So sometimes, when she wasn't careful, little-girl Allie from the past would manifest her ideal evening into out present time.

She was light as a raincoat and he carried her off to bed.

Chapter 4

Late afternoon at the hospital. The meals were done and a lot of the patients were descending into naps. The screams and cries tapered away one-by-one until only the lady with the burned hands could still be heard and that was barely an intense groan with melodramatic inflections. On Allie's personal scale, which maybe one day she could popularize -- the McCaig-Kelly scale -- this would be a 5. The scale went up to 27 [Allie's age.]

The paperwork was in the envelope and it was time to check Mrs. Ramirez's blood sugar. She headed out into the main corridor. Her shoes were soft, warm and battered: true nurse's shoes. But everything clattered like horse hooves in that harsh corridor. Allie sometimes imagined being rushed down this corridor on a stretcher. Descending into Hell could not be more harsh or more cold. It was important, she recalled, not to attract that reality to her. So, she quickly abolished it by first visualizing an elderly Native American man on the stretcher and then slowly moving her mind back to the 2005 Toyota 4Runner.

The Native American man was something she had invented herself. It was her anti-ego: whenever she found herself visualizing herself in a dark place where she didn't want to go, the Native American man would be sent there instead.

She arrived at her destination inhaling a deep leather interior that she had found bottled in a deep old memory. She released the breath and returned to the now.

"Well, little Allie, you gonna let me outta here yet?" asked Mrs. Ramirez with a weak smile that barely shrugged open the heavy curtains of her cheeks.

Allie gave a half-smile in return. Her ice-blue eyes took a hint of mouthwash-green from her scrubs and her lips were thin and stretched.

"Well, Mrs. Ramirez, the thing is you have too many nice shoes for me to let you go losing all your toes. I really want to do some more work on coming up with a diet you can stick with this time."

Mrs. Ramirez shuffled in her bed. This was a small symbol of defiance: a protest march of sheet wrinkles. The two women talked for a while of glycemic indexes.

Would Mrs. Ramirez ever get her shit together? Allie looked her in the eyes... deeply.

Eyes are black in the middle. They have to be, to see. They hold light. Around that they are white. They reject light. In between is a ring as unique as a fingerprint. Good doctors read the flecks, smears and spirals.

But this is just the beginning of the story. There is another light, which can't be explained by light bulbs and sunbeams. It's the light that the pictures in your mind are made of.

Allie had never seen that light more easily than here in the hospital where thoughts of life, death and the unfortunate lack of alternatives was closest to the surface.

As she walked the wards, especially at night, more and more often she saw the light even before she saw the face or before she heard the voice with its words.

She was still having a hard time with the dead eyes. Dead eyes in living faces. Feeding them almost felt a sin. Although they laughed and joked as you popped their feed-pipes in, the dead eyes told the truth.

Beyond dead, these eyes loved death and loved to spread it. They made you cold and ruined your day. And whatever light they stole from you didn't revive them a jot. Who knows where it went?

"Mrs. Ramirez," Allie began and then she stopped. Allie was still new here and she needed the money and didn't want any trouble. And she really had no idea how to save that last spark in Mrs. Ramirez's eyes. And she felt cold. So she wrapped her thin, muscly, freckly arms around herself and stood up, saying "Stick with it, okay!"

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"I'm thinking of going back to work," said Hannah as she approached the deli counter with Luna.

Luna raised an eyebrow, but not much. Just enough, really. It was getting harder and harder to get any sort of reaction other than calm wisdom out of Luna these days.

"I thought you were having feelings like that," she replied, slightly tilting her head down and looking right down her long straight, southern-European nose at Hannah. Then she ordered the quinoa salmon wrap.

Hannah was about to say more but she suddenly had to shout, "Wait! I'll have that in a cardboard box, please. Yes, a cardboard one. You'll find them back in your kitchen. Thank you, I'm so grateful."

A couple of minutes later, her salad came out in chemically-neutral brown paper then they headed off to the lookout park to have a quick bite.

Luna stretched her arms over her head, fingers interlaced. "This is an amazing time," she said.

They were alone. Then a car parked. Two blond dreadlock guys came out of their wagon and then got their boards down.

From a cinematic angle, you would see the two ripped and stoked dudes against a forever mirror of human-sized waves flocking in. From Luna and Hannah's perspective, they were set against a background of a gnome adoring a cactus in front of a small stucco house that was worth \$3M, or rather a house that was worth probably 10,000 dollars on a \$2,990,000 part of the world. Occasionally, the people in the house would come out on Rite-Aid deckchairs and survey their kingdom: the ocean and the affronted neighbors. They would never sell their house. It was class war, American style. A trashy house in a paradise that the rich took too long to discover.

"They are so lucky," said Hannah.

Luna raised her eyes. "The surfers are lucky... lucky we don't rip their clothes off and ... disgrace them. And yes, the Hillbillies are lucky too. A whole ocean to piss in!"

Hannah couldn't let this slide "Luna, do you have a problem with the people who live in this house?"

Luna laughed and looked with sympathy at Hannah, ready to heal her.

"Not at all. I welcome them into my world with a laugh... a joke. This is the most intimate invitation. Have you tried laughing yoga yet?"

"Maybe. I sometimes laugh at yoga pants."

"You have to try this. Lotte's husband brought it to America. It strips away the... the trash from yoga and takes it to the core. It's not about having biceps."

"What is it about? Laughing, of course, but ... what else?"

Luna looked paradoxically serious.

"First, you should go ahead and have the biggest laugh you ever had and then we can talk more."

But suddenly Hannah went ahead and did some fairly average crying.

The sea was salty too. How to change the subject?

"That Marine, Luna, he's not dead. Am I right? I mean... 'Marines': that sounds like they're good swimmers, right?"

"It might be better if he was dead. Those are crimes a young man might not be able to live with. His next life will give him the work of making amends. A few lives, maybe. Twelve lives... I heard they killed twelve."

"He could be innocent," said Hannah, who had removed almost all the damp traces of her implosion. The main evidence was a red nose. "The trial is still going on. The others are saying they didn't do it. It was insurgents. I think it is still going on."

Luna suggested a brisk walk on the beach, so they went. The grey, grainy sand -- always cool -- accepted their footsteps well: the only price was a slightly itchy residue.

"We always end up down here," said Hannah. She meant the beach, but Luna thought she meant this unhappy planet.

"You hate Drake, don't you?" Hannah asked out of the blue.

"Not at all," replied Luna calmly, "I think he'll make you a great ex-husband."

They had a laugh and then talked about what kind of work Hannah would want to do.

One thing was clear: a career as an oral hygienist was off the table. Hannah admitted she had considered it for a little while when it looked like all of the girls were pulling on scrubs to get back in the workforce and Hannah realized she was too squeamish for real hospital type stuff.

Eventually though, she had actually had a dentist visit and Dr. Schumann turned to his young assistant and said "More suction please, Tammy" and Hannah realized that she was also too squeamish to even hear a phrase like that everyday. After thinking longer, she realized she was also too squeamish - or prudish or misanthropic - to be a massage therapist like Luna, although she kept that to herself.

"Would you like to go back into the theater," asked Luna, "I know you were happy there."

"I think... I think it was just a hobby really," replied Hannah with twenty keys hooping around her left index finger and slapping her palm.

"No! It was your life!"

"Same thing... back then. Oh look at the time!"

They looked at the time.

--

Ultimate Frisbee.

Jack had actually taken Frisbee 101 at college, so he was not exactly a noob when it came to Frisbee. In fact he was rather good at it. His specialty was the no-look pass. But every time he played 'Ultimate' - which generally peaked when he was not getting sex from his wife -- there was a quiet period when he stood on the grass, overlooking the bay and wondered if Frisbee could indeed go no further than this dude-ified football-clone they were playing.

Below the steep green park, beyond the party strip of PB, the ocean pinned it all down. The fleet was in town: big time. A lot of metal in the water. Not so long ago, those guys were just a bunch of clowns to Jack. These days you had to recognize that they were taking on harsh duties and solid risks. You might well believe that they were total idiots to get sucked into the biggest display of wounded national machismo since... well, there might not be a 'since.' But regardless, they believed, they served and some of them got blown up.

"Heads up, bro!"

The Frisbee was just ten feet away, oscillating wildly.

"Frisbee, this may be your ultimate expression. It may not. But for today, it is as good as it gets and I honor you."

Fap. He made the catch and ran with it and they went on to win the game.

Someone was having a cook-out and it smelled good. Jack was starting to prefer Tofu dogs these days and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

They were high fiving each other farewell when his phone rang. It was Drake who wanted to meet up and talk business. Jack was very thirsty so he first covered his ass, slightly, with a text message home and then cycled down to Garnet.

The traffic was stacked both ways as twilight flourished. One way was surfers leaving. The other way was people coming to party. Both directions looked pretty relaxed, Jack had to admit, as he skipped that scene on his two-wheeler. He had to concede that Pacific Beach had some pretty laid back traffic jams.

Jack had forgotten to ask Drake which bar they were going to be slamming them back in tonight. Something told him 'Vietnam Sam's': that salty, oversexed, miniskirted place. That place where Jack was sure the DJ had done visuals with napalm victims but no one could verify it.

Outside Sam's, two girls were harshly staring at each other as seagulls squeaked mockingly overhead.

"Girls. Ladies. Drinks!" he said and they turned their stares on him. Their clothes were at once clingy and droopy, their eyes jaded yet... kind of pissed. They were the kind of girls you took Polaroid photos of. As they drank with Jack and Drake, they became a kind of black mirror.

Even in the body-hot bar, the ocean air occasionally asserted itself. For Jack, who grew up in the dry, that sea smell was impressive: a pirate, a subMarine commander, a shark entered the room. Jack became alert. Looked around. Were there more people or TVs in the bar? It was close but the answer was people. Hot girls, hungry guys. Hot guys too. Big guys too. Military big, with predatory eyes. Trained to break in doors and get everyone up against the wall. Jack was studying one guy, large and Armenian looking, when he got caught. Caught and tagged. Jack hoped that someone else would be a bigger irritation tonight to that soldier and he hoped the soldier was not here with his pack.

Then Jack thought about that attack on the village in Iraq and the trial that was still going on. Jack had nearly signed up once or twice: could have been him standing over a pit with those civilians huddled in it. And been there when the first bullet went down and cracked the man's head like ice. And he was sure that he would not have been the guy to fire the first shot. But the second? Or third? Or any of the 200 that followed. Of that, he was unsure.

This event was from someone else's past: just something he read about on the Internet. Yet tonight it felt like something in his own life, from his own future.

"Yo, Iceman," called Drake with an empty shot glass in his hand.

The girls actually laughed. They were looking super hot and restless; rocking on their stools. One had very dark and serious eyes, and she looked like she wore eye shadow on her cleavage.

They were hyped. Drake must have been telling them how rich he was: that almost always worked. The dark one... she looked... Arabic.

"Shit, man, how much did we drink?" mused Jack as he stepped up to go to the bar.

"Not sure, but I am on to my third personality which is not a good sign but... too late to stop now." Then Drake dove back into the girls.

Jack got the drinks. Jack was skilled at carrying drinks, even though the crowd was now dense and the music was getting quite dancey.

From about fifteen feet, Jack saw Drake, the two girls and an empty seat. It looked, suddenly, like an empty grave. When he got back to the table, he finished his whiskey and said. "I think I'm about done. Done with this."

Drake looked up, unsure if this was some clever 'make them beg' seduction strategy that he would benefit from learning. "But bloodclot, we didn't talk any business. We gotta take care of business. And this thumpin' bar... is the perfect place."

A strobe light kicked in and there were suddenly, definitely, too many drinks. The awful feeling that David Lynch was directing the evening came over Jack. "Drake," he said, "let's hang later... later this week. I'm just not feeling it."

Drake looked calmly and coldly at Jack. He was a man who didn't like to have a toy taken away from him. A big played-out rap beat came on and the girls started wriggling erotically. What was waiting for Jack in the kitchen? Stereotypically dry and accusing leftovers. A skinny string of untouchability in a cool bed to follow.

Of course, he didn't plan on following this flirtatious evening all the way through to its conclusion in a bed with soft toys scattered around it and 'T-Pain' playing in the background. That line had not yet been crossed.

'Yet.' There was a 'yet' in him, he noticed. And if the only thing separating you from something is a 'yet' then what are you waiting for? Time is a bit of an illusion, after all, and if destiny can't be avoided it can be abbreviated.

The illusion of free will is a fragile one. The slight nudge from some unseen angle that suddenly tipped the table in front of him and poured drinks on the laps of the girls had more control over Jack's life than years of moral and practical learning, his religion, his society, his vows, his very sense of selfhood.

The drinks were vulgar and enjoyed exploding their colors as they hit the lip at the edge of the table which was meant to stop them but instead was the means by which they reached unprecedented heights of acrobatic grandeur.

Ultimate Frisbee.

Skintight synthetics soaked up the reds and blues: the girls looked good all spattered but they were pissed and foul-mouthed. Everyone is foul-mouthed and has a tattoo nowadays. Poor seamen. Maybe everyone has VD too.

Suddenly big, ripped army/navy/air force/Marine guys were in the mix.

"Are you fucking with the girls, you cocksucker?"

Oh, it was that guy. From earlier. And now they were on the street; all on the street together. The beat they were swimming in a second ago was just a faint pulse now. There were five enemies around them now. Ten fists. Ten big-ass feet. Jack looked at Drake. Jack knew that somehow Drake would be the one to get off lightly from this, whereas he would probably end up having a ball amputated or being told that he was a great teacher but the kids were just scared of him now.

In the hush of an improbably - but fittingly - deserted street, in the haze of being near the ocean, everybody, in their own way, got ready for the fucking up of Jack.

Chapter 5

On the way home, walking, Jack reflected. He looked at his lovely, continuous and unbroken legs pounding along. He breathed deep into his unpunctured lungs and the air happily oxygenated all parts of his brain.

A cat skittered out in front of him, then froze. Then it turned and looked up the road. Like a small loyal dog, and not at all like a cat, it accompanied Jack's steps home. There must have been something large and hungry in the alley that produced that cat.

Numerous cars passed Jack, fanning shadows that nobody needed. Half of the drivers were drunk and almost all of them would get home all right. Of course, those who didn't would have driven into a new, black life.

A police car passed him by. He could see the police inside. Two young white guys with creased faces, observing him like they were disappointed by his slow meaningless stroll.

Damn! He had left his bike locked up outside the bar. Well, never mind. He cut across someone's lawn on the corner, like everyone else did. The lawn was partially xeriscaped by edict of the people. It crunched and some little mammal skittered away. Orange sodium faked a dawn in a way that depressed anyone coming home at this hour, unless they had not expected to see a dawn. Jack maintained a spring in his step.

The screen door shivered at his arrival but he managed to keep the noise down to a minimum. He was sober, so his ears and brain were working together nicely and he did everything right. His DC shoes were put to bed with the other shoes and he crawled in to his bed.

He lay down and looked into two surprising open eyes. Lilac lips in the night softly whispered, "Have a good night?" and there was no harshness, and there was generosity and perhaps time was reset. Perhaps this was a magic night.

Two minutes later she was on top of him, grinding him down into the mattress that was usually too springy and hard but not tonight, not now.

For a second, he was certain he was dead. That this was the blanket the angels put over your eyes.

Then another second.

Then another.

Then her fingernails dug in his chest and he smiled as he came alive all over and she smiled too.

Thank God for that crazy beach guru!

Chapter 6

It got warmer. Everyone worked hard. Tiny moths got in the food over at Hannah's house and laid their eggs. Everything in the kitchen either had to be sealed up or destroyed. Hannah was paralyzed in the garden for over an hour dealing with this. The moths left a faint dust behind when you tried to swat them. Violet told her mom that it was in fact the tiny scales that covered their wings that made up the dust. That was why Hannah went to the garden.

She could have gone back in. Thrown away some food that was suspect, bagged up the rest. Or thrown it all away, boiled everything, gone shopping. But instead she stayed and looked at her fragile garden which seemed as loosely rooted as a moss and liable to blow away like moth scales.

She should probably xeriscape. Rip it all up. Tear it out. Put beautiful rocks and suggestive cactus in. Reduce her footprint. But she didn't.

Something was impeding all of her useful destructions.

Her mind latched on to the last time Jack had been over and to something he had said about destruction.

There was something different about Jack these days. He had this aura of gratitude that was quite compelling. Hannah had mentioned this to Allie when they were out on Girls' Night Out at a Salsa club near Balboa Park. Allie had not really noticed, although they had been fighting a bit less lately. That could just be the extra hours she had been picking up and all the time he had been spending running round with that homeless guy.

Hannah was sometimes described as a good listener. She internally disagreed. She in fact possessed the gift of turning her brain off but leaving her face turned on, sensitively tuned to the other and aping their needs. The best listener, it turned out, was a mirror.

Even though she was still listening here, she did the face trick anyway to find out about the homeless guy without actually asking. Since Allie had seven years fewer wrinkles than her, she liked to keep a certain element of aloof distance in the relationship, like an older sister.

Allie said, "Oh, you don't know about Super-Hobo? AKA the Buddha of Pacific Beach? So Jack was out drinking with... uh... with Drake, I guess. And then they spill someone's drink. Or whatever. Then Jack is suddenly surrounded by a bunch of Navy guys. Then he is thinking he is going to get all beaten up and... oh isn't this just typical! First he gets himself in danger and then he is just totally visualizing and attracting just the worst, most violent outcome. But then out of the blue walks up this hobo guy..."

"Called?"

"Oh... Adam, I guess. You know, I am not judging his... hobo-hood. So anyway, he walks up. He's like this totally ripped, Jesus-looking guy and he just kind of strolls into the middle of this scene and then just looks out at the navy guys and Jack says it's like they can't look him in the eyes: all of the bad vibes start to... it's like they all sober up quick. One of the Navy guys gives Jack a big shove but then they are done and go back into the bar."

"And probably end up beating some other guy to a pulp two hours later."

"Well, yeah, maybe. But anyway, so now Jack's got this like Blood Brother! >Snort