

The Tempter Comes

By Bob La Forge

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1 The First Night

People who have insight, when they sleep, they see things;
people who have fear, when they sleep, things see them.

Thomas Parker was sleeping in the guest bedroom of his good friends the Donnelees. Every summer he came here for one to two months depending on his parents' travel schedules. They both worked for the same company that required a lot of overseas travel during the summer. So for as long as he could remember he always came to Jabesh and stayed here. But this year due to an extra amount of travel for his parents, he was going to stay for the entire three months.

Getting to Jabesh from his house was a long bus trip, maybe ten hours or more and the closer he got the more scattered the rest of civilization became. From the large city where he lived to small towns, from small towns to farms, and from farms to desolation, that is, until he would spy Jabesh approaching. Then he would regain whatever energy the trip had drained away.

He always looked forward to his stay here and enjoyed the change of pace and scenery. It was probably his favorite time of each year. This summer, though, would be different—very different—although he had no idea.

He had just arrived that early evening and after all of the hoorays and hugs was now sound asleep in bed. It was a simple room as most guest bedrooms are wont to be. The twin bed was in the middle of the room with a small end table on either side. An old cherry dresser with a mirror was along the wall to the right and next to the door. A single window was on the left. The window was open but it was an unusually still and silent night. The thin curtains hung unflinching on either side. The window reflected in the dresser mirror much to Thomas' relief. A closet stood opposite him. There were a few small pictures on the wall but nothing of distinction. Because it was so old, all of the wood in the room was much darker than when it had originally been shaped into furniture or moldings. This made the old-fashioned white porcelain doorknob on the closet stand out even more.

Tonight was fairly dark; not much of the quarter moon made it through the window. After having been jostled out of every three-minute nap on the bus, Thomas was sleeping quite deeply on his right side on the edge of the bed.

Then slowly an unsettled feeling crept into his dreams. He unconsciously began fidgeting and making low moaning sounds. His fingers gripped the blanket more tightly. Then at once he awoke but had not yet opened his eyes or moved. He did not know why he had awoken. He listened. There were no noises; no one was walking around in the hallway outside his door. Why had he been startled awake? He remained that way for a minute, listening intently. Nothing. Like a spring, he opened his eyes.

No more than six inches from his face someone was staring at him. Before he could even react there appeared a deep darkness and then nothing. With a yelp he scrambled to the center of the bed never taking his eyes away from the spot where he saw someone. His heart was pounding like the beat of a drummer leading an army into battle. He was up on one arm and sweat was sliding down his face. Yet never did he remove his eyes from that spot. The room was dark but whatever was there was now gone because he could see the black shape of the dresser and the reflection of the window in the mirror. He sat up and swiftly scanned the room. Faint sounds of fear leaked out of his throat. There were no shapes other than what he expected. Still he scanned and breathed more and more heavily until he thought that he would faint.

No, he had not imagined it; he knew that. He or she (it) must have ducked under the bed. Now what should he do? Should he leap out of bed as far as he can and bolt through the door? Should he continue to listen to try to figure out where it is? Thomas felt like he sat there for an hour; barely moving although it was probably no more than several minutes. It was as though the room had been filled solid with lacquer; nothing moved except the heaving of his chest, nothing made noise save his own fears, all time had ceased. The air became hard.

Though it lasted less than a second he reviewed that moment over and over. "It couldn't have been Toni," he thought. "She wouldn't do anything that bizarre." Toni was the Donnelee's daughter. She was the same age as Thomas and, over the years, they became great friends. Besides, he could swear that whoever was staring at him had unusually large, what looked like, totally black eyes. And the skin—he thought that it was the palest skin that he had ever seen. Of course the room was dark and it did happen fast but the more that Thomas thought about it the larger and blacker the eyes became and the skin became as white as a tombstone.

He knew that he had to do something. He could not sit there all night in terror; he would be dead by morning. So he very slowly pushed himself closer to the only end table with a lamp. Only this was the end table nearest to where the face had been. Still he had to do something. He got to exactly an arm's length away from the lamp and not an inch closer. Willing not a bone to crack, he slowly extended an arm towards the lamp. He pictured exactly where the switch would be and moved his fingers to that exact spot. He was pondering, "If something grabs my arm what should I do?" Screaming was clearly the most immediate response. Beyond that all bets were off; anything could happen.

He held his breath as he extended his arm with the speed of a tree growing. With a great relief he got his fingers onto the switch and turned it. The light went on and he jerked his arm back. With this addition of light returned the streams of sweat and the swift jerks of the head to examine every part of the room. He half expected to see an arm extended over the side of the bed working its way towards him but there was nothing new. Still, he sat there listening for scurrying, breathing other than his own, perhaps seeing a hunched shape disappearing out the window (the option he was hoping for). But there was only the dresser, the pictures, and the unchanged items that he had seen for the many years that he had been coming there.

It must still be under the bed, he thought. Leaning over and looking underneath was easily dismissed as an option. "I might as well just tear off my face and hand it to him."

There was nothing nearby for him to use as a weapon. Some thick books that he was going to read this summer were on the dresser. Fortunately he had not yet put them away. He devised a plan. He would leap out of the bed over to the dresser and grab the pile of books. By the time whoever it was that was under the bed managed to crawl out he could clobber him and run out into the hall. It was a plan perhaps as well conceived as Napoleon's march into Waterloo, but it was all he could think of.

He stood up on the bed being careful to stay in the exact center as far away from any edges and groping hands as he could. He crouched as tightly as possible and then leaped to the floor in front of the dresser. Of course anyone functioning on as much adrenaline as he was is never going to do things correctly. He over-leaped and wound up crashing into the dresser. He staggered a couple of steps back towards the bed at which point he jerked his head around to canvass the area around him. Nothing darted out. He managed to stay on his feet and lunging towards the dresser he grabbed the books, raised them above his head, and turned back towards the bed with his bulging eyes staring intently at the space near his feet. Nothing stirred.

He could not hold the books all night. He was already near exhaustion just from the emotional expenditure. He crouched down slightly to see more under the bed. There was nothing. He crouched nearly to the ground until he could see completely through to the other side. Beneath the bed was empty. He scanned the room one more time. Finally he lowered the books although not daring to put them back down yet. He waited for several minutes. He put all but the largest book back onto the dresser being careful not to turn his back to the room. Holding that one book by its spine he slid his feet across the wooden floor to get to the closet. Holding the book like he is going to pitch a baseball he put his other hand on the porcelain doorknob. He paused. The knob made a very slight sound, but nothing stirred within. He turned the knob very deliberately. At any second was someone was going to burst out and leap on him? He could not vanquish the image of something with a mouth full of long, pointed fangs ripping into his neck while his last action as a human was to scream and faint. He turned the knob some more. He heard the faint click of the bolt as it pulled clear of the frame and then he was unable to turn the knob any more. The porcelain was about to slip from his sweaty hand. This was it; he had to do it.

With a quick jerk, he flung open the door and set himself ready to jam the book into whoever face he saw. The door banged against the wall as he stared into the closet. It was small and only a few of his clothes were hanging there. There was nothing else. He lowered his book arm to his side and turned around. There was no one anywhere.

He put the book back onto the dresser and shut the window. He bent down and looked under the bed one more time. He glanced at the clock; it was now after three AM. He had a mind to open each of the dresser drawers but thought that would be really stupid. Whatever that person or thing was, was certainly bigger than a dresser drawer. He did it anyway.

He climbed back into bed but did not turn off the light or lie down. He sat there with his arms wrapped around his knees. Of course he made sure that he was, once again, in the exact center of the bed.

"Maybe I was having a really bad dream. Maybe I woke up and just thought that something was there." But no matter how much he tried to convince himself that it was just a nightmare, he was never really satisfied.

At a quarter to four he decided that unless he got some sleep he would be good for nothing tomorrow and the first full day at the Donnelees was always special since he was fussed over and questioned and treated like the prince that had returned to the castle. But he could not bear to turn off the light. So he went into his closet and got a light jacket. He zipped it up and pulled it over the lampshade. This way there was still some light but not a lot, but it

was enough to see anything lurking in the room. Very gingerly he lay back down as if the bed might suddenly burst into flames. He lay there with his eyes open slowly panning back and forth but being careful not to move his head. He was very good at being vigilant. Eventually, though, from sheer exhaustion he fell asleep.

The next morning there was a knock on his door. “Get up, lazy bones.” The blanket flew up into the air with Thomas not far behind.

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” he half yelled, half grunted. His eyes sprung open and he bolted up in bed. The room was quite bright from the morning sun. His head snapped from side to side as he scanned the room in a near panic. Nothing was there and nothing appeared to have been disturbed since he went to bed. He crawled to the edge of the bed. He knew that it was foolish but still he gripped the edge and bent way down to see if anything was underneath. He fervently hoped that nothing would bite him on the face and pull him down, but he was too tired at the moment to do anything else. There was nothing there either. He got out of bed and stood by the dresser. It could have been that it was light out, that someone was outside his door, or that everything looked normal, but he was feeling more confident—maybe too much so. He went over to the closet, put his hand on the knob, took a deep breath, made a fist with the other hand, and yanked open the door. The sudden pull ruffled some shirts on hangers and the movement caused him to yelp and fall backwards onto the bed. He quickly jumped back up and awaited his attacker with clenched fists. But nothing came. He realized what happened and, after a quick double check of the closet, shut the door and wiped the spit off of his mouth.

He gathered up some clothes and went for a shower. He was still pretty shaken. He did not know if it was from the lack of sleep or from what he saw (or thought he saw). He just knew that he was glad that it was daylight and that there were people around.

When he came downstairs, bowls were sprawled across the table like houses in an urban development. Mrs. Donnelee and Toni were carrying even more dishes to the table.

“The prince is coming,” Thomas heard someone shout out as he descended the stairs.

“Thanks for joining us this morning,” said Mrs. Donnelee rather impishly. Toni was smiling broadly. It was later than he thought. “You sure are dragging your feet. It’s a good thing there isn’t carpeting on the floor otherwise you would trip over the pile.”

He sat down groggily at the table.

“Still not quite with us?” asked Mrs. Donnelee.

“I’m still getting the fuzz out of my eyes,” he replied. After a few seconds he cleared his head. “This is quite a spread.”

“Nothing’s too good for the prince,” proclaimed Mrs. Donnelee. They had given him this nickname because he was always treated like royalty when he came. It was perhaps one of the reasons why these times were always so special to him. Getting fattened up on Mrs. Donnelee’s fabulous cooking was one much anticipated pleasure and she never disappointed. Well, actually, there was that one experiment with the “mystery” pig parts but that will not be counted against her.

Thomas sat down. “Where’s Carl?”

“He didn’t feel like joining us,” Mrs. Donnelee remarked quickly.

There was a moment of silence.

“This is certainly quite a spread for just the three of us,” he announced too overly cheerfully. “Is the rest of the town planning on joining us?” And he was quite correct. There were platters and bowls with pancakes, scrambled eggs, oatmeal, bacon, sausage, toast, butter, jelly, and, yes, grits. Every year one of their goals was to get him to like grits and every year he would take one-half teaspoon and promptly proclaim his undying dislike. Just as he sat down Toni proudly put a small plate in front of him. It was quite elegant and differed from everything else if for no other reason than because it was formed from multiple items.

“What is this?”

“It’s Eggs Benedict,” proclaimed Toni. “It’s quite good. We had to, umm, practice making and, umm, eating it for several days now. We wanted to get it just perfect for you.” She stood there looking very pleased and hoping for nothing less than high expectations and compliments. In fact, both Toni and her mother just stood there beaming at Thomas. He hoped that this was not grits dressed up fancy.

“Well, isn’t anyone else going to sit down?” He felt like a monkey in a zoo. They both pulled up chairs. They bowed their heads and Mrs. Donnelee gave thanks. It seemed a little shorter than usual to Thomas but he figured that maybe it was because she could not wait for him to try the Eggs Benedict.

Finally deciding that something this good looking could not possibly contain any grits he cut off a good slice. “Mmmm, this is great,” he said with a slightly over-exaggerated look of pleasure. He knew that they were hoping for a lot from him and he did not want to disappoint. “This is really great.” This time it came out much more

sincere. "You outdid yourselves on this one." This seemed to please them both and they proceeded to fill their plates with everything else.

But Thomas could not shake his feeling of dread. That face kept flickering in his mind like a slow motion strobe. It was making him increasingly uneasy. He did not want to say anything about it because he did not want them to think that he had gone mad over the last year. Well, at least, not on the first day. He figured that some light-hearted topic would get the conversation going down a pleasant and breezy path.

"So Mrs. Donnelee, how did you get your first name? Were you named after a flower or after a musical instrument?" Mrs. Donnelee's first name was Viola. He figured that either answer would give him fodder for many following questions. "So were your parents musical? Did they play any instruments? Did you sing a lot as a family when you were growing up?" Or "Did your parents have a nice garden? Did they teach you a lot about flowers? Is purple, then, your favorite color?" Either way they would be able to chat for a while and it would, hopefully, get his mind off of things.

Mrs. Donnelee replied, "I was named after my grandmother."

"Oh," he responded rather dismally. His head hung just a little lower as he drizzled some maple syrup over his oatmeal and then scooped a spoonful of the mix into his mouth.

For the rest of the meal Toni and her mother talked excitedly about everything that had happened in the last year. The Fullman kids almost burned their own house down. The church got a new assistant pastor since it was growing so quickly. All the while Thomas looked very enthused but what haunted him was unshakable.

At one point Mrs. Donnelee said, "I guess your lamp got cold during the night."

Thomas froze solid; the fork with the sausage just inches from his mouth.

Toni giggled. Mrs. Donnelee continued, "We saw that you put your coat on it. That's all. We figured that it must have been shivering or something."

2 The Picnic

Keep your friends close
because you never know when
they will get your tail out of a trap

While Mrs. Donnelee cleared off the table she said, “Don’t forget that today is our church’s kick-off-summer picnic. It starts at five so we should head out plenty before then, so don’t go wandering off too far or anything.”

As Toni and Thomas were leaving the house he said, “The church picnic is on a Friday? Isn’t that rather odd? Wouldn’t tomorrow be better?”

“There’s something going on at the church tomorrow and, besides, it’s summer, it stays light longer.”

From a short distance away they heard a hearty “hello” and loud panting. Coming eagerly towards them was Mr. Keskes and his two Great Danes Moses and Larry. The dogs in their enthusiasm to reach the two practically pulled Mr. Keskes as though he were on a sled.

“Well, hello there, Thomas, it’s so good to see you again.” Mr. Keskes tried to hold out his hand to shake Thomas’ but with a leash in each hand the task was beyond even a superhero. The dogs were all over the two. “And I see that I’m not the only one glad to see you both.”

Moses was all brown whereas Larry was a harlequin and both approached pony size.

Seeing that trying to hold a conversation while a tongue the size of a small island is constantly lapping up your face is near impossible Thomas and Toni excused themselves and continued on. Mr. Keskes cheerfully bid them goodbye and strained to wheel the two ponies around.

Toni spent a good hour showing Thomas the flower and vegetable gardens that she planted in the backyard. While they were sitting on the bench overlooking the tomato plants and swinging their legs Toni said, “Your parents are gone a lot aren’t they.”

Thomas tightened a corner of his lip, “Yea, rather than spending a lot of time with Mom and Dad I feel more like I’ve been parented by small curiosities: collections of plants and insects that I’ve observed on solitary walks, searching out the smallest and furthest room of a large building, walking a darkened neighborhood and seeing a slice of a living room through a lone lit window and imagining the family inside.

“My parents bring me lots games that can be played by one person. But probably one of my favorite times is to read in an old chair in the corner of the attic.”

“But I suspect that puzzle books are your favorite.”

Thomas brightened up and looked over at Toni. “You pegged that one.”

Toni continued, “Yet for all of the time that you spend alone no one would call you an outcast or unfriendly. In fact, I think that when you’re given that rare chance, you’re very loyal and quite interesting.”

“Gee thanks. My books and puzzles don’t compliment me very often. It’s just that being an only child whose parents are often gone have forced me to often invent my own pleasures rather than join those already in progress with others.”

They sat for a few more minutes in silence staring at the vegetable plants and then they both got up.

They spent the rest of the day futzing around the neighborhood. At 4:00 they headed back home to get Toni’s mom and head out to the picnic.

As they approached the church Thomas saw a crowd larger than he had ever remembered. “I guess that they are growing quite a bit,” he thought. Off to the left were a large inflatable Noah’s Ark and a fish (presumably with Jonah inside) for children to jump around in. There was a softball game on the far right. In the middle to the right near the front doors were three eight-foot tables covered with dishes of food. It reminded Thomas of Mrs. Donnelee’s breakfast that morning. If he did not know any better he would have thought that everyone in town eats every meal from tables stacked with food. There was an impressive array of folding tables and chairs between him and the food.

But what caught his attention were three tables close together about twenty feet to the left of the food. Each table had a red cloth completely covering what appeared to be a box underneath. He expected to see a magician stroll up, dramatically announce his intentions, and then whisk one of the covers off sending a flock of doves to fill the sky. With a whisk of the second cover a herd (pack, team, group?) of rabbits would bound into the delighted

crowd. But with the whisking of the third cover he envisioned a very compressed elephant that would slowly pull its head out from its chest, extend out its legs that it had bent underneath it and rise up. Then it would shake itself until the rest of its body puffed out to normal size and its ears flapped like the paddles on a riverboat. The crowd would gasp, the table would break, the magician's eyes would twinkle, and the elephant—much glad to be back to a normal shape—would raise its trunk and let out a gleeful trumpet. But instead the three boxes sat unaffected and unmoved. Thomas looked around but did not see anyone with a tuxedo and a top hat. He felt slight disappointment.

Speaking to Toni he asked, "What is this all about?"

She pointed at the sign that stretched across the front of all three tables, "Nearly Extinct." She replied, "It's three things that are nearly extinct, just as the sign says. At one point the pastor is going to unveil them and talk a little about each."

"What's in there—cages with Marine Turtles and Great Apes? That would be cool."

"I don't think it's anything that heady."

From behind them there was a distant greeting getting rapidly closer. "Hello Thomas. It's great to have you back again."

They both turned and saw Sarah and her parents who, having just arrived, were advancing quickly across the grass. Toni and Thomas met them half way. Sarah was grinning broadly, "Well, it's about time you came back to visit us. And here I thought that this summer was going to be no fun at all."

"Hey," came Toni's quick retort, "what about the rest of us? Aren't we any fun?"

"Oh yes, of course. I was just referring to, umm, extra fun."

Sarah's father reached over and energetically shook Thomas' hand. "Always good to see you, son. How long are you here for this summer?"

"I'm glad to see you also, Mr. Paterich. I'm actually going to be here all summer this year. My parents have to go to several countries on business and it is going to take them longer than usual."

"Well, we'll make sure that you are well looked after. You have plenty of good friends here. We'll have to have you over for dinner sometime in the next couple of days," affirmed Mrs. Paterich.

"That would be great," Thomas responded. Sarah smiled broadly.

Mrs. Paterich said, "We're scheduled to help cook. We'll talk to you later and firm up some plans." Then she leaned over to Thomas and whispered, "Avoid the sausage; they got a cheap brand this year. But everything else is good." They both walked away leaving Sarah with Toni and Thomas.

Sarah turned to Thomas. "So you're here for the whole summer. That's great. It'll be the whole gang again. So what countries are your parents going to this year?"

"I actually can't remember. They told me and I have it written down somewhere in case I need to call them, but every year blends into the next and I lose track."

"I've never been to another country," mused Sarah. "My parents don't go on many vacations so I'm pretty much stuck here in bustling Jabesh."

"You have great parents, Sarah. You are really lucky."

"Well, they're not bad."

"Not bad?" Thomas corrected. "Most kids would kill to have parents like yours."

"Well, it's not like they're perfect. I mean, my Dad's really cheap. For my birthday I asked them to get me a desk. I gave them the exact color, make, and what store they could buy it at. It fit perfectly in my room. It wasn't even a lot of money. So for my birthday what do I get? No, not the desk that I asked for, but some cheap thing. It was the wrong color, it was too small, but it was on sale. I don't know if I ever got exactly what I wanted but I know that whatever I did get was cheaper."

"And my mother, if she ever agreed to anything on the first go around I think I'd faint. Her first response to everything is 'no.' 'Mom, can I get a new pair of shoes?' 'No.' 'But, Mom, I put a playing card in the bottom of my shoe to cover the hole so that my socks don't get wet.' 'No.' 'Mom, do you want to have lunch today?' 'No.' 'Mom, would you like me to cook you dinner for your birthday?' 'No, just make me toast. You don't even have to put butter on it.' It drives me crazy. She ought to tattoo an 'N' on one palm and an 'O' on the other and every time that I ask her something she can just hold out her palms in front of my face. At least then I wouldn't have to hear it."

Thomas held his left hand in front of him palm-up. Starting with the pinky he touched each finger while ticking off the following. "Let's see, they constantly praise and encourage you, they spend a lot of time with you, they are always honest with you, they give you reasonable boundaries, even when you are at your worst they are always patient and calm with you..."

"Hey!" Sarah butted in.

"Looks like I ran out of fingers on that hand." The he looked up with a grin. "Like I said, most kids would kill to have parents like yours."

Sarah saw Thomas looking back over at the three tables with the hidden boxes. “You want to know what is under there?” she said quietly.

“You know?” asked Thomas.

“I helped build them so, yes, I know,” she answered.

“Build them?” Thomas said with emphasis. “If they are something that you can build then how could they be nearly extinct? If we are running low on them then just build some more.” He paused and then said with excitement, “Unless its cages. Did you build cages to hold the animals?”

“Animals?” She looked momentarily confused. “What’s there is just symbolic of what is nearly extinct. They aren’t the things themselves. In fact, they couldn’t be the things themselves.” Sarah was being a bit cryptic. She knew how much Thomas liked puzzles.

Thomas thought that he knew what was going on. “I didn’t know that the pastor was getting into the environment.” So many groups were becoming environmentally aware and this church was following the trend he surmised. “That’s a good thing, mind you. I just wouldn’t have thought that he would have gotten this dramatic with it this quickly. I would guess then that they’re pictures or cutouts of animals who are on the endangered list. Hmm, you never struck me as good with a jigsaw...”

“I am too pretty good with a jigsaw, I’ll have you know.” Sarah broke in with her hands on her hips and her jaw fixed firmly, “and several other power tools to boot.”

“OK, I believe you. But I’d still guess that they’re pictures of animals.”

Sarah, however, dispelled that confidence. “Though you’re right, nature is important, this is more of a—umm—spiritual nature.” Thomas clenched one side of his mouth tightly. He was caught off base.

Sarah dropped what she thought was a good hint. “These are things that you don’t experience much anymore. They used to be much more common but now it’s rare if you come across any of them. You’ll never find them around someone who is arrogant and self-centered.” She looked hopefully at Thomas. But he seemed more confused then ever.

Sarah tried to think of another clue but then finally looked around and lowered her voice. “Why don’t I just tell you what it is? Besides, it’s almost time to eat.”

Thomas appeared pleased. “OK” he whispered. “What is it?”

“It is three phrases that you rarely hear anymore.”

“Phrases? How can a phrase be nearly extinct?”

“Let me tell you what they are and then you tell me. Under the drape on the first table is the phrase ‘I’m sorry.’ The second table has ‘I was wrong’ and the third table is ‘It was my fault.’” She crossed her arms and looked at him rather pleased. “Well, when was the last time that you heard any of those phrases?”

It finally clicked. “Yea, I see what you mean. It’s true although a bit anti-climatic. After all I had visions of compressed elephants and...”

“Compressed elephants?!”

“I mean, marine turtles and great apes.”

“Well, what did you expect from a church in the middle of nowhere? Besides, the pastor has a way of making everything seem interesting. I’m sure that he’ll do a great job when it comes time to whisk off the clothes.”

“So what part of it did you make?”

“I made three boards, covered them with felt and stood them up. Then I cut the letters out of wood and painted them and nailed them to the board.”

“How did you cut out the letters?”

“I used a jigsaw. I already told you that.”

“Wow, I’m quite impressed. I didn’t know that you had it in you.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“You mean you used two jigsaws at once?”

She gave him a look of “come on now.”

“Sarah!” They turned to see Sarah’s mother coming towards them. “Sarah, it’s almost time to eat. Why don’t you and Thomas come sit with us? Toni and Mrs. Donnelee are also at our table.”

Sarah pushed gently on Thomas’ back. “Come on and join us.”

Her mother added, “And I invited Gary from your class and his family to sit with us also.”

Sarah’s face twisted. “What, the Prince of Darkness was unavailable?”

“You be nice now,” her mother scolded.

After dinner they played games: softball for the adults, an egg toss and water pistol tag for the teens, various activities for the children including face painting and animal balloons.

When all of the activities were over there was a loud sustained whistle. Everyone turned towards it to see the pastor standing there with a smile on his face. “If I could get everyone’s attention for the next 15 to 20 minutes I would like to share something very exciting that we have planned for the church.

Motioning towards the three tables with the boxes he said, “We’ll get to those at the end. But first I’d like to present something very exciting.

“For the last six months a number of us have been discussing what direction we’d like to go as a congregation and we believe that God wants us to take a three-prong outreach. We are asking that every one of you seriously consider becoming involved in some manner. If this comes any where near to what we are hoping then not only will this church have a great impact in this community and beyond but everyone who is involved will have tremendous joy and satisfaction.

“As you know, each person consists of three parts: body, soul, and spirit. The body is our physical part, what we can touch and see. Our soul is our personality, creativity, and emotions. And our spirit is that part of us that communicates with God. We want to set up teams that will reach out and help people in each of these areas. It will be challenging but, believe me, it will be worth it. Now here’s what we want to do...”

The pastor then shared his plans. When he finished everyone was charged up and talking about what part they would like to play. It had the markings of a great success.

On the way home Toni and Thomas talked excitedly about the church’s plans. Then she suddenly broke that conversation and asked, “So what would you say is your strangest habit?”

“Strangest habit?”

“OK, oddest habit, if that makes you feel better.”

Thomas slowed his walking. It was hard to consider an answer to that question and still walk at a normal pace. “Well,” he said slowly. “OK, here it is. Whenever I go to sleep, no matter where it was, I always start out by lying on my right side.”

Toni raised an eyebrow.

“When I was younger, my parents did not allow any lights on in my bedroom when it was time to sleep. OK, that’s not so bad, but there was a problem. To the right of my bed was the door to the hallway, which my parents insisted stay open at night. As any child would know, within the terrible darkness of that hallway some evil could sinisterly be lurking, standing unseen just feet away, watching me and waiting for that moment when my eyes finally sank shut and I was ripe for attack. However, I could maintain vigilance for a long while.

“But it was not as easy as simply never falling asleep. On the opposite wall were windows; my bedroom was on the first floor. Anyone—or anything—could easily stare at me through those windows and in the summer there was only a nylon screen that could be cut quietly and without effort.

“I could not watch both at once and though I could cross my eyes I could not push them to the outer edges like a space alien. There were many nights of swiveling my head slowly back and forth until I finally fell asleep just from the headache alone.

“That was, until I noticed that the street light outside the windows created perfectly lit rectangles on the wall next to the door. So by lying on my right side I was able to watch both. If anyone tried to enter my room by either the door or the windows, I would catch him. What exactly I would do in that case was a situation not comfortably contemplated since it only aroused more anxiety. The fact that I had all entrances covered was sufficient in itself. Vigilance was still required but somehow knowing that the enemy was frustrated in all directions gave me a quicker peace and a longer night’s sleep.

He turned toward Toni’s with expectations of a reaction. He was not disappointed.

3 Problem Solving

The wisest teacher is the one whose student surpasses him.

As usual, Russell was up earlier than everyone else in his house. He really was not a morning person but he cherished these times of tranquility. He could read, go into the basement and do woodworking, or just sit on the porch of their very modest house and take in the cool morning air and listen to the birds.

His little sister, mother, and grandmother would get up at least an hour or two later. Then the worrying would fill the air like smoke from a tire fire. Not from his grandmother who mostly stayed in bed and certainly not from Danielle. Rather, his mother was a cognoscente of anxiety and negativity. If there was one problem she could magically multiply it into two problems. If it was a small problem she could quickly grow it into a fat adulthood. It, therefore, does not take a mathematical prodigy to calculate that one small squirrel in the attic in the morning would eventually become two big gorillas in the living room by the end of the day.

This drove Russell and his sister to untold and unnecessary grief.

But the most frustrating for Russell was that she was always problem oriented and not solution oriented. If he provided a solution to a dilemma then he would get five reasons in return as to why it will not work.

His grandmother's bedroom was on the second floor. Once, Russell's mother was fretting that her mother might fall down the stairs in the dark. Russell, whose bedroom was on the first floor, offered to switch rooms.

"That simply won't work because she likes to look out the window and the bottom of your window is blocked by a bush. And besides, she'll become disorientated in the unfamiliar area. We'd have to switch all of the furniture in both of your bedrooms. We'd have to paint the walls because she only likes white, and, anyway, she's been in that bedroom for years."

It would be useless to point out that they do not live across from a zoo and so nothing happens out there anyway and, besides, there are always the living room windows. That if she is lucid then she will figure out where she is and if she is not then what difference does it make anyway? That the furniture is not nailed down nor is it made of iron; it can be moved. Walls can be painted and people do move with no ill emotional, spiritual, physical, moral, or psychological effects. Why would it be useless? Because no matter how powerful the reasoning, how irrefutable the logic, how brilliant the observation and presentation of the factual reality, the response would always be, "You just don't understand." If he were lucky then that would be the end of it—problem maintained.

But if he was not lucky then his mother would play the familiar victim card, "You don't know how hard it is. Life isn't easy, you know. I just can't up and do things on a whim. There needs to be considerations and planning. I just can't go off doing what I darn well please whenever I want. I have people to take care of, you know. Do you think that things just get done on their own around here? And on and on and on." Russell could mouth the words as if from a written script. He never could understand why she did not just tape record the speech and hit the play button whenever the situation begged for it. It would certainly save a lot of hand wringing on her part and teeth grinding on his.

So no problem was ever solved and nothing ever did happen around that house because there were always too many considerations and never any planning.

His biggest concern (we must not say "worry" here) was that his sister, Danielle, would pick up these same traits. He could already see the occasional, unnecessary, and slightly dramatic apprehension like when she could not quickly figure out a homework problem and she would bury her head in her hands and mumble, "I could spend three lifetimes on this one and never get it."

To battle this he would always try to be positive with Danielle and patiently work with her to examine possible solutions.

A month ago his mother exhausted everyone with the dilapidation of the living room carpet. "I can't have anyone over because I'm so ashamed of this rug." Not that they ever had anyone over as long as Russell could remember anyway. "It's got to be full of germs and molds; I'm surprised we're not all sick with wheezings. People will think that we're poor and living on our last nickel." Of course since Russell's father ran off ten years ago they have been rather poor, but why let the neighbor's know?

Russell made the mistake of proposing a solution. "Why don't we just replace the rug?"

"If we tear up the carpet it'll release all of the mold at once and we'll all choke to death. Or we'll die months later of some horrible respiratory infection. We'll end our days coughing up black, horrible viles. And besides, how will we get rid of it? If we put it out for garbage the neighbor's will see it and know how we live. The

floor underneath is probably even more disgusting than the carpet. You'll hurt yourself on the nails. We can't afford a replacement anyway." Somehow that response was predictable. The only surprise was the order of the excuses. He would have bet his left thumb that the cost would have been at the top. Russell just hung his head and walked off.

"That's the last time I'll ever do that again," he thought for the 18th time this month.

Later he took Danielle for a walk to the chocolate shop and asked her what she would do regarding the carpet. She hesitated and mulled as usual so he asked her, "Is there really a problem?"

"Well, the carpet is in pretty bad shape. I bet that it's older than grandma," she said in her sweet, high-pitched voice.

"Dirt isn't older than grandma."

"It could use replacing."

"So will we all cough up green spores and die if we pull it up?" Russell asked.

"Probably not, but grandma might get sick. She is frail, you know."

"Boy, do I know. We both hear about it every day. OK, so how can we minimize that from happening?"

"Well, we could open up all of the windows."

"Good. And what else?"

"We could open up the door and put on some fans and blow everything out."

"Excellent. And anything else?"

She thought for a while. "We could wet the rug down first to keep the mold from flying up."

"That would make the rug really heavy and it sure would stink, don't you think?"

"I guess that's true," replied Danielle, "umm, I don't know what else."

"Your idea of keeping the mold from flying around, if there is even any mold, is a good thought. Perhaps we could lay newspapers or plastic all over and tape them to the rug. That would keep everything contained. What do you think?"

"That's a good idea." Then she added, "We can always put grandma out in the backyard while we were doing all of this. A little sunlight might do her some good anyway."

"Fabulous idea. I wish that I had thought of that."

Danielle seemed quite pleased. She had come up with that idea without even any leading.

Russell added, "Although it's been so long since she's been out in the sun I'd be concerned that her skin would flake off and blow away in the wind and then eventually everything else would flake off and we'd have nothing left but a pair of sensible shoes and a pile of ancient pantyhose."

"Oh stop that," Danielle giggled.

Russell continued, "What about the nails?"

"Well, we can always wear gloves."

"Excellent. A simple, straightforward problem solver you are." He tapped her on the back. "And if the floor underneath is bad?"

"We can clean it up."

"And if it is really bad?"

"Umm, we can cover it with linoleum or something like that." She paused for a minute and slid her lips back and forth as she thought. "Or cover it with another rug."

"And if we can't afford another rug or linoleum? Then what? We can't leave an ugly floor exposed. Then we'll never have people over."

Danielle looked up at him and giggled. "No. But maybe we can do some extra baby-sitting or yard work until we can buy a new rug. It doesn't have to be expensive, just decent."

"Very good, very good. So back to the original question. Can we pull up the current rug without any major problems?"

Danielle quickly replied with a little smile of confidence, "Yes."

"And now for the biggest question of all, will we tell Mom that?"

"No," she said with an even bigger smile.

"Will we then do it ourselves behind her back and show her that it can be done?"

"Only if we want our throats slit," replied Danielle with mock anguish.

Russell patted her affectionately on the head, "Good girl. When you get out of school the world's problems had better watch out because you are going to plow right through them like a tank through tricycles."

Danielle lowered her head slightly and grinned broadly. Her shoulders seemed a little more square and she picked up the pace.

At the chocolate shop they were sitting at a window table contently sipping on their milkshakes. Danielle had a mocha caramel shake while Russell was enjoying his favorite—double chocolate.

“This shake,” proclaimed Russell, “has five tablespoons of chocolate syrup in it. Five tablespoons! Just say that out loud and let its magnitude sink in.” He closed his eyes and took another long suck.

They unconsciously imitated each other’s style. They would sip a little through the straw and then slowly eat a small chunk of ice cream off of the spoon. These two steps alternated until either the liquid or the ice cream was gone. If they were lucky and/or careful, each part would finish at the same time.

“I tell you, this place makes the best shakes in town,” Russell crowed.

“This place is the only place in town that makes shakes at all,” Danielle responded.

“Well then, see, I’m right!”

Both returned to their ritual. They were nursing their shakes and clearly enjoying every mouthful. Danielle was reviewing in her mind how she solved the carpet dilemma when a tall, dark-clothed man walked very slowly past the large front windows. He was staring very intently into the shop. Both Russell and Danielle stopped drinking and looked up at him with their mouths slightly open. But he was not just peering into the shop in general; rather, his eyes were locked on Russell every step of the way. Then as he was right in front of where Russell was seated the man stopped and glared right into Russell’s eyes. Russell felt the hairs on his neck go taut. He felt like wax that was melting under the intense glare of the sun. The spoon slipped out of his hand and clanged on the table. No one noticed. Then the man started walking again, but still remained locked on Russell. When he passed the edge of the window he looked forward and picked up the pace. Very slowly Russell and Danielle turned and looked at each other feeling all creeped out.

Without even looking at it, Russell clawed at the spoon until he picked it up. Then they looked back down at their shakes but neither moved. They stared for a long time into the glasses. Finally Danielle looked at Russell with horror in her eyes. Russell was gingerly lifting the spoon out of his glass. The shake was now a thick red fluid. It dripped heavily off of his spoon and back into the glass. Danielle’s shake was the same. She slowly stirred the thick liquid. Then they both stopped and looked at each other. Russell cautiously leaned over and smelled it. He grimaced and quickly sat back upright and rubbed his nose.

“Blood,” he frowned, “They’ve turned into blood.”

4 Bus Trips and Brothers

We must lean on each other because our burdens pull us too far crooked

After breakfast that Saturday Toni and Thomas walked to the downtown circle. Thomas figured that getting out into the sunlight and seeing old friends would help him forget about The Face. The downtown circle was throwback quaint. The center of town was a park that formed a large circle. A street ran completely around it and on the opposite side from the park were small shops shoulder to shoulder. In the center of the park was a gazebo.

It was a hot day and by the time they reached the park Thomas was thirsty. They went over to a water fountain but it had sand in the bottom and looked like it was whacked too many times with a stick.

“Is this water safe?” asked Thomas as he pressed in the button. A flaccid stream barely rose above the nozzle.

“Unless a hog died in the supply pond within the last two days then, yes, it is safe,” Toni said with reassuring confidence.

With his finger still on the button he looked over at her with his mouth open trying to read her face. Seeing nothing that would cause him to run, he turned back and stared intently at the water for a few seconds. He might have been looking for pig hairs but having seen none he went ahead and drank although very carefully. The water was cold and he could not detect any strange tastes or odors so he gulped down several mouthfuls.

Toni furrowed her brows and gazed intently at him. This rather unnerved him. Finally she said, “OK, you didn’t die. I guess the water was good this time.”

“This time? Was there a mass die off sometime this last year?”

She chuckled and led him to a picnic bench. It was surrounded by flowers that almost glowed like a cat’s eyes in a lamp. A hummingbird flitted from one to the next.

Toni was watching it intently. “You know, I think that hummingbirds and bumblebees must really be the same thing. When it wakes up in the morning it decides whether to put on feathers or fuzz.”

Thomas turned from the hummingbird to Toni. “That was, um, rather poetic.”

“Thank you,” answered Toni with a smile. “I have my moments rare as they might be. So how did your bus trip go? Usually it’s pretty uneventful.”

“I wish that it was that uneventful.”

“Uh, oh,” Toni responded, “What happened? You’re sitting here in front of me in on piece—as far as I can tell—so it couldn’t have been too terrible.”

“Well, for the first half of the trip I sat next to a woman who always needed to be connected. I think that she was afraid that if she wasn’t on her cell phone every second that her head would collapse like a deflating balloon and then fall into the hollow husk of her body. She was constantly on her cell describing in throbbing minutiae every detail of the trip.”

Then in a mock shrill voice he proclaimed, “We’re passing another hamburger joint. Gee, I can’t believe how many of them are out there. How many hamburgers can people eat? I didn’t know that this country had that many cows. Now the bus is slowing down. I wonder if we got cut off by some farmer driving his pokey tractor with enough hay bales to feed every cow in Texas for a year. I bet that stuff itches. And bugs! I bet they’re loaded with them. I itch just thinking about it.”

Returning to his normal voice, “I just wanted to shout, ‘What are you, announcing the World Series? Do you need to report and analyze every monotonous event? This is a bus trip across nowhere. It is not the Yankees versus the Dodgers.’ But I knew that she would merely pause and stare at me like I had just grown rat’s ears. Then she would spend the next half-hour describing the ‘nut job’ sitting next to her to the human microphone on the other end. Most of the time I merely sat in perturbed silence. And what really annoyed me was that she had the window seat even though she never looked out. Did I mention the word ‘throbbing’? Because that is what my head was doing most of the time.

He again assumed the voice, “Oh, we’re slowing down again.” Then he reverted back to his voice, “What could be her possible conjecture this time? Did we plow through a flock of penguins like an arctic icebreaker? Perhaps an oil tanker jackknifed and the bus driver doesn’t want to hydroplane the next 200 miles on the oil slick. It would be such a relief if she finally came up with a logical and sane explanation for once. Oh wait, it’s coming.” Back to the voice, “I can’t believe how many times we slow down. If we go any slower we’re going to wind up where we started. I wonder what it is this time?” Back to normal, “Wait, wait, it’s coming. I was like a hungry dog

waiting for a bone. Here it comes.” Back to the voice, “I bet he’s gawking at some young girls in a convertible. I tell you, for these guys that’s the only excitement they get all day.”

Back to normal, “It’s the leering reason again. As though this turbo-charged bus with its overhead cam overtook a carload of pretties in a Mustang. After hours of this kind of dialogue I understood what the phrase ‘throw yourself under the bus’ meant. She seemed to have an endless supply of phone batteries. From the looks of it she obviously saved money on clothes and luggage. Actually, I think that her well-worn, tattered luggage was stock filled with nothing but more batteries. She was a Zen master at being able to breathe through her nose and talk at the same time because she never came up for air.

“She eventually got off in one of those small, one-diner towns. It probably used to be much bigger but those who didn’t want to go deaf left. I think that every corner had a sign ‘Caution, deaf child.’ She could talk until the Mona Lisa’s ears melted onto the floor.”

Toni was clearly more amused by Thomas’ trials than he was. “So what about the rest of the trip? Was the second half any better?”

“Part of it I was by myself. I think that was God’s was of balancing the ledger although I still think that He owes me. I actually got to sleep some although it was only in five-minute nuggets: fall asleep, hit a bump, fall asleep, hit a bump.”

“That is certainly a moment to cherish. But now you’re here and it is a lot better.”

Thomas thought about last night but did not want to give anything away. “Yea, a whole lot better.”

“What about the rest of the trip? You said, ‘part of it’ you were by yourself. Did someone else sit next to you?” asked Toni.

“Well, that was another thing altogether something unto itself.”

“Huh? Was that grammatically correct? Was that even English?”

Thomas ignored her and kept going. “We pulled into a bus station with the waiting room modeled after the more dreary parts of Ellis Island. It had a small café that only the dead eat at because they’re the only ones the food can’t harm. This gentleman gets on and asks if he can sit next to me. He was fairly well-dressed (of course the competition of the rest of the crowd was deficient) and seemed normal and intelligent.”

“‘Seemed’ is a give-away.”

“Anyway, not long after he sat down I heard him mumbling. I thought, ‘not another cell phone sucker who’s going to haunt me the whole rest of the trip with his vapid, guess-where-I-am drool.’ But then I peered over and both of his hands were on his lap and I didn’t see anything in his ears. This was not a good indication. I considered the possibilities and, at my optimistic best, still felt queasy. I didn’t want to get his attention so I looked at him from the very edges of my eyes. He was just staring ahead with a slight intensity that only added to my concern. A few minutes later he muttered again. I was prepared this time and I listened closely. ‘If you mess up again the maestro will be very unhappy.’ This was unnerving. I was perhaps hoping for ‘Our Father who art in Heaven.’ Was he talking to someone in his head? Was he talking to himself? Or was he talking to me? Not good. No prize behind any of those doors was worth taking home. This was not reassuring. I positioned my face right at the seat in front of me and with one eye I tried to survey the scenery and with the other I guarded my life. ‘If you mess up again the maestro will be very unhappy.’ This recycled every five minutes.”

Toni commented, “Obviously he didn’t kill you because you’re here now. In fact, you’re not even marked so he must have been harmless.”

“Well, other than the emotional Apocalypse that I went through then, yes, I’d agree with that. Once I actually dozed off—against all of my survival instincts. When I awoke I turned my head quickly and he was staring at me. I froze, he smiled and turned away.”

“Maybe he was looking at the scenery.”

“No, it was dark out and besides, there was no scenery on the side of my face. He got off the stop before here. As he left he nodded and smiled at me.”

“Oh, that’s nice. You became friends in the end.” Toni was being quite facetious.

“But it was weird.”

“Why?” she asked more seriously.

“It was like a knowing smile. Like he knew something and I didn’t.”

“Well, you’re here now and safe among friends. We’ve got you surrounded and covered.” She smiled.

That reassured Thomas more than Toni would have expected, but then she did not know about the night before.

“So how is Carl?” asked Thomas. “Last year he seemed to be getting a bit rough around the edges.”

“Well, whatever was on the edges worked its way down deeper. He’s really been a grief this year. Mom is quite worried about him. She tries to talk to him but it’s like he put corks in his ears.”

“What about you? Will he listen to you?”

She twisted her face. “Oh yea, like that will ever happen.”

“When is he going to turn 18?”

“That happened a few months ago. We both expected him to bolt on that day but to our surprise he’s still here. Of course we’re glad that he is. Mom’s hoping that by keeping him nearby she’ll be able to bring him back to our side.”

“*Our* side? You make him sound like the enemy.”

“Sometimes I wonder. Right after father, umm, left five years ago he just completely buried his emotions.”

“Sort of like Pompeii?”

“He’s just gotten worse and worse.”

“Like how?” asked Thomas.

“You wouldn’t see any around much because we keep finding them and hiding them, but he’s been laying out traps to catch small animals. Most of them were pretty crude and wouldn’t have caught a squirrel on a suicide mission but that’s not the point.”

“Why is he trying to catch animals?”

“To do things to them. I don’t even want to know what he has in mind, but I’m sure that it is horrible.”

“Has he ever caught any?” Thomas was very much hoping for a negative answer.

“Not that we know of, but I doubt it. I think that we would have found something—remains or whatever—lying around if he had. Besides I’m sure that he would have not been able to restrain himself from making Mom and I squirm by telling us what he had done and perhaps displaying a trophy. We would have shut him up immediately but he would have told us enough to make us both sick.”

“When did he start this?”

“About a year ago.”

“What else has he been doing (as though that’s not enough)?”

“He’s has a great fascination with fires. That’s been going on for a while but it seems that he has higher goals than he used to. Right after Dad... left he would make large crisscrossed piles of lumber. Then he would put plastic soldiers on all different levels and then set fire to the bottom. He seemed to take a little too much glee in watching their tiny faces melt and then tumble into the flames where they would sizzle and crackle. I don’t know, it just seemed perverse to me.”

“I remember when I was young.” Thomas was speaking quicker and more excitedly. “I brought a piece of plywood into the basement and built two cities out of cardboard. Each city was on opposing ends with a no-man’s land in the middle. I made square houses and large town halls and laid them out with streets and everything. Then I rolled paper into balls and stuck them onto the ends of toothpicks. I made two piles; one for each city. Ultimately I was going to light the balls on fire and lob them back and forth from one city to the other. Whichever city wasn’t completely burned to the ground was the winner.” He looked a little wistfully. “Unfortunately my parents found out about it before I could do it. I had to dismantle the whole thing.” He seemed to have the regret of one who will never know what could have been. After a few seconds of silence he looked up at Toni expecting either an impressed “that was quite a project” or a consoling “gee, it’s too bad that they caught on when they did.” Instead, she was staring at him with a “are you some kind of idiot?” look. His face lost all emotion. He looked somewhere off to the left out of the corner of his eyes.

“Well, I was a lot younger then,” he said slowly and unconvincingly. “Anyway, you said that Carl has been setting higher goals. What has he been doing lately?”

Trying to pretend Thomas’ medieval war lust was never mentioned Toni went on. “A few months back an old abandoned shed burned down. Everyone knows that it was Carl but no one could prove it. He denied it but the smirk rather belied his sincerity. Another time a partially built house suffered some damage. We all know that it was Carl but it’s not like we have fingerprints or anything. My mother who loves burning candles now has them all hidden up in the attic.”

“No point tempting a fat man with a box of donuts, I guess,” added Thomas still feeling a bit beaten. “Is there anything else? Should I read anything into the fact that he wasn’t at breakfast?”

Toni shifted slightly back and forth and said, “Well, yes. I’m sure that he wasn’t there because he knew that you were going to be there. I hope you don’t feel bad. I mean, you shouldn’t take it personally or anything. I know that sounds kind-of stupid but he wouldn’t have been there no matter who was coming.”

“So where was he? Was he out with friends or something?”

“Friends?” said Toni incredulously. “He doesn’t have any real friends.”

“Really? Growing up he used to have lots of buddies that he would hang out with. What happened?”

“He got more and more aggressive. First it was just intimidation. Then he started pushing and slapping. Eventually if someone didn’t do what he wanted he would pick a fight with him. Who wants to hang around someone like that?”

“So what does he do with himself?”

“Sometimes he hangs out with some group that calls themselves ‘Misfit Among Freaks.’ I’m sure you don’t need a powerful imagination to figure out what they’re like. But we don’t really know where he goes. He’s either out somewhere, we don’t know where, or he’s up in his room with the door shut. It’s really breaking Mom’s heart. She doesn’t know what to do. He won’t listen to anyone. He always has a sarcastic or flippant answer. He thinks that he is always right and everyone else hasn’t a clue.”

“Maybe I can talk to him.”

“Good luck,” Toni replied without the slightest indication of hopefulness.

Both sat and watched a squirrel dash, stop, sit up, dash, stop, sit up.

“Hey look,” proclaimed Thomas, “here comes the gang.”

Coming within sight was a group of Toni’s friends that Thomas always hung out with each summer. When they saw Thomas they waved enthusiastically and walked a little faster to greet them. Before they reached the table Thomas and Toni got up and closed the distance in a couple of eager strides.

“Great to see you again, Thomas,” said Russell.

“Yea, has it been a whole year already?” asked Danielle.

Russell looked over at Sarah, “Did you know that Thomas was in town already?”

She replied, “I talked to him yesterday at the church picnic.” Then she knit her eyebrows and looked at Russell and his sister, “Now that I think about it, I don’t remember seeing either of you there. What happened?”

Russell tightened his jaw and started to get agitated but then saw that Danielle was watching him so he stopped, but his voice could not hide his grave disappointment. “Mom somehow heard that a lot of people were sick and didn’t want us to be exposed. So she kept us home all day.”

Danielle alleged more dogmatically, “The real reason is that Mom was afraid of what people would say about her so she made up the sickness excuse.”

“How do you know that?” Russell was rather indignant in his question.

“Oh come now, Russell, this is Mom that we’re talking about. When we do go to church she spends more time fretting about what people will think about her dress.”

“Yea, well, she’s still our Mom, you know. We don’t have to wave our, umm, dirty laundry in front of everyone.”

“Come on and join us.” Thomas wanted to break up this contention, “we’re just sitting here chatting about the last year.”

Everyone sat down.

Sarah spoke first, “So what were you guys talking about?”

Thomas answered, “Carl.”

Russell seemed quite interested. “Have you talked to him yet?”

“No, I’ve only heard noises out in the hall at night as if light and people need to be avoided at every turn,” remarked Thomas.

“Carl has always been a night person,” responded Toni defensively.

“Along with a number of other creatures that are either stepped on or run from,” said Russell.

“Now you’re simply being mean,” interjected Toni with a slight flash of anger; after all, Carl was still her brother.

“Sorry,” came Russell’s meek reply.

Toni continued, “He’s changed since, you know, what happened to Dad.” She stared at the table top for a couple of seconds before looking up again. “But he’s been getting worse. Lately he’s been getting more and more obsessed with the whole theme of death and destruction.”

“See I wasn’t being mean.”

Toni strongly responded, “But when I see him I don’t think about stepping on him.”

Russell responded, “Well, I don’t think about stepping on him either.” And then leaning towards Thomas he whispered, “He’s too big.”

“I heard that.” Toni gave him a scold.

Thomas said, “To keep you two from bickering like an old married couple,” – Russell and Toni put on an exaggerated look of mortification – “What is this obsession with death and termination? And what is the difference anyway?”

Toni started, “Ever since dad,” – she paused – “left, Carl’s become more consumed with the idea that things disappear and never come back and that stability stands right up there with flying pigs as a hope that you can count on.”

Sarah spoke up, “He really freaked when he read an article about how the sun will burn out in 13 billion years and that it loses four million tons every second. When we hung out once last summer we went exploring in the woods we found a new valley of sorts and all he would talk about was how one day every living thing would be gone and this would be nothing more than frozen solid ground. There would no trees, no water, no birds—just blank, gray rock. He would stand there not admiring the beauty that is there now but picturing the deadness that it might become. It really creeped me out. That might have been the last time that we did anything together. I mean, who wants to stand around and talk about death?”

Russell added, “That was until he found out a few months after that that the sun wouldn’t just flicker and die out like a candle but will instead probably first expand until it has engulfed the Earth and then will contract into a cold, dead ball. Now he saw everything as first charred and then frozen. Not unlike my mother’s cooking I might add. But somehow this scenario was even more frightening and disturbing. I don’t know why. It seems like gone is gone.”

“Maybe it was because the sun flaring up first is an active and, I guess, more sudden destruction,” remarked Sarah.

“Like dying in your sleep versus being hit by a train,” added Russell.

“He told me that when he looked at people he would see them in their coffins rather than what they are standing there and have ahead of them in life,” Sarah continued.

“Death and termination,” said Thomas.

“Rather than life and potential,” finished Sarah.

Toni cut in, “Another thing that he was a bit obsessed with (if you can only be a bit obsessed with something) is scary pictures.”

“I can believe that,” remarked Thomas. “I can imagine his room being covered with posters of carnage and monstrosities. Probably lots of demons ripping the heads off of hopeless victims.”

“No, not that way,” said Toni. “Actually, kind-of the opposite. He would avoid photos of things like spiders or scorpions as though if he touched them they would pull out from the page and run up his arm and bite him in the face. I would watch him reading his school biology book and when he can to a picture like that he would get all nervous and quickly turn the page.”

“Well, that one is different,” said Thomas.

Russell remarked, “I’m surprised that he even comes out of his room. I mean, what would he do if he encountered a real spider?”

“Well, being stuck in the same house with us all of the time is probably even more horrible to him than becoming a briquette by the sun or being bitten by something venomous. How much more scary can you get than mom and I?” said Toni with no hint of humor.

“I guess, to him, rolling around on a nest of cottonmouths might even be more appealing,” said Thomas with a wry smile.

Toni jumped in, “All right already. Let’s change the subject. Being compared unfavorably to bugs and snakes just isn’t building up my self-esteem.”

Russell said, “Actually we have to get going. We’re on our way to watch a game. The Wildcats are playing. This is one of the few seasons that they are giving us something to cheer about.”

“They’ve almost won 25% of their games,” Sarah added with a false sense of pride.

“Still,” Russell responded, “it’s an improvement. Twenty-five percent of actual wins is better than 100% of moral victories. Would you two like to join us?”

“It sounds like fun but maybe next time,” answered Thomas.

At that Russell and Sarah got up.

“We’ll see you later. You’ll have to tell us about your bus trip,” Sarah said with a wink, “I mean, is there anything more boring?”

Thomas and Toni just looked at each other as the other three disappeared down the sidewalk.

“I’m still a bit thirsty. You want to go get a soda?” asked Thomas.

“OK.”

Thomas put his hand on the edge of the bench to get up.

“Ouch!” He jerked his finger up to his mouth.

“What happened?” Toni asked.

Thomas took his finger out of this mouth and looked carefully at it. “There was a splinter in the wood and it poked into my finger.”

“Let me look at it.”

Thomas held up his finger. There was a faint bit of red.

“There’s hardly anything there at all,” proclaimed Toni.

“What do you mean? My finger is throbbing in anguish. I’m surprised that I haven’t fainted from the blood loss.” Thomas sucked on his finger some more.

“Oh, please. Save your theatrics for Hamlet.”

“Getting sympathy from you is like trying to rise a river by throwing pebbles into the water.”

Toni merely rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Pity me,” answered Thomas meekly.

Toni got up with a sigh and walked away from the table. Thomas looked at her leaving, then back down at his finger, and finally jumped up and hurriedly caught up with her. By then he had forgotten about his finger.

They crossed over the street and into the small food store.

“If you grab some soda, I’ll get the chips,” offered Thomas.

“Chips too?” said Toni with a bit of a smile. “OK, but don’t get too big of a bag.”

Toni went straight to the back of the store while Thomas wandered down a couple of aisles. Deciding that he did not want to waste all day finding the chips section he went over to someone stocking a shelf. “Where are potato chips?”

The clerk held up one finger to tell Thomas to wait. There was no one else in the store so this seemed strange but then the clerk stepped around the box on the floor and silently signaled to Thomas to follow him. Thomas obediently tucked in behind him and followed him to the fourth aisle, which the clerk turned into and then, halfway down, stopped, and motioned to the chip area like a game show host. Thomas thanked the clerk who smiled and headed back to his aisle. Thomas spied his favorite—sour cream/green onion chip—and grabbed the biggest bag. Back at the counter Toni was waiting for him. They paid and thanked the clerk who was now working the register and who nodded appreciatively.

Once they were outside of the store Thomas said, “Is the clerk able to speak? He is either really shy or he can’t talk.”

“Oh, he can talk alright,” said Toni. “He just doesn’t anymore.”

“He doesn’t talk anymore?” Thomas was incredulous. “Why doesn’t he talk? Does he have some disease?”

“Tim, that’s his name, has always had a really bad way of thinking about himself. All the time that he was growing up both of his parents would always put him down. He could never do anything right in their eyes. He was too clumsy for sports they told him, too ugly to ever get married, and too stupid to ever make it in the world. Even when he would do well they would tell him that he could have done better. He really is a pretty good kid but they did nothing but beat him down.”

“Why did they do that?”

“Probably because they are insecure jerks. Not every idiot in this world happens to be a teenager, you know. Anyway, he came to believe that nothing about him was any good. One day, about a month ago, he heard himself on a tape recorder and thought that he sounded really awful.”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“True, but he took it further than most would since he already had such a lousy view of himself. He thought that his voice was grating and annoying and only irritated people. He figured that nobody ever said anything to him about it only because they were being polite, but he was sure that people were saying to each other behind his back, ‘Boy, I can’t stand it when Tim talks. It really gets on my nerves.’ This was never true but he was convinced that it was so he decided to spare everyone the anguish and stop speaking altogether. Supposedly the last thing that he ever said was, ‘I’m being erased.’ A couple of times I tried to tell him that it just wasn’t so and that no one ever said anything about his voice, but he said that I was just being kind.”

“Wait a minute, if he stopped talking then how did he tell you that you were just being kind?” Thomas thought that he had indisputable proof that she was just telling a tall-tale. Tim probably only had laryngitis that day or something reasonable like that.

“He wrote it down. When I told him that he was not perceiving things correctly he turned over the pad by the register and wrote, ‘You’re just being kind.’ So see, I’m not making this up as I go along, it’s true.”

“It’s rather sad. Hopefully sometime soon he’ll realize that the problem isn’t with his voice but with his parents’ attitude and snap out of it.”

“Me, too. Of course, a big part of the problem is his own attitude and perception. People will affect us only as we allow them to. Tim needs to find his good points—of which there are many—and focus on them rather than

sinking into his perceived weaknesses.” Toni looked at Thomas and smiled, “Maybe you can make Tim your second project—after Carl, of course.” Thomas merely grimaced.

5 Horrors, Dictators, and Paradise

Sometimes fears are like ghosts;
they do not exist until you believe in them.

The rest of the day for Thomas and Toni was pleasant and dinner was as scrumptious as Thomas had come to expect from Mrs. Donnelee. Breakfast was always spectacular but dinner never failed to be magnificent. All three settled into the living room and talked about the previous months. At one point Carl sneaked in the back door, scooped some food onto a plate, and slid unseen up the stairs. After the evening conversation it was time to retire. Thomas knew that the sunlight would not last forever and he would have to go back up to the bedroom. He was like a kid waking up on Monday morning and hoping that his parents would make a mistake and still think that it is Sunday and he would not have to go to school. Just as that never happened once in any child's school days so it was equally inevitable that the sun would go down and everyone would get tired and go to bed.

Last night was uneventful but then he was quite tired and being at the church picnic and seeing everyone distracted him and put him in a good mood. But as this day advanced he was feeling progressively more anxious. He wondered about Carl sneaking about and was thinking too much about that first night. He had not seen Carl for a year and so maybe he changed a lot, but he still could not explain how he could have disappeared so quickly and quietly.

With each stair step to the bedroom he felt the swelling in his throat progress from knot to lump to baseball to anvil. And with each step his legs got slower and slower and heavier and heavier. Maybe he could sleep on the couch. In the morning he would feign ignorance and propose that maybe he was sleepwalking. Of course, he had no confidence that whatever might happen would be restricted to his room anyway. And besides, the living room was too open; he could never watch every opening. A chill ran through his body.

He reached the door and reluctantly opened it. He stood in the doorway and stared into the room. Maybe he could lie awake all night. But two out of three nights of practically no sleep might just kill him but then again, at this point, he was not sure if he even cared. He entered the room and gently closed the door. First he crouched down and looked under the bed. "Nothing there." Then he opened the closet. "Pretty empty." Though he felt stupid he even opened each dresser drawer. He put a small book at the foot of the door exactly one hand width from the edge. "If anyone opens the door," he thought, "they will push the book and never be able to put it back exactly the same way." Finally he closed the window. He knew that it would be hot in the room without the breeze but he was willing to sweat a little rather than have his face gnawed off or maybe even something worse.

He removed his coat from the lamp and turned the light on. Though he had already checked under the bed, he still kept a wide berth of it. He was rather unnerved by the thought of someone wrapping their fingers around his ankles.

He approached the bed slowly and just as he got within a few feet he practically leaped onto the mattress. The loud squeak of the springs almost sent him up to the ceiling. He lay down in bed very deliberately. The lamp was still on. This is how it stayed for a good thirty minutes. He rarely blinked. He breathed even less. If what happened the first night was nothing more than a nightmare then it was surely going to happen again tonight considering how frazzled his nerves were. A squirrel trapped in a dog run was calmer than he was.

Finally, he turned off the light and rolled onto his right side. There, he had done it. Step one. Step two—falling asleep—was going to be a little harder.

He stiffly lay there aware of every sound, every possible disturbance in the air. Five minutes, ten minutes, he never moved. After 15 minutes he knew that he had to look. Just once, just one quick look. If there was not anything there then he could go to sleep. On some of his weekends helping his dad he had lifted large logs onto the back of trucks, carried bundles of shingles up ladders and onto roofs and yet now he could not raise his eyelids. "Just do it," he thought. "Just open them quickly and don't think about it." The more he thought about it the more sewed shut they were.

Then in a moment when his mind went blank he sucked in his breath and opened his eyes wide. He could see the outline of the dresser. That was good. That meant that nothing else was there. Without moving any part of his body he looked around that side of the room. Nothing had been moved, the door was still shut and the book was in its place; he was safe. He rolled over, saw that the window was still shut and closed his eyes. He was not totally convinced, but he was too tired to stay up any longer. He fell asleep quickly, almost quicker than he had wanted.

It was now the deep of night. Thomas had been sleeping like a rock. It was hot yet he was not disturbed by the thin patina of sweat that had coated his entire body. The air hung as still as mist in a graveyard.

But then he felt unsettled. He was still asleep but the feeling was rising to the surface and becoming more uneasy as it came. It started out as a small writhing spider in his gut but then grew larger as it crawled closer to his skin.

He awoke with a gasp. The eyes staring at him were solid black and larger than anything natural. The skin was paler than the moon. It was inches from his face. It was staring, unblinking at him, examining every pore, every hair. Then its mouth opened. It was beyond black; it was a void. The mouth rapidly grew larger until it obscured the creature's entire body. And still, it was a void with no detail, no form. Then it shut in an instant and there was nothing.

All of this happened in a second while Thomas lay paralyzed unable to breathe. It was only when it was gone that he jumped with a muted shriek. He turned on the lamp and looked around with a terror seen only in those unprepared for their imminent death. This time there was no mistake. That was no nightmare. Something was watching him. Without thinking he leaped out of bed, looked underneath it and opened the closet door but this time he knew that he would not find anything. The book was unmoved. He opened the bedroom door and looked out into the hallway. All was still. He looked back into the room. The window was closed. There was no way for that thing to have escaped. He knew that he could not sleep there again tonight.

Thomas quickly gathered his pillow and blanket and went downstairs. He lay down on the couch where his fatigue trumped even his nerves and he fell fast asleep.

As he slept on the couch he again felt something. He jumped up with a yelp like he had been electrocuted. Standing in front of him was Toni and her mother. It was clearly morning and a sunny one at that.

"What are you doing down here?" Mrs. Donnelee was obviously concerned. "Did you have a nightmare?"

Thomas was crouching on the couch with the blanket pulled up to his chin. He was visibly shaken. He said nothing.

"Are you OK, Thomas?" asked Toni reaching over and touching him on the shoulder. "What's going on?"

He went limp. "Yea, yea, I'll be alright. Sorry about that. I don't know. I think... I think that there was a spider up in the room." That last sentence picked up speed as he thought that it was a good explanation. "Maybe it was nothing but it sure looked like a big spider to me. I didn't want to take a chance so I came down here. Sorry if I startled you."

"Well, you go and wash up and we'll put breakfast on the table," said Mrs. Donnelee. She was wondering if maybe he had been talking to Carl and had picked up his phobias.

Breakfast was noticeably quieter than the first two days. Toni and her mother tried to make small conversation and they discussed the plans for the day. Thomas tried to follow but was clearly distracted.

He and Toni left with a picnic lunch. They were first going to the store to get more chips and then out to the park on the other side of town. Thomas was jittery the whole time. Toni did not want to ask him anything until they were alone and settled. While they made their way to the store some people who recognized Thomas stopped him and asked him how he was doing and what he had been up to the past year. The first time this happened he acted like a thief being interrogated by the police but by the third time he was able to appear normal. Toni studied him each time.

As they entered the deli Thomas smiled and waved enthusiastically at Tim. Tim did the same. Thomas knew enough not to ask him how he was; he did not want to put him on the spot. Besides, he did not want to carry on a conversation where one end was a grocer's pad.

This time Thomas knew where the sour cream and green onion potato chips were and headed straight for aisle four. And, yes, he had finished the previous bag last night. Once again he picked the largest bag and seemed quite pleased for the first time that day. "Nothing like sour cream and green onion potato chips to perk up one's day," he said under his breath.

"Put that down! Did I tell you that you could pick that up?"

Thomas instinctively dropped the bag back on the shelf and swiftly turned around. When he realized that this stern command was an aisle over he gingerly picked it back up again.

"You're always grabbing things! Do you always have to grab everything as we walk by? Do you think that we have money to burn and that you can have whatever you want?"

The voice seemed overly harsh and intimidating.

"I was only looking at it," bleated a voice rather meekly.

"Looking at it. You're always *just* looking at it. Then you want it. And then you're asking me for money to buy it. Maybe if you looked less we'd have more money," said the Gestapo voice.

Thomas looked at Toni with a questioning “who is that jerk?” As they walked back to register he looked down the aisle of voices. He could see a man around 50 years old with a wife and two children, a boy and a girl, somewhere between ten and thirteen. They were all dressed plainly and the children seemed huddled together like two lambs. The wife appeared to be nothing more than a spectator. Thomas could see the father rip something out of the boy’s hand and forcefully put it back onto the shelf. “Now let’s get going. We don’t have time to lolly-gag,” the father demanded.

Not wanting to still be at the register when the commander-in-chief marched his family over Thomas quickly paid and ushered Toni out the door. The door had not even closed behind them when Thomas asked, “Who was that guy?”

“That’s the Fullmans,” answered Toni. “The father’s name is Floyd. He treats his family like they’re cattle. He’s always yelling at the kids. He takes the saying ‘king of the castle’ way too seriously except that his wife isn’t the queen and his children are definitely not a prince and princess. No, he’s the king and then it is a long drop to where they are the serfs.”

“Why doesn’t his wife do something about it?”

“Because she is either too skinned or too uncaring. I have a feel that it is the former.”

“Is he Tim’s father?”

Toni almost laughed if it wasn’t so sad. “No, he’s not. Unfortunately there are a lot of parents out there who think that the best way to motivate their children is by putting them down. The problem is that the further you pound a nail into a board the less of its shine you’ll be able to see.”

“Well, at least the children don’t seem to be wanting. I mean, at least they look decent; they’re not rag-a-muffins. He must spend some money on them. I guess that’s a small, very small, consolation.”

“Spends money on them?” Toni responded with a tone of exaggerated disbelief. “He hardly spends a nickel on them. Did you see the clothes that they were wearing? They aren’t exactly fashionistas. No one looks at the Fullmans and thinks ‘swank.’ The only thing tighter than his butt is his wallet. He gives them food and shelter and thinks that he’s done his job. Anything beyond that and he thinks that he should win father of the year.

“Unfortunately because those kids spend their existence trying not to do anything wrong; they never reach forward to grasp new adventures or to grow more complete. They’re like a tightrope walker whose whole world is focused on staying up. He does not think about doing a cannonball into a pond or playing the violin. He has one mission in life at that moment and this is to not slip up and hit the ground hard. The only difference is that he reaches the other side and gets applause. Those kids never reach the other side.”

“Do you know the children?”

“A bit. They’re actually pretty decent, but the father watches over them like a hawk and so they never go anywhere. I don’t know anyone who has actually spent any time playing with them. I think their father’s idea of a good time is having them practice their handwriting.”

They had walked a good ways from the store when Thomas looked back. He could see the father saying something loudly and the two children looking very cowed. He had a feeling that the children would probably make good friends and didn’t deserve 99% of how he treated them. But, of course, the most frustrating problem is the one that you cannot do anything about.

Thomas and Toni headed to a small park on the edge of town. He hung his head as they walked on.

It was obvious to Toni that something was bothering Thomas and it was more than the Fullmans. She mostly made small talk until they reached their destination. It was quieter and more isolated than the large park in the center of town. This place did not have any parking and so fewer people went to it.

They found a table tucked behind some rhododendrons with flowers like purple pom-poms and laid out their lunch. Thomas gave thanks and broke open the bag of chips. Toni distributed the sandwiches. She was hoping for an opening to ask Thomas what was bothering him.

Russell was deep out in the woods at his favorite place. It would take him a good 30 minutes to reach it and while he was here everything else in life melted away, sheltered from a raucous world.

There was a small pond around which ferns gathered with palms lifted up in praise. The sun waved its light across the water like a young girl waving a handkerchief. Damselflies swerved across the surface defying gravity as though they were not even part of our clumsy world.

He would sit on a rock like an altar besides the water where he would offer bread to the angels flying beneath the surface, their fins gently flapping like golden wings. They would soar up to our world and pluck at the offering at its crisp edge and then disappear back into the depths.

When he was out here, Russell said that he could hear God singing in the trees.

Over the years he built a number of birdhouses that he attached to the trees with bungee cords. He did not want to use nails because he thought they would damage the tree. During the summer he could make one a week depending on its complexity. Some were typical, the square box with the peaked roof, others were quite elaborate.

One summer he was into architecture and so he made a series of “building” birdhouses. There was a castle that had two turrets in the front with a hole in each that made for two separate homes. It had an open drawbridge on which the birds liked to sit as though they were sentinels.

The Empire State building was what the warblers seemed to prefer. It was three feet tall with a column of holes going up the front. He painstakingly painted little windows up-and-down both sides and the front. He mimicked the shape to near perfection.

There was a colonial house with a porch with white pillars that the chickadees liked to congregate on as if a meeting of the Congregationalists was taking place.

He made a number of churches, some with little fake bricks glued on, some like your rural, white clapboard meeting places, and some almost like cathedrals. All had a hole where the doors would be inviting anyone to come in.

There were many different ones like houses and one attempt at the Taj Mahal although he could not quite get the dome right. It sloped rather crookedly like it was an ice cream cone left out in the sun too long.

One of his favorites was a Noah’s ark with little plastic animals glued on the “deck.” When a bird perched on the top of the ark it seemed like a giant dinosaur compared to the animals.

Another summer was his “people” period. Several birdhouses were like square faces with holes for the eyes and mouth. He tried to make them look like some of his relatives. The one with the moustache and glasses was easy to recognize. One originally had a wig glued to the top but the hair made nice nesting material and so now Aunt Louise was quite bald.

During his food era he made one like a chocolate cake. This was one of his more difficult ones. He had to create a circular frame and then bend thin wood around the outside. The frosting was black silicone chalking with lots of peaks and swirls. He was actually quite pleased with it, but then discovered that it is difficult to securely attach a round birdhouse to a round tree. The point of contact of all of a quarter inch wide and so it swayed at the slightest touch. Any bird landing on it would think that it was in a hurricane. So he had to take it home and cut the back off so that it was flat.

He made another like a watermelon and several like cupcakes (albeit octagons since he did not want to deal with bending wood in a circle again) each with a different colored frosting. One was pink, another red, and some yellows, whites, and orange. Each one was topped with a round rock painted cherry red.

He even made one like a heap of spaghetti and meatballs. That required a lot of strands from a glue gun and the entrance was a meatball with a hole through it. He cut half of the tines off of a fork (if only his mother knew she would kill him; after all, they did not have the money to glibly mutilate cutlery) and glued it sticking up from the spaghetti.

These birdhouses were every color of paint that he could find on the charts. Fortunately his mother never went into the basement otherwise she would have fainted upon seeing the wall of paint cans stacked along one side.

All told there were maybe 150 of these houses, one on each tree for nearly as far as the eye could see.

He also made troughs that he hung from trees and filled them with birdseed. He could not keep the fat squirrels out but that was OK since they needed to eat, too.

This day he brought a new birdhouse. He headed over to a tree that was still unadorned and so was not yet a home. His hand touched a branch like it was the arm of a young girl. He delicately hung the new home there and stepped back. “It is perfect,” he thought.

A multitude of birds gleefully flew from birdhouses to branches and then off to take care of the business of the forest. Between the flapping of wings and the merry chirping there was never any silence. Many times Russell would sit on the rock at the pond’s edge, close his eyes, and pretend that he was surrounded by angels. It was at once exhilarating and peaceful to the very marrow of his bones.

Since he was born with one leg shorter than the other he would limp from trough to trough emptying the seed from the bags that he brought in on a wheelbarrow.

The world here was much gentler. Here he did have to be brave. His limp was not exacerbated as in gym class. No one stared at him here except for maybe the birds but that was always in gleeful anticipation. He certainly was never mocked or bullied. If it were possible, he would spend his entire life here.

6 The Angst-feeders

Anxiety escapes our body in twitches, glances, sweat, clamminess, and grunts.
There are some things that do not want that to go to waste.

Toni waited until they at least finished their sandwiches. She did not want to have a serious conversation with olive loaf hanging out of her mouth. “So what’s going on?” she finally asked.

“What do you mean?” Thomas tried to sound calm, but he had a feeling that she knew something and that she was going to keep shaking the can until he spilled the beans, but he did not know if he should say anything this quickly. He did not want her to think that he had gone crazy or was on drugs. But he knew what he had seen and he could not keep it in forever, especially if she found him on the couch every night or with clothes decorating the lamp.

“Well, where should I start? How about your sleeping on the couch last night. You’ve never sleepwalked before. I don’t think that most people decide to pick up that habit when they’re thirteen.”

“Some might, you know. A lot of people develop weird habits when they get older.”

“And you’ve been awfully quiet and distracted at times. Usually when you get here you’re like a balloon filled with excitement. Did something bad happen at home before you left?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

“So it is something then, just not ‘like that.’”

Thomas realized that he had been caught, but in a big way he was glad. He really wanted to tell Toni about the two incidents. He needed to find out if he was the only one or if he was just plain crazy. Teenage hormones will do strange things; however, hallucinations are generally not one of them. It appeared that now was the time.

“Well...umm.”

Toni leaned in, “Yes?”

“It’s kind-of well, umm, I don’t know, well.”

“Look if you don’t tell me already I’m going to throw a rope over that branch and hang myself. This doesn’t have anything to do with a greasy secretion, does it?”

“What?” Thomas was taken back. “Where did that come from?”

“It’s a side effect of some medicine they were advertising. Forget it. So then what is it?”

“OK, OK, here goes.” He inhaled very slowly. Just like with cold water in a lake, he was going to have to take a deep breath and take the plunge. “The first night that I was here I woke up suddenly in the middle of the night and thought that there was someone crouching on the floor staring at me. It was only a second and after I turned on the light, I looked around and there wasn’t anybody there. It seemed so real, but I figured that it was just a really bad nightmare. It was a long bus trip and I was quite tired so I thought that anything was possible. It really wiggled me out, though. That explains the coat on the lamp.” He managed a forced half-smile.

Thomas did not notice because he was too focused on recreating those images in his mind but Toni had gotten quite pale and still. She was not saying anything or moving a single muscle in her face.

Thomas glanced very quickly at her and when he saw that she was not going to react right away he went on although he was glad for the lack of an interruption. At this point he had passed the point of no return and needed to get it all out. “The second night I was feeling quite good from the picnic and didn’t think about it much. But the third night I was really apprehensive about going back to bed. It seemed that the night came on like a full-speed train screaming out of a tunnel. As I climbed the stairs to my room I felt more and more sick with anxiety. I managed to crawl into bed (it was no small accomplishment, I tell you) and turn off the light. OK, it took a while, but eventually I did turn off the light. I thought that was rather brave, don’t you? I even managed to fall asleep. But then I suddenly woke up and opened my eyes...and there it was again. But this time I got a little bit longer of a look and so I knew that I wasn’t seeing things. But then, once again, it was gone.” He looked at the picnic table for a few seconds. No one spoke. She continued to stare at him as though she was a mastodon frozen in ice for a thousand years. “But I know that I saw it... or him... or her.”

With trepidation, he looked up at her. “Well, do you think that I’m a) crazy or b) really crazy?”

He looked at her for a few seconds. Then he knitted his eyebrows. She did nothing but stare at him. He cocked his head, “Hello?”

Realizing that she was being forced to respond broke her out of her spell. Hesitatingly she said, “Are you sure? Did you really see one of them?”

“Them? Them?” Thomas replied. “You know what I’m talking about?”

“Well, yes,” Toni answered slowly and then said nothing for a few seconds. Thomas could tell by the way that her eyes were swaying back and forth that she was in deep thought. He knew that he was about to find out something and so could wait those extra few seconds.

“Yes, I do know what they are,” she finally said “or at least what we all think that we know about them. They are called the night-creepers or angst-feeders. They don’t seem to come that often, but we have all heard about them. Many have experienced them although not many have actually seen them.”

“Night-creepers? Angst-feeders? Those aren’t exactly heartwarming names. Who or what are they?”

“We aren’t entirely sure but we do have, what we believe to be, mention of them from over a thousand years ago. They are only seen at night and are just as you described them. They have large, completely black eyes, probably to see better at night. Some believe that they never blink. They are unusually pale, perhaps even bloodless. They have long, straight black hair. Some say that they wear a dark robe with the hood pulled up. Others insist that it is more like a white nightgown. Most claim that they are female, almost like young girls, but that is in dispute. Maybe it is because they are small and have the long hair. The general consensus is that they are neither male nor female. In fact, it’s pretty sure that they aren’t even human.”

“Not human? Then what are they? What do they do?” Thomas was turning rather pale himself.

“They create anxiety and then feed off of it, hence one of their names—the angst-feeders. They will stare at you for hours on end night after night just inches from your face watching and evaluating every twitch, every grimace. They are trying to figure out what causes you tension and anxiety and once they figure that out then they work it and grow it and feed off of it. Some will get up right into your face and watch every tiny muscle spasm, even those that you would not be able to see yourself even if you were staring at yourself in a mirror in broad daylight. Others gently, almost imperceptibly, run their long, thin fingers over your skin feeling changes in body temperature or slight twitches sometimes hovering for hours on the same spot. Still others will imperceptibly lick the sweat off of your arm tasting for different chemicals; their tongues not even touching your skin. They all listen for groans, murmurs, to your talking in your sleep, anything that might indicate what you are thinking, what is causing you fear.”

“But how can they figure out what anxieties I have just by watching me?”

“We can tell what someone’s anxieties are by watching them. We see signs like tension in the facial muscles or breathing heavily. There may be an occasional grimace. A person might get defensive around certain subjects or look slightly more wild-eyed and paranoid. They may get beads of sweat on their upper lip or comb their hair through their fingers when they are nervous. They may talk faster or stutter. There are many different signs that warn us when someone is anxious and we don’t have to be around some people for very long at all before we can tell what puts fear into their heart.

“The night-creepers have been doing this for millenniums. They don’t need anything as obvious as fingers drumming on a tabletop. They can learn much from a momentary tick in your eye or a slight rise in body temperature or sweat that is minutely saltier. And they are very patient. They can watch you for many, many nights, gathering bits of fear, sampling your tensions. And they know how to add to those anxieties, to multiple them, to spread them like a cancer. And then they feed on them.”

“This is all rather unnerving; I don’t think that I’ll ever be able to sleep again. I mean, how can I go to sleep when I know that one of them will show up and stare at me all night?” Thomas shuddered. He crossed his arms in front of him and rubbed his shoulders.

Toni looked off to the side for a few seconds. Then she turned back. “You’re not the only one lately. I’ve heard from the pastor that a number of people have been coming to him these last few weeks complaining about feeling anxious. A few even think that they may have seen one of them, but they weren’t sure.”

“But where do they go? How come I didn’t see them but for a second after I opened my eyes?”

“They hate to be seen. The fear that they feed on must be from inside of you; it must be your own. If your fear comes from seeing them then it is not a fear that they can consume. The writings tell that their mouth is a black void. So when they are seen they open it wider and wider with great speed getting so large that the blackness obscures their body until they are completely shrouded and then in an instant the void collapses and they are gone. Where they go, no one knows. Perhaps they have returned to the churning abyss where they dwell.”

“Churning abyss?” He paused while it all sunk in. “My word, that is horrible.” Thomas was greatly disturbed. He was sweating and his hands were vaguely trembling. “How... how do they get into the room? Can I put a chair against the door or something to keep them out? Maybe I should close and lock the window.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not that easy. No one knows how they get into someone’s room. They don’t enter through doors or windows; we know that much. We don’t even know how they move. Some stories tell of them silently pulling themselves along the floor as though their legs are paralyzed. Others, though, claim that they’ve seen

them crouching on the edge of the bed staring down at them. However they move, it does not seem as though walls and doors are an obstacle. It seems that they just appear, probably in the same way that they can just disappear. It's like they come and go from a world beyond our own."

Thomas was thinking that he is never going to get any sleep the entire time that he is here. He was wondering how long it would be before he would die. No one can spend three months wide-awake. He figured, though, that he would probably first go crazy and so death would be just another strange event. He remembers hearing about people who stayed awake for days at a time. It was never a pretty story although the hallucinations were rather cool, but that was because it was happening to them. Now it was happening to him. No one else's problem ever seems that big until it becomes your problem. Finally he said, "But why me? And why now?"

"Is there anything going on right now that you are especially worried about?"

"I'm thirteen years old. That means that I'm worried about everything; it goes with the territory," Thomas replied somewhat exasperated.

"As far as any of us know they don't come around all that often. It's not like there's a horde of them that roams through everyone's houses every night. They must sense something in you. Is there anything in particular that you have been more worried about than usual?" asked Toni.

"Well, yea, probably." Thomas was not exactly being forthcoming. After a momentary pause he veered off, "So is there anything that I can do about them? Can I keep them away? I don't exactly want to get onto a first name basis with them. If they like the dark so much then maybe I can just keep my light on. That should scare them off."

"Being in the light is always a good thing, but they aren't going to be so easily overcome by a 60 watt light bulb. Once you fall asleep they can just turn the light off anyway."

"They can turn the light off!? How can they do that?"

"Well, Thomas, it's not like they're ghosts. They do seem to have substance. Keeping the light on may help a little but from what we've been told there is only one thing that seems to keep them away."

Thomas leaned forward. This was the first decent thing that he's heard today. "And that is what? Is it garlic? Is it a crucifix?"

"They're not vampires. It's prayer."

"Prayer? That's it?"

"They feed on anxiety. Prayer calms us down. It reassures us that we are not alone; that we have a strong foundation on which to stand and a stronger God. When we pray with sincerity and gratitude we get a peace that we cannot understand. It transcends our logic and circumstances. The angst-feeders hate that. But prayer is not like a silver bullet. It's not like we pray once and 'poof' they're all gone. I'm also not talking about kneeling at the side of the bed and folding our hands and praying, 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' This must be a heartfelt, personal prayer. It has to be more than words; it must be communion. Only then will they vanish."

"I need help. Will you prayer for me?"

"Of course. But ultimately your peace will come only when you pray. My prayers can strengthen you so that you can do what you should."

"I should have thought of that," Thomas said. "That's true."

"That's why we're all here for each other. Now come on, we'd better get home; it's almost dinnertime. And then tomorrow after church, there's something I want to show you outside of town."

7 Behind the Storm

He does not struggle with sin; he gladly lets it win every time

Thomas descended the stairs but as he got near the bottom he slowed down. Mrs. Donnelee was sitting with her elbows on the kitchen table and her head buried in her hands. Toni was still asleep. Thomas crept over on his tip toes and quietly pulled out the chair opposite her. He knew that she must have heard him, but she did not stir. He sat down and watched her waiting for an indication of anything. She did not move. Finally he spoke in a near whisper. "Are you OK? Are you not feeling well?"

She spoke slowly, her words like shadows. She did not move her head. "I used to like talking about my grief. I would find some comfort in the words of those who shared similar sorrow. But eventually both my words and theirs became hollow echoes. I grew numb to the repetition." She exhaled a small sigh and then continued.

"First it was Jim. Now it is Carl. I try not to be harmed by sadness. I try to push it away or bury it under business and sometimes it works for a while but then it returns; it always returns. Sometimes the worst pain is the dull kind because it lingers, it is relentless. It does not twist your body like angry fists and then leave. Instead it is like a disease that rots you away and never leaves until its host is dead.

"They say every pain has a value yet mine seems to come cheaply.

"Last week I was walking behind the house and I saw a beetle on its back with its legs hopelessly flailing. I just stood there staring at it. It was very odd. In the past I would not have hesitated to flip it over and let it continue on. But this time I wasn't sure if the more humane choice would have been to let it wear itself out and then die. For several minutes I watched its turmoil not knowing to flip it over or to walk away." She still did not lift her head. "But, yes, I did reach down and flip it over.

"I... I just don't know what to do with Carl. His words rip through me like a bullet. They are filled with such anger. They sting like a shovel hitting stone. I don't think he realizes just how much he hurts me. But then again, maybe he does. I don't know. I just don't know." There was a long silence. Thomas stared at the table in front of her elbows.

"I pray for him. I pray for him all the time." She slightly rolled her head back and forth in her hands. "It's all that I have left."

Upstairs, Toni's door shut and her feet could be heard on the steps. Mrs. Donnelee looked up towards the stairs with a soft smile as though held up by pins.

Toni crossed over to her mother. "Good morning, Momma."

"Good morning, sweetheart," she responded. They kissed cheeks as Mrs. Donnelee's hand momentarily cradled the back of Toni's head.

Mrs. Donnelee, Toni, and Thomas sat down in the second pew with Toni in the middle. Even in a church of 500 people there was always room in the front.

Out of the corner of his eye Thomas saw someone impatiently herding several others into the first pew.

"Don't dawdle," the father was whispering loudly, "You're distracting everyone by lolly-gagging."

Of course everyone was ignoring the children and was more riveted by his weekly show of petulant hand gestures and cockroach hissing. The two children sat down in a simultaneous plop.

Toni likewise sank into dejection. She leaned over to Thomas, "I hate with the fire of a thousand suns sitting behind Floyd Fullman in church."

"Why?" asked Thomas.

"You'll see. I'd rather coat my tongue with thumbtacks then endure an hour and a half of his tyranny."

"Wow, I sense some hostility here," remarked Thomas.

With emphasis on the first word Toni said, "I'm not the one who's hostile. You just wait and see. It won't be long now."

Sure enough it was only a minute later.

"Stop swinging your leg," Floyd said sternly to his son, "You're in church. You should be sitting quietly and meditating."

The son obeyed like a whipped dog. Toni looked at Thomas with vindication. Thomas merely looked at disgust at the back of Floyd's head.

Then Thomas whispered to Toni, "Isn't he the one that we saw in the deli yesterday?"

“That’s the one.”

The service was starting and the worship leader asked everyone to stand. Floyd grabbed his daughter by the elbow to lift her up. Apparently she did not spring up quickly enough to his liking. At the pause at the end of the first verse he whispered to his daughter, “Put more heart into it.”

Toni and Thomas just looked at each other. “Maybe a thousand suns are not enough,” thought Thomas.

Throughout the service the two Fullman children fidgeted too much, were not attentive enough, did not stand straight enough, did not find the verse in the Bible fast enough, coughed once (oh, the horror of that—you had thought that they ripped the cross off of the wall), and were not making enough eye contact with the pastor. All the meanwhile the wife took no notice and did nothing. She just sat there with her hands politely folded.

Neither Thomas nor Toni could focus for more than a minute or two on the preaching. They were either watching with disgust Mr. Fullman’s latest scolding or were waiting for the next one. It was becoming a game to Thomas to see if he could figure out what they were doing “wrong” that anticipated the next scolding. Even Mrs. Donnelee shook her head a couple of times.

At the end of the Benediction all four of the Fullmans stood up and, making no eye contact with anyone, marched up the center aisle and out the back door. Only twice did Mrs. Fullman manage a weak smile as she passed several of the women of the church. The children followed like ducklings.

Toni and Thomas watched their rapid exit. When they had all disappeared Toni turned to Thomas. “See, what did I tell you? His constant tyranny is so distracting that I couldn’t concentrate on the service. I can hardly even tell you what the sermon was about.”

“Well, you got that right,” replied Thomas. “I just kept thinking about how I would love to snap his earlobe with a rubber band, but I’m sure your mother would be disapproving.”

“Yes, a good admonishment would visit when you got home,” answered Toni with conviction. “However, I must admit that I’ve considered doing worse. And in church yet! I should be ashamed.”

“But you’re not,” Thomas said with a smile.

A number of people came over to Thomas and expressed their delight to see him back again.

When they got to the back of the church the pastor greeted them both warmly. “I’m so glad to see that you will be visiting with us again this summer, Thomas. It is always a pleasure to see you.”

“Thank you pastor,” replied Thomas. “I’m always encouraged by your sermons and look forward to them.”

“Such a fine lad,” the pastor said with a gentle mock condensation and smile as he patted Thomas on the top of the head. Then he leaned down so that his head was between Toni and Thomas’ and he whispered, “I give you both credit for your discipline and focus because Floyd Fullman’s antics distract me to no end when I’m up there. I don’t see how you can sit behind him.” Then he stood up, gave them both a good slap on their shoulders, and walked away.

Thomas and Toni looked at each and burst out laughing.

8 The Encounter in the Woods

When the foolish get lucky
that does not make them brave

After Mrs. Donnelee's usual hearty lunch after church, Thomas and Toni walked to the eastern edge of town. He kept thinking about what Toni had said about prayer and felt greatly relieved about tonight. At least now he had a weapon of sorts. Maybe they would come back but, if nothing else, now he had a way to tick them off.

Last night he read several chapters in his Bible and prayed himself to sleep and the only time that he woke up was when it was time for breakfast.

However, before they were completely out of his mind Toni said, "You know, there is one thing about you and the angst-feeders that has puzzled me."

Thomas felt a bit sick inside hearing them verbalized again but he figured that he better go along and get it over with. Besides, maybe Toni was going to propose another method of beating them. "Well... what is it?"

"In all of the talk around town and the lore that has been passed down, rarely has anyone even seen one of them. And yet you've seen them twice. That's very unusual. You're good at puzzles. What's the answer to this one?"

"Well, it's not like I have any supernatural powers. Maybe I'm just sensitive to them," Thomas replied wishing that was end of it.

"How can you be sensitive to something that silently stares at you? They make no noise. They probably don't breathe. How can you hear nothing?"

This struck a chord in Thomas. "Maybe that's it."

"Huh?"

Thomas continued. "Let's say that you are alone. You are reading a book while in a comfortable chair in the middle of the room. There is no radio or TV playing. It is dark out and the curtains are drawn. Everyone else is asleep in their beds and you have stolen a moment by yourself. All is quiet and peaceful. In fact, it is very quiet.

"Then you get an unsettled feeling. You do not move your head but your eyes look up from the book. They aren't focused on anything but you are concentrating on detecting anything unusual. Nothing seems out of place but that edgy feeling is still there.

"Slowly you lift your head and look around. In succession you check doorways, windows, corners, the edges of furniture—nothing. You turn around and give a startled jump. 'How long have you been standing there?' you say with a relieved nervousness. 'Only about a minute,' the person replies. 'You scared the death out of me,' you continue. 'I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd see why the light was on. I didn't mean to scare you. In fact, I crept as quietly as I could down the stairs. I didn't think that I made any sound at all.'"

"How did you know that someone was there? The floor made no creaks. They didn't make any noise. No bones quietly cracked. They were just standing there."

Toni thought for a moment and then looked up and shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe it was because there is always an ambient noise surrounding us no matter how subtle. The refrigerator may be humming gently. Leaves may be sliding across each other on the trees and bushes outside. These are all very low-level but they are always there nevertheless. We are never totally in silence. You probably are never bothered by any of this instead preferring to save your attention for more directed and out-of-place noises such as conversations or cars crashing. But your mind is aware of these background noises and if one of those sounds is disturbed, your subconscious processes the information. Is it worth telling you to investigate the alternation or to ignore it?"

"In this case, your mind knew that nothing would normally muffle the hum of the refrigerator unless someone or something silently moved in between it and you. This caused your unsettled feeling. This was your mind telling you that something is there that was not there a minute ago. This is your being told, 'Look up; you may be in trouble.'

"The answer to your question as to why I woke up suddenly and saw them is not that... the thing made any noise but that it subtly muffled some of that background noise in my room. That's why I felt uneasy and woke up."

Toni questioned, "But you would have to have some really good hearing to detect that. I mean, your room doesn't have anything that makes noise so whatever sound there is in there is even more subdued than usual."

Thomas thought for a bit. "I've always had pretty good hearing."

“Pretty good? You’ve got hearing like a dog!”

“OK, enough with comparing me to animal parts. Let’s change the subject.”

Toni agreed, “Fine with me. It’s not like I exactly enjoy talking about them especially knowing that they are in my house. Maybe I’ll sleep with the light on too tonight.”

“No, just pray.” Thomas smiled at her.

Toni responded back knowingly.

They had reached the edge of the woods. Though it had seemed like a casual, random walk, Toni was really leading the way to a particular place. Without hesitation Toni headed right for one spot bordered by two large trees. Thomas could see the vague remains of a path, but he would never have noticed unless someone brought him right to it.

“Do you know where you are going?” he asked.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’ve got this fly in a jar.”

“OK.” Thomas knew that it was better to just follow and not ask too many questions.

“You know, Toni, I’ve been wondering about something ever since you mentioned about Carl wanting to catch animals to, you know, do things to them. So whatever did happen to Muffin or Cupcake or whatever pastry you named your cat after? I notice that she hasn’t been around. Did he... get a hold of her and... do something?”

“No, she died a months ago of very natural causes.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. What happened? Did she get sick? I didn’t think that she was that old.”

“She got out and was hit by a car,” answered Toni seriously.

“That’s natural causes?”

“Well, she was outside when it happened. That seems natural to me. If she got hit by a car while inside the house, well, that would have been unnatural.”

“Oh, I see.” There was a pause. “It probably was deliberate,” Thomas continued.

“Huh?”

“She had to get away from Carl somehow. She probably knew what he was planning and her future didn’t look too rosy. I bet that was the only way out that she could think of. She couldn’t hang herself because all of that hair on her paws would get in the way of tying the knot. She couldn’t open those stupid childproof and, consequently, pet-proof bottles of pills. If she leaped off of a cliff and plummeted 1,000 feet she would just land on her feet and then sit down and lick herself. The only sure bet was greeting a rapidly moving tire. It’s quick, settled and, since the crows would eat her before anyone found her, tidy. That way the family would just think that she eventually turned up on the doorway of some rich, childless person’s house and was lapping up teriyaki salmon on a silk pillow. You’re happy in your fantasy and she is out of her impending misery. She was, indeed, a very thoughtful cat.”

Toni looked incredulously at him. “You are such a strange child. Have you ever thought of seeing a psychiatrist?”

Thomas smiled, “The voices sometimes ask me the same thing.”

Toni put her hand up to forehead and sighed with forced exaggeration.

Thomas continued, “So all seriousness aside, do you think that Carl would ever have done anything to the cat or did he like her too much?”

Toni answered, “Carl thought that the cat was worthless. No, I take that back. There was one thing that he admired—that was the way she was able to curl up with her head nearly up her butt. He rather envied that, quite strangely. But otherwise, he thought that she did nothing but sleep all day and contributed nothing to the household.”

“Well, there is a good reason why you never see cat action figures in the toy section,” Thomas added.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Toni replied in a huff.

“That there aren’t any cat action figures?” Thomas asked.

“Noooo,” Toni drew out that word, “that she didn’t contribute to the family. I found it very relaxing when I was petting her in my lap and she was purring.”

“Now there’s a tough job description.”

“She was also funny and cute, I happened to like her a lot. I’d get another one but I’m afraid to with Carl around.”

The woods were thick with underbrush (obviously they did not have an overabundance of deer) but they had a good wide clear path to carry them. Thomas asked several times where they were going but each time Toni would just smile and say, “You’ll see.” That worked, because it made him even more curious.

In previous summers the three of them (this included Carl in his more gregarious days) had done much exploring in all of these woods although the last few years Carl showed no interest. However, oftentimes Sarah and sometimes Russell joined them in these adventures. Thomas was sure that they had been down this path before so he

could not figure out what was so special that they had not seen before. Maybe they had not gone down far enough before or maybe they had to swerve from this path to find this surprise. He was growing more curious the more he wondered about it. Was it a waterfall, an ancient ruin, an old graveyard?

They had been walking for around a half an hour. Toni abruptly stopped and said in a load whisper, "Wait, what was that?" Neither moved for a few seconds. "Did you hear a noise?"

"A noise?" whispered Thomas incredulously. "We're in the woods. It could have been anything. It might have been a squirrel or a rabbit or maybe even a duck." He smiled a bit hoping to defuse things. He thought that Toni's jitteriness was not warranted.

She still did not move; her ears were like radar listening for any incoming sounds. Finally she relaxed and said, "A duck? We're in the middle of the woods. Ducks don't take nature hikes."

Thomas laughed. He pictured a row of ducks wearing Boy Scout uniforms and carrying backpacks and using hiking sticks. "Let's keep going."

They walked further on continuing their chatting. Toni was talking about how her mother had been planning dinners for a month that she thought Thomas would particularly enjoy. "Nothing's too good for the prince" would punctuate the conversation several times.

Nothing unusual happened for several minutes. But then Thomas heard a snap off to their left. He did not want to rattle Toni so he nonchalantly glanced over his shoulder. The underbrush prevented him from seeing very far and it seemed to be rather thick in this section. He did not see anything and thought that maybe she had spooked him more than he first thought. He had been jittery lately and so anything could possibly twitch his nerves.

She did not say anything about it this time so Thomas surmised that it was probably nothing. They continued to walk but he kept his ears tuned to the left. Was it his imagination or did he keep hearing faint noises. At times it was like a shuffling of leaves but then again sometimes like the crushing of small dried twigs. Whatever it was it was singular and it was keeping up with them. All this time Toni was talking about the dinner that mother was preparing for tonight. Thomas felt the back of his shirt and under his arms getting damper. He kept stealing glances all around but nothing unusual could be seen. Involuntarily he quickened the pace. Toni seemed oblivious to all of this. He sped up even more but the faster that they went the louder the noises became.

"Can we slow down some?" asked Toni. She was starting to get out of breath.

"No," said Thomas deliberately.

"No? Why not?"

"Don't panic or anything but you were right before. Someone or something is following us. It's on our left. The faster we go the faster it goes. You probably didn't hear it because you were talking. Maybe we should turn back."

Toni stopped and yelled out, "Carl, is that you?"

Thomas almost jumped out of his skin. He whispered, "What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

Toni shouted again, "We're on to you, Carl. You can come out now."

Thomas was waving his hands at Toni to get her to talk lower.

There was no response, just the occasional rustle.

"Carl, we know that it's you," Toni repeated. "You got us good. Ha, ha, ha. Now you can come join us." Still no response.

They were both scanning the woods carefully. Toni was thinking that it was Carl; Thomas was thinking wolves.

Suddenly about twenty feet behind them a large, dark object fell out of an overhanging tree branch. It hit the ground with a thud. Thomas and Toni jumped almost up into the trees themselves. They stood there and stared at it.

"Wow, that is one big tree branch," Thomas said. "If we were only a couple of second slower that would have hit us on our heads and caused a whole lot of grief."

Thomas stopped talking and breathing. They both stared more intensely at the branch. It was beginning to twist, a little at first with small jerky movements but then more and more like a magician trying to get out of a straitjacket. They were both frozen in bewilderment. The branch was changing. The bark was becoming slick and shiny.

Finally Toni shrieked, "It's a snake!"

And it was quite a snake. It was at least ten feet long and fat and black and it started slithering straight at them picking up speed each second.

"Quick!" shouted Thomas and they both ran for all they were worth with the snake staying right at their heels. They did not even notice anymore that the sounds in the woods kept pace with them.

Thomas shouted, "Follow me, now!" He made a sudden right turn into the woods. Snakes are not like deer or rabbits; they cannot make sudden turns. So this tactic put a good distance between them and the snake but once it got back onto their trail it made up the distance quickly.

"Another right!" yelled Thomas and once again they gained some ground. But they could not keep this up for long. Eventually they would either tire or one of them would trip and then the snake would be around them in a blink.

"We can't keep running in circles." Toni was already gasping heavily. It would only be a matter of time. They were both watching the ground as they tried to angle back to the path, which was flatter and had fewer roots to twist ankles or catch feet.

So neither of them noticed when they barreled right into someone standing on the edge of the path. The impact caused Toni to fall to her knees. She was shaking and sobbing. She was waiting for the fangs to sink deeply into her back and the muscular coils to wrap around her body. Thomas tightly gripped the man's shirt to keep from sinking onto the ground. He looked up at the large man and then quickly back at the snake. Oddly, it had stopped. Then it reared up and hissed angrily. The man did nothing. Toni was about to collapse into jelly. Thomas was paralyzed; his jaw hung open. The man's face was rigidly glaring at the breast, but he had no weapons. For what seemed to be forever nothing changed. The snake menaced, Toni sobbed, Thomas quivered, and the man stood with narrowed eyes. And then the snake turned and disappeared into the brush.

The man gently grabbed Toni by the shoulders and lifted her up. She looked up at him with a tear stained face. Thomas also looked up at him; his mouth still had not shut.

"My name is Jocum. Are you two all right? That was quite a scare you got there, but everything is OK now." He had one hand on each of their shoulders. His voice, though deep, was calm and reassuring considering what had just happened.

He shouted past Thomas and Toni, "Seth, you can show yourself now."

Out of the bushes to the left came another large man. Thomas and Toni stared at him in wonder. These two guys could be brothers; they were both so similar. They were around 6' 6" and well muscled. "No wonder why the snake took off," Thomas thought.

Jocum said, "So what are you doing out here, Seth?"

"I saw these two going into the woods and I had a feeling that there might have been some trouble brewing. So I thought that I should follow them and make sure that nothing bad happened." He looked down at the teens. "Yes, that noise that you heard following you was me. Sorry if I scared you; I had no intention of doing so. I didn't want to barge in on your company, but I couldn't do anything about all of those pesky leaves and twigs on the ground."

Jocum was looking at him intently and then turned to the teens. "Maybe we should head back to your house. You need to lie down and gather your senses again. Right now I think that they're running every which way." With a gentle push he turned them back towards the path. "Are you able to walk? We can carry you if you can't."

Thomas looked at Toni and then answered in barely a whisper, "No, we can make it."

As all four of them headed back it was quite a while before anyone spoke. It was Thomas. "I didn't know that you had snakes that lived in trees around here." Jocum looked at Seth who then looked off in the other direction.

Jocum responded, "It probably escaped from a zoo. I don't think that you'll have to worry about anything like that again. Just don't go out into the woods again unless you have plenty of companions."

"Oh, you don't have to tell us," Thomas added quickly.

When they got back to the house Seth said, "You two go inside and rest up. We're going to leave you now."

Jocum reached around to a small leather waist pack that no one had noticed before. "Wait a second. Let me give you something first." He zipped it open and pulled out a brown bag. He opened it up and pulled out some cookies. "Here, these are honey wafers. They're quite good and they'll give you back some energy. Here's a couple for each of you. Go ahead, take them, they're not going to poison you."

They gingerly took the wafers and then he opened the door, rubbed them both on the shoulders and gently pushed them inside.

"I'll see you both again sometime," Jocum yelled into the house.

After the door shut they both took a deep breath. Toni looked at Thomas, "We don't have a zoo here."

9 Turnings

Temptation does not knock and wait.
It glides in gorgeous and alluring and drops tantalizing tidbits into our ears.

“Did anyone else hear the dogs last night?” asked Toni with almost awe in her voice.

Russell responded with likewise astonishment, “How could we not? It sounded like every dog in town was having its balls squeezed.”

Toni looked startled and sat upright. “Excuse me!?”

“I mean, having their tails stepped on.”

Sarah giggled and then jumped in, “I’ve never heard anything like that before. When did it happen? I think that I rolled over and looked at the clock. It must have been sometime around midnight. Something really got them going. Between the howling and the growling and the barking I thought that we were being invaded.”

“Maybe the cats were having a late night convention.” Russell proposed.

Floyd Fullman put on his short-sleeve white shirt and thin dark tie like he did every morning. He pulled tight the round laces on his spotless leather shoes and strode determinedly out the front door to his office, briefcase in hand. He would nod seriously to a few of the familiar faces that he passed by, but did not have the time to ever stop and chat even for a few minutes.

Entering the insurance building he took the stairs to his third floor cubicle. His ID was obediently hung on a cord around his neck.

His daily routine varied little. He worked through breaks and lunch and rarely left his area. At precisely noon he would fill his glass with water from the water cooler and take exactly one paper towel. Then he would return to his desk, unfold the paper towel in front of his keyboard, and take his sandwich out of its bag and lay in on the towel. He would take one bite and then continue his work where he left off. When he finished his sandwich he would fold the towel into a perfect square so that no crumbs escaped and dropped it into his wastebasket.

The only spontaneous deviation was when he lifted his head in disdain when a wisp of music curled over the top of his wall from beyond the empty cubicle next to him. “Inconsiderate jerks. Just because they don’t want to work they shouldn’t prevent others.”

He was double-checking his calculations when there was the thump of a full box hitting a desk and then a rustling of papers in the adjacent cube.

Floyd sighed loudly and shook his head.

“I am so very sorry,” came the voice nearly in a whisper.

Floyd turned quickly. Rarely did anyone dare disturb his space. Standing half behind the edge of Floyd’s wall was a tall, straight-standing man wearing a short-sleeve white shirt with a thin dark tie.

“I’m sure you’ve got a lot to do,” he said with a serious firmness, “but I’d like to take a brief moment to introduce myself. I’m your new co-worker. My name is Alexander.” He reached out and gave Floyd a good firm handshake.

“I’ll let you get back to work. I’m sure you have an important deadline to meet and I wouldn’t want to be the person that delays you. Beside, I’ve got my first assignment and I want to get started on it.” He started to turn away but then leaned back at Floyd. “But first I’m going to ask whoever it is to lower that music. I need to concentrate, you know.”

Floyd turned back to his monitor and paused. For the first time in a very long while he actually had a faint wisp of a smile.

For the next two weeks that Floyd came into work in the morning, Alexander was there already buried deep in some papers. But he always managed to turn around just as Floyd passed by no matter how quietly he was walking to say “Good morning, Floyd, a lot to do today, eh? Time to get on with it.”

Then one mid-morning Floyd put down his pencil and walked around the wall to Alexander’s desk. He cleared his throat. Alexander swiveled in his chair.

“Ah, Floyd, so nice to see you coming over. I hope that I wasn’t disturbing you. Sometimes I’m so engrossed in my work I don’t realize how loud I can be.”

“No, no, nothing like that. I was just wondering what you are working on; that is, if you have a minute. I don’t want to break your concentration.”

“No, Floyd, now is the perfect time. I just finished up something important and was thinking about how to tackle the next task.

“I am doing project analysis. I’ve only been hired for a few months. My job is to determine how efficient and productive each person and project in this company is. If there is any place to cut off some fat then I will find it.”

Floyd nervously shuffled.

“Ah, Floyd, but you don’t have to worry; you’re at the very top of my most productive list. If there is anyone in this company that makes it succeed it is you.” Alexander smiled. “You’re going to get my highest recommendation.”

Floyd recorded his second near smile and only two weeks after the first. He took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before exhaling with great self-satisfaction.

“Say, Floyd, I know that you’ve got a lot to do but maybe sometime over lunch you can tell me what drives you, what your greatest strengths are, what you look for in the ideal employee. Let me know if there is ever good time for that; I’d love to hear what you have to say.”

Floyd was a bit taken back. No one had ever showed interest in his work before especially in how it was that he was so good at it. “Well sure. How about tomorrow? I’m ahead of my deadline so an hour won’t hurt.”

“Of course you’re ahead, Floyd. You’ve never missed a deadline in all of your years here.”

At that, Floyd squared his shoulders.

“Didn’t think that I’d notice that, did you, Floyd? I’m going to make sure that the head of the company is aware of that when I submit my final report. You’ll get all of the credit due to you after all of these years.”

“Well, it’s about time. I’ve worked hard here these 25 plus years. It’s about time that I got my recognition.”

“I’ll do my best, Floyd. So tomorrow it is. I’m sure that I’ll learn a lot.”

The next day Floyd told Alexander about all of the projects that he was ever involved in, the military-like promptness of his daily attendance, the fact that he never handed in a report with an error on it, and how he willingly put in a great deal of overtime when it was needed.

After two hours Alexander finally spoke. “So what was your biggest raise here? Considering all that you’ve done it must have been pretty impressive.”

Floyd flashed anger, “That’s been my biggest issue with this company. No one ever recognizes my contributions. My best raise in over 25 years was 3.7 percent and that was when the company had a banner year. Usually I get very little or sometimes nothing at all.”

“Oh, that’s not right, Floyd. How about promotions? You’ve gotten several of those at least.”

Floyd pursed his lips hard. Then he said, “Only two in all of that time. And both of them were really just a title change. I didn’t move up in the company or anything. I’ve been in this same cubicle the whole time.”

“There is something wrong there, Floyd. By now you should be a VP at least. Without you, this company wouldn’t be where it is today. Have you ever said anything?”

“Well, no. I probably should have, but I always thought that if I worked hard and did my job that they would recognize that. Instead they always promoted some young gunslinger past me, someone who knew how to chat up the boss. Instead of doing work he would flit around back-slapping with the latest quip from his joke-of-the-day calendar.”

“That is just wrong, Floyd. You deserve better than that. You should stand up for yourself. This company has just not treated you right. You deserve your fair share.”

“You’re certainly right there.”

“In fact, I’d say that they pretty much have taken advantage and cheated you. You’ve given them your flesh and bones and what did you get in return? —Nothing but a kick in the head. It’s time you did something about it. I bet that you’ve never even called in sick.”

“You’re right there. How did you know that?” asked Floyd.

“Knowing you, it was a good guess.”

The next day was the first time in over 25 years that Floyd was late for work.

Terese stopped staring blankly at her monitor and swiveled her chair towards her co-worker. “What am I doing here?”

Anne replied, “I thought that you were working on our boss’s presentation for tomorrow.”

“No, who cares about that?”

“Your paycheck cares about that.”

Terese continued, “No, I’m serious. I mean, what am I doing with my life? My marriage basically died five years ago. Paul and I never do anything together. Half the time the only reason why we talk is to argue. I’ve been in

a holding pattern for too long. All that I ever do is go around and around and the view never changes. I've got to come in for a landing and do something else."

"Well, at least you were consistent with your airplane analogy," smirked Anne.

"Great," Terese replied with some agitation. "I'm going down in flames and you're analyzing my literary qualities."

"Sorry," said Anne. "Maybe you and Paul should go on a vacation together. Maybe that will refresh things."

Terese retorted, "We would only argue where to go. I'd want someplace exciting and he'd want to go where he can lie around and scratch his belly."

"Then try counseling."

"A lot of good that would do even if I could get him to go." She leaned back limply in her chair. "I need a change," she said weakly and covered her eyes with her hands.

"Well then," Anne tried to sound perky, "your prayers have been answered."

Terese looked unimpressed and did not even remove her hands from her face.

"I heard this morning that we're getting a new office manager starting today."

With severe deadpan Terese replied, "Another nag in a long line of nags. Let's see, Elsie just quit last Friday," and then with exaggeration, "thank God. And before that we were stuck with Betsy and before her was Daisy, who was perhaps the worse. Did you ever notice that all of our office managers are named after cows? I suppose that this one will be Claribel."

"Somehow I doubt that." Anne was leaning forward almost out of her chair. She had a look of great enthusiasm.

Terese followed her gaze. In the doorway stood a tall, well-chiseled man. He wore a crisp, dark green suit and his sharp blue eyes were fixed firmly on Terese.

The department head stepped in front of the new employee while the two women craned their necks to see around him. "I would like to introduce our new office manager, Peter. He is starting today. Peter, this is Anne and Terese."

With a resonating voice he turned to Anne and with a wonderfully exotic accent said, "Nice to meet you, Anne. It is my pleasure."

"Nice to meet you, too." Anne was rather weak at the moment.

Then he turned to Terese and reaching out he picked up her hand with both of his. "It is my great pleasure, Terese. I'm sure that we will get along very well together."

They both were frozen there for a few seconds before he gently let her hand slip out. Then after a couple more seconds he turned and followed the department head but did not fail to glance again at Terese as he turned the corner.

Neither woman spoke for a while. Finally Anne just said, "whew."

For the next several days every time that Peter was in Terese's area he would smile wryly at her and ask how things were going. She would always respond, "Great, just great." And then when he left she would just sigh. Several times she would find her favorite candy bar lying on top of her keyboard. "How did he know?" she would wonder.

Two weeks after starting, Peter came over to Terese's desk and leaned with one hand on it. "I forgot my lunch today. I would like to go out and get a quick bite. Would you care to join me? I would be very honored."

Terese felt the blood rapidly rush to her head. She was sure that the scarlet color of her face exactly matched the curtains that she had recently hung in her living room.

She almost blurted out that she always brought her lunch but maybe tomorrow would be O.K. What she said was, "sure."

"Great," Peter replied. "I'll be by in a half an hour."

Twenty minutes later Peter came by. "I'm sorry if I am a little early, but I could not wait any longer." Behind his back Anne gave a look of "Well!"

They ate at a quaint restaurant. It was not lavish, but it was no roadside diner either. There was a candle between them. Peter led the conversation balancing just the right number of questions for Terese with personal stories about himself. Every time that Terese said something he would lean forward and focus completely on her. He would summarize everything that she said with "That was fascinating" or "You are really very interesting." Later on, Terese could not describe a single feature of the restaurant.

At the end of the meal when she put her purse on the table and opened it, Peter reached over and gently put his hand on it.

"I'll cover this one. You can give the next time," he said.

Jackie was feeling so low she almost crawled out of her apartment. It was another Saturday morning and that meant that she probably would not speak a word until Monday morning at work. Over the years she had been hurt by so many people that she decided that if anyone wanted to be her friend they were going to take the initiative. That way she would know that they were sincere and not just humoring her efforts. The result of this tactic was that everyone either did not want to be her friend or they took her standoffishness as a stop sign. Whatever the reason, the reality was that she had no friends. The only people that she spoke to were her co-workers. Sadly, that made Monday mornings her favorite time of the week because then at least she had five days of conversations ahead of her.

Saturdays were usually spent the same: walking the circle in town a couple of rounds and then heading over to one of the larger stores where she would tramp the aisles until it was time to go home and cook. At least this way she was in the presence of other people even if they did not notice her. On the chance that she bought something when the cashier said “thank you” that was Jackie’s big conversation for the weekend.

For several years she ended each day drinking herself into a stupor, but after getting arrested several times for disorderly conduct she gave it up cold six months ago. It was a difficult decision and even more difficult to accomplish, but she managed to fight through those terrible nights.

She was shuffling down the hall on her way to her town circuit when one of the apartment doors suddenly opened right next to her. The swiftness of the motion startled her. She took a step back and faced the door.

“Well good morning,” proclaimed the cheery voice. “It’s so nice to meet you. My name is Karinthea. I just moved in yesterday.” She stuck out her hand for Jackie to shake, which Jackie gingerly did seeing how it had been so long since anyone was this friendly towards her she was out of practice. “So what’s your name?”

“I’m, I’m Jackie. I, uh, live two doors down.”

“Well, very nice to meet you, Jackie. You know I’m brand new here in town and I don’t know where anything is. If you ever have any time could you show me some of Jabesh’s sights?”

Jackie spoke slowly as she tried to comprehend the reality of the situation. “Yea, sure. That would be fine.”

As if possible, Karinthea brightened up even more. “Great, you know, I need to get some stuff for my apartment. You won’t happen to have any time today, would you? I don’t want to impose. I’m sure that you’re busy.”

“No, no, actually I don’t have anything much to do today. So today would be fine.”

“Great! Say, why don’t you come in while I get my list together.”

They spent the whole day together. Karinthea bought them lunch and by late afternoon Jackie was having such a good time she did not even realize how late it was. She looked at her watch. “Oh my, I’m sorry, but I have to head back. I haven’t made anything for dinner yet and it’s getting late.”

Karinthea grabbed Jackie’s shoulder and gently shook it. “Don’t you worry about that. You can come to my place for dinner. I’ve brought plenty of food and it’ll be nice to eat with someone for a change.” Jackie thought the same thing.

After dinner they sat and talked some more. Karinthea’s life fascinated Jackie to no end. They swapped stories both those that were exhilarating and those that were grimy. At 10:00 Karinthea got up and rummaged through one of the boxes still unopened. “Ah, here they are.” She returned with two wineglasses and a bottle. “Let’s celebrate my new apartment and, even better, our new friendship.” She filled the two glasses and eagerly handed one to Jackie. She raised her glass. “To my place and to us.”

Jackie put her glass down on the table and stared at it. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I used to have a big drinking problem and I’ve been clean for the last several months.”

Karinthea coaxed, “It’s only wine and it’s only one small glass. How can it hurt? Besides, it would be a great way to end this fine day and to begin our great new friendship.”

“I, I really can’t.”

“OK, I don’t want to do anything that would cause any problems.” Karinthea took a sip with her eyes closed in obvious contentment. She left Jackie’s glass on the table. “That is the best stuff that I think that I’ve ever had. But you were saying earlier about your job...”

For the next hour Karinthea took periodic sips from her glass each time concluding with something like, “My that’s really good. I wish that you could share it with me.” After the third time of this Jackie stared down at her glass, a bead of sweat formed on her temple.

Karinthea chatted away some more and refilled her glass. It was at that point that Jackie said, “You know, one little sip won’t really hurt. Besides, I don’t want you to celebrate on your own.” Karinthea grinned widely, “That’s the way!”

By the end of the evening Jackie had drunk several glasses and was tilting woozily. Karinthea had to help her to her apartment.

Over the next several weeks Jackie and Karinthea had dinner together practically every night each time ending it with a toast. Then one evening when Jackie was already fit to be tied to the mast, Karinthea took out a small bag. "Look, I've got some pills. They'll really make you feel good. Here, have a few. You'll be singing and soaring like a bird."

10 Meetings and Puzzles

When you have an army of Generals no one ever leaves the strategy tent

After breakfast, Thomas and Toni were sitting on the second floor balcony of her house trying to decide what to do that day. Thomas had not seen the angst-feeders going on a week now and so was feeling much more relaxed about that. Even the snake in the woods was only flashing into his thoughts every couple of hours now rather than every couple of minutes. Maybe this was going to be a good summer after all, he thought.

Thomas was looking up over the roof. Then he looked around at the other houses. “Why does every chimney have what looks like a lid on it? I know that you should put a cap on a chimney to keep out the birds and squirrels and such but all of these are in an upright position. They aren’t covering anything. What are they for?”

Toni did not look up. “Don’t worry about that. It’s nothing that you’ll ever need to concern yourself with, I’m sure.” She paused for a bit and then said quickly, “What was something that you did as a child that seemed really important at the time but now, looking back, seems rather silly?”

Thomas momentarily still thought about the lids and Toni’s evasive answer but then said, “When I was a child I dug a small hole near the street in front of our house. I put on the bottom of it red berries that I had carefully gathered from nearby bushes. I said ‘carefully’ because I believed those berries to be extremely poisonous, if not the most deadly berries to be found on the earth. I never saw anyone eat these berries and once I found a dead bird lying at the foot of the bush. If that wasn’t convincing then nothing was.

“While I was dropping in the last of the berries a girl slightly older than me came by. I told her that the pit was a trap filled with poison and that anyone who stepped into it would die. Without hesitation, she put her foot into it, waited a few seconds and said all too glibly, ‘That’s just stupid. There’s no poison there; see, I’m still alive.’ and walked off. I stared after her expecting her to suddenly go rigid and then fall over dead as an old tree branch. But when she disappeared around the corner at the end of the block and I didn’t hear any screams I knew that I was wrong.

“I was stunned speechless. I guess, in a way, I knew in my heart that the berries weren’t really poisonous or at least not the most poisonous on the face of the earth, but I could live with that as part of the game. But to have someone so demonstrably shatter my illusion left me with nothing but a hole with squashed berries. How could I go on? There was nothing left. The game was over far too soon. Whereas before, I could make believe, now the whole thing just seemed dopey. After she smugly walked away and disappeared I quickly pushed dirt back into the hole and patted the top smooth. I even scattered a few stones to make it match the rest of the area. I certainly didn’t want to leave any evidence of my obvious stupidity.

“I sat on the ground for quite a while with my birdie legs sticking out of my overly large, brown, baggy shorts. My plans for the morning—building traps—were laid to waste, buried beneath the newly patted earth.”

Toni asked, “Why was it even such a big deal? OK, the trap didn’t really work. So what? What were you expecting to trap anyway?”

“I guess that I had envisioned some stranger with no good on his mind canvassing the neighborhood with some evil to perpetrate. He would then accidentally step into my clever trap. (It was going to be disguised, of course.) The poison would quickly penetrate his shoes and socks, diffuse into his skin, and rapidly contaminate his blood. He would gasp for air, his heart would race a few times, his eyes would bulge, and then he would fall over with his foot still stuck in my hole. The neighborhood would be saved from this scourge and everyone would know that it was my doing. I had protected lives and possessions. My life would have had taken on a greater purpose than plastic soldiers and tiny dump trucks. This was to have been my launching pad to rise above commonality.

“Rather ambitious for—what—a six-year old? But a too-smart-for-her-own-self girl had to ruin it all with reality.” Thomas looked as glum and disappointed just then as he probably did those seven years earlier.

“But, I bet,” said Toni, “you still hope for some version of that scenario to play out some time in your life.”

“Don’t we all?”

They decided to give Russell and Sarah a call and meet at the park. Sarah would make something for lunch and they would all find a picnic table.

Back down in the kitchen Sarah asked Thomas, “Do you like fresh mozzarella and grilled eggplant sandwiches with basil?”

“You bet!” answered Thomas almost licking his lips. “That would be great.”

“Well, we’re going to have peanut butter and jelly.”

An hour later all four of them were all chomping down on the PB&J and talking about some of the happenings around town.

“I’ve been hearing rumors about some of the new people in town... and nothing has been terribly good,” said Sarah.

“Have you heard these rumors from people who shouldn’t be sticking their noses in other people’s business?” chided Toni.

“Nooo,” said Sarah dragging out that word. “Actually, I’ve heard the same thing from a number of different people. I don’t know any specifics just that they’ve been having a bad influence on some.”

Just then Gary and several of his friends went out of their way to walk close to the group.

Gary said with a smirk, “So Russell, still tucking your T-shirt into your underwear?”

Russell responded, “No, now I tuck it into my socks.” He smiled smugly at Gary whose smile disappeared and then his mouth gaped like an open mailbox.

Not knowing when to stop at merely being a jerk Gary blurted out, “I bet you still wet your bed.”

Before Russell could top him again Thomas said, “Here’s a thought. Why don’t you continue on to where you were going and we won’t disconcert you any further.”

Gary responded, “Yea, um, well, we certainly wouldn’t want you to disconcert anyone. You might hurt yourself.” He turned to his friends and they all gave a weak but confused laugh.

To which Thomas replied, “Something like that.”

At that Gary smirked and slightly tossed his head as though he had won and he and his pack left. The group silently watched them leave.

“Every year I come back there is always one thing that stays the same. Building get additions, shrubs fill in, Toni’s mother’s cooking keeps getting better, but Gary remains a solid and immutable idiot,” said Thomas.

“Immutable?!” proclaimed Russell. “What did you do, swallow a dictionary?”

“Let’s change the subject,” said Toni. “The problem with people like Gary is that they are insecure. They can’t stand on their own merits so they have to build themselves up by inventing shortcomings in other people. They prop up their own self-esteem by trying to make other people seem smaller than they really are.”

“Hey,” blurted out Russell, “I don’t tuck my T-shirts into my underwear... or into my socks for that matter. And I’m not small!”

“We know that,” replied Toni calmly with a reassuring grin. “Maybe it was a bad example. Gary is so insecure that he tries to get your goat by making things up. But the best thing that you can do is what you did; don’t insult him back but either show him that you aren’t bothered by it or top him by making his comment even more ridiculous. In other words, keep your goat content and he won’t get it.”

Sarah jumped in, “But it is hard to keep your goat content when the wolf is growling at the gate.”

Toni replied, “Than trust your goat to the safety of the shepherd who watches over it.”

“Huh,” said Sarah looking very quizzical.

“If you know that God accepts you then why do you care about the wolf?” asked Toni.

“True enough,” replied Sarah.

With the situation having been defused and with Russell wanting to discuss anything else he turned to Thomas, “So, you make up any new riddles this last year?”

Thomas smiled coyly, “I’ve got a few.”

Toni perked up, “A few! So give us one.”

Thomas agreed, “OK, here goes. This first one is easy.”

“I hate when someone says that,” interrupted Sarah, “then if we don’t get it we really look stupid.”

Thomas chuckled, “I have hands but no fingers, a face but no nose. I make noise but have no throat. I am a grandfather but have no children. Sometimes I have feet but even then I cannot walk. Who or what am I?”

Sarah spoke first, “Without fingers, a nose, a throat and cannot walk so then you are either inanimate or a very low life form.”

“Maybe it’s Gary,” Russell chimed in.

“Russell,” Toni gently scolded.

“Well, I didn’t say which one he is,” said Russell.

Toni ignored him, “Only people can be grandfathers.”

Russell jumped in excitedly, “or clocks.” He then grinned knowingly.

Thomas pointed to Russell. “You win round one.”

Russell smiled broadly and looked down but it was obvious that he was quite pleased.

“So what’s another?” asked Toni wanting to win one. “But make this one a little harder.” As if to imply that she had that puppy by its ears all along but held back.

“OK, here goes. I am all around you. You can’t get away from me no matter how far you go. You can’t escape me in outer space or in the deepest ocean. I can be different colors and shapes. You can never see me all at once. Without me you would die. Who or what am I?”

“Oooo, that one is harder,” said Sarah.

“I’m sure that we’ll get it,” said Toni with firm assurance. “Let’s just take it apart. First what is all around us?”

“Air,” Russell blurted out.

“Light,” added Sarah.

“Oxygen,” said Russell and then his eyes shifted to the side and his lips pursed. “That would basically be the same as air, I guess.”

“Anything else?” asked Toni. There was a pause. Then she said, “What about atoms, molecules, electrons?”

Sarah jumped in, “And bacteria and viruses.”

Thomas tried to suppress a clue of a smile.

“By that near smile,” put in Toni, “I’d say that we’re on the wrong path.”

“I didn’t say anything,” protested Thomas still grinning. “Maybe I grinned because you are on the right path. Maybe I grinned because I’m thinking about sour cream, green onion potato chips.”

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Toni remarked. “And besides, that was not a potato chip grin. I know your potato chip grin and that was not it.”

“OK, OK. Do you want a hint?”

“We don’t give up that easily,” Sarah responded.

“So let’s look at this from a different angle.” Toni was determined not to give in. “Maybe it’s something abstract. We’re surrounded by information, sin, goodness, knowledge, life, death. Do any of those fit? What else?”

Sarah questioned, “But none of that comes in different colors.”

Toni thought hard, “OK, you’ve got a point. Let’s go from a supernatural viewpoint. We’re surrounded by God, angels, and demons. Do any of those work?”

Sarah replied, “You could probably remove angels and demons and we’d still live.”

Russell chimed in, “But if you remove God we would die. So maybe God’s the answer.”

Thomas responded, “In a way, you can say that God is always the answer. But in this case, nope, because...”

Toni was back to setting the pace. “Is there anything else that we are surrounded by?” She looked hard at Russell to try and get a clue.

“What are you staring at me like that for? You’re creeping me out. Stop it.”

“Clothes,” said Toni firmly. “We’re all surrounded by clothes.”

“You’re getting closer,” put in Thomas.

“You hush,” said Toni quickly. “We don’t want any hints cause if you give us a hint then when we get it you’ll claim that it was a tainted victory.” She stared some more at Russell. He didn’t care for this scrutiny and squirmed in his seat. But he thought that she must be on to something.

Toni continued slowly. “Hair. Cells.” At this Thomas shifted. Toni cast a quick glance at him and then narrowed her gaze on Russell. Russell was about to yell out “Stop it!” again when Toni said, “Skin.” Then she paused. You could see her eyes shifting back and forth as if reading each line in the puzzle to see if it fit. Then she cried out, “Skin. That’s it. It fits. The answer is skin.” She sat up straight and looked around at everyone. Russell relaxed.

Thomas pointed at Toni. “You win round two.”

Toni seemed quite satisfied. It did not make any difference if she got any more – she had gotten one and that was proof enough.

Sarah whined. “Oh, come on. One more. You’ve got to have at least one more.” Sarah surely did not want to be the only one who did not take home a prize.

“OK, since you’re being so pitiful.” Sarah tightened her mouth and looked hard at Thomas. He merely snickered. “Here goes. When you eat this you feel ashamed. Most people have far too many of them. Oftentimes the same thing in a different country is useless to you unless someone can help you. Some are big and some are small. Most you are familiar with but occasionally you’ll come across one that you don’t know. What am I?” Thomas sat back and crossed his arms. He knew that this was going to take a while.

Russell leaned forward onto the table. “I know that answer to that one. It’s easy.” He paused to savor the moment and also to ensure that no one else had figured it out that quickly. After all, if he gave everyone a few more

seconds and they still couldn't come up with it then he did not just win; he conquered. After glancing around at everyone he said, "Words. The answer is words." He grinned with great satisfaction.

Thomas' arms fell limp. "How... how did you get that one so quickly? I thought that you all would take a really long time on that one."

"I should know because I'm eating my words all of the time." Russell crossed his arms high up on his chest and looked away as if he were a Goliath among children.

Thomas said just above his breath, "I need dumber friends."

"Hey," shouted Toni.

Thomas could see that Sarah was looking pouty so he said, "Ok, one more and that's it. Here it is. Sometimes you get into me and sometimes I get into you. You can't burn me, but I can burn you. But sometimes when something else burns you I can be soothing. I am powerful enough to move huge objects, but you can hold me in your hand. Who or what am I?"

Sarah said, "Wait, wait, I think that I've got this one." Everyone looked at her. There was a very long pause. Sarah squirmed and fidgeted. More silence and then she put her head down.

Thomas looked past everyone and said in a low voice, "Look over there in the parking lot next to the Laundromat."

Sarah said firmly, "No, no hints. I can get this one."

"No," said Thomas, "that's not a hint. I mean look over there but don't be too obvious."

Of course, they all turned at once and stared at the parking lot. A car that was sitting for a while a few buildings down had started up and discretely pulled in behind the Laundromat and stopped. A tall man emerged from a doorway and opened the passenger door and got in. The group could see the two momentarily lean in close to each other. Then the car backed out and left.

"Who was that?" asked Thomas.

"Which one?" said Russell.

"Either one," responded Thomas.

"I've seen the tall guy a couple of times," said Russell. "I never liked his looks. He seems to be hanging around Terese—I don't know her last name—a lot. She's the one who works down at the financial office building a few blocks down. He's one of those new people in town that we were talking about earlier."

Toni added, "Does he work at the Laundromat? Was she picking him up from work?"

Russell said, "Picking him up is certainly an appropriate phrase. No, he doesn't work at the Laundromat. The Jamisons have owned that for years and only members of their family have ever worked there. I know the whole clan and none of them look like that guy. Actually I think that he works at the same place as Terese."

"So it's a stealthy rendezvous," concluded Thomas. "This smells like a dead fish."

"If she's the person that I'm thinking of," Toni remarked, "then isn't she married?"

"She is indeed. As a matter of fact," continued Russell, "She has been different the last month or so. She's been more belligerent and if I ask her how she's doing she just snaps back 'fine.' I don't think that she's been in church lately either."

"Well, you've been quite the detective regarding the woman Terese, haven't you, Russell?" asked Thomas with exaggerated suspicion.

Russell turned scarlet, "Just being observant, I guess."

"Un, huh," said Thomas.

They all watched the car go down the block but before it turned the corner it stopped. The passenger door opened and the man got out. He stood straight up and stared motionless back at the group. Sarah and Russell who had twisted around to watch all of this suddenly snapped forward again so that their backs were to the car. They moved so quickly that they almost wrenched their backs. They sat there stiffly staring into the bushes as though they expected to be shot. They did not breathe. The other two diverted their eyes—as though he could see that far—but kept the car in the corner of their vision.

Sarah whispered, "If he starts coming towards us, we need to bolt. Head towards the gazebo but then duck around the restrooms instead—he'll lose sight of us—and then circle around and hide on the other side of the bleachers."

No one agreed or disagreed. Everyone was afraid to move or breathe. They even feared that he maybe he could read lips so no one else talked. Russell could feel his shirt getting wetter by the second.

And then the man got back into the car and it drove out of sight to the left.

11 Back in church

It takes ten seconds to sling an accusation;
perhaps a lifetime to refute it

That night Thomas slept uneasily. He never really woke but several times he faintly cried out. His dreams were full of eyes.

A few days later Toni's mother, Toni, and Thomas were just finishing up another legendary Sunday breakfast. Of course Carl had managed to make other plans and so was customarily absent. Being so full, Thomas nearly had to crawl over to the couch.

The dining room and the living room were two sides to one room. The couch and one chair were in matching red and dark blue tweed. Most of the furniture had been inherited but everything was orderly and nothing was frivolous.

The three of them tidied up and as they approached the front door Thomas hesitated. He put his finger on a small box attached to the wall next to the door. "I've always wondered what this box is here for. Is it for an extra key? I've always wanted to check it out but never quite felt that I should." In fact he had opened it several times when no one was around but never did more than look in and even then he could not figure out what that thing was that was in it.

Toni looked up at her mother to provide the explanation. "That's there for security. We just hope that we never have to use it. Now come on, we don't want to be late, after all, we won't want someone else to take our seats behind the Fullman family now would we?" She gave an impish smile and ushered them out the door.

As they walked to church several others joined them. These were people whom Thomas had only the faintest remembrance of but they showed sincere enthusiasm in asking him how his previous year had gone. When they got to the church there was a one-second contest to see who would win the right to hold open the door.

As they were standing around waiting for the service to start Thomas asked, "Who is that person over there?" nodding to his left. "Is she new?"

Toni followed his nod. There were maybe twenty people in the area. Of course eliminating all of the males and those whom she knew Thomas would remember made the selection that much easier. "You mean the woman with the unkempt hair, the shoddy clothes, and the slouching stance?"

"Um, yes, that's the one," answered Thomas with a degree of apprehension. He could tell that this was not going to end in a gracious portrayal.

"That's a church vampire," said Toni with more than a hint of disdain.

"That description lacks a great deal of flattery although it might be a step up from church blood-sucker or church tick. Why do you call her that?"

"Her name is Janet. She showed up six months ago, but I know about her from my friend June who goes to another church in town. Janet used to go to June's church."

"OK, but what makes her a church vampire?"

"You know how a vampire flits from person to person sucking their blood?"

Thomas interrupted, "I don't think that vampires exactly flit from person to person. I believe that they search out and obtain one good meal and then leave."

Thomas got one of those "keep quiet" looks from Toni. This was not science they were discussing but character.

Thomas grimaced and hunched slightly to signal his acquiescence.

"Anyway," continued Toni with a slight huff, "a vampire will glide through a crowd looking for the healthiest rube that he can find. Then he'll isolate and seduce that person before draining her. Sometimes the person doesn't even know that she was bit. She just wakes up one morning wondering why she is so pale."

With a smile Thomas said, "So you're saying that Janet is the undead?"

Toni's agitation rose so quickly that Thomas quickly mollified her, "OK, OK, just kidding. So how is Janet like a vampire or, specifically, a church vampire?"

Toni narrowed her eyes at Thomas for a few seconds as to gauge his true interest and then continued. "Janet is too lazy and irresponsible to work so she goes to a church and plies her pitiable story of hard luck. She dresses like a street waif, her hair and face are never made up, and she carries well her hangdog look. The one

question you never, ever want to ask her is ‘How are you doing?’ that is unless you don’t mind standing there for the next half an hour. All of her conversations start with ‘You don’t know how hard I have it.’ She will moan on about how rough her finances are, how her house is falling apart and is unsafe, how she can’t afford proper medication, and so on and so on. Most people just nod and beg with silent prayers for her to quickly finish... or for the earth to open and swallow them; either option is more merciful than being mired in her discourse.”

“It looks like she has some children orbiting around her,” observed Thomas. “What about them?”

“And if you notice, all dressed just as shabbily as she is. They are more like props than anything. All she has to do is mention the children and wallets fly open.” Toni continued, “Ultimately she’ll find at least one or two people in each church who will pay all of her bills or buy her food for a few months.”

Thomas replied, “I didn’t know that there were that many churches in this town. I mean, hasn’t everyone caught on to her by now?”

“Oh, she’ll go wherever she needs to. And besides, it takes her a couple of years to finish the circuit. By then, the first church has some new low-hanging fruit to pick so she can start all over again. Most people won’t warn others about her because they don’t want to appear to be cold-hearted. She does have her routine down quite well and, let’s face it, it does work. She has a husband but no one really knows what the deal is with him. Maybe he likes her bringing in the supplemental income.”

Thomas looked concerned, “But some people really are needy and a few dollars does make a huge difference. I know one woman with three young boys whose husband left them. She can’t work because of a car accident a couple of years ago. Do we ignore her because we have become paranoid that scammers, or vampires as you would call them, have infiltrated the church?”

“No, of course not. But we need to be wise. We shouldn’t just hand over the keys to a house without first doing some kind of background check.”

“Hire a detective?”

“No, but ask some pointed questions and make a few calls. Someone shouldn’t just walk in, say ‘I’m poor’ and expect the church to hand her \$1,000 on the spot. Why is so poor? Did she gamble? Does she drink? Is she lazy? Or maybe life did smack her up with no fault of her own and as hard as she may try she can’t seem to get back up on her feet.”

“So where does Janet fit in?”

“I think that you already know that answer.”

“Has she been to this church before? Do people here know about her?”

“I’ve never seen her at this church before recently. She only started coming a couple of weeks ago.”

They were both watching Janet as they spoke. She appeared to have cornered one of the older—and better-dressed—women in the church. The older woman was nodding and appeared understanding. Thomas wondered when she was going to be bit on the neck so to speak.

“I doubt that you will be one of those cold-hearted people and warn others about her, but are you at least going to tell the pastor?”

“I probably will, but I don’t want to come across as mean. I just want to make him aware so that he can be more alert and not just be a softie. You know what a big heart he has.”

“It rather matches his ears.”

“Thomas!” Toni scolded.

The service was ready to start so Toni’s mother started down the aisle. Toni and Thomas quickly followed. Toni was thinking, “Please pick a seat in the middle this time. Please, not the second row again.” But her mother kept going and going and finally stopped and turned down... the second row. Toni’s shoulders sagged. “Why has she suddenly developed a hankering for the second row?”

Sure enough, a minute later, down came Floyd Fullman, the two ducklings, and the mother hen and sat in front of them.

Toni and Thomas looked at each other. This was going to be another lost sermon.

Floyd regimented everyone into their places. There was an actual moment of calm. But then Floyd slowly turned around and stared right at Toni and Thomas freezing them with his eyes, “This is only the waves; the whitecaps are coming.” And then he turned back to the front.

12 The Tall Man

If you know yourself
then your adversary is already defeated

Russell's bad leg was bothering him more than usual that day and he was laboring under a more exaggerated limp than usual. As he was approaching the consignment shop a man was watching him intently. Russell was not paying attention to him since he was so focused on the discomfort in his leg.

As Russell got near to the shop the man stepped in front of Russell causing him to walk right into the man.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not very coordinated today," explained Russell.

"Not a problem," said the man smoothly. "Did you hurt your leg?" But there was not any compassion in this question. It was rather more like ice dripping onto Russell's face.

"Uh, no not really. I was born with a limp. One leg is a bit shorter than the other. It's just that I twisted it yesterday putting up a new birdhouse and it hurts more than usual."

"So you were born that way, huh?"

"Yes, why do you say it like that?"

"So God made you a cripple? How do you feel about that? I bet that makes you mad sometimes."

"Calling me a cripple seems a bit harsh, especially from someone that I just met two seconds ago."

"So then it does make you mad at God."

"I didn't say that."

"God must not like you too much to have created you that way. Now look at Gary over there." The man pointed at a teen across the street with a bunch of athletic, tanned friends. They both looked at the group.

On more than a few occasions Gary and his friends had made fun of Russell. He seemed to be their favorite whipping boy. It was not infrequent for Russell to wonder how much different his life would be if he were tall, good-looking, and athletic. Russell twitched and looked away. He thought it rather unfortunate that Gary had to be there at that time and hoped that Gary would not see him and come over and provoke him.

The man grinned but with more than a touch of sinister. "God obviously likes Gary better than you because He made him tall and strong and good-looking. As a result he has lots of friends and he'll marry a beautiful woman and have wonderful, healthy children who will grow up and be just as good-looking as their parents. He'll get a better job because he'll make a great first impression just walking in the door. Who wouldn't want someone like that in their company?" He waited to let the words sink in. Russell's shoulders sank. Then the man continued.

"But what about you? Because God created you with problems you'll always have a lousy job. You'll probably never marry and you'll struggle all of your life. And you know whose fault that is? – God's. God could have made you just like Gary, but He didn't. Instead He made you like this. God stole from you many of life's pleasures. What do you think about that?" The man stared intently down at Russell. He had the grin of a malevolent victor.

Russell was rather shell-shocked by this assault. This was his most sensitive nerve and somehow this stranger found it and was pressing mercilessly on it. He was only coming to get something for his mother. He did not expect this sucker punch. He hesitated. The man leaned in closer.

Russell looked up and was startled as to how close the man's face was. He stepped back.

"Nothing to say, I guess. Yes, God has been pretty rough on you. It's too bad He created you so far from ideal."

"Actually," responded Russell with unexpected verve, "He created me perfectly."

"Perfectly?" The man laughed. "Have you looked in a mirror lately? You are as far from perfect as anyone that I've ever seen." He laughed again.

Russell continued. "Yes, perfectly. As someone who has one leg shorter than the other I've been perfectly created."

The man pulled back and looked puzzled.

Russell seized the moment. "What does Gary's heart look like? Is it vain? Is it self-centered? Does all of his preening satisfy him deep to his bones? When he makes fun of others is that because he is secure and sure of himself or rather is it more likely because he knows that there is something missing and he isn't clever enough to satisfy that gap so he has to drag others down to himself?"

Now Russell leaned forward. “When he stands before God one day and God asks him, ‘What did you do in My name?’ I don’t think that, ‘I looked my best for others’ is going to impress God much. Do you?”

The man looked startled.

“The way that God created me is the best way for me to serve Him. If I were taller or more athletic then maybe I would miss God because I would be too busy straining to look at myself in the mirror behind Him.

“And besides, it is God who blesses and God who curses, not good looks or strong muscles. As long as I do what is right and respect others—a lesson you could learn—I’ll do just fine. I may not marry the most beautiful woman but I’ll marry the right woman. And if we have children even if they aren’t the most beautiful well at least they’ll know that they are the most loved.”

At this the man stepped back; the counter parry was swift, effective, and most unexpected. Even Russell was startled—although quite satisfied—with his eloquence.

Russell took a step forward. “Say, aren’t you the guy who’s been with—or should I say seducing—your co-worker Terese?” He stepped in a little closer. The man leaned back. “You are. I thought that you looked familiar. We saw you drive off with her the other day. You were hiding behind the Laundromat. What is your name anyway?”

“What?” said the man taken back by how the match had turned.

“Your name. You do have one don’t you?” Russell got perhaps a little too sarcastic what with how well his play had gone.

“My name? Peter. It’s Peter.” And then the man turned a lip and walked off.

Russell, forgetting the painful twist in his leg, limped to the store much less dramatically than before.

The next day Russell and Danielle were sitting in the chocolate shop. He had relayed everything that had happened yesterday between himself and the Tall Man. Russell was quite pleased with himself and by the time he finished the story the confrontation had been longer, more intense, and the victory more triumphant. Danielle beamed at her brother when he finished.

“So you really cut his legs off at the knees, didn’t you?” she remarked.

Russell had the same look of modesty as a boxer who just knocked-out his opponent and won the championship belt. “Well, you know, it isn’t as though I haven’t had experience with tough cases. I’ve been mocked by the best of them. In fact, this one was comparably easy.”

Danielle knew what was coming. Anytime Russell talked about how much of a sacrifice he had made and the obstacles he had overcome she knew what he was leading to. But she always bit because she knew how much fun it was. “What tough case did you ever have to deal with?”

Russell mounted his imaginary podium. “Oh you know quite well what I am talking about, young lady. If there ever was a stick in my spokes, a pin in my balloon, you were it when you were a baby.”

“Oh is that so,” she said looking exaggeratedly indignant.

“Absolutely! You put the ‘yell’ in Dan-yell. You could go from sleep to shriek in 1.2 seconds.”

“Oh, come on, I wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh, no? Your nickname was Mouth Vesuvius.”

“So I cried a lot. It was probably because I was mistreated. If you had been nicer to me maybe I would have been more content,” she responded with a smile.

“Nicer, to you,” he said with his voice rising in mock anguish. “If I was any nicer to you I’d be a saint by now. People would have plastic almond-colored statues of me all over their houses. My face would be stamped on cheap medallions and hung around necks.”

“Oh, alright already. Nobody’s lighting candles to you yet so settle down. So tell me again—in case I missed it the first 64 times—how were you so nice to me?”

Russell adjusted himself in his seat. “I was the one who fed you probably most of the time. Dad wouldn’t do it because, after all, that’s not man’s work and Mom was too busy wringing her hands and fretting over everything. And let me tell you, you weren’t an easy feed.”

“And here comes the pick-on-Danielle routine,” she said with her own version of mock anguish.

“Pah-lesse. Like I constantly pick on you. You were one tough critter to get food into, let me tell you. Do you know those stands at the carnival where you have a row of clown heads whose mouths are hollow and who have a balloon on top of their heads? And everyone has a water pistol and tries to squirt the water into the mouth of their clown and blow up the balloon?”

Danielle put down her chocolate chip shake and put her hands on her hips. “So you’re saying that I had a clown face?”

“Well, you did have such big ears that you looked like a truck coming at us with both doors open.”

With that Danielle reached across the table and punched his shoulder quite hard.

“Ouch. I did say ‘did’” emphasizing that word, “‘have big ears’. Since then they’ve kind of migrated back towards your head and so they are positioned quite nice now.

“But to answer your question, no, I didn’t say that you had a clown face. I wasn’t finished. You remember how those heads constantly turned from side-to-side and the trick was to keep the water from the pistol in the mouth? Well, that rotating head was modeled from you. You could never sit still. I was constantly following your mouth with the bottle and then later on with the spoon. It drove me nuts.”

“Well, there’s that explanation,” Danielle interrupted.

Ignoring her remark Russell continued, “If only we would ever go to a carnival I would empty that stand of stuffed animals.”

“Well then, see, you should be grateful. I developed in you a rare yet extremely useful talent.”

“But that wasn’t the worst of it.”

“OK, so now here it comes,” she said and then raising her voice ever so slightly as though she was talking to everyone in the shop, “Everyone here get ready for the horror you are about to hear. It will astonish you, it will amaze you, it will cause you to cuddle my poor little brother in your arms.” Lowering her voice back to normal, “So what was it, as though I can’t guess?”

“Scream, oh my word! I used to wonder how such a small person could store that much noise inside. I was afraid that if you ever got cut that the release of all of that noise at once would permanently deafen all of us and bring down the house on top of us all.”

“Oh, stop it,” she giggled.

“We always hoped that you would get kidnapped because the criminals would pay us to take you back. And as God knows, we really could have used the money.”

Danielle got serious again. “Yea, we did live rather cheaply, didn’t we?”

“And still do. But then I think that Dad made it seem worse than it was. He wouldn’t let us change your diaper until it was as big as a weather balloon. ‘Those things don’t grow on trees’ he would say. Instead of buying you shoes he wanted to put your feet in sandwich bags held on with rubber bands.”

“Oh come on now. I don’t believe that.”

“Well, OK, maybe that one is a bit of a long tale, but he really was cheap. I think that his favorite line (only because we heard it every day) was ‘Who puts the butter on your bread?’ The problem was that it would have been nice to have something more than butter and bread.

“He also liked to say, ‘This house doesn’t have any low hanging fruit in it. If you want something you’re going to have to work for it. If you want to eat you have to hunt.’”

“Hunt! I was four months old! I don’t think that I was terribly adept at using a spear at that age.”

“You didn’t need a spear. I think that you could have simply screamed your prey into submission.” Russell paused for a moment. “Well, Mom and I made sure that you had enough to eat and clothes to wear. Even though you were a girl...”

“And still am in case you don’t remember!”

Russell continued, “Even though you were a girl, Dad made you wear my hand-me-downs. His comment was that it wasn’t like all of the other four-month olds would mock you and beat you up. I wasn’t too worried though; I was bigger than most four month olds and could smack them down if they gave you any lip.”

“You had better have been bigger than most four month olds, after all, you were—what? —four years old at the time?”

“So see, there you go; Dad was right. You could wear my old clothes and they did fit you.”

“I guess it wasn’t too bad then,” remarked Danielle.

“Except that everyone would say what a cute little brother I had.”

“So,” she said with vigor, “I was a cute baby! Even you are forced to admit it!”

13 The Niss

We may not be able to avoid the evil that attacks from without;
but we can always resist the evil that wants to enter in

Thomas was coming down the stairs that morning when he spied Toni sitting at an old desk in the far corner of the living room. He went over and stood next to her. “Good morning. And what are you working on this early—paying bills?”

“And a fine morning to you. No, just writing down some things in my diary.”

“You keep a diary?”

“It isn’t a diary about how I feel. There aren’t entries in it like ‘I was sad today.’ It’s more about events or information that I want to keep track of. I don’t write something in it every day, only when something important happens.”

Thomas put a hand on the top of her chair. “Is this new? You used to have an old kitchen chair here. Now you have a real office chair with wheels and everything.”

“The leper colony was having a garage sale and Mom picked it up there along with some dinner plates and cutlery.”

Thomas yanked his hand off of the chair and held them out away from his body.

“She got your bed sheets there also. They were a great bargain.” She was trying hard to suppress a smile.

Thomas’s jaw locked. Then he looked down at Toni. “Hey, wait a minute; you don’t have a leper colony here.”

Toni let her smile broaden as she snickered.

“OK, you got me on that one.”

Later on Thomas and Toni went up to the small second-story balcony of her house and nestled into the two chairs squeezed up there. It was a beautiful, clear day. They had just finished another wonderful lunch and had a pitcher of fresh lemonade squeezed by Mrs. Donnelee at their sides. They both said nothing and were enjoying the breeze. Toni had her head back and eyes closed.

Thomas was noticing how just beyond the town to the west the plains were flat and straight all the way to the horizon. In fact, if he closed one eye, the flat roof of the house in front of him was exactly level with the dark line of the horizon.

Toni lifted up her head. “I have a riddle for you. I’m not as clever as you are at making them up but here goes. I go up faster than I go down. I grow but never get heavier. People love to watch me but no one wants to touch me. A lot of me can keep you alive but even a little of me can kill you. Who or what am I?”

Thomas closed one eye again and lined up the house’s roof again. Why is there always a secret pleasure in playing an unseen game while talking to someone? This time the horizon was several inches higher than the roof. Thomas brushed it off as his having shifted in his chair and thought no more of it.

He finally said, “Smoke goes up quicker than it comes down.”

“But you can touch smoke,” she rebuffed.

Thomas was thinking a balloon but you can touch a balloon also.

“Give me another hint,” he said.

“You’re giving up too easily.”

“I’m not giving up; I just need another hint. There can be lots of things that fit the bill.”

Thomas could not think of anything that “fit the bill” but he had to say something.

“I make noises but I have no mouth. How’s that for a hint?”

Once again Thomas closed an eye. This time the horizon was easily a lot higher than the roof of the house. “That’s strange,” he thought. He shifted in his chair to try and situate himself in his original position and then he closed one eye again. There was not much of a difference. Then he slumped down. Yes, if he slumped enough then he could bring the roof level with the horizon again but he knew that he was not sitting that low in his chair before. He was practically horizontal with the ground. He sat up again.

“What are you doing?” Toni asked with an emphasized exasperation. “Are you stumped and trying to avoid admitting it? Has my puzzle sucked all of the energy out of you so that you are unable to even sit up properly? Have I actually stumped the great puzzle man?”

“Oh, I’m,” Thomas squirmed a bit. Secret games suddenly become stupid when you are caught. “I was, ah, lining up the horizon with the flat roof of that house in front of us. It’s kind of stupid, I know, but kind of strange, too. Sort of a weird optical illusion, I suppose. But anyway...” He looked at Toni staring at him like he had just begun foaming at the mouth. Feeling increasingly peculiar he felt that he had to say more as to explain why the illusion was so interesting and why he should not necessarily be disqualified as being numbered among the sane.

“It’s just that it appears that the horizon has been getting higher. You know, like the ground is getting taller, heaving up like it is inhaling.” He was about to say “Forget it” and change the subject to something more reasonable like the riddle or even waffles when he noticed that Toni went pale. She let out a faint gasp and jumped to her feet and leaned over the balcony rail as if to see better. Her mouth was slightly open and she was very intently staring at the horizon. Thomas looked out again but it was as though she could see ghosts whereas he was a nonbeliever.

“What?” he asked. He looked at her and then out over the roof again. “What is it?”

This whole time lasted a couple of minutes. He looked down at her hands as they grasped the wooden rail. She held it so tightly that he would not have been surprised to see permanent indentations when she let go.

Then she screamed out over the town with a fury in her lungs that was previously unimaginable, “NISS!”

Thomas and his chair fell sideways onto the floor spilling the lemonade.

“NISS!” she screamed again. “The Niss, they’re coming!” She was pointing at the horizon.

Thomas jumped to his feet and looked out across the town. He still saw nothing strange except that the horizon did actually seem even higher than before. But the townspeople, every single one of them were frozen in place as though a deep chill had swept through the town. Some were looking up at their balcony whereas others were staring to where she had pointed. Time had stopped. Then, as if on cue, everyone ran. They went in all directions but had two things in common, they were all terrified and they were all equally shouting, “The Niss! The Niss are coming!”

Thomas looked like a startled cat, “What? What is going on?”

Just then he heard the church’s bell ringing wildly as if Quasimodo had tanked up on caffeine. This seemed to put everyone into an even higher gear.

“No time right now—we must get going,” yelled Toni.

She grabbed Thomas’ hand and pulled him down the steps. Several times he stumbled and almost went down headfirst. He could hear shouts of “Niss!” spreading across the town. People who had smaller children were picking them up to make greater haste.

When they turned the corner of the house Mrs. Donnelee was at the front door quickly ushering them in.

“Hurry, hurry,” she was yelling and waving. “Where’s Carl? Where’s your brother? Wasn’t he with you?”

There was a woman with three children gathered around her like panicked chicks. She was listening to a man whose mouth was moving like a piston on a steam engine. Thomas recognized her as Janet from church. She said something and then the man pointed and jabbed at the air several times and yelled loudly, “GO! Go to the church now! You don’t have time to get home! Your husband will be safe at work! All of the proper precautions have been made there! You must take your children and make haste!” With that she scooped up the smallest child and they all ran like the Devil was after them.

Toni yanked Thomas into the house.

“Where’s Carl?” again shouted Mrs. Donnelee. “Have you seen Carl?”

“I don’t know where he is,” Toni yelled back.

Mrs. Donnelee was hanging out the door frantically looking both ways. Toni was running from window to window slamming them shut and locking them. She had an incredible sense of urgency.

“What are Niss?” Thomas asked as he chased after Toni from room to room. He also had a great sense of urgency about him but he did not know why.

“This Niss,” Toni said between breaths, “are creatures that swarm in the billions. They’ll smother a town and plunder it.”

“What do they plunder?” The word “plunder” gave Thomas an image of pirates each one with a stripped shirt and an eye patch kicking in doors everywhere. For some reason that dispelled some of the sting of this entire drama. “Besides,” he thought, “there aren’t billions of anything. This whole thing seems overblown.”

“Souls,” replied Toni.

Thomas snapped back to reality. “What?”

“Souls! They plunder souls.”

“Souls?” Thomas questioned in almost a hush. “How does someone steal a soul?” If everyone were not in such a panic he would have found the whole thing rather comical or at least surreal; almost like something someone on a drug trip would say.

Toni continued talking. She was now running up the stairs so Thomas was forced to follow. “The Niss are small, about the size of your thumb. They are shaped like a cigar and are gray with black splotches. They must be hollow or nearly hollow and the same density as air so they kind of fly.” She was running to each bedroom closing windows. “Their back half sucks in and out very quickly and that propels them along. They move very fast. They swarm in the billions. That’s why it looked like the entire horizon was rising up. That was them, stretched across the sky and moving our way.”

“So what are you shutting all of the windows? Are they that strong that they can rip through the screens?”

“Quite the opposite.” Toni was speaking between heavy breaths now. “They are extremely weak but they can get through an opening the size of a button hole. That’s why I think that they’re hollow. They can squeeze themselves very narrow. Everybody knows how to make their homes air tight—to keep them out. In fact, before anyone can move into a home it must first be inspected for even the slightest crack or opening. They’ll crawl all over everything trying to find a way in. Nobody’s been able to kill one and if you get one into a jar it’ll sit there forever and then once you open the jar it’ll fly out at you. Your only hope is to wait it out.”

“So what is this part about the soul?” Thomas was feeling rather overwhelmed not to mention his having to sprint from room to room.

“Now that’s the really horrible part. They will try to get inside of you through one of your nine orifices.”

Thomas knit his eyebrows together and started to count but was quickly distracted.

“Actually they can’t get in through your ears because of your eardrums but all of the rest will do. Once inside, they will slowly feed on your soul.”

“How can you possibly know that? I mean, you can’t even see someone’s soul.” Thomas could hear Mrs. Donnelee screaming out, “Carl! Carl!”

Toni paused at the top of stairs to catch her breath. “You can’t see your soul but you know that it is there. It’s your personality, your conscience, your morals, your creativity. When someone gets a Niss inside of them it’s like they begin to rot. They’ll become more angry or bitter. They might complain more or snap at you for every little thing. Then they might start stealing or getting into pornography or drinking or drugs. Further down the road they are committing adultery. You can see the progression and the more Niss they have in them the quicker it spirals down.” As if she just realized that she just wasted a couple of precious seconds she suddenly dashed down the stairs with Thomas seemingly sucked down behind her in her draft.

“The scary thing is that they are hard, if not nearly impossible, to resist. Some people have gotten caught in the open and try to fight them off but the Niss are relentless. They will probe for any weakness and keep at you and keep at you until you momentarily let your guard down. Then they’re in.

“And believe it or not, some people even welcome them. Sometimes it seems that the Niss know exactly who to go after.

“Many people gather at the church. It seems that the Niss rarely make it in there. Something more than good sealant seems to keep them out.”

Toni hit the bottom of the stairs and nearly catapulted into the living room with Thomas practically tethered behind her. He was clearly sweating although the exact cause was indeterminable. She ran over to the fireplace and pulled on a rope. Thomas could hear a loud bang from up on the roof. “What was that?” he asked.

“Remember that lid that you asked me about? That’s what it is for. It seals the chimney from them. Everybody has one. It’s one of the safety precautions.”

Running over to her mother who was still in the open doorway Toni grabbed her and pulled.

“Mama, you need to come in. Carl is probably safe at someone’s house. We need to seal the door. Come on, Mama.” Toni tugged several times and with great reluctance her mother came in. Toni slammed the door shut.

At the Fullman’s house similar preparations were taking place. The children were shutting windows, closing off the chimney, and pushing rags into any cracks they found. The two children and mother rushed breathlessly from room to room. Meanwhile, Floyd sat motionless in his chair silently watching the door. He made no twitch to the loud calls for him to come and help.

At the church many had gathered. Janet was there with her children. Rarely had the Niss been able to traverse these walls and even then it would only be a few and they would seem to lock right in on their targets and enter them. Every pastor who was there would always keep the front door open for refugees until the very last moment. Then he would pull the doors shut with a decisive bang and turn and speak words of comfort to those gathered while the light dimmed as the Niss covered the windows.

Today there was a crowd in the hundreds. Some were trembling and terrified, others with their heads down dabbed at their eyes. But most stood around the pastor with quiet confidence. On everyone’s mind was the horror of

seeing several Niss slip in, then wondering if any would come straight for them. The children with their bravado pictured snatching them out of the air and then crushing them with their hands thus saving the congregation. But even while these dramas played out in their heads they clung tightly to their parents.

Several came over to the pastor and with great sorrow and sometimes weeping they confessed sins: greed, lust, gossip, unforgiveness. Then their hearts would be strangely peaceful and assured.

From the small box next to the door, Toni pulled out a keyhole shaped plug. Every time Thomas had passed the door he wondered what that box was for. Once or twice he opened it and peered inside, but he was afraid to take the thing out. He thought that it might be an alarm or something and he did not want to set it off. Now he was about to find out.

Toni tried to stick the plug into the keyhole but she dropped it. She quickly picked it up but then dropped it again. "I can't find the plug," she yelled as she frantically scanned all around the floor. "We've got to find the plug!"

"I saw where it went." Thomas reached under a chair and produced the plug. Then he firmly pushed it into the keyhole.

Once the door was secured they lit several kerosene lamps. "No guarantee of electricity," Toni said.

Every street was empty and every house was quarantined. There was a suffocating stillness like a giant wave was able to strike.

Russell was out at his favorite place. He had just finished filling the troughs with seed and was sitting on his rock on the edge of the pond. The angels glided beneath the surface, bobbing up occasionally to snatch the offering that he periodically dropped from his bag. He closed his eyes and listened to the joy surrounding him.

At the Donnelee house they gathered to the front window and could see that the Niss had reached the far edge of town. It would only be minutes before they hit. Mrs. Donnelee closed her eyes tightly and thought of Carl.

When she opened them again she could see someone nonchalantly turn the corner and cockily stride towards the house. It was Carl. He had a defiant grin. It was obvious that he could see everyone watching him through the window. He gave a wink. Mrs. Donnelee rushed to the door, pulled out the plug, and flung the door open.

"Carl!" she screamed, "Carl, come in here. You can make it. Hurry!"

He simply stood there grinning. Just then Thomas and Toni knew. They felt the blood drain from their bodies as their jaws sank down.

"Carl, come here now! You can still make it!" screamed Mrs. Donnelee. She was about to lunge out to grab him when Toni rushed over and restrained her by wrapping her arms around her mother's waist.

"Carl!" she was now shrieking, "Carl!" She was fighting to pull away but Toni had her firmly by the waist. Carl never moved; Thomas was frozen.

"Mama, no" yelled Toni as she was being pitched about.

The Niss were now only a couple of blocks away and coming fast.

"CARL!" she continued to shriek.

She was now starting to drag Toni partially out the door. It would only be a matter of seconds now. Thomas ran over and wrapping his arms around both Toni and her mother pulled them both in.

"No, no," Mrs. Donnelee was pleading just before she collapsed with Toni to the floor. She was sobbing hysterically. "No, no."

Thomas slammed the door and stuck in the keyhole plug. He ran back over to the window.

Russell's eyes sprung open. He heard the frantic clanging of the church bell. It was a ways off but its warning was like a punch in the head. He sprang off of the rock. He knew he had no time to waste. He grabbed the empty wheelbarrow and with a more exaggerated limp because of his rushing he pushed towards town.

When his pace was leisurely this was never a problem. In fact, the frequent stops to watch a scampering lizard or admire some toadstools were welcome. But at this quickened pace Russell's limp swayed the wheelbarrow violently so that it would bang into trees and tip over far too often. Russell was pouring sweat trying to bully the wheelbarrow and yet the bell sounded no closer.

At one point the wheelbarrow aggressively tipped and pulled Russell onto the ground. He rolled over and stopped face down in some dried leaves. His hand struck a rock hard, but He did not have the time to see if he was hurt. He struggled to his feet and wiped his hand against his pants leaving a dark streak.

He was forced to leave the wheelbarrow on its side and half skip home. It was the fastest way that he could move. He would never do this around others but no one was here and the situation was desperate.

As he reached the edge of the woods he had to bend over and lean on a tree trunk. The wheezing of his labored breathing drowned out the sound of heavy drops of sweat falling on brown leaves.

“Please, God, get me home safely.”

He looked up and saw that the town was already deserted. Then he looked to the west. They were coming—a dark, pulsating wave that looked ready to crest across the town.

He gathered himself and like a wobbly pogo stick headed for his house. His mind went blank as his whole energy and focus went into movement.

He was only two blocks from his home. He did not hear the people banging on their windows urging him to come in.

He was getting closer. He could see his house on the next block. The stitch in his side was excruciating. He turned. The Niss were but a half a block away and coming like a train. He looked back at his house. He would not be able to make it. He cried out, “Save me!” and then did the only thing that he could do; he fell to the ground. He curled up into a tight ball, squeezed his eyes, pinched his nose with one hand and pressed a handkerchief that he had ripped out of his pocket tightly over his mouth.

The Fullmans finished securing the house. They gathered in the living room with the children clutching their mother with all of the strength that they had left. They gaped at Floyd wondering if he had become paralyzed with fear or went insane. From the look on his face they determined that it was neither. “Floyd, what are you doing?” Mrs. Fullman yelled. “You’re just sitting there.”

Floyd sat motionless as if no question had been asked and no one was near him; his arms rested firmly on the armrests, his fingers curled around the edges. He simply stared at the door like a waxen parody of a life spent isolated unto himself. The dictator was content to let others run the show. In a situation where he would be in his glory barking commands—“You secure the kitchen,” “You take the upstairs!”—rather he sat in rigid silence with the faintest smirk.

The children were confused and frightened, their lips quivered. Tears ran down the cheeks of the girl. The three of them then rushed to the corner of the living room and huddled in a tight ball.

At the church, Dan was kneeling at a pew but rather than praying feverishly like the others he was looking around. The pastor’s words were a background hum to him. He might as well have been in a wax museum as oblivious as he was to everyone else. He kept thinking about his pornography magazines. He knew that the Niss would find them under his bed and in his closet. He could just see them crawling all over them and in between the pages. That did not really bother him. What was really squeezing his guts like a fist was that he thought that everyone here somehow knew. And despite their histrionics and overplayed distress he knew that somehow they wished that some of the Niss would get him. “Look at Dan,” they were thinking, “He’s not praying because he’s got pictures on his mind.”

He looked around the room, his upper lip was moist. He caught Jackie staring at him. He was unnerved. “I knew it! She knows and she’s going to blurt it out. Then this group will probably throw me outside. They act pious, but all they care about are themselves. But I’m not going to be anyone’s scapegoat. They’re not going to throw me outside just to save themselves.” He clenched his fists. Then he looked back over at Jackie, “who, of all people in this room is she to look at me? Her reputation is certainly well known. She should be clutching the foot of that cross and praying for all she’s worth—which isn’t much—rather than sitting there looking at me.” He turned away with a sneer. “Just let her dare say anything about me.”

Carl gave his family one last grin and turned to the west. The Niss were only a block away. Mrs. Donnelee’s face was buried in her hands. She was unable to look. She was still sobbing uncontrollably, her body shaking; Toni had her arms around her with her face buried into her mother’s neck. Thomas could not tear himself from the window. It was like watching a car accident about to happen.

When he saw the Niss, Carl turned towards them. Then he raised his arms like a cross, opened wide his mouth, and leaned back his head.

Then they hit.

The leading edge reached Carl and several dozen Niss flew down his throat. He fell backwards onto the ground and several more poured in. His flesh went pale, his back arched, and he twitched violently.

Thomas gasped and backed away from the window and braced himself against a chair. The Niss hit the house and swarmed all over its skin. They quickly covered the window and the room went dim.

The Niss probed everywhere for an opening. One might disappear under a cedar shake, find a dead-end, and come back out. Not a single inch of any house could be seen anywhere in town. It was like a gray undulating

sheet had been laid over everything. Families huddled in corners like lambs hearing the howling of wolves roaming outside. The Niss groped in masonry cracks, under shingles, and tears in screens. They crawled all over the chimney lids and poked into keyholes. They made no sound, which only made the invasion that much more horrifying. If they found an overlooked crack in the foundation of a neglected house then thousands could be in the room next to you and you would not even know it, yet.

The only place left uncovered was the church. The sun still shone through the windows illuminating those huddled inside. Many were on their knees praying loudly, some, it seemed, overly dramatic as though God would be more entreated by their acting than by their faith. Others just kept looking from window to window to window as though the glass might shatter and the flood pour in. The pastor was calming others, "Do not be afraid little flock, for the Father has chosen gladly to give you the Kingdom. Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

Floyd Fullman stood up and without any hesitation walked over to the front door and put his hand on the knob. Mrs. Fullman's scream of "No!" echoed unrequited. He pulled open the door and they rushed in. Mr. Fullman went down quickly and convulsed hard on the floor. His legs were kicking violently. Hosts were never treated cordially.

Mrs. Fullman covered the children's mouths and noses with her hands and screamed, "Close your eyes!" They were swarmed upon in a second. The children's muffled screams deterred none of them. They crawled through their shirts, up their pants' legs, and into their ears. Mrs. Fullman shook her head violently but did not let go of her children even though she could feel them sliding on her stomach like garden slugs. Her hair was entwined with them and some had worked their way between her shoe and the bottom of her feet.

The boy could resist no longer and he opened his eyes but for a moment. Two of the Niss crawled under his eyelids and disappeared.

The girl pressed one hand tightly against her mother's hand which was pinching the girl's nose. Her eyes were scrunched tight. With her other hand she kept pushing them off of her face only to have dozens more fill their place. Her cries were muffled by her firmly pressed lips.

Though she had fought hard to resist, several of the Niss crawled in through Mrs. Donnelee's nose. As they entered it was an almost warm, pleasurable sensation. She was tempted to relax and enjoy it nearly wishing that more would enter. But the screams of her children quickly startled her back and she once again joined the battle even though it was too late for her.

Russell was covered. He could feel them probing into his ears. It was like being covered with slugs on amphetamines. Through firmly pursed lips he kept making two quick squeals followed by two longer ones. This pattern was repeated over and over again and again. Try as they did, yet, they could not get under his skin.

There were several audible gasps at the church with fingers pointing towards the ceiling. Then people scampered in unison like a herd of sheep towards the opposite corner. Those who were praying twisted unnaturally to look up. Several—maybe eight—Niss had somehow squeezed in. They entered in a tight clump but then split off like fighter jets. They appeared very deliberate in their trajectories. One clump of three flew straight to Dan. He hardly reacted other than blinking once. They shot into his mouth. He responded as though someone had merely bounced a Ping-Pong ball off of his nose.

Two others bulletted at Jackie. She at least screamed and wavered her arms in a wildly random fashion. They disappeared into her fully extended mouth corking her screams. She staggered a few steps back and then fell on her butt. She sat there dazed.

One each targeted Patrick Eggers, Joey Riddledale, and Melinda Nemes. None of them put up much resistance.

No other Niss entered the room.

Everyone else including Janet and her children had taken refuge behind the pastor who was praying with a calm yet urgent fervency. After several seconds of breathless silence Pastor Goldsmith ran over to the infected five and hurriedly ushered them into a side room. Several times he had to pick Jackie off of the floor as she kept collapsing. After getting them in he slammed the door shut.

He was in there for several long minutes. People were mixed in their expectations. Would he simply open the door and return to the group smiling and reassuring them that all was OK or was he going to be hurled through the splintered door by some demonic force. Those with the former opinion were rewarded.

At the Fullman house, satisfied like a sated vulture flying from a half-eaten carcass, the Niss left exiting en masse through the front door.

Floyd Fullman lay on his back still slightly twitching. Mrs. Fullman was gently sobbing. Her son was a like a pale mannequin with a frozen startled look as if he had been unexpectedly paddled on his behind. The girl was likewise crying and still brushing away phantoms from her face.

Then, perhaps sensing that no more could be done, the Niss disappeared from everywhere. They gathered at thirty feet above the town pausing like a massive sheet and then they left. At all of the houses the sunlight appeared first in speckles and then within seconds fully flowed throughout the house. All over town houses could be seen again, grass, trees, and roads reappeared as if a winter snow had melted. People exhaled heavily.

At some houses, like the Fullman's and at Terese's, there was the prediction of worse times ahead, for others there was relief and drawing closer together over a shared victory.

Yet no doors opened. The signal had not yet been given. Activities within the houses increased but from overhead the town still appeared deserted. Someone in a plane at that moment would have expected to see a column of army vehicles with everyone in white biohazard suits driving down the streets.

Fifteen minutes passed. The only indication that anyone was there were anxious faces peering out from behind thick curtains.

The first door to open was the church. At first just a crack, then like the slow lifting of a lid on a casket from within the door opened more. Pastor Goldsmith stepped outside and quickly shut the door behind him. He checked every direction, every overhang. He went into the street and examined a full circle. He stood for a while watching for any slight motion. He seemed to have a greater sense of the Niss than most people did. He knew when they might be close and when they might be lying in wait for someone.

After many minutes he relaxed into a smile and walked back to the church and flung the doors wide open. "Everyone can come out now," he proclaimed. "They're gone. It's safe."

As the crowd left the church the pastor went over and rang the bell. The signal was given.

Russell was perhaps the last to stir. Unlike everyone else he was unable to watch the departure. He could never drop his defenses for even one second to take a peek since he could not know what might be lurking and ready to worm into him. The Niss were crafty and were not beyond setting traps. Only when he heard the bell ringing and the doors opening and people calling out his name did he feel safe enough to squint a look.

Several rushed over—glancing up at the sky the entire short trip—and helped him to his knees.

"Did you get any?" asked George.

"No, no, I don't think so," answered Russell.

"Well, if you did you'd know it. You'd probably look a lot different than you do," replied George.

They brushed Russell off and helped him to his feet. He was still shaking.

"That's a nasty cut you've got on your hand," someone said. He took out a clean handkerchief and wrapped it around Russell's hand.

Thomas looked out the window. People were gathering and talking excitedly. Carl was no where to be seen. He went over and helped Toni and her mother to the couch. They looked like the losers of a ten-round amateur boxing match, unmarked but clearly beaten. Thomas was too fearful to open the door. Maybe the others knew the behavior of the Niss well enough to go outside, but he did not. He was not convinced that they might not be lurking behind a hill or even suddenly fly out of the sewer drains. Unconsciously he was rubbing his arms and chest as though something were crawling inside his clothes. But there was nothing there.

14 The Aftermath

You cannot save the world unless you yourself are already saved

The next day everyone was gathered at different places discussing whom the Niss got and who escaped. Oftentimes you would hear, “Well, that doesn’t surprise me.”

The biggest discussion was always about Floyd. Although the stories grew in drama as the day wore on it seems that he laid on the floor until the next morning. Then he stirred and moaned and rolled onto his side. Finally he wearily got up and staggered around. No one else was in the house. Like a drunk, he yelled out a few times for his wife but there was no answer. He made his way into the kitchen where with a sweep of his arm he crashed some items from the countertop onto the floor. After a while he went into the street where the sun hurt his eyes. While blinking profusely and screening his eyes with one hand he vigorously told people to get out of his way while haphazardly trying to swat them away with his other arm. Once he tried to hurl something at a young boy who was staring at him but then realized that he did not have anything in his hand. Everyone knew that his fall was great and that his final descent was going to be quick. The only question was how it was going to happen.

Wherever Russell went people would slap him on the shoulder and say things like, “If there was anybody who could survive like that I would have put my money on you” and “We all knew that you could do it.” At first it made him feel really special but then his shoulders started to hurt so he went back home. All his mother could do was to wring her hands and pace the floor while saying, “Where were you? I was worried sick. Don’t you even care about me? You’re going to send me to an early grave, I tell you. You were lucky this time, but next time you won’t be so lucky and then where will I be?” Danielle stayed out of the way for the most part, but when Russell first came home she gave him a great smile and thumbs up from the top of the stairs.

Mrs. Fullman and her two children were not at home because she had taken them to Pastor Goldsmith. She was sobbing in his office telling him how weak she had been all of these years and how sorry she was. She said that she should have been more supportive and protective of her children. She apologized to the Pastor, to her children, to God and to everyone in town if they had only been in his office also.

The pastor talked about God’s grace and how He blesses even those who are most undeserving. He talked about the many people in the Bible who messed up and yet God gave them second, third, and even more chances.

For most of the time her son just sat there with his arms crossed silently challenging anyone to deny him. But eventually his arms softened until they slid into his lap. When the pastor said, “No sin is greater than God’s forgiveness” her son burst into tears. “I didn’t want to let them in. I swear it. I... I just opened my eyes a tiny bit and it was... it was... too late.” His mother and sister wrapped their arms around him. The pastor got up from behind his desk and came around and knelt down and put one hand each on Mrs. Fullman and her son’s shoulders. When they had both finally caught their sobs they wearily looked up at the pastor. He gave them a reassuring look and said, “Let’s pray.”

When they left his office several hours later they were all very tired and weak but felt washed inside. Each one of them finally understood hope.

That same night when it was very late a featureless shadow crept towards Grace Bible Church. He hesitated as he drew near like a buzzard approaching its potential prey making sure that the corpse was ready for picking. He had a large container in one hand that he carefully protected. He maneuvered himself to a large tree that was close to the church. At that hour there were no cars, no people about. And especially after the attack that day everyone was exhausted and sound asleep. “This is going to be easy,” he thought. But he knew not to get cocky. One slip and he would be roped.

He paused and listened intently for several minutes. There was nothing. Crouching low he slunk up to the side of the church. It was not made of brick but was one of those old-fashioned churches made of white clapboard. “It will be gone in minutes.” He grinned not from joy but from hatred. He unscrewed the top of the container and splashed its contents against the wooden walls in several places. A little splashed into his hair. The fumes caused him to step back a few feet. He rubbed his hair and then smelt his hand. He cursed when he realized that he got some on himself.

Pastor Goldsmith was stirring restlessly that night. The Niss and what happened to several of his congregation laid heavily on his mind. He was very thankful for Mrs. Fullman and her children’s visit but he was concerned about Floyd’s influence. He also wondered how he should handle the situation with Jackie and Dan and a

few of the others. He did not know if he should wait for them to come to him or if he should go to them and, if the latter, if he should give it a few days for things to settle or just go tomorrow.

He also wondered where he might have gone wrong. Why did he not see problems in those people? As their pastor he felt responsible for them. Was he becoming too focused on his big plans and forgetting about the people that he was responsible for?

For several hours he wrestled with these questions. Finally he felt a strong urge to pray. He tried to pray in bed but did not feel comfortable. So he got up, put on his night robe and wandered out into the darkness of the sanctuary. He paced around asking God for guidance and wisdom.

Outside the church the shadow put the empty can down and crept back to the tree. He pulled out of his pocket a long tightly wound piece of paper and straightened it out. He gave it a couple more twists all the while greedily keeping his eyes on the side of the church by the can.

Pastor Goldsmith felt unusually constrained in the church. "Maybe I need some fresh air." He went out the door at the back of the church and stood on the small concrete slab there. He breathed deeply and looked in wonder at the stars.

The shadow tucked the paper under one arm and pulled a matchbook out of his other pocket. He lit a match and when it was burning fully he held the paper upside down and lit the bottom. His eyes nearly glazed as he watched the flame burn up the paper. Then as the flame approached his hand he reached back to throw it against the church.

The sudden brightness of the flames caught the pastor's eye. He turned and hesitated as he tried to figure out what was actually happening. When he saw the person's arm cocked back he yelled out. "Hey! What are you doing there?"

The shadow hesitated trying to decide whether to run or to throw the flaming paper anyway. In that moment of indecision the pastor sprinted towards him. He dropped the paper and turned to run. His right side smacked into the tree and pushed him off kilter for a second.

"Stop! What are you doing?" the pastor yelled again as he narrowed the distance between the two of them.

The shadow tried to run but it was too late. A good tackle took him to the ground and put him on his back.

"Get off of me! Get off of me! Leave me alone! I wasn't doing anything!" The dropped paper lay burning in the grass.

The pastor sat on top of him and pinned his arms to the ground. "What were you doing there?"

The lights in several adjoining houses went on. The grass around the paper started to smoke. The grass was dry from a lack of rain for three weeks.

The shadow squirmed and continued yelling, "Let me go! Get off of me you idiot!"

"What's going on out there?" several voices shouted.

The grass ignited.

The pastor being 6'2" was not going to be easily toppled. He knew that the shadow person would eventually exhaust himself.

The fire spread a foot in every direction. The pastor heard crackling and turned. The fire was moving rapidly. There was not a moment to waste. He did not want to let the arsonist escape but he could not let the church burn down either. He pointed at the person and commanded, "Stay there!" and got up and ran over to the fire. He tried stomping it out but it was growing faster than he could contain it.

The shadow rolled over, got to his knees, and ran. He managed to get ten feet before he was tackled once again. This time it was one of the neighbors who came out to see what was going on. Within seconds another neighbor also got a hold of him and forced him to the ground. Seeing that it was hopeless he gave up.

Meanwhile, the fire was within a few feet of the church. The pastor dashed to the back of the church and returned with the end of a hose. He frantically turned it on and doused the fire. He soaked the ground until it was almost a pond.

From behind some wailing sirens came the flashing lights of a police car. It drove up on the lawn and stopped near everyone. After a very quick explanation from the pastor the officer cuffed the arsonist and stood him on his feet. "Let's bring you over to the light and see who you are."

The entire group followed the officer to the front of the church.

"Carl!" gasped the pastor. "What were you doing here like this?"

Carl merely scowled at him and turned his head away.

The officer jerked him around and marched him to the car. "If what he threw on the church is what I think it is then he is going to be spending quite a number of days in jail."

After thanking everyone for their help Pastor Goldsmith went back into the church. He slumped down in the back pew and his heart sank. "This is going to kill Viola."

Every day the next week Floyd arrived late at work. A dark sloppy pullover hung where the white shirt and tie used to be. As he passed by his co-worker's cubicle he would raise one hand and loudly shout, "Alexander." Alexander with a self-satisfied smile would intone "Floyd."

Two weeks after the Niss, Jackie was hovering outside the church doors. Her face was drawn and her hair and clothes were in competition to see which could appear the most unkempt. She was staring at the doors but was reluctant to push them open as though they might burn her hands if she touched them. She stood there quite a while not a few times almost turning and leaving.

It was at one of these moments that the pastor's wife came up behind her and gently said, "Come on, let's go in" and opened the door. Jackie looked in as if guard dogs caged behind the altar were about to be unleashed. "I don't really want to go in. I don't believe in that stuff anymore. I went to your church for most of my life. Religion was good for a while, but it's like a shoehorn. Once you get your shoes on you don't need the shoehorn anymore. Well, I've got my shoes on now."

The pastor's wife stepped into the door, "Come on. I'll make you some tea." Jackie hesitated, but then followed her in. As they walked down the center aisle Jackie was saying, "You know, I respect what you do; I really do. You've given up so many things in order to help other people. I think that's quite admirable. More people should do what you do; the world would be a better place. I just think your reason for doing it—trying to follow the Bible, doing what you think Jesus would do, and all that other religious stuff—is where you're wrong." Mrs. Goldsmith paid serious attention to everything that Jackie had to say but said nothing.

Mrs. Goldsmith opened the door to the kitchen and invited Jackie to sit at a table while she heated up some water. Jackie continued, "There's just too much wrong in this world to believe in God. Too many people are hurt; too many people just don't care. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that you and your husband are phonies or anything. I think that you're both sincere in your thinking. I just think that you've been deceived by all of this religious stuff."

Mrs. Goldsmith set two cups of tea down on the table. They sat silently at the table sipping tea. Jackie put the cup down and stared at nothing.

"So why were you standing outside the church?" asked Mrs. Goldsmith.

Jackie started to cry. After a long minute she said, "I want to be forgiven."

For the next hour she spilled out all of the anguish that was inside of her perhaps even more graphically than need be. But the pastor's wife listened intently, never interrupting, never tossing out easy platitudes. When Jackie had finished, Mrs. Goldsmith put her arm around her. She said, "Do you want to hear about forgiveness?" Jackie nodded.

Thirty minutes later when Mrs. Goldsmith was finished she said, "Do you want to pray." For the first time Jackie looked her in the eye and tried a smile. Then she nodded.

Jackie went home feeling like a new creation.

Dan stopped going to church and his obsession with pornography took on even a darker side. His paranoia of thinking that everyone was onto him spread to include even strangers. If anyone even looked at him he would give them a look that would cause them to quickly turn away. He felt dirty on the inside and his outer appearance reflected that more and more.

Patrick Eggers, who always had a touch of fault-finding, now delighted so much in forcefully pointing out other's mistakes and gossiping that he ultimately was treated like a leper. Of course to him, the problem was that everyone else was just jealous of him because he was so clever and they were so weak and corrupt.

Joey Riddledale took up drinking as if it were a form of nutrition. His work became so sloppy that after six months he was fired. So having no income he figured that the quickest way to make up the difference and get rich would be to gamble. That was until he had absolutely no money left at all. Then he tried stealing jewelry from a store figuring that he could pawn it for some quick money, but he was caught and wound up in jail for a month.

Melinda Nemes began getting into frequent arguments with her family and friends. She spread harsh rumors about her co-workers and as she became more and more isolated her level of bitterness deepened. The few times anyone tried to approach her about her attitude her response would always be "Well, excuse me! Aren't you just little Miss Perfect!" Then she sat home alone every evening and weekend spitting out, "Who needs those losers anyway?"

The day after the invasion, Russell, Sarah, Thomas, and Toni gathered at the chocolate shop. Even though everyone was talking about the Niss they grabbed the booth in the furthest corner. They had other things to talk about.

Toni said, "Yesterday was just the start."

Thomas looked very pale, "You mean they're coming back?" He thought about taking tomorrow's bus back home.

"No," Toni answered. "The Niss rarely come back that quickly. They are like a train that blasts into the station, does what it is supposed to, and then hurries off again. The Niss usually don't just come by themselves. Most of the time other strange things start occurring around that same time."

"Like what?" Thomas was ready to jump over Russell and bolt.

"There already have been some strange things going on," said Sarah in a low voice. "What about those strangers that we've seen in town these last few weeks and how they've been hanging around people like Floyd and Terese and Dan? I think that they've been a bad influence on them. Granted, they all haven't exactly been auditioning for sainthood these last few months but still, their fall came much faster and harder than anyone would have expected. I even heard that Floyd came close to being fired."

Russell chimed in, "I've heard about a few other new people, too, that I've been told—well, to put it in a nicer way—are a bit unsavory."

Sarah added, "It's like someone is trying to drag our town down."

Toni was looking at Thomas. Finally she said, "Thomas, you're looking rather thoughtful. Is something going on in that puzzle-mind of yours?"

Everyone stopped talking and looked at Thomas. He looked up but still did not say anything. One eye was shut and the other eye stared at nothing. A good minute went by. Eventually he spoke.

"Obviously I don't know anything more than you. In fact, I probably know less than you since all of you seem to be quite familiar with things like Niss and Angst-feeders."

Sarah and Russell jolted upright.

"Angst-feeders!" Russell almost yelled the words. He had to put his hand over his mouth. Then he whispered, "Angst-feeders. Why do you mention them? Are they around, too?" He leaned back against the back of the booth. "This is not good. This is not good at all."

Sarah watched Russell and then turned back to Thomas. "Have you heard about the Angst-feeders? Did someone see one?"

Thomas sat there like he was shot. Toni took it up. "Yes, Thomas saw them twice right after he got here."

Now Sarah was the one who yelled, "Twice!" She, too, had to clamp her hand over her mouth. "And you didn't tell us?"

Russell just sat there with his head back and mouth open. It was good that there were not many flies in the place.

Sarah repeated herself but much more quietly this time. "You saw them twice in just a few days? And you didn't say anything?" Realizing that no one was going to answer her question she continued. "This is just one more bad thing happening here. It's like we're being invaded."

Russell still did not move.

Sarah asked, "Is there anything else that you aren't telling us?" This time she directed the question at Toni. "Should we grab some knives from the kitchen before heading back home?"

Toni gave a sideways glance at Thomas who just sat there staring at the table. She leaned over and said very quietly and deliberately, "There was this incident in the woods a few days ago." She then told Sarah—and Russell if he was even listening, it was hard to tell—all about the snake in the woods and the two large men.

When she was finished Russell slowly brought his head down close to the table and looked at her. "You're kidding? A branch turns into a snake and two large guys rescue you from it? And you didn't tell us?" He looked over at Sarah with bewilderment but she did not move.

Toni looked embarrassed. "Well, we didn't say anything because it was just too weird. We didn't think that you'd believe us."

"Listen, girl," said Russell, "with what's been going on around here lately, I'd believe anything."

Sarah spoke, "Did you tell the police?"

"About the Angst-feeders, the snake, or the two big guys?" asked Toni.

Sarah hesitated, "Um, well, I can see why not."

"Besides," said Toni, "the two big guys helped us out. I wouldn't call the cops on them." Toni pondered for several seconds. "Who do you think those guys were anyway? I mean we have a bunch of instigators stealthily

descending on our town, but then we have another group—well, two that we know of—who are helping us out. Or at least it so appears.”

Without looking up Thomas spoke, “I’m sure that all of this is tied together somehow. All of those unsavory people did not blow into town coincidentally at the same time. The Niss, the Angst-feeders, killer snakes—it’s like all of this is being coordinated. I don’t know who it is or what they want but something wicked is in the air.”

Everyone stared at the table. Then Sarah said what no one wanted to hear. “Maybe we should do something about it.”

The other three slowly lifted their heads and stared grimly at Sarah.

Sarah shifted in her seat. “Well, um, it was just a thought.”

“And a good thought at that,” proclaimed Russell.

Thomas likewise nodded his head as though this was the ultimate puzzle.

Toni was startled. “Let’s think about it first and reconvene tomorrow here at, say, 11:00.”

“I hate the word ‘convene,’” said Russell. “Nothing good ever comes when people convene.”

15 Playing Detective

Need begets desire.
Desire begets effort.
Effort begets knowledge.
Knowledge begets wisdom.
But sometimes need, desire, and effort also beget pain.

The next morning Thomas and Toni arrived at the chocolate shop an hour early. They sat at a window table. The shop was a half block from the firm where Floyd worked.

Toni asked, "Tell me again, who are we spying on and why?" Before Thomas could utter a syllable she added, "And tell me why we aren't going to get into trouble because of this?"

Thomas waited a couple of seconds to ensure that all questions had been asked. Then he said, "I was thinking about this whole thing for the last few nights. I don't think that we're going to learn anything by the four of us sitting around talking all of the time. We have to start gathering information. I don't know much about any of the new people, but I thought that we might start with the new guy that's been working with Floyd. I think that there's something strange, if not rotten, about him. I think that he's been influencing Floyd for the worse."

"Well, that would not be much of a challenge," interrupted Toni. "Wouldn't that be like offering a dog a steak?"

"Whether it's hard or easy I still think that it's happening and I want to try to figure out what's going on."

"So what are you going to do?" Toni was not sure she really wanted to know the answer.

"It's not just what I am going to do. I am hoping that all of us will get involved. I think that we should follow him," answered Thomas.

"We?"

"Yea, you, me, Russell, and Sarah. It will be easier if more of us are involved. I noticed that he always leaves work at precisely 5:00. I thought that maybe we could keep our distance and see where he goes. We can start out as a group and then at various intervals one of us can peel off. That way it won't be as obvious to him that he's being followed."

"OK, just for the sake of arguing, suppose we are able to follow him without him figuring it out. So what do you expect to discover at the end of the road? Do you think that he'll lead you to some abandoned warehouse basement filled with hexagrams and chicken bones?"

"Nooooo," said Thomas trying to emphasize that this was a little more serious. "But I would like to find out where he lives."

"And then what; break into his house and go through his pockets, look for false bottoms in dresser drawers, hack into his laptop?" Toni said with not a little sarcasm.

"You obviously have little understanding of the potential sinister mystery of this situation." He paused. "Actually, I don't have even the vaguest idea what I'm going to do."

"So basically you're going to build an airplane while flying it."

"I'm taking this one very slow step at a time. First I want to see where he lives and if he is living with anyone else. If he and that guy who's been after Terese..."

"Peter."

"...are roommates then it does rather point to a conspiracy does it not? But I guess ultimately I'm not really sure what I'm looking for."

"Then how will you know when you've found it?"

"I don't. Maybe it'll be like discovering Penicillin; something accidental and fortuitous will be right in front of me."

"And you'll save the world?"

"Just Jabesh will be fine with me." Thomas paused and leaned towards the window until his shoulder touched the glass. Then he bolted back upright as if he were on a spring. "Here he comes! What's he doing? It's way too early." Thomas stared intently at his watch.

Toni was now twisted and looking out the window. "How did you know that he would come this way?"

Thomas was now distracted. "I did some reconnaissance yesterday," he said quickly.

"Oh my. This is getting worse," proclaimed Toni with exasperated concern.

Thomas hushed her.

Sure enough, the man passed in front of the window. He was tall, appeared to be of foreign descent, and quite good-looking. He seemed to be in his late thirties. Thomas was panicky; the others weren't there. He did not have much of a plan but what little there was just went up in flames.

When the man got a good half-block away Thomas got up.

"Let's go," he said craning his neck to see down the block.

"You are not serious! What about the others?"

"Come on, we can't wait for them; we'll lose him."

Toni very reluctantly lifted herself up as though her clothes were made of wood. Thomas was very excited.

"Come on," he whispered loudly. He practically snatched her out the door.

They saw the man walking briskly away. They adapted the same pace. When he turned a corner Thomas got nervous worrying that they might lose him but each time they turned the same corner he was still in sight.

He was heading towards the southwest corner of town where things were grimmer and old buildings left to decay. This intrigued and excited Thomas even more.

The man never once looked back which was good because traffic here was infrequent and it would have been easy for him to spot the two of them and conclude that they were trailing him.

Neither Thomas nor Toni spoke even in a whisper thinking that any sound here would be amplified due to the lack of competition.

Without even hesitating, the man opened a door and entered a particularly dilapidated building.

Toni and Thomas stopped.

"That's the old liquor factory," whispered Thomas. "Maybe we will find a basement with hexagrams and chicken bones." He meant that as a small joke, but why would someone leave work in the middle of the day and go to an abandoned warehouse? Obviously, something significant was going on in there. Thomas knew that if they could figure out what it was then it would fill in a good portion of the puzzle. He was betting that this time the berries would be poisonous and someone would step into his hole.

"Perhaps this would be a good time to turn back and examine what we know," whispered Toni.

"What we know? We don't know anything. It's only just now starting to get interesting."

"We can't leave the others waiting for us. They'll be worried."

Thomas countered, "It's only a little after 10:00. We'll be back in time."

"Well, we can't just go in there. We don't know who might be waiting. Maybe there's a whole group of them. Maybe someone saw us coming."

"Nobody saw us coming," said Thomas somewhat indignantly.

"How do you know? Can you see into the shadows of every broken window?"

"No, but if we don't go in now then when will we?"

"Never sounds real good to me," remarked Toni.

"Well, I'm going in even if it's just to poke my head in the door. I have to see what is going on. If he lives in there then he's a squatter and we wouldn't even have to break in to look at his stuff." Thomas started walking quickly.

Toni paused and then hurried to catch up. "So you do want to rifle through his belongings. I'm sure he won't mind. Maybe he'll even reward us by twisting our heads off."

"Shhh," Thomas said sternly.

They were getting near to the door. Thomas said, "You can go home if you want, I would understand."

"No way, I'm not going to let you go in there by yourself."

They reached the gray, metal door. It was open about a foot. They stopped, took deep breaths, and peeked inside. It was too dark to see anything. Toni looked at Thomas. Without even looking back he very slowly opened the door and they both crept inside. The door slapped shut behind them causing them both a great startle.

It was dim; the light clotted at the grimy windows. The air was as thin as the edge of a knife. They were first struck by a gaggle of smells all of which were retching: liquor, urine, tobacco smoke and some things worse.

Their eyes adjusted. They had entered a large room with a ceiling as high as a cathedral. The gray walls were peeling like dead skin. Everything was filthy. There were numerous beer cans, several piles of liquor bottles, broken glass, and enough cigarette butts to start a plantation. The trash littered the floor like bodies on a battlefield. It was now home to numerous spiders and flies with shortened lives.

No one was to be seen. They listened carefully.

There was a distant echo of footsteps that came from a corridor to the left. Thomas pointed that way. Toni looked pale. They scurried as quietly as possible across the room and stopped at the entrance to the corridor. It immediately turned to the right so they could not see anything without going in.

They cautiously stepped into the corridor. The walls were peeling yellow paint. Pipes of various diameters ran along the top half of the walls and the ceiling. They were too busy avoiding the rubbish on the floor to notice anything else. They walked a couple of feet before they looked down the corridor. They could see the man about 100 feet away at the far end. He was stopped and facing them. They froze. The hair stood up on their necks. They felt as though the blood had drained from their bodies.

With something between a growl and a hiss he changed. It was at once confusing and unnerving. They both squinted hard to focus. It was as though his skin was moving all over but at the same time he remained in exactly the same position. His eyes remained riveted on Toni and Thomas with a malevolent gaze and yet the rest of him swirled like smoke yet never breaking the sharp outline of his silhouette. The sight was fantastic until the two of them were able to truly discern what he had become and then they would have fallen backwards in horror had they not been riveted to the floor.

It was as though his skin had become transparent and in the hollow that was now his body had been poured to capacity with dozens of snakes. They slithered over and between each other, around his head, up and down his arms and legs and throughout every part. The smallest ones moved sinuously in his fingers while the larger ones curled around each other while traveling around his chest, up into his head and then back down into his legs. Yet all the while they never extended outside of where his skin would be. But there was no skin. Their motion was continuous and both mesmerizing and horrific. Only the man's eyes remained static. Had Thomas and Toni been forced to touch him the scales would have glided over their fingers. They could have put their arms through his body and out through his back while the snakes crawled over and around their flesh. His eyes were gleaming slits.

Then he took a few steps towards them. His movements were as natural as ever and yet now his true substance was exposed. Thomas and Toni's hearts pounded and sweat rapidly saturated their shirts like no physics could ever explain. If he charged they would probably never even move an inch. They were completely hopeless. He could devour the both of them with no resistance.

But then he stopped and raised his arms. The snakes writhed and tangled around themselves with greater intensity. A large snake stopped just where his mouth was. It opened wide its mouth in exactly the same place where the man's natural mouth would be. Its thick, curved fangs hung menacingly for a few seconds and then a loud guttural hiss burst out like a fast train exiting a tunnel. Thomas and Toni had to cover their ears. She stumbled and fell backwards onto the ground.

Just then two of the pipes running along the ceiling broke free and fell on either side of Thomas. Toni yelped and pushed herself away. Then the pipes moved and twisted themselves around Thomas like violent, iron snakes. He did not even have the chance to move. They encircled his legs and wrapped themselves around his chest and neck. One of his arms was pinned against his body. Then they stopped. He was imprisoned.

A forked tongue flickered out of the snake-man's mouth. He appeared pleased. And then, he turned and disappeared around the corner to the left.

"Thomas! Thomas! Are you alright?" Toni was frantic. She wanted to grab the pipes but was too afraid that they would snatch and engulf her also.

"Help me! Help me!" yelled Thomas. He was unable to move anything. All that he could do was flap his one free arm.

After several reluctant attempts, Toni finally grabbed one of the pipes and tugged. It did not budge.

"I don't know what to do!" she cried out. "Maybe I should go get help."

"You can't leave me here with him!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I... I don't know! See if there is something you can use as a pry bar."

She was snapping her head in every direction trying to find something—anything.

Then there was a noise. Or more correctly, many noises—from all around.

"What... what is it?" Thomas could not move his head since it was wrapped so tightly.

"I don't know." Toni was furiously looking all over; but it was so dim.

She stepped out into the large room. Thomas yelled, "Don't leave me!"

Then she saw them. There were easily hundreds coming towards them from all directions. Rats. But these were no common rats. Instead of scurrying, stopping, sitting up, looking around and then scurrying again; they came forward with focused determination. They were crouched low and fixed their eyes unwaveringly on their single target—Thomas. They were large—at least three times bigger than ordinary rats or like—one might say—rats with gym cards—and their blackness only emphasized their bulging, red eyes. Whether driven by hunger or wrath was inconsequential; Thomas would be torn apart.

Both Thomas and Toni saw them although Thomas, not able to move his head, only saw them coming down the corridor from where the snake-man had been. They filled the width of the corridor floor for some twenty

feet deep. Some were on the overhead pipes that were still attached to the ceiling; others were stalking on the pipes running along the walls.

Thomas shouted, "Do something! You've got to do something!" He was wiggling mightily but could not affect his imprisonment one bit.

Toni was scanning everywhere while futilely screaming to no one, "What? What?"

"Throw something," yelled Thomas.

Toni scooped up some beer cans and bottles and began throwing them at the rats. She was a pitching machine on amphetamines. She grunted with each throw and was blindly hurling them in any direction at the encroaching horde.

The rats paused momentarily. A few that were actually hit protested loudly with great offense. But this delay was, as noted, momentary. Thomas was beyond helpless. He might as well be a chicken being lowered upside-down into an alligator pit.

Toni, seeing the despair of the situation, was faintly calling out, "Help. We need some help." But it was so weak that no one could really have heard.

As the rats advanced they seemed to grow in excitement in anticipation of their blood meal.

"Help. We need some help. Please God send some help" again came the faint cry as she continued pitching bottles and cans. The area around her was becoming vacant of ammunition. She could not even look back at Thomas because she was afraid that she would see the inevitable scene of his being helplessly swarmed by the vicious vermin. Even his soon-coming shrieks were already echoing in her head. She weakly threw her last bottle and sobbed, "God, save us."

There was a bang of a metal door wildly hitting the wall. Across the large room Toni could only see a large dark shadow sprinting towards her. "This is it," she thought as she backed against the wall and braced herself for the onslaught. She hoped that her death would at least be quick.

As the figure got closer she could make him out better. It was Jocum. Toni was perplexed, her face stained with dirt and tears. Did he save them before so that he could destroy them now? Was he in cohorts with the snake-man? In four large leaps he crossed through the pack of rats while they jumped at him and then he landed right in front of Toni facing her. She closed her eyes.

He said, "Take courage" and turned and stood in front of her. In the corner to their left was a pile of liquor bottles. He dashed over and gathered up a number of them.

"Get me some matches," he yelled at Toni, "now!"

This was not hard to accomplish seeing how every conceivable thing that could be smoked apparently had been in this place.

Jocum dashed back to Toni and put most of the bottles on the floor. Toni wondered why she had not noticed that pile before. Then taking one of the liquor bottles he emptied the remaining contents in an arc several feet in front of the closest rats. He did this with several more bottles until the arc formed a semi-circle from wall to wall.

"Give me the matches," he yelled.

Toni handed him one book with three matches left. Jocum lit one and flung it at the arc. It went up with a gush. There was a small wall of fire. The rats stood on their hind legs and screamed maliciously. None were near the flames but this unexpected delay further antagonized them. While Toni was in amazement at the entire spectacle, Jocum was already repeating his firewall in the corridor but this time after he emptied a bottle he pitched it at a rat on one of the pipes knocking it to the floor.

A problem was that the layer of alcohol being so thin could not sustain the fire but for less than a minute.

Jocum yelled, "Keep throwing alcohol at the fire."

Toni quickly obeyed. This kept the barrier up longer. Each time she emptied a bottle she hurled it at the nearest rat. Her aim seemed supernatural. Each bottle sent a hissing rat tumbling backwards.

"Don't forget about the ones in the corridor," he again yelled.

With Toni dashing about keeping the rats at bay Jocum grabbed the end of one of the entwined pipes. He braced his foot against the wall and with a loud grunt pulled hard on the pipe. Nothing happened. Just then one of the rats on an overhead pipe leaped onto his neck and bit hard into his flesh. An abundance of blood flowed freely and soaked the top of his shirt. Jocum yelled and reaching behind his head snatched the rat. Pulling it free was not easy but with a quick jerk he tore it out and threw it down the corridor. Seeing that no more were immediately ready to leap onto him he yelled out, "Don't forget about the ones on the pipes!"

Thomas' eyes were bulging like golf balls. "Hurry! Hurry!" he was screaming.

Jocum went back to the pipe and pulled again. After a few seconds there was the creak of metal and the pipe began to bend. Once he had gained the momentum he was able to unwind it by several turns. But by then it had unwound so much that the end now hit the wall and would not move anymore. Thomas was far from being free.

Toni was running out of liquor bottles and energy. She had restocked a couple of times but now the rats on that side had overrun the pile and so she could not get to it anymore. The flames were getting lower. The rats were waiting for their moment.

Jocum put his right foot halfway up the unwound pipe. Then he simultaneously jumped up putting both feet together on the pipe and yanked hard with his hands on the free end of the pipe. There was not time for an elegant solution; brute force had to be the answer. After each quick yank he had to land on the floor again with both feet lest he topple over. This action was carried out over and over again and each time the pipe bent ever so slightly. But with enough of these slight bends he was able to get it to a 90° angle, enough to clear the wall. This allowed him to continue with the untwisting and he managed to unwrap two more loops. That was enough for Thomas to step out of that pipe if he could. The problem now was that a second pipe was still tightly entwined with part of it being wrapped around his neck like a noose so that he could not pull his head through.

Time was now extremely short. Toni had taken to rolling up some papers and cardboard, lighting the ends with a match, and waving them around like torches. But as a stalling tactic its effect was minimal. The rats may have been coming more slowly but their advancement was none-the-less relentless.

The great mass in the corridor were now two-thirds of the way down and moving like a black undulating force. They were so numerous that you could not even see the floor.

Jocum ran over to the corner of the corridor behind Thomas who screamed, "Don't leave me!" He grabbed a few bottles scattered there and hurled them in front of the pack scattering and sprayed alcohol along the floor and walls. "Toni, throw me some matches, quick!" Toni snatched a pack off of the floor and flung them side-armed to Jocum. He caught them and with unbelievable quickness ran past Thomas to the liquid on the floor, lit a match, and tossed it onto the alcohol. The pack backed away and shrieked horribly. He then turned back to Thomas.

Meanwhile the rats in the main room were tightening the arc around Toni. They swayed menacingly as they got closer. She managed to find a few more bottles to empty and light in front of them but that gained mere seconds.

Jocum grabbed the end of the second pipe, jumped up, and with both feet braced against the wall strained every muscle until it began to bend. He continued pressing hard with his legs against the wall until he had fully extended himself. Then his feet slide from the wall and hit the floor hard while he held his exhausted self up with the pipe that he was clutching. But it was enough. Thomas, though with much difficulty and a number of deep scrapes across his face and arms, managed to squeeze his head down through the circle of the pipe. He then pulled his legs up through the remaining curls losing a shoe in the process.

With her barely managing to restrain the rats in the main room Toni had forgotten about the ones in the corridor. Furious with their loss of a blood meal they sought vengeance and leaped and swarmed about Jocum's legs tearing with rage his pants and flesh.

Thomas, now free, barely took one step and with his shoeless foot stepped down hard on a broken, jagged bottle. The edge cut long and deep into his foot. Every muscle tightened like stone. His eyes clenched and he released a faint moan. He bent down to the floor like a puppet whose strings were released.

Jocum swatted away rats until he found a brief moment when none of them had recovered enough to rejoin the attack. He then snatched up Thomas with one arm, ran over and with his other arm did the same with Toni and ran threw the pack of hissing rats to the door. He kicked the door open with his foot leaving a smattering of blood on it. He raced across the street and down half a block before collapsing against a brick building. Blood like puddles from a rainstorm trailed from the door. Whether they were from Thomas or Jocum one could not tell.

The blood was dripping from the already saturated sock of Thomas' cut foot. The pain was even more intense than at first and now it was throbbing.

Jocum said, "We don't have time to rest. We need to get your foot looked at and pronto."

"But what about you?" Toni cried out addressing Jocum.

His pants were shredded. Strips of cloth hung with loose pieces of flesh. The back of his neck was raw. He was easily losing more blood than Thomas.

"I'll be taken care of also," he replied.

Toni removed her sneakers and pulled off her socks.

Thomas moaned, "What are you doing?"

She handed Thomas one of the socks. "Here, press this against your heel, it'll help stem the tide." She handed Jocum the other sock. "Here press this one..." and looking at the multiplicity of wounds said, "somewhere."

Jocum took the sock with much gratitude. "Thanks. Now put on your sneakers; we have to get going."

Jocum stood up and looked at Toni. “Can I assume that you are unhurt and can walk on your own? I mean other than the physical and mental exhaustion.”

“Absolutely,” she replied.

“And you,” now looking at Thomas who was holding Toni’s sock against his heel and grimacing with grave seriousness. “You will have to be carried.” With that he lifted Thomas in his two massive arms. “Keep that sock tight.”

They hurried back to the center of town. No one was around. Though it was hard to tell, it seemed that there were sounds following them from within each of the abandoned buildings that they passed. But what was doubly odd was that nothing ever ran from the one building that the three of them had just passed to the next one. It was like each building had its own set of... things. Jocum tried his best to appear that he had heard nothing. He did not want to alarm Thomas and Toni any more than they already were. He set his face like flint and pushed on ahead.

But he was concerned. Thomas was losing too much blood for any more attacks. Even if Jocum could rescue them again and again each delay could ultimately prove fatal.

They had walked like this for several blocks when Toni said between loud gasps of breath, “The hospital is on the other side of town. It will take us a long time to get there at this pace. I don’t think that Thomas is looking that well.”

Indeed Thomas was growing weak. Of course any number of causes contributed to this from the loss of blood, to the bruises from the pipes, to the trauma of being nearly devoured by vermin.

Jocum smiled, “Well then, we’ll just have to quicken the pace.”

Toni answered, “I don’t think that I can go any faster.” She was quite exhausted and wanted nothing more than to lie down on the sidewalk and close her eyes. “You two go on ahead and I’ll meet you there.” Though she was completely sincere she was hoping that someone would offer a better solution. She had heard those sounds in the other warehouses also and they had unnerved her. Fortunately the great urgency of the circumstances crippled her imagination and so kept her focus on the immediate situation and away from hysterics.

“That’s not the quicker pace that I mean,” replied Jocum. Just then a car sped around the corner and stopped right next to them.

“Ah, Abil, you are always a timely fellow. Toni, can you please open the back door?”

Toni was rather startled by this turn of events and just stood there.

“Any time within the next hour would be suitable although sooner rather than later would be appreciated.” Jocum smiled.

Toni was brought back to life and hurried over to the door and opened it. At the same time Abil got out and rushed across the front of the car to open the front passenger’s door. He looked at Jocum and Thomas’ wounds.

“Been in a bit of a tussle, have you? We’ll get you fixed up right quick now.”

Jocum gently lowered Thomas into the back seat. Thomas winced at even the slightest jarring. Toni ran around the car and got into the other side of the back seat. Jocum got into the front and they were off.

Abil looked in the rearview mirror and said to the two, “We’ll be at the hospital before a hungry dog can swallow a sausage.”

“Cute,” said Jocum.

Jocum turned and asked Toni, “So what were the two of you doing in that abandoned warehouse anyway? And don’t tell me that you made a wrong turn and got lost.”

Toni sheepishly turned her head to look out the window. She said meekly, “We were doing, uh...spying.”

Jocum replied, “I see.” And then he turned back towards the front because they were at the hospital already.

Toni was startled. “How did you get here so fast? You weren’t even speeding.”

Jocum smiled and said, “Toni, can you run in and let them know that we are coming? Then call your Mom and tell her where we are. Oh and after you are do that, wash up and take a breather.” Toni obeyed more quickly this time. Just as she opened the door Jocum yelled to her, “Wait!” She stopped like she had become granite. “Here, I have something for you.” He leaned back and handed her a small, brown paper bag. “Honey wafers. They’ll give you some quick energy.” She took the bag and waited.

“Now you can finish what you need to do,” he said making a scooting motion with his hand.

Abil came around and lifted Thomas out of the car and carried him into the Emergency Room. A nurse directed him to put Thomas on a bed and wheeled him behind a white curtain. Toni watched until he completely disappeared. Then she turned to make sure that Jocum was next, but he was not there. In fact, Abil was not there either. She ran to the glass door. Even the car was gone.

After her mother arrived and she had a chance to calm down and eat a few of Jocum’s delicious wafers Toni called Russell’s house. She apologized to him for their not being there at eleven.

“We were both worried. It’s not like either of you to miss an appointment, let alone a convening.” From the tone of his voice it was obvious that he had been sincerely worried but that he was not feeling slighted. “What happened? We actually wondered if someone or something had captured you.”

Toni just said, “We’re OK now, somewhat, I guess. We’re at the hospital.”

“The hospital!”

Toni continued, “Yes, but we’re OK. Why don’t you and Sarah come over tonight to my house at say, 7:30 and I’ll tell you what happened.”

“7:30? Forget it. We’ll be at the hospital within an hour.” There was a pause. “Is it really gruesome? I mean, if not, then can I bring Danielle? But I don’t want her to faint or anything.”

“No, it’s not gruesome and I’ve got some really great wafers for you.”

16 The Man in the Woods

Of course temptation is better than what we have;
otherwise it would not be tempting

Russell and Sarah were quite astonished by the events from the day before. But for Russell, it really shook him up. Maybe it was because he felt somewhat responsible. Yes, it was Sarah's idea to do something about what was going on but he readily agreed to it. Maybe if he had been discouraging then Thomas would not have followed along.

To calm himself down, Russell was making his second trip that day out to his place in the woods. He already went that morning with his wheelbarrow of seed, but had to come back because he was getting hungry. But with everything going on he felt that he needed an extra dose of refreshment and some time alone. Besides, he had finished another birdhouse and was eager to get it up.

He was at least feeling better after hearing that Thomas' cut was not as bad as it first appeared and that it did not require as many stitches as expected.

Because of what had happened, the four never got together to make their secret agent plans. That was a great relief to Russell. What was going on was too serious for the likes of him. He was going to stay out of trouble, not harass anyone, and spend as much time by his pond as possible. There were no maniacal pipes out there. After all, his birds and fish and squirrels were all gentle friends of his.

He was trying to occupy his mind with what kind of birdhouses to build next. He needed a new theme. The one in his wheelbarrow completed his recent theme of space objects. It was a very clever replication of a space shuttle and complimented his already occupied Apollo spacecraft, asteroid, and nine planets (which resembled more the nine boxes although Saturn did have a spiffy ring around it). His space station was an octagonal tube that encircled a tree trunk. It took him the better part of a day just to assemble it. He was quite pleased with that one.

For a new theme he thought of animals, but the idea of a bird flying into the mouth of a cat, even though it is made of wood, just seemed too odd. Besides, nearly every animal that he thought of looked like a large rat with bulging red eyes.

A carnival theme? Too complex. How about baked goods? Now that is something gentle on the mind. Maybe he could make a birdhouse that looked like a biscuit. But he had already done cakes and cookies a couple of years ago. He needed something new. He thought about transportation. "Yea, that just might be the ticket," he thought. "There are cars, ships, planes, boats." He was thinking about the first one being an old-fashioned steam engine.

He was walking very slowly and was still a good distance from his paradise. He was trying to picture how a steam engine could be done (and still be recognizable) when he was greatly startled. There was a man standing in the path about 20 feet in front of him. Russell stopped and simply stared. No one was ever out here before.

The man stood there smiling, overly smug like someone not wearing underwear and knowing that you would never find out. He had his arms casually crossed in front of his chest. He was dressed with black slacks and a long-sleeve buttoned black shirt, not exactly hiking gear.

They both silently stared at each other for several extended seconds.

The wheelbarrow dropped to the ground as the handles slid out of Russell's hands. "Are you Jocum or one of those other guys that Toni and Thomas met?" he asked haltingly.

The man did not raise his arms or squeeze his eyes tightly together or even twitch the slightest muscle, but just then hundreds, perhaps thousands of branches crashed to the ground in circle of at least 100 feet. Russell jumped like a spring.

"Whoa," Russell cried out, "What's going on here?"

Though they surrounded him none of the branches were within thirty feet. In fact they left Russell and the man together in a clear center.

The man never moved. He kept his eyes tightly fixed on Russell never losing his smile.

Then all of the fallen branches began to twitch and jerk. Their writhing became more pronounced. There was much scrapping on the ground and thrashing against bushes. Russell turned several times in a rapid circle. The same thing was happening everywhere. The man seemed oblivious to the surrounding drama. It was as though he was somewhere else and only his image was there in the woods. But, in fact, he was very real.

And then the writhing stopped and each “branch” raised up one end, its black slit eyes riveted on Russell. Their forked tongues flickered and hissed. Russell groaned in horror. He was too paralyzed to even cry out. He knew that he was done.

But none of the black snakes inched closer to him. They simply stood their ground and menaced. Every one of them portended of wanting to fling themselves forward and strike their fangs inches into Russell’s flesh but were being held back by an unseen leash.

“Is, is this magic?” stammered Russell.

“Magic? Laughed the man. This question seemed to rouse him from his sardonic gaze. “No, my child, this,” he lingered on that word like a showman, “is the supernatural.”

Sweat was oozing from every one of Russell’s pores. “What? What’s the difference?”

The man laughed again, this time even heartier. “It is the difference between a unicorn and a horse, between Atlantis and Rome.”

Russell stared blankly with obviously no comprehension. It is hard to have one’s wits revving like a Ferrari when surrounded by hundreds of black, hissing snakes.

Seeing his dilemma the man offered some help. “Quite simply, one is fake and one is real. You, my boy, cannot wave a stick and make spoons levitate no matter how hard you try, but to turn branches into snakes—that, as you can see, is all too possible. Ah, it has been done before; you’ve probably even read about it in your Sunday school.” The man seemed almost wistful. But then he quickly snapped back to menacing. “For a mile around I can turn every branch into a poisonous adder and every leaf into a scorpion.”

Russell eyed the snakes. This was bad enough. It did not take a mile of snakes to do him in. In fact, only one was sufficient. He could feel his every breath. His body seemed as though it were stuffed with rags. However, still the snakes did not inch any closer. Many slid side-to-side but it was as though there was a pane of glass in front of each one.

“So, who are you?” asked Russell.

“Who do you want me to be? I can be your most delicious fantasy, your most enticing pleasure. Do you want me to love you? I will hold your hand and lead you. Have you been wronged? I will justify your anger. I will fan your secret passions, bring to you what you want to see, and smother you with your richest temptations. And I will make all of this as easy as can be. Who do you want me to be?”

With that he morphed into all sizes, shapes, and colors of people at the rate of four per second, each one gazing at Russell and smiling. It was like watching someone ruffling through a pack of picture playing cards but in 3D.

Russell’s jaw fell slack. He thought that one of those people was Allison, the girl in one of his high school classes that he wished that he knew better. Another looked like his favorite grandmother who passed away last year and yet another was his father. Actually it seemed as though all of them were familiar both those whom he longed for and those who bullied him. After fifteen seconds the show stopped and what stood before him was the man once again.

Seemingly unperturbed by his fantastic display the man continued. “I am Terese’s office manager, Floyd Fullman’s co-worker, and Carl’s new best friend. I can be Allison or whomever you want and I will take whatever I want. Do you know me now?”

“You’re, you’re the Devil,” proclaimed Russell. He jerked his head around quickly expecting the snakes to be unleashed at the sound of that word. Once he guessed the answer he figured that the game would be over. But nothing changed.

The man laughed longer than what seemed to be appropriate. This further unnerved Russell as was probably the desired effect.

“So what are you going to do with me?” asked Russell.

“What do you want me to do with you?” countered the man.

“Umm, let me go... unharmed.”

“And why should I do that?” the man tightened his face.

How could Russell successfully answer that question? The Devil has no stomach for mercy or compassion. And Russell knew that a great many men and women over the millennia have stumbled over this very question and paid with their souls. There was no logical reason that would catch the Devil off guard. There was no moral reason that would be convincing. There probably was not even an immoral reason that would do the trick. He stood in silence while the Devil peered at him. He could pray, but he did not know what to pray for. Still, the Devil glared at him, his face tightening ever so slightly more. Pages of Scripture flew in succession through Russell’s mind and then one page stopped with one verse magnified more than the others: “Resist the Devil and he will flee from you.”

“That’s it,” thought Russell. He felt hopeful. But then he wondered, “But what does that mean?” He wondered if he pushed him real hard then he would scamper away like an ape with all of his snakes following him. That seemed quite stupid since most of the time that anyone would apply this verse the Devil himself would not be standing right there in front of him. Besides, Russell had this image of him putting his hands on the Devil and then having them burst into flames. That seemed oddly unlikely but, still, it was not worth taking a chance.

Instead, Russell asked, “What do you want from me?” Even as he was saying this he wondered why he was asking. He knew that he was doing nothing more than stalling. He just wished that he could be more clever.

“What do I want from you?” smiled the man. His voice was soft, even gentle. “Why everything, of course.”

“Well, you’re not going to get anything.” At this, Russell raised his voice. Was this a false heroic akin to leaping off of a boat to save a woman’s hat when you know darn well know that you cannot swim?

Remaining perfectly calm the man replied, “And what do you have that will prevent me?” He spoke with the condescending confidence of a warrior with his sword on the neck of his feeble opponent.

There was silence. Russell’s head hung down. The man smiled with a firm arrogance. “I thought not.” He took a couple of steps forward. “This game has wasted enough of my time. I could be off starting a war somewhere; not dawdling with a minor character.”

Russell’s eyes darted back and forth as his brain searched for something. Then he sputtered out, “Greater is He who is in me than he who is in the world.”

The man stopped short and his smile tightened considerably to the point of appearing grim. The great warrior did have a seam in his armor. But Russell knew that there is a chasm of difference between saying something and standing on it. It was not as though the Devil had never heard this before.

“And who is in you? Do you have a tapeworm? Perhaps you roasted and ate your little, longed for girl friend Allison. Was she good? Do you wish that you had more?”

“In me dwells God’s Spirit. I am a temple of God.”

The man straightened up. There was silence again but this time it was throughout the woods. The snakes were quiet and still.

“You think mighty highly of yourself, don’t you? What makes you think that you are worthy of God? Moses could only glance at His back but here you are God’s own temple. Are you greater than Moses? You certainly don’t glow and, besides, how could all of God fit inside such a boy as yourself even though you are rather dumpy? Don’t you think that if God wanted a temple that He would pick something better than a crippled boy? I’ve seen God’s temple and I can assure you that you aren’t even worthy to be splattered against its walls.

“I think that it is time to dispense of this myth of your own self-importance. Pride is a sin, you know.” The Devil snickered. “Now what do you say that we stop playing this old woman’s game and get back to real business?”

He stiffly flattened out his hand and held it upright, his fingertips inches from a tree. Then he calmly pushed his hand into the tree as though it were only a mirage. When the tips of all of his fingers emerged out of the other side he stopped. He was quite peaceful, almost playful. Then he slowly moved his hand up the trunk of the tree so that it appeared like a shark’s fin cutting through water. After he had gone about two feet he paused and then withdrew his hand. He turned towards Russell and smiled.

“I have everything that you could ever possibly want and in exchange I only want one thing. That seems quite fair, don’t you? Millions have accepted this deal. What’s the matter with you?”

Russell pushed against the back of his teeth with his tongue.

“One thing, only one small thing and you can have it all.” The Devil appeared slightly larger and enticing. “And consider that if you accept my offer then at least you’ll still be alive five minutes from now. Now doesn’t that count for something?”

Russell stammered. Many things flashed through his mind. Yes, there were a lot of things that he wanted. It would be easy and then he would be out of here safe and sound. He stared at the ground and staggered in a small circle.

The Devil continued. “With money you would never have to worry about getting a job and stress like your parents. You could travel, have lots of adoring friends, all of the chocolate that you could want. You could even have your own dessert chef and every night have fresh chocolate pastries. And, Allison, instead of watching her from the corner of your eye, you could be married to her and have lots of children.”

Like a rapidly cascading montage Russell saw expensive cars, his name everywhere, people swarming him and begging for their picture with him, a huge house, a swimming pool, dirt bikes, an enormous TV, people grinning like fools and slapping him on the back telling him how wonderful he is, a great body, Allison hugging him tightly, sleeping late, no more school, piles of ice cream sundaes. On and on came the images. But most of all he saw himself tall and athletic. He felt almost overwhelmed. Yes, it would be easy and at such a small price. Who would

know? And just before he died he could repent and all would be forgiven. He looked up. The Devil was leaning towards him.

“Who would know?” the Devil asked. “It is just you and me here.”

Russell came back as though shook out of a dream. “But I know that it’s true,” he proclaimed. “I know that I am a child of God and that I am His temple.”

“Oh, do you? Well, I know that its not true and I’ve been around a lot longer than you have. I have seen God and have spoken to Him and believe me, it’s not true.”

Russell was taken back. How can you argue with someone who has actually spoken to God?

“I, I know that it’s true because it is in the Bible.”

The Devil laughed. “The Bible. Fairy tales written by men with fantasies of immortality. It is full of contradictions and stories that even a three-year old would recognize as hooley. What fish swallows a man and spits him out whole? What donkey talks in perfectly good Hebrew? Who is beaten, whipped, crucified, speared and then pushes away a rock and walks out of a cave alive? Is this what you are trusting in? You’re riding a unicorn. You are leaning on a broken reed. I can write a better Bible than that. Give it up. The mark of true wisdom is knowing when to surrender. Better to be a slave in my house than a corpse at the door of God, eh son? What do you say? You are only throwing pebbles at a mountain. Come over to me and live and I will show you things that your mind could not imagine and your eyes have not seen.”

At this the Devil took a step closer and extended his hand. Russell stood fixed. Doubt was creeping in on all fours. “He has actually talked with God,” he thought.

The Devil could sense it. He had tempted the best and had won many, many times. He knew each person’s weaknesses and it was not hard to set up the scenery. David and lust, Eve and the desire to know, Peter and his cowardice. He even got one of Jesus’ handpicked apostles to turn on Him. They were all the same, only the props were different. And teenagers, they were the easiest of all.

“Moses, David, Peter, Elijah—these were the hall-of-famers, the top of the line, the superstars and they all fell. What makes you think that you are better than they were? Faith is the greatest of all tormentors for it only impedes reality.”

“But, but,” Russell could only stammer.

The Devil stepped closer; his arm was still extended. “You are but a crippled boy pushing a junk wheelbarrow in the woods. Instead, you could be a god.” He knew that he was closing the noose. Soon this boy would be hanging from his belt like millions of other souls.

“Even Jesus gave in. Are you better than Him?”

Russell felt like he was slapped out of a stupor. “Jesus didn’t give in,” he thought. “And if God wants to create a fish that can swallow a man and then spit him out whole then he can. And if He can create talking people then He can create a talking donkey.

“No, you’re wrong,” Russell yelled. “If you’re the Devil then there is a God and if there is a God then He can and did do all of those things that you said couldn’t happen.”

The Devil sneered. “The choice is yours. The opportunity is fading. You can choose abundant pleasures or your blood can scald the ground. What will it be? Your time is nearly up.”

Then, as if the panes of glass were removed, the snakes started to slowly crawl towards Russell. There was no where to go, he could not take out his opponent, and there was no one to intervene. He was the only piece left on the board and he was checkmated. He felt himself getting dizzy but he had to resist. If he was going to be killed he wanted to do it fighting, not lying on the ground unconscious.

He swayed and took a step back but it was on his bad leg and it gave way and he fell to the ground. He looked up. The Devil who only a second ago was twenty feet away was now standing right over him. The adders were coming closer but now they were intermingled with thousands of scorpions all with their claws held high.

The Devil and thousands of his horrors versus one dumpy, crippled boy, Russell thought. The odds were not good.

Russell mumbled, “I rebuke you in the name of Jesus Christ.”

“Bah,” said the Devil. “That may work for angels but in your mouth they are only parroted words.”

Russell sagged. He dropped his head and leaned over and put both of his hands on the ground. He knew that the fangs and the stinging would be horrible. He also knew that the Devil would not let it happen quickly. Mercy is never in the vocabulary of the wicked.

He did the only thing that he had left. It had saved him from the Niss, perhaps it would work again here. He prayed barely audibly, “Jesus, save me.” And he wept.

He did not know what to expect. Perhaps one of the large men that Toni and Thomas talked about would leap over the horrors and whisk him away to safety. He waited. Nothing happened. The only sound that he heard

was the rustling of dried leaves getting louder and louder as the snakes slithered towards him. The ground seemed to quiver with their approach.

He clenched his teeth and tightened his eyes. Yes, it was going to really hurt badly. He felt his arms quivering and then his entire body. "I'm going to collapse into heap," he thought, "and then they are going to swarm all over me. When the search party finds me I will be bloated with poison. This is going to really hurt Danielle."

The quivering of the ground became more pronounced and then there was a loud noise surrounding him. It was first a loud crack and then a rumble. It lasted for several seconds but he still did not open his eyes. He was shaking like he had been hit with an electric shock. Then he fell over onto his side.

The noise and shaking stopped. He opened his eyes. All around him was a chasm whose depth he could not fathom. Its width was at least twenty feet at its narrowest. He could not see any snakes. He could not even see the Devil. But back in the woods beyond the edge of the crevice he could faintly discern the shadowy shapes of a number of people. And then he fainted.

Russell slowly opened his eyes. At first everything was murky like looking through the silt from the bottom of a pond. It was as though all of the world's colors had been washed out. He could hear a faint, intermittent hum. He tried to put his hand on his head but could not tell if he had succeeded or not.

He wondered if he had died and was waking up in Heaven. Perhaps the hum was angels singing.

He heard a muffled voice. It was as though someone was at the end of a long tunnel. He closed his eyes again and strained to concentrate on the voice. It was becoming clearer. It was high pitched, almost squeaky. He could feel the fuss leaving his head.

"Russell? Russell? Can you hear me?"

He could now feel his hand on the top of his head.

"Russell? Russell? Are you OK?"

He opened his eyes with a jolt. Inches away from him was a face that rapidly came into focus.

"Russell? Are you OK?" came the voice again.

"Huh?" he said with the barest hint of energy.

"He's coming to" he heard as the face turned away. He discerned a groan in the background.

Suddenly everything became clear. It was Danielle who was staring at him.

"What... what are you doing out in the woods? Go away. Go home, now. Get out of here," he said confusedly. He was weakly trying to shoo her away with his arm.

"Woods?" Danielle replied with even more confusion. "What are you talking about? You're at home. You're lying on the couch."

"What?" he replied weakly. He tried to sit up but Danielle gently pushed him back down.

"You need to rest for a while," she reassured him. "I have some water here. Do you want some water?" She held the glass up to his lips but he did not respond to it.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You're at home," she replied firmly. "I just told you that. Are you OK?"

Russell looked around; his eyes were focusing. Sure enough he was home. The groaning was his mother on the far chair with her head buried in her hands. She was mumbling, "You two will be the death of me yet. I try so hard and this is the thanks that I get."

"What happened?" Russell asked.

Russell's mother got up and began pacing the room. She held her hands cupped to her chest. You could almost see the worry lines deepening by the second.

"That's what we're wondering," Danielle replied. "We found you propped up in the doorway. It looked as if someone put you there. "How long were you there?"

"I... I don't know. What time is it?"

"It's 8:00," came Danielle's answer.

"A.M. or P.M.?" asked Russell.

"A.M. or P.M.?" Danielle responded with bewilderment. "What do think, that you've been wandering around the countryside for days with amnesia? You've only been gone for several hours. It's 8:00 at night. I know that you've had a rough time of it, but it couldn't have been that bad. Here, have some water and when you feel up to it I'll help you up to your bedroom so you won't go tumbling down the stairs. Oh, and here." She handed him a brown bag. "This was next to you. It has some kind of wafers in it. They're actually quite good. Where'd you get them from?"

Russell looked like a boxer getting up from a knockout punch. He stared dumbly at the bag.

“Oh forget it,” she replied. “Here, this will make you feel better.” She folded a wash cloth, poured some water on it, and laid it across his forehead. “By the way, your wheelbarrow is outside next to the door.”

17 The Narciss

A play where we are the only character will have no audience

It had been two weeks since the incident at the factory and Thomas' foot had been healing nicely. Jocum came by several times and rubbed some ointment on the wound that did wonders. But if Thomas stepped down just the wrong way bolts of pain shot up his leg. It was worse than walking on eggshells; it was like walking on grenades.

Since he naturally walked with a slight hobble Russell was the most sympathetic and helpful. It had been a week since his encounter in the woods and although he still lost sleep over it and at times needed to go some place alone and cry, his meetings with the pastor helped quite a bit. Russell did not tell the pastor the actual details since the pastor would not think Devil but rather drugs. So he told him that a snake in the woods attacked him. But this was enough to elicit words of encouragement.

While the others were able to go out to the park and the chocolate shop Thomas was oftentimes stuck in the house with his foot on a pillow on the coffee table. They offered to hang with him but inevitably the inviting weather would call them outside and with insincere enthusiasm he would scamper them along with his hands to go enjoy the beautiful day.

This particular morning he woke up feeling drained. Because of all of the hammer blows that Thomas had absorbed this summer he was feeling particularly beaten down this day. Noticing that everyone had gone out on errands he chose to go off and sulk.

He snuck out the back of the house and made his way through the less populated parts of town. After about an hour of grumbling and wretchedness he found himself at the edge of the woods. He had come to the place where he had seen Russell disappear into a number of times. He always wondered where it had led. Maybe there was a little shelter or cave that he could hide himself in and curl up and deepen his misery.

He followed the vague path of trampled leaves. After about a half an hour it dawned on him that this might have been the area where Russell had the encounter with the Devil. He tried to coyly glance around as though if anyone were watching him they would be less apt to attack if he did not appear panicked and vulnerable. He did not even want to wipe away the trickles of sweat lest he give himself away. He was so focused on any slight sound or movement around him that he failed to notice the root protruding from the ground. He stepped down on it exactly where his stitches were. He let out with a howl and hopped around on his good foot. The other foot throbbed like someone was hitting it steadily with a hammer. He leaned against a tree with his foot suspended in the air. He would have displayed a good pout if his face was not so twisted in anguish.

After several minutes the pain became more manageable. He spied a four-foot long stick near the tree and hobbled over to it. It was sturdy and would make a good temporary cane. Realizing that he was not in topnotch hiking condition he figured that it would be more prudent to head back home. He leaned on the stick and looked around to get his bearings. Something caught his eye. He leaned forward and squinted. He could see lots of pieces of different colors poking through the leaves. This was quite perplexing. After everything else that had gone on the last thing that he wanted was another weird occurrence. He leaned against the tree again and listened for any unusual sounds. Hearing nothing he crept closer with the caution of one traversing a minefield. Finally, he could see that they were multitudes of birdhouses. His heart was momentarily uplifted.

"So this is what Russell does out here. It's quite marvelous."

He limped around in amazement. Numerous birds were perched in the openings and many flew hastily between the trees. Fat squirrels stared at him from high branches and busily waved their tails and chattered. He spotted a nice rock near a pond and sat down. But seeing no deeper than the initial novelty of the birdhouses he once again fell into a morose.

"My summer has been ruined. I'm really stressed all of the time. I've lost a lot of sleep because of those creepy things." He paused. "I don't hate life; I just hate my life. In fact, the way things have gone even God must hate me." "I's" were flying everywhere with a healthy number of "me's" making their presence known. The air was thicker with pities and disappointments than with birds.

"Why do I even bother?" he moped.

Suddenly, everything around him was rapidly sucked away in all directions. It was as though he was repelling all of creation: the trees, the sky, even the rock, the pond, and the ground. They all faded into a black distance like trains that had silently rushed away from the central hub of a station in all directions. He jumped to his

feet. All around him for 360° was utter darkness. He could not feel the ground beneath him but he was not floating. He could see nothing but himself. There were no stars or shadows; he could hear no rustle of leaves or flapping of birds' wings. He was engulfed in what seemed to be a black hole.

He yelled out but his cry was swallowed and nothing returned. He spun around but there was not a thing anywhere.

He panicked, "Am I in a coma? Was I in some accident that I can't remember? Did a branch fall on my head? Maybe there are people standing over me right now and I don't even know it."

He flapped his arms. Everything seemed to be working OK. He yelled again and kicked his legs.

"Is this an illusion? Maybe people in comas think that they can still do things when, in reality, they cannot. Maybe it's like they're in their own small world and nothing else exists. Maybe someone is even holding my hand and I can't feel it."

He stared into the emptiness trying hard to discern even the slightest speck of light. "What if this is it? What if I never recover?"

He began to cry. He thought about how this was just the perfect ending to a miserable summer. He took a couple of steps forward and stopped. He realized that even his cane was gone. He stood there sobbing with his head buried in his hands. Somehow the darkness seemed even thicker. What do you do when the rest of your life consists of nothing other than yourself?

He staggered another couple of steps and then his one foot stopped moving and he fell forward. He put out his hands and felt a terrible sharp pain. Yet still, he could see nothing that stopped him from falling forever. He slowly stood up. His hands were throbbing. He looked at them and saw that they were both scrapped and bleeding, but from what?

He was afraid to move; he did not know what traps laid in this darkness. "Maybe I cut my hand on a needle stuck in my arm from a feeding tube. Or maybe I'm being operated on at this very moment and I cut my hand on the scalpel. Oh, this is terrible. This is so terrible."

He tentatively crouched and then just sat. But he had no idea what he was sitting on. This world had but one voice, one object, only one of anything and it was all and only him. He became aware of every cell in his body. He could feel his blood as it flowed into the smallest extremities of his fingers and toes. He could hear the acids in his stomach break down the pancakes that he had for breakfast. If he wanted to, he could count the hairs on his head without even moving.

He remembered it said once that when someone is in a coma their hearing is the last sense to go and how that was merciful because it allowed them to hear the words of their loved ones and also gave them one last chance to hear the "Good News of the Gospel." But seeing how he could not hear anything he must be even beyond that stage.

Then every hair on his body tightened. "Perhaps," he thought in horror, "I'm not in a coma. Maybe I've fallen into a trap of the Devil." His body slumped even more.

"What to do?" he wondered. "Will I ever wake up? Is all that I have left only what I can remember?"

He started to bury his face into his hands but with his hands bloodied he could not even do that.

After an indeterminable length of time he thought, "So this is how my life ends, fade to black—literally."

He wondered if his family was standing there, maybe Toni and her mother. "They are probably crying over me and wondering how this could happen to such a good person. But perhaps years have gone by. Perhaps no one bothers to come around anymore. Perhaps I've been cast into a nursing home remembered only on my birthday by a staff that barely knows my name. Maybe even right now there is a sagging balloon tied to the foot of my bed. How many birthdays have I had like this?" He tried to picture his room. He figured that it was a large room with three other beds. Probably there were torn-out magazine pictures taped to the walls. Most would be of animals. The rest would be gardens and such. The bulletin board over his bed might have his feeding schedule and, because of the place's mechanical imprudence, an activities calendar. Most likely there were several birthday cards crudely tacked on top of each other. He probably got flipped from one side to the other like a fried egg at least a couple of times a day to prevent bed sores.

"Ah, the good life," he thought sarcastically, "no worries about food or school or getting a job. I don't have to think about others; it's just me and nothing else."

He thought about church last Sunday or at least the last Sunday that he was conscious of. The pastor strode up to the podium wearing a cowboy hat, vest, and fake gun belt with two six-shooters. Then with excessive deliberation he removed each item and laid them on a seat next to him. Then he said, "I am no longer going to be the sheriff of this church. You've got yer own reckoning to do." The sermon was on personal accountability and how everyone was responsible for their own choices, thoughts, and actions. Everyone remembered the point.

He got to thinking about how terrifying the summer had been but then also how exciting it was when the four of them got together and talked about what was going on. He wished that he were back there at that time. He thought about his parents and how they would not believe any of it but then that was going to be part of the fun. Would they think that he had lost his mind or was he becoming quite the liar or... or maybe it was simply true. Only he would really know that it was true. Now all that he has to show for the summer was drool on his pillow.

He missed his friends. He wondered if Toni got married and if she had any children by now. "Probably twins," he surmised. "I bet that she has two wonderful little daughters."

"I wonder how Russell is doing? And Sarah, she was such a sweetheart. She is probably the head of some company by now. I hope that they are doing well. I may not be able to do much of anything else, but I guess that for the rest of my nothing life I can pray for them."

Just then he felt something on his shoulder. It startled him. This was the first thing that he had experienced outside of himself since he got hit by the branch or whatever it was that put him in this state. Maybe he was coming out of the coma.

"What?" he cried out. He stood up quickly and turned in a semi-circle. His breathing was rapid. At first everything was still totally dark. But then, as though played in reverse the entire world came rushing back towards him in all directions. With bewilderment he spun all around. The rock came up from underneath and stopped a few feet away from him as did the pond. Trees flew towards him at rocket speed but then stopped on a dime. The ground and sky did the same. He turned wildly and shielded his face with his arms. He thought that he was going to be crushed.

When it all stopped he was still by the birdhouses. Everything looked the same as it did before any of this happened. The only difference was that Russell was standing next to him looking confused and concerned.

"What's going on here? Are you OK?" Russell asked. "Did you get lost?" Then looking him over he continued, "And what happened to your hands? It wasn't snakes again, was it?"

Thomas just stared at him with slack jaw.

"You look dazed," continued Russell. "Maybe you should come over here and sit down and collect yourself. What happened? Did you fall down and knock yourself out or something? I saw you heading into the woods but I was quite a ways away and you know how slow I can be at times. I thought that maybe I'd catch up and show you my birdhouses. I didn't think that you'd ever seen them before. Then I heard some yells. I thought that maybe there was a fight going on or that...um...you-know-who was back and got you. But it takes me a while to get anywhere especially when the ground is uneven. And I must admit, after what happened to me out here last week, I was a little hesitant to, um, get involved again. By the time I got here you were just staring off into space. I waited for a bit just to make sure that I wasn't going to spook you and then I put my hand on your shoulder. It was like I shocked you with a cattle prod. So what went on here and why are your hands cut up?"

Thomas was listening but he was still too rattled to talk. He was looking around trying to determine if this was real or if he was imagining it. Then he heard Russell's voice again.

"Was it the snakes again?"

Thomas looked up and replied slowly, almost mechanically, "no, no, not this time."

"Then what? If you don't want to talk right now we can go back. Then you can gather yourself and tell me what happened."

"OK, let's do that," Thomas replied in almost a whisper.

Russell gingerly helped Thomas up and turned him back towards town. Then they limped back. For Russell it was like he was helping his grandmother get from one room to the next. It was a long, silent trip. Finally they reached the Donnelee's house. Toni and her mother were busy putting away groceries. At the sight of Thomas they rushed over and helped him to the table.

"We wondered where you vanished off to. What happened? You shouldn't be out on your foot like that. You need to let it heal more." Mrs. Donnelee said with a high-pitched staccato.

"I found him out in the woods by my birdhouses. He was pretty weirded out," explained Russell.

"Your birdhouses?" asked Toni rather bewildered.

"Don't worry about it right now," answered Russell. "I'll show you them sometime."

Thomas finally spoke but in a low, cautious tone. He spoke into the table. "I was feeling sorry for myself so I went out into the woods to mope. I was sitting on a rock when all of a sudden everything went black. I thought that a branch hit me in the head and put me into a coma. I thought that years had gone by and that I was in a nursing home with balloons tied to my feet. I guess that in reality it was really only a few minutes."

At this the other three looked at each other. Thomas gingerly felt all around his head.

"That's weird, I don't have any bumps on my head from the branch." He paused in confusion. "I was yelling and crying and one point I fell down and cut my hands, but I couldn't see on what. In fact, I couldn't see

anything. I couldn't hear anything either. Then I felt something touch me and everything came back again. I, I don't know what happened. Maybe I passed out but I seemed to be conscious the whole time. I don't know."

Mrs. Donnelee put her hand on Thomas' shoulder. "We know what happened."

Thomas looked up for the first time. The three of them were staring at him.

"It was a Narciss," she continued.

"A Narciss," repeated Thomas. "Oh, of course. Now I feel much better."

She gave him a minor scolding look and then continued. "A Narciss is an invisible entity that, we believe, roams everywhere. It seems to be impervious to walls or trees or anything for that matter. It just passes through things like it is half in our dimension and half in another. It appears to have but one purpose, to seek out those who are firmly and completely focused on themselves usually due to self-pity. Then it engulfs them and sucks them inside, rather amoebae-like.

"Once inside, the person, in a sense, gets his wish; the only world that exists is his own. There is no interference from other people's needs or opinions, there are no confrontations or annoying conversations. He is always right and whenever he wants an agreeable opinion, he can just give it to himself. It is as though he has climbed into a coffin and pulled the lid on top. He is now safe and perfectly entrenched on the one planet that he craves for the most—the planet of himself. He can think whatever he wants and no one will contradict him. He can do whatever he wants (to a degree) and no one will scold him. It is all rather tidy."

"But it was horrible," proclaimed Thomas. "Who would ever want that?"

Mrs. Donnelee answered, "Ah, and that's the rub. You don't have to put up with those things that you find disagreeable but neither do you have the good. You will never grow, you will never learn, you will never change. A world with just yourself in it is not only lonely and sterile but also quite colorless and barren. Your world may be just the way that you want it but it is also quite shallow.

"There is a proverb that says, 'Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of the ox.' If you want your life to be predictable and easy that can be achieved by getting rid of as much as you can including friends and family. But if you want strength then you need to bond and work with others. That may mean a lot of fixing and removing the garbage but in the end it is always worth it. A manager with oxen in it may stink sometimes but the harvest is tenfold richer."

Thomas said, "But obviously it isn't too hard to get out. I did."

"It may be harder than you think. The key is that you must stop thinking only about yourself and start thinking about others, wishing good for them, missing them, wanting to be with them. Some never want to leave. That doesn't happen often, in fact, it is quite rare, but it does sometimes."

Thomas again, "What happens then?"

"They lose all contact with reality and so are unable to function at all. They usually get locked up. But those are the extreme cases."

Thomas, "But what seemed really weird is that Russell could see and hear me but I couldn't see or hear anything."

"Except yourself," remarked Russell.

"Yes, except myself," he replied sheepishly.

Toni joined in the conversation. "That is because you were still actually in reality even though from your perspective you were on your own lonely, little planet. So everyone who is also in reality, which would be pretty much everyone else, could see you but you could only see yourself."

"If you remember," chimed in Russell, "the Narciss is invisible so no one can see it; however, everyone can still see you. But once inside, you are now in its world or, more precisely, your world. It may be invisible from the outside, but from the inside it is a thick darkness."

Toni added, "That is why you fell. You were still walking in the woods even though you didn't know it. You must have tripped over a branch or a rock. It's like walking around in a big paper bag, everything is dark and clumsy but you are still on Earth. And everyone else can see you stumbling about. They may try to warn you about things, but, of course, you don't listen to any of them even if you could hear them because you are always right. Remember, in the world of the Narciss you are the only one who counts."

Thomas asked, "So how did I get out?"

"We don't know," said Mrs. Donnelee. "What were you thinking about just before Russell tapped you on the shoulder?"

"Um, I was thinking about how everyone was doing and what had happened to each one of you after all these years, or supposed years."

“Well, there you go,” Toni remarked. “Now you know how you got out. You were already right on the edge. Russell’s tap just made it easier. But if you stayed focused on yourself then he could have slugged you in the head and you would still be in there.”

Thomas thought for a bit. Then he straightened up. “Does everyone around here know about all of these creatures except for me? What else am I going to run into?”

Though a weak, unconvincing grin Toni said, “You really don’t want to know.”

That did not exactly comfort Thomas. Actually he slumped back down.

Russell smiled at Thomas and slapped him on the shoulder. “Well, we’re all in this together. We’ve all survived quite a lot in these last few weeks and yet we’re still together. That has to mean something.”

Thomas looked up at Toni. “You had twins. Two little girls.”

Toni took a startled step back.

That night in a particularly deep sleep, Thomas did not notice the cold tongue slowly skimming the skin of his arm or the unblinking black eyes staring gravely at his every twitch with all of them greedily suckling his fears and anxieties.

18 The Plan

The cynical see a plan and say, "It won't work,"
the fearful see a plan and say, "Let's wait for something better,"
the lazy see a plan and say, "Let someone else do it,"
the ambitious see a plan and say, "Let's make it work."

Thomas woke up the next morning feeling strangely anxious and yet, in another way, he was feeling better than he had in a while. Yes, his friends were there for him. He sat up in bed and inhaled the breakfast that Mrs. Donnelee was crafting.

Sarah had heard about what had happened and wanted to hear it from Thomas' mouth. After all, he was the first person that she knew who had ever been inside a Narciss.

The four got together in the park. It was a crystal clear day with a refreshing breeze. It was a day that almost washed away the last few weeks.

At Sarah's prodding Thomas reluctantly shared the story about the Narciss. Sarah was full of questions but Toni sensed that Thomas did not want to relive the experience that deeply again so she tried to cut the account to the quick.

They talked about the change in Floyd and his family although one was getting worse while the other three were doing much better. Toni commented, "I noticed that in the couple of weeks right after the Niss that Floyd sat at the very back of the church while his wife and children sat up front in their usual places."

Russell added, "And last week was the first time that I didn't see him in church at all."

"But the rest of his family was there," put in Toni.

Everyone looked contemplative.

Finally Sarah spoke out. "Well, what do you think?"

"About what?" replied Toni.

"What do you think about what is going on?" Sarah answered. "I mean, we've never had this many creepy things going on all at once."

Thomas cut in, "I think 'evil' would be a better word."

"Well, you like puzzles, Thomas. Isn't this like one big puzzle?" Sarah had something deliberate in mind that no one else was getting at the moment.

Thomas appeared confused. "A puzzle? What are you talking about?"

Sarah took a rather serious posture. "Think about it. In the last few weeks we had the Niss, a Narciss, really big rats, a snake-man, several large men, an influx of creepy visitors, and, as if that wasn't enough, the Devil."

Thomas added, "Don't forget about the angst-feeders." He started to feel bad again.

Sarah continued with purpose, almost enthusiastically. "See, we rarely get any of those things let alone all of them all at once. Something is going on. We just need to put the pieces together. See, it's like a puzzle." She sat up straight waiting for the light bulb to come on in everyone's head. However, no one stirred. Sarah became disappointed and tried once again to rally everyone to her idea.

"Don't you see? Why is all of this happening? Why here and why now? I'm sure that the Devil has better things to do than hang around Jabesh. We're a nothing town in the middle of nowhere. Why is he here? Any why are all of the other things here?"

The others began to stir. Sarah was beginning to feel vindicated. She continued, "In my lifetime (which admittedly isn't all that long) we've never had any of these things. Now it's as if they've all been summoned here for a reason. The question is, 'What is that reason?'" She felt that she had made a brilliant summation to the jury and that they had no choice to return a favorable verdict. She waited.

Toni spoke first. "Sarah's got a point." Sarah squared her shoulders and tried to suppress her confidence. "Something is going on here. The last time the Niss were here my grandfather was a boy. I remember him telling us the story. Let's face it, an awful lot of particularly bad things have happened lately."

Russell added, "And we've had an awful lot of visitations by bad people and bad things; particularly some of us. Something or someone is attracting them here."

"So what is it?" asked Thomas.

"You're the puzzle boy," affirmed Sarah. "That's what we're hoping you'll figure out."

Thomas quickly shot back, "Everybody else here knows way more about these things than I do. You're the ones who should be figuring this out. I'm only here for the summer."

"You know," Sarah alleged, "all this seemed to start when you got here. Are you sure that you didn't bring them?"

Thomas looked exasperated.

"I'm only kidding," Sarah said. She was going to lightly punch Thomas on the shoulder, but Thomas sulked so she left it alone.

To break the tension Russell took a swig from his glass and proclaimed, "The water from the fountain is particularly good today."

Sarah knit her eyebrows and looked intensely at nothing. Her mouth twisted. Everyone else silently scratched at the table or played with their fingers. Suddenly Sarah bolted upright. "I know the answer!"

Everyone quickly looked at her. Toni spoke. "You do? You've figured it out already?" She paused in amazement. Then she said, "So what is it? What's the answer?"

"Water," Sarah proclaimed loudly. She then looked rather pleased.

"Water?" Russell looked more confused than ever.

"Yes, water," answered Sarah.

Thomas was even more confused than Russell "What are you talking about?"

"Water. That's the answer to your last riddle. Remember when we were sitting at the bench just before that guy got into the car with Terese? I forget exactly how it goes but it was something about you can't burn it but it can burn you. It can move big things but is small enough to hold in your hand. The answer is water." She leaned back and crossed her arms in front of her chest. She did not even bother to conceal her triumphant smile.

Thomas spoke hesitantly. "I, um, guess that you, um, won that one."

"OK," said Toni, "since we're apparently in a riddle solving mood let's get back to tackling the big one. Let's see what we can come up with. All of these... horrors have come here for a reason. They want something here in Jabesh. What can it be?"

"Wait a second," Russell responded, "maybe they don't want anything here in Jabesh."

Sarah returned from her victory pedestal back to the grave situation at hand. "Then why are they here?"

Russell continued, "Maybe they are going someplace else and are just gathering here. You know how troops gather at some agreed on place before heading out to the battlefield. Maybe this is where they are gathering before heading out."

"Then why are they causing trouble?" asked Sarah. "It seems that if they were merely gathering here then they would lay low. And anyway, why here? Why not gather somewhere deep in the woods where no one will see them?"

"And besides," suggested Toni, "they've been here for a while. And those creepy guys, you know, the ones that seduced Floyd and Terese and—from what I understand, some others—they came in and took jobs. They are planning on being here a while."

"And another thing," added Sarah, "the Niss came and went. It's not like they are hanging around and waiting. I don't think that this is merely a gathering place. I think that Jabesh is the battlefield."

That last remark startled Thomas out of his pout. "OK," he said, "then we have to figure out what is in Jabesh that they want. It's time to start putting the pieces together."

"It could either be a person or a thing. Let's start with the idea that it might be a person. It seems that no one person is the focus of these attacks. Terese was ensnared by Peter. Floyd was baited by what's-his-name. There have been others that were also roped in by these new comers."

Sarah jumped in, "My neighbor, Dan, I think was one of them."

"There you go," Thomas affirmed. "Plus each one of us except for Sarah has been attacked. So I don't think that there is any one person that they are after."

Toni's "hmm" stopped anyone else from talking. Then she said, "It may not just be one person. Maybe they are after a number of people although that does seem rather farfetched since it is hard to see a connection between all of those people."

"So then that leaves a thing," suggested Russell. "But what? If this were a movie it would be some ancient relic or book that would give power to the forces of evil so that they can overthrow God, or something like that."

Thomas responded, "As silly as that might seem, let's examine it anyway. We shouldn't dismiss anything out of hand. Does anyone know of anything unusual in this town? Maybe a rumor about something hidden in a church."

Everyone thought for a while. Then they all mumbled variations of, "No, nothing that I can think of."

Thomas pressed on, "Is there a history of some settler or strange gentleman who passed by the town and left something?"

There was again a long moment of contemplation. Then several, "No, nothing that I ever heard about."

"What about people's souls?" asked Sarah. "Maybe that's what they want."

Russell said, "I doubt that the 'souls' here are any tastier than anywhere else." Sarah shot him a look. He continued, "It's too much firepower for just a few souls. It's got to be something more important, more special or unique."

"Well then we're just going to have to do a little scouting around," proposed Sarah.

Russell got a bit boisterous, "That's easy for you to say! You're the only one here who hasn't been attacked. The rest of us were nearly killed. I don't think that the rest of us have much blood left."

Toni felt the need to defuse the situation. "Speaking of which, Russell. How did you go from being passed out in the woods to being at your front door? I rather doubt that Satan took pity and brought you home."

Russell seemed uneasy. "I've wondered that myself."

"I have a suspicion about that," said Thomas.

Russell anxiously looked up. "What?"

"Remember how you said that just before you passed out you saw the shapes of people out beyond the earthquake or whatever it was?"

"Yea?"

"I've wondered if that might have been Jocum and some of his buddies. And that he carried you home."

"But there were a number of them. You've only mentioned Jocum, Seth, and the guy in the car," Russell stated.

"Abil," Toni interrupted.

"Yea, him. But I think that I saw more than that."

Thomas thought for a moment. "That's the only ones that we've seen. How do we know that there aren't more?" He paused. "Another clue that it was one of them was the bag of wafers that were left with you. Somehow that seems to be their trademark."

"Or at least Jocum's trademark," Toni affirmed. "The big guys seem to be on our side. But anyway, that is all a side matter, what are we going to do about the not-so-good guys...things?"

Sarah seized the opportunity. "Like I was saying, maybe we should do some investigating."

Toni shuddered and looked sideways at Thomas. "The last time anybody tried to do that it became a crisis."

Sarah agreed, "Well, we don't have to go hunting them down where they live. I'm talking about going to churches, talking to the pastors and priests and see if there is any history there that we don't know about. Maybe someone should go down to the library and see if anyone wrote a history of Jabesh. Things like that. I'm not suggesting that anyone charge with head down and lance in hand into the enemy's lair."

No one seemed particularly enthused so Sarah tried more convincing. "Admittedly it's a rather fetal plan, but if we want to figure out this puzzle we need to gather more pieces."

"Sarah's right," Thomas added reluctantly. "If we are going to figure out anything we need more information." Toni and Russell fidgeted. "It should be fairly safe." Toni rolled her eyes; Russell sunk his head into his hands. "How about we split up this way?"

Russell's head snapped up, "Hey, I don't remember green-lighting any plan."

Thomas gently responded, "We're all in this together and without each other we'll never get anything figured out. We each have a necessary role. If one of us cuts out then the whole thing falls apart. It's more dangerous if fewer of us are involved."

Russell countered, "Why don't we just get the Yellow Pages and look up suicidal spies? That would make our roles just that much easier."

Thomas ignored him. "Sarah, since you were the one who suggested going to the library why don't you..."

19 Sleuthing

Knowledge does not walk in the door and sits down opposite you.
It must be chased down the block, around corners, over fences, and tackled, pinned down, and interrogated,
and even then you must ask the right questions.

Sarah's assignment was to go to the library to see if there were any books on the history of Jabesh specifically if ever some ancient wayfarer passed through the town during a tumultuous time. Perhaps he left something that was now drawing everyone's—or more properly, everything's—attention.

“If we have anything at all on Jabesh it would be in the original section of the library.” The librarian pointed past Sarah to a singular door on the opposite end.

Whereas the new part of the library was glass and metal the original section was bricks and stones. It was not lit very well and had the mustiness of her great-grandparents' house. There were only around ten aisles of books but they were each very long and every one was quite packed with books. No one ever came into this part.

She wandered up and down the first two rows and scanned the general topics of each section. There was nothing of interest, mostly a lot of old tomes that nobody even touched for the last fifty years. She stared at a few of them and wondered that if she tried to remove them if they would simply crumble into dust.

Going down the third aisle the title on one of the spines caught her attention. “Monstrosities and Horrors. What a cheery title. Maybe they'll be something in here about what we've been running into.”

She pulled out the book. As she did, she noticed that the space where the book had been extended clear through to the other side. For some reason she felt compelled to casually peer into the space. Her eyes grew wide and she recoiled in panic. Leering at her from the opposite end was a malevolent face, its eyes tight with rage. She dropped the book and its corner landed right on top of her foot. She hopped up and down and grabbed her aching foot. She looked up again and the face was gone. Realizing that she was on the verge of hyperventilating she put her hand on her chest and took deep breaths. After a few seconds she bent down and picked up the book.

“I better get out of here,” she thought. She turned to her right to exit the aisle. Only a few feet away from her was a very tall, willowy man standing at the end of the aisle and blocking her way. It was the same one who was just glaring at her. His arms were longer and thinner than normal. He was staring her down with that same look of fury.

She once again dropped the book and hastily backpedaled. Her throat was paralyzed. The willowy man very deliberately raised his arms and put his hands on each end of the shelves; his head jugged forward.

When Sarah was three-quarters of the way down the aisle she heard a loud bang behind her. She let out a little scream and nearly jumped as high as the top shelf. She quickly turned around and saw that the two ends of the shelves had come together thereby blocking her way. She was trapped. She spun around and looked down the aisle towards the man. He was leaning forward with his hands still on the shelves. His eyes flared with anger.

She knew that if he charged her there was nothing she could do. She tried to scream but her breath got caught in her throat. She heard another bang behind her. She snapped her head around. The shelves were coming together like a zipper that is closing. What was the better fate—being crushed or running into...?

She hastened away from the collapsing shelves. As she got closer to the man she could see a sinister grin forming. He licked his lips. The banging of the shelves was coming closer. When she got to within ten feet of the man she threw herself on the floor and frantically kicked several feet of books through the shelves and onto the floor on the other side. The converging shelves were now just feet away and coming fast.

With an adrenaline rush that would have made an Olympic sprinter proud, she pushed herself through the opening. Actually the last half was easier because that was when that shelf violently slid towards the middle of the aisle and slammed into the shelf opposite it. The result was that she slid right through and into the next aisle. She sprang to her feet. If she ran to her right she had to go all the way down to the far end. But if she ran to her left she would have to pass right near where the willow man was and one of those long arms could easily grab her. She ran to the right with all that she had. As she was running she could hear the shelves opening up again and pounding steps keeping pace with her on her right on the other side of the shelves.

There was only one door out of this section and he was closer to it than she was. She had no idea what she was going to do other than to run. She reached the end of the aisle and without even looking ran to her left using the end of the shelving to swing as quick a turn as possible. She had her head down and was not even aware that she was heading towards the final aisle and the corner of the room where it was the darkest. Behind her she heard a hissing.

Then she hit something that knocked her backward onto the ground. She cringed waiting for the willow man to smother her. Instead, all that she heard was that same hissing sound like steam escaping through teeth. She looked up and saw towering over her a large man. Twisting her head around she could see the willow man advancing with determination though he had stopped running. His eyes were locked onto her. She got up and ran behind the large man and put her arms around his waist and peered out from behind his left arm. The willow man kept coming. His rage was unabated. Sarah's fingers dug into the large man's arm. She felt a lump coming up her throat.

And then the willow man suddenly stopped. He narrowed his eyes as he glared to the large man's right. Sarah looked up at the large man who was looking with surprise at the man next to him. It was another very large man. His fists were clenched and the muscles in his arms were tight. He was staring down the willow man.

For several seconds there was a standoff. Sarah was too afraid to even faint. None of the four moved. They each glared at each other as if in a dual. Then the willow man spit a black lump at the feet of the second large man and turned and left. Sarah let her breath go and then slumped to the floor with a thump and cried. Her research at the library was finished; she was going to return her library card.

After letting her expel her nerves with a good cry, the second man helped her to her feet. "My name is Abil and this," he pointed to the man that Sarah was standing next to, "is Seth." While she clung to him, Abil guided her out of the library and to her house with Seth leading the way keeping an eye out for any trouble. When they got to her door Abil handed her a book. "Maybe this is what you were looking for."

She took the book and blankly stared at it. Everything was still blurry. It was not until later that night when she was more settled that she actually looked at the book and was able to read the title—"The history of Jabesh."

Thomas was sitting in Pastor Goldsmith's office. After the usual formalities and general questions Thomas cut to the chase. "So, pastor, are there any, um, hidden objects or rooms in this church?"

The pastor leaned back in his chair and gently chuckled. "Are you on some kind of treasure hunt, Thomas?"

"Um, no, not really. I've just heard that, um, there is a lot of history associated with Jabesh and I thought that, um, while I'm here this summer that I might check some of it out."

"And one aspect of this history that you've heard about is that there is some secret hidden in this church?" The pastor was playing along.

"Well, no, not really. But I thought that it might be as interesting a place to start as any. This is the oldest church in town and, I mean, don't lots of churches have things hidden in them? I mean, like relics, or ancient books, or..."

"The bones of martyrs?" The pastor chuckled.

Thomas looked down. He knew that he looked silly.

The pastor, seeing that Thomas was feeling humiliated, seized the situation. "Well, I've only been here for five years and the church is over 50 years old so I don't know everything about it." Thomas looked up. The pastor continued. "But, as you know, running the entire length of the sanctuary is the basement and it is all classrooms. The floors down there are solid concrete. I don't think that there is anything buried under there. The walls are also pretty solid. But you are welcome to go down and investigate yourself."

"The rest of the church is pretty simple. There isn't any room for false walls."

Thomas looked pensive. "What about the attic?"

"There really isn't much of an attic. I've only seen it once and it is quite claustrophobic and certainly quite empty."

"And the steeple?" Thomas wondered. "Have you ever seen inside of it?"

"Inside the steeple? No, but I can't imagine anyone storing something in there."

"Why not?"

"Because the only way into the attic is through the closet in the secretary's office and the steeple is on the other side of the church. You'd have to practically crawl all of the way across the attic. It wouldn't be fun." The pastor could see Thomas mulling this over. "But you are welcome to check it out. You're smaller than me so it might not be quite so bad for you."

Thomas perked up. This was the only possibility left. If anything at all were hidden in this church it would have to be in the steeple. "Do you think that there is anything there?"

The pastor leaned forward and said with a good-natured sinister sneer, "Only bats, most likely. And we don't want you disturbing them. They're the good guys. Without them we'd be slapping mosquitoes ten times as much."

Thomas knew that bats are harmless but, still, he did not want a face full of them. He hesitated. Then he looked up and said, "Do you have a flashlight?"

Upstairs, the pastor opened the closet door. Thomas turned on the flashlight and stepped in. There was no wall on one side, only a few crude steps that lead up to the attic. And, yes, the pastor was right; it was a very tight attic. The roof slanted at a steep angle on either side and only the middle was maneuverable and was only three-foot high at that. Thomas took a deep breath and shone the light down the center to the opposite end where the steeple was. It looked like the longest 100 feet that he had ever seen. There was no floor, only joists at sixteen inches apart.

Thomas looked back at the pastor who just shrugged. Thomas turned towards the steeple and started his way down. The air was motionless and so thick that it felt as though it was half air and half particles from old insulation. Taking precise sixteen-inch steps on the edge of boards while in a tight crouch in heat over 100 degrees is not the formula for a joyful time. But with great deliberation, Thomas crept his way across the attic. By the time he was only halfway there the sweat was already dripping off of his chin onto the joists. He could hear behind him, "Thomas, how are you doing?" He replied that all was OK.

"For all of this trouble," he thought, "I better find something good."

Eventually he made it to the edge of the steeple just as he thought his legs were going to permanently cramp. He gingerly sat on a joist and stretched out each leg. There was a large opening that went high up into the darkness. The floor under the opening was covered with a kind of gunk. He really did not want to step in it so he contorted his body so that he could keep his feet outside the gunk but still see all of the way up. He slowly aimed his flashlight up the steeple.

He strained to figure out what he was looking at. Instead of smooth walls or at least familiar studs everything was jagged and irregular. The smell was horrid. Then it dawned on him that there were hundreds of shapes. He looked more intently. It was not just shapes but hundreds, if not, thousands of eyes staring down at him. He thought of the Niss and in his panic he lost his balance and fell with a yelp into the gunk.

The shapes were startled and with high-pitched sounds swirled wildly within the steeple.

Thomas was stiff with fear but managed to cover his face with his arms. In that place he could not run nor could he fight. This was the end, he thought, he would be torn to pieces. He tensed and waited. He could feel things brushing quickly against his face and hands again and again. The sound was terrifying.

But then the screeching gradually ceased and the shapes settled down. Thomas took one quick glance around the steeple with his light and then with twice the speed made his way back to the closet.

"Whew," said the pastor pinching his nose. "Looks like you were rolling around in some guano. I thought that only dogs liked to roll around in stuff like that."

"Guano?" Thomas's clothes and hair was covered in the stuff.

"Bat poop. From all of the noise that I heard I guess that you did manage to disturb them. But hopefully no harm was done. Follow me." He went to lead Thomas by the arm but quickly withdrew once he remembered what Thomas was plastered with.

"I keep an extra set of clothes in my office. You, um, might seriously want to consider changing your clothes. And it might not be a bad idea to rinse your hair in the sink in the bathroom. I can give you a towel."

Toni's task was to visit all of the town's old-timers and anyone else who kept an eye on things to see if she could discover anything bizarre or significant.

She thought that the first place to go that morning would be the nursing home. There had to be some people there who remember stories regarding when the town was first built. She asked at the desk who was the oldest person there who was still lucid. They brought her up to the third floor. When they entered the room there was small raison-like man sitting in a chair by the window. He did not move even when they came right up next to him.

The nurse spoke loudly. "Pop, this is Toni. She'd like to ask you a few questions about the town." The nurse turned to Toni, "Everyone calls him Pop. He turned 98 a couple of weeks ago." She motioned over towards the wall. "Go bring that chair over here."

Toni retrieved the chair and faced it towards the man. The nurse signaled for her to sit down. When Toni did she had a better look at Pop. His eyes were closed. She looked up at the nurse. "He's asleep. What should I do? Maybe I should come back later." The nurse just shook her head and gently put her hand on his shoulder. His eyes slowly opened and with eyes like blueberries looked right at Toni. Then he got a big smile.

"So, I have a visitor. Are you coming to take me to the dance? I can still cut a rug with the best of them," he chuckled.

The nurse left and the two struck up a lively conversation. Pop was more lucid than many of her classmates. Eventually Toni got around to Jabesh.

“Yes, our little town seems to be quite the lightning rod for strange happenings. Twice since I’ve been alive the Niss plundered our town. The first time was the worse. I was only around ten. After they left a lot of people just seemed to go crazy. There was a lot of crime and several murders. The jail filled up and some of the worse ones were sent to the state penitentiary.

“The second time was maybe forty years later. From what I know it was unusual for them to come that closely together. But by then things were getting better in town and they didn’t wreck as much havoc. We still had a number of people affected but nothing like the first time.”

“How did they compare to this last time?” Toni asked.

Pop looked puzzled. “This last time?”

“Oh, never mind about that.” Toni figured that they must have moved everyone into a large inner room and no one was the wiser. “So what do you think brings them here?”

He knit his eyebrows. “Brings them here?”

“You know, is it a great persistent wind? Is it a dry spell? What rouses them and brings them to Jabesh every so often?”

Pop folded his hands in his lap and tilted his head ever so slightly, “I don’t know, my dear, I’m not a theologian.”

“A theologian? What does theology have to do with it?”

“The Niss aren’t cicada. They don’t crawl out of the ground every 17 years and descend on some town. They just don’t just happen.’ They are directed.”

“Directed? By who?”

“There is only person who can direct such an evil horde,” replied Pop.

“God?”

Pop twisted the corner of his mouth, “OK, two persons, but God is not the one who directs such horror.”

“Then it must be Satan. Are you saying that the Devil determines when the Niss should gather and where they should go?”

“Exactly.”

“But why Jabesh and why now?”

Pop reached forward and put the tip of his index finger on Toni’s knee. “That is for you to figure out.”

Russell had what appeared to be the easiest task of all. He had to go to the other six churches in town and see if they had anything hidden. Two of the pastors viewed him as having a serious case of lunacy whereas the other four merely humored him. There was no crawling through any attics for him, but there were no answers either.

20 Antagonizing

Be careful whom you antagonize
for they may run faster than you

The four gathered at the gazebo the next morning and shared their findings. The only thing that Russell had to say was that he felt like an idiot going to the pastors and asking if there were anything “unusual” hidden in their churches. “I think that some of them thought that I was looking to rob the place.”

Thomas, likewise, did not have much to contribute. He was too embarrassed to tell anyone about falling in the guano so his story came down to he crawled around in the attic and did not find anything.

It was Sarah’s turn and she was almost jumping with impatience. With everyone’s wide-eyed attention she breathlessly recounted the incident in the library.

When she finally paused at the end Toni concluded, “So Seth and Abil rescued one of us again. Thank God they’re here. Does anyone have any idea who they are?”

“Wait a minute,” Sarah cut in. “I’m not quite finished.”

“There’s more?” wondered Russell.

“Just before they escorted me out of the library and back home they gave me a book.” She zipped open the pouch that she was carrying and pulled out a thin, worn book. “It’s a history of Jabesh. It’s not very long and I read the whole thing last night.”

“Wow, it must be a real pot-boiler,” proclaimed Russell.

“Actually, most of it is a pot of cold water. But the first chapter is the most interesting of all.

“Jabesh was founded some 200 years ago by a cultic religious group. Apparently, their leader was some nut job who preached that he was the only one who had discovered the hidden truth about God and the universe.”

Toni interrupted, “It seems like there’s always some loony like that somewhere.”

Sarah continued, “He managed to convince a few hundred people. They converted an abandoned warehouse into their temple. Then he got in trouble with the law—I forget why... Oh, wait a minute, now I remember; he swindled some money from the town’s hot shots. Yea, that’s right. I remember now. Anyway, they jailed him and were talking about hanging him. But a group of his people stormed the jail and shot some of the guards and got him out. I guess that he had been giving them orders from jail because once they sprang him they all gathered on the edge of town and left. Nobody went after them because they didn’t have the firepower to confront such a large group of armed men and, besides, they were just as happy to be rid of them.”

“Let ‘em be someone else’s headache,” Toni mused.

“However, the leader and his people didn’t know that nobody was after them and so they kept going like their tails were on fire. They zigzagged across the country thinking that they weren’t caught yet because they were being so clever in their escape. Little did they know that no one cared. Eventually after several months they wound up here.”

Thomas interjected, “But why settle here? There’s nothing here. It’s not even a stopping point to somewhere else.”

Sarah answered, “That’s exactly why they stopped here. They felt that it was safely out of the way and that no one would bother them here. They used to practice weird rituals and apparently work themselves up into frenzies. They would sacrifice animals and carry on deep into the night.

“It turned out that they were a nasty bunch of folks. Despite having lots of children—although apparently with a lot of wife and husband swapping—their numbers never really grew because instead of practicing forgiveness they worshipped revenge. Someone was always trying to blindside someone else with a shovel to the back of a head or a bullet from a dark corner. They were also a pretty boozy group and grew their own hallucinogens. Also, they were really into Satan worship. If you could name a sin they perfected it.”

Toni remarked, “And I bet gambling and stealing and wife beating and child abuse were all in the mix.”

Sarah picked up the story, “Eventually Jabesh developed quite a liking among the scoundrels in the rest of the part of the country and attracted quite a number of them. The Leader tried to maintain some kind of control but everyone pretty much did what they wanted to do. There wasn’t any law; even the army steered clear. The book even mentions that there were some giants among them.”

“Giants?” Toni questioned.

Sarah replied, "Not like fifty feet tall or anything like that. More like eight feet tall. But still, you don't find people that tall today."

Sarah finished the history lesson. "This went on for well over a good hundred years until the entire country became more civilized and lawless towns like Jabesh were eventually tamed." At this point Sarah took a deep breath and let everyone mull that over.

Finally Toni spoke. "What about the rest of the book? Was there anything else that was significant?"

Sarah replied, "The book was written just over sixty years ago so it doesn't contain anything recent. The rest of the chapters were as interesting as watching hair grow. I actually fell asleep a few times."

Toni directed her question at Thomas who was sitting there quietly staring off into the distance. "Any thoughts?"

Thomas looked pensive. "No, just trying to figure out what, if anything, that adds to the puzzle."

Toni was the last to go and, like Sarah, was getting fidgety. "OK, you're turn," coaxed Sarah looking at Toni.

Toni first relayed the interview with Pop. Everyone thought for a while but did not know what to make of it other than Russell noting that he did have an encounter with Satan so they know that he is in the area and that, therefore, Pop is probably correct in that the Devil is orchestrating what is going on.

Toni continued, "After talking to several other people at the nursing home, none of which had anything interesting to say, I went to a couple of other old-timers around town.

"I learned that seven new people suddenly appeared in town in the last few months. Each one of them came alone, each one is rather unfriendly and detached, and each one attached himself or herself to someone whom they eventually corrupted. But here is the interesting part, in all seven cases the person that they attached themselves to goes to our church. There was Floyd Fullman, Jackie (I can't remember her last name), Peter Eggers, Joey Riddledale, Melinda Nemes, and... and someone else whom I can't seem to remember right now."

Russell spoke rather hesitantly and meekly, "Terese."

Thomas grinned, "Of course. No surprise that you remembered that one." Russell turned red.

Toni added as an upbeat, "But I heard that Jackie came back."

"That's great," remarked Thomas. "What about the others?"

"I haven't heard anything one way or the other," answered Toni.

Sarah asked, "Was that it? Were there only seven? Is it possible that some others came into town, but we didn't hear about it because we don't know them?"

"I suppose that's it's possible," remarked Toni, "but unlikely because the people that I talked to seemed to have their finger on the pulse of Jabesh. If there was a seventh or eighth corrupter I think that they would have heard about it. Jabesh isn't all that big of a town so not much would slip on by."

"Did any of them have any thoughts as to what is going on?" questioned Thomas.

"I didn't really ask them. I didn't want to tip my hand as to what my real intentions were. That might have scared them."

"So true," remarked Russell. "Good move. It seems to me that whatever is going on is being directed at our church, after all, all seven of the creeps targeted our people. But why us?" He glanced sideways at Thomas. "So puzzle-man, is any of this information pieces to the puzzle? Is anything getting clearer?"

Thomas pursed his lips and stared at the floor. With each passing second everyone's hope diminished. Finally Thomas looked up. "I don't know. I don't know what to make about any of this. I have this deep feeling that there is some unifying theme, but I can't, for the life of me, figure it out. It is certainly much more complex than our usual puzzles like 'you remove my outer layer, eat my middle layer, and throw away my inner layer.'"

"Corn-on-the-cob," blurted out Sarah looking quite pleased. "That's an old one."

"Thank you, answer-girl," declared Russell with a bit of a bite.

Sarah looked defensive, "Well, that was the answer."

The rest of the morning was spent picking apart what they knew and trying to fit it back together in some way that resembled something, but nothing ever really fit. At noon they went over to the deli and got some food before heading over to a picnic bench. They were all worn out from the morning's topic and needed to talk about something light and insignificant. The Jabesh football team was just the right subject.

After lunch Russell had to go get Danielle, Sarah was going home to help her parents get tonight's picnic dinner ready, and Toni had to run some errands. "Why don't you come along and help, Thomas? I've got to pick up some things for dinner tonight." asked Toni.

"My foot's a little sore today. I think it is from walking on those narrow rafters yesterday. You go on ahead and I'll see you at dinner."

Yes, Thomas' foot did ache a bit but his real reason not to go was because he wanted some time alone to ponder the situation. He slowly walked to the edge of the park and sat down on a bench. He was thinking through each part of Toni and Sarah's information seeing if there was anything that needed to be researched further. "All of the original crazies," he thought, "what happened to them? Are they buried in a cemetery? Maybe there is something in the leader's coffin." Then he got a chill. Grave robbing was not on his resume. "Is there another question that needs addressing?" Then with a realization he sat up with a start. "Yes, that could be important."

He sprung to his feet and with determination headed to the library.

"I'm looking for Mr. Davis," he asked the person at the library desk.

"He is in his office right now. I can see his silhouette in the window. Just go knock on his door."

"Thank you." Thomas lightly rapped on Mr. Davis' door. He could see a hunched figure through the etched glass lift his head.

"Come in and be quick about it."

Thomas meekly opened the door and carefully jutted his head in as though he expected a baseball to be flung at it.

"Come in and sit down. What can I do for you?"

Thomas promptly took a seat and folded his hands in his lap. His eyes glanced around the room.

"I haven't got all day; what do you want?" Mr. Davis was not so much rude as efficient. He clearly did not fancy small talk and hesitancy drove him nearly to explode. Thomas figured he better cut to the quick before he got thrown out. Mr. Davis peered at Thomas in a still semi-hunched position.

"You're sort-of the town historian, Mr. Davis, and I have an important question for you. I hope that you can answer it. I understand that this town was started by a bunch of crazies..."

"You had better be careful how you label people." Mr. Davis narrowed his eyes. This rattled Thomas and he stammered.

"I, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Go on then."

"This religious group, they had a temple. Do you know what happened to it?"

Mr. Davis sat up as though on a spring. He stared at Thomas as he tried to determine the implication of the question. The answer was not as important as was why Thomas even knew to ask it.

He leaned forward and rested his chin on his hand as his fingers curled around his mouth. Thomas squirmed and looked around the room. After a long ten seconds he moved his hand away from his face. "Why do you ask this question?" His hand returned to his chin.

Thomas had been rehearsing this answer on the way over. He knew that it was an odd question and did not want Mr. Davis to get suspicious. So with a suspicious perkiness he said, "I've been studying the early years of Jabesh for a class project and am trying to get as much information as possible." He then forced a smile.

Mr. Davis' eyes became like slits. "You're not even from here. Why wouldn't you study your own town?"

Thomas did not expect anyone to challenge his answer; it had seemed reasonable enough. "Well, uh." Thomas' fingers rolled around each other. "Well, I, um." His lips went dry. "I, I like Jabesh." He could feel his every breath.

Mr. Davis leaned back in his chair. He brought both hands up to his face like he was praying, but he was doing anything but that. Finally his hands fell into his lap. Thomas half expected him to raise up a gun and shoot him pointblank in the chest screaming, "Take that you meddling little twit." Instead he said very quietly, "The temple became what is now the abandoned liquor factory."

Thomas' hair on the back of his neck stood up. He started to sweat and wanted only to bolt from the office. "Uh, thank you, that's all, um, that I wanted to know." He got up out of the chair. He started to reach over to shake Mr. Davis' hand but then stopped and turned.

"That's it? That's all that you wanted to ask." Mr. Davis stood up. He was much taller than Thomas expected.

Without looked back and while hurrying out Thomas replied, "Yes, yes, that's all that I need to know. Thank you." And with that he left the office.

Thomas rushed across the library and burst out the door. He felt as though he had just run ten miles. He saw a bench underneath a tree about 100 feet away and headed towards it. To Thomas it seemed like a hike across the country. He plopped down in it and just wanted to cry although he did not know why. He was catching his breath when he saw Mr. Davis exit the library with a scowl on his face. He was very seriously talking to someone on his cell phone. He did not see Thomas sitting under the tree. Thomas watched him disappear around the corner of the library. Then he got up and followed him. However, Thomas stopped at that corner and slowly peered around it. He was not in the mood for any surprises. Mr. Davis, though, was on a mission and was already striding rapidly across

the street. Thomas, ignoring his sore foot, shifted into a higher gear and followed him. He had to do all that he could to keep up the pace. This went on for several blocks and then Thomas lost him when he turned a corner. Thomas had turned the same corner but when he looked up the sidewalk Mr. Davis was nowhere to be seen. Then he looked sideways and stopped dead in his tracks. Directly across the street in front of the insurance building Mr. Davis was talking with much agitation to two very grim men. Thomas recognized one as the fellow who was with Terese that day at the back of the Laundromat and the other as the fellow who he followed with Toni to the old liquor warehouse.

Thomas was afraid that any movement would catch their eye, like a frog and a trio of snakes, so he just stood there staring at them. The more Mr. Davis talked the grimmer these two men got. Then Mr. Davis looked up and saw Thomas. He immediately stopped talking. The other two men looked over at Thomas also. Mr. Davis pointed right at Thomas and said something. Then all three turned and came right at him.

No point acting like a frozen frog now; all three snakes were coming to devour. Thomas turned on his heels and scooted around the corner. The three men broke into a gallop. For some reason at this time Thomas' foot decided to hurt. He ran past an alleyway with a fire escape but knew that there was no way that he would be able to climb a ladder with his foot being what it was.

"Hey, you, kid, stop!" The gruff voice was closer than Thomas expected. For some reason he did not think that grown men would actually run. He was quite wrong. Thomas broke into a full-throttle dash. Up ahead there was an old wooden fence between two buildings. There was a hole in it right at Thomas' size. He fell to his knees and crawled through. He slowed down his running and nearly stopped as he turned and looked at the hole. Now maybe he could catch some breath.

Just then boards flew everywhere as several legs kicked out the section of the fence where the hole was. Thomas knew now for certain that they did not want him just to ask a few simple questions. This was much more serious. Two of the men poked their heads through the hole and when they saw Thomas they angrily ripped out some hanging boards. Thomas ran across the lot and up the ten-foot hill at the back. At the top was a chain-link fence too tall for him to climb before they would reach him. He looked both ways. As far as he could tell the fence ran all along the top of the hill in a straight line for several hundred feet. There was no time to fully evaluate the situation. He sprinted to the right just as the men reached the bottom of the hill; Terese's "friend" climbed the hill while the other two chased Thomas along the bottom of the hill. Thomas was not in shape for this; already he was sucking air hard. He ran along the narrow ledge between the fence and the slant of the hill. Mr. Davis, who was already falling behind, had to stop.

Far up ahead Thomas could see a large tree had pushed the fence to the edge of the slant. If he tried to go around it he would surely slip on the grass on the slope and slide down the hill into the insurance man's hands. He could not go back. It looked like checkmate. He kept running. Giving up was not an option. These gentlemen did not seem like the type quick to give mercy.

As he approached the tree he could see a low branch about chest high. He thought that he might be able to duck under it and keep at a decent run whereas the man would almost have to stop and crawl under. That would buy him more time. Just as he was within a few feet of the branch Thomas panicked and his mind went blind. He crouched low to the ground but instead of ducking under the branch he leaped on it. He frantically grasped for any small branches growing out of this larger branch and scurried up with whichever ones he managed to grab. His feet pushed furiously. His hands and face were multiplying with scratches and cuts, but he continued making his way up the branch like a rabid squirrel.

Terese's man grabbed the branch and pulled it low, but this took two hands and so he had to wait for the other man to scramble up the hill. By the time he got there Thomas was out of reach. The man let the branch snap up, which nearly toppled Thomas. But he was now on the other side of the fence so he dropped to the ground. He was facing the fence. All three stared at each other. They were only two feet apart. Thomas could almost feel the fury in their eyes.

Floyd's co-worker thrust his arm through the fence and grabbed Thomas' sleeve with a vise grip. In that instant the man's arm turned smooth and pure white with things beneath the skin pushing out in various places before collapsing back in. This palpitating happened so frequently that it appeared as though his flesh was boiling. Thomas' eyes bulged with terror. He struggled twisting his arm back and forth but could not break his grip. The other man pushed his arm through the fence also trying to snatch at Thomas with his fingertips just catching Thomas' sleeve. Finally the shirtsleeve ripped and Thomas fell to the ground.

The two men grabbed the fence and shook it savagely. Thomas backed away and then got up and ran. He could hear loud hissing behind him growing more distant.

He headed for the grocery store hoping that Toni might still be there. He rapidly canvassed the aisles several times, but could not find her. One of the employees seeing him so wide-eyed and frantic asked him if he

needed help. Thomas looked at him like he was about to get mugged, quickly replied “no thanks” and took off again. He dashed out of the store.

He simply could not run anymore. He had to slow down to a quick pace. A few times he had to stop and bend over holding onto his pants to keep from toppling over. But he knew that he had to catch Toni before she got home since he could not say anything in front of her mother.

He reached the edge of Jabesh’s central park. He squinted hard and thought that he could see someone on the other side with a bag of groceries. He never realized just how big the park really was. Fortunately she was taking her time. The best that he could manage was several seconds of what might be called running alternately with a rapid walk. After several cycles of this he got within shouting distance.

“Toni! Toni!” The exertion almost knocked him to the ground. However she did stop and look around. She even looked at a chipmunk as though it might have been calling out to her. Thomas yelled again. This time she turned around and saw him. He squatted on the ground unable to go any further. She hurried over.

“What’s going on?! Did something happen? And why is your sleeve torn off?”

Thomas held up his hand while he caught his breath. When he seemed able, she helped him over to a bench. Between breaths Thomas gasped, “The two men... who got to Floyd and Terese... were after me. I barely... got away.” He stopped and gulped more air. He kept looking all around.

“Why were they after you? What did you do? You didn’t go back to the warehouse, did you?”

He shook his head “no,” took some deep breaths and then let out a long exhale. “I found out something that might be key.” He stopped dead. On the far side, the two men were rapidly checking out each building along the park. It appeared that there were several others with them. It would not be too long before they reached Thomas.

“Over there,” he pointed while hunkering down, “those are the men who are after me. I’ve got to go. I can’t let them know that you’re in on this, too.” He got up but stayed hunched over.

“Wait, you just can’t go like this.”

“I can’t stay here any longer. Then they’ll get the both of us.”

One of the men stopped and stared intently at where Toni and Thomas were. Thomas quickly ducked behind the bench which, if you are trying not to look suspicious, is probably not the way to act. The man took a few steps towards the bench to further evaluate the situation. Though the man was really quite a ways from their position, Thomas still felt the need to whisper while he was nearly lying prone. “What is he doing now?” But then hastily added, “But don’t be too obvious that you’re looking at him.”

Toni looked sideways. “He’s still staring over here. Wait. It looks like he’s shouting something to his other buddies. Now they’re all looking this way.”

Thomas felt as though all of his blood drained out of his body and through the slots in the bench. He could not stay there and yet, if he bolted, he could probably get away but that would expose Toni and they would swarm all over her. He could tell her to sprint, but was afraid to put her into the hunt also and besides, for all of her qualities, speed was not one of them.

“It looks like they’re coming this way,” Toni fretted.

Then Thomas noticed Toni’s neighbor, Mr. Keskes, walking his two Great Danes. “Toni, I’ve got an idea. Get Mr. Keskes over here—quickly.”

She looked puzzled but waved her arm and shouted, “Mr. Keskes, so good to see you.”

He smiled and pulled his dogs around. They tugged at the leashes when they saw Toni. The two dogs pretty much yanked Mr. Keskes over to the bench. Mr. Keskes looked down at Thomas who was still sprawled across the bench as though he were looking at someone dressed up as a lizard.

Thomas stammered, “Uh, hi, Mr. Keskes.” One of the dogs had its front paws on Toni’s lap while trying to lick her rapidly moving face. The other dog pressed its face into Thomas’. “I’m, um, playing a game of hide-and-seek and need your help. The, um, seekers are just on the other side of the park and they’re coming this way. Can you, um, do me a favor and, um, walk your dogs over to that row of rhododendrons over there and, um, I’ll follow you?”

Mr. Keskes was quite amused by this and laughed heartily, “Why certainly, Thomas. I love a good game.”

Thomas arced his head back towards Toni and said, “If I not home for dinner, which I doubt, just tell your mother that I got a last minute invitation at, um, somewhere else. And give her my apologies.”

Toni looked anxious, “Where are you going? When will you be home?”

“I don’t know. If I’m not home, I’ll, um, leave you note where to meet me.”

Mr. Keskes pulled Moses down from Toni’s lap much to her appreciation. “Come on, boys. We’ve got a game to play.” He then started to veer away from the bench. Thomas rolled off of the bench and, squatting very low so that his head was below the top of the dogs, walked between them. Mr. Keskes’ eyes twinkled splendidly and

even the dogs seemed quite amused. All four of them headed down the sidewalk towards the bushes while Thomas labored in that same squat position to keep up. Fortunately the rhododendrons were only 100 feet away.

"It's good he doesn't have poodles," thought Toni.

Once they reached the edge of the bushes, which were a good mature height of six foot, Thomas stood up, hurriedly thanked Mr. Keskes for his contribution to the game, and headed down to the end of the row where he was able to slink behind a maintenance building and peer around the corner.

As Toni watched Thomas and the dogs depart she could see the group of men hastening across the park towards her. She did not know what her reception would be: would they drag her off somewhere, pummel her right there, or rush past her straight to the rhododendrons? Whatever was going to happen it would not be sweet. She stared blankly at the ground for a few seconds and then picked up the bag of groceries and headed down the sidewalk in the opposite direction of the rhododendrons. It did not take long before they caught up to her.

"You there, stop!" she heard gruffly behind her.

She turned as calmly as if it were her mother adding one more item to a shopping list. Facing her were three men and two women. None of them appeared to be happy. Toni tried to affect a smile. One of the men spoke with forceful intimidation, "That boy that was on the bench with you, where did he go?" If Toni was not so focused on putting on a phony front she would have fainted.

"Boy," she replied. "What boy? There was no boy with me." Her vocal chords were as tight as a piano string. She had to make a deliberate effort not to look past them to where Thomas was hiding.

Another one of the men sneered and appeared as though he was making every effort to keep from grabbing her and punching her to a pulp. "That boy! We saw a boy with you on the bench! He ducked down. We saw him!"

Toni was glad for holding the bag of groceries since the paper was soaking up the sweat from her hands. She gave a small laugh that came out more fake than she would have hoped. "That was no boy that you saw. That was my knee. I was sitting across the bench with my feet on the bench and my knees up. When I turned and put my feet back on the ground it probably looked as though someone was ducking down." Her throat was tightening up so much that she was surprised that she spoke so much and was able to finish the sentence. She hoped that they would just turn away so that she could breathe again. But it was clear that they were not convinced. She knew that there was a boy there, they knew that there was a boy there, but he was not there now, and none of them saw him leave.

One of the women turned and examined Mr. Keskes as he strode happily down the sidewalk but it was clear that there was no one with him except for the dogs. She turned back and glared at Toni.

One planned advantage to Toni walking in the direction that she did was that the group facing her all had their backs to the rhododendrons. Thomas could see this and hurried across the street being careful to keep the shed between him and the group. He dashed to the other side where he was able to get to the backside of the row of shops.

Seeing that they were not going to get any information from Toni who just stood there smiling like a dunce, everyone in the group turned every which way to see if they could catch a glance of the disappearing boy. They quickly split up with one scouring the bushes and another yanking on the locked shed's door.

Toni stood on the spot like a wax figure holding a bag of groceries. She did not know that Thomas made it across the street already and was sure that one of them was going to drag him out by his shirt. When they left the rhododendrons empty handed she was satisfied that he had gotten away. She took a deep breath and went home the long way. She was positive that the bag had more of her sweat than she did.

Meanwhile, Thomas watched the group from behind the buildings. They had spread out to continue searching all over town. Since they had already been in his area none of them came his way. When they had all disappeared down various streets he sat down in the dirt and rested his head against a garbage can. He was too exhausted to even cry.

He could hear the town clock chime. It was four o'clock. He then realized that he had not eaten since breakfast. Trudging wearily behind the stores he went halfway around the circle when he came to the back of the chocolate shop. He knew that they had a small table in the rear that hardly anyone used. It was not near any windows and sometimes even had boxes stacked on it. You could not even see this table unless you were right in front of it since a wall and some plants blocked it. It would be a perfect place for Thomas to rest and get something to eat. What he would do after that was only a guess.

21 The Clue

Sometimes the greatest joy of solving a puzzle is not the discovery but the relief

Just before dawn Toni jolted awake. Her eyes flitted around the room. Ever since Thomas told her about angst-feeders being in her house she was skittish about what might be in her room. Seeing nothing she closed her eyes but lay there wondering if Thomas was in the room next to her and, if not, where he might be. She tried to get back to sleep but ultimately submitted to her wide-awake state. She got up, got dressed, and crept down the hall and stopped outside of Thomas' room. She pressed her ear against the door but did not hear anything as she had expected. She did not figure that Thomas would be lying in bed at that hour reading aloud a book. She wanted to slowly open the door and see if he was there but was afraid that it might creak and scare the tar out of him. She stood there for a while and then decided to go downstairs.

The sun was still hiding behind the horizon but it was now getting light out. She sat at her desk and pulled a chocolate bar out the drawer. "Good as any breakfast that I'm aware of," she thought. In the heat it had melted slightly and she went into the kitchen to wash her hands. As she entered she saw a note lying crooked on the table. Since her hands were still chocolaty she did not pick it up.

"Wait a minute, uh oh. He left a note." Without touching anything she bent over and skimmed the note. It was a puzzle. She raced up the stairs and stopped once again outside of Thomas' door. This time she deliberately turned the handle and then quickly jerked it open to avoid any squeaks. Sure enough, the bed was untouched.

Toni looked around in a panic. Where could he be? Her first impulse was to go out looking for him, but then realized that he probably would not be standing in the middle of a street. He was probably hiding out somewhere. Maybe he even spent the night sleeping in a large drainpipe while things crawled all over him.

Then she remembered that Russell usually got up early so she went over to his house. As she was walking she wondered how she would get to him. She could not ring the doorbell or knock since that would wake up everyone and scare the devil out of them. If she peered through the windows she might get arrested.

But as she got closer she could see Russell sitting contently on the front step. As the faint light etched his face he appeared almost beatific. When he saw her coming towards him he first got a big, welcoming smile, but that changed quickly to one of concern. He rose and met her out on the sidewalk. She told him what had been happening. Russell got more nervous as the story progressed.

"We've got to go back and figure out the note and as soon as possible."

Toni and Russell crept into her house. Even the slightest crack of their bones sounded like a firecracker. They scanned the rest of the house. Nothing else looked out of place.

Sure enough, there was a note on the table in the same crooked position.

"It's a good thing that we got here first otherwise it would be you, me, and the snake-man meeting him," Toni said with concern. "That would be real cozy. We could reminisce about the good time we had at the factory."

"I don't think that we are lucky today. Look at the table."

There was a precise two-inch L-shape in white chalk on the table. The note was a few inches away at an angle. Russell bent over and looked carefully at the paper without touching it. Not unexpectedly, the bottom, left corner had a matching chalk mark on it. Russell picked up the note and lined it up with the chalk mark on the table. They matched exactly.

"See," he said to Toni, "both lines of chalk are the same length. Thomas wrote this note, held it against the table and drew a chalk line half on the table and half on the paper. That way we would know if it had been read."

"Unless the person saw what was going on and laid it back in the exact same way," replied Toni.

"True, but it is far less obvious when you first see it in its original position. We saw the lines clearly because they were distinct against the brown tabletop. Originally, the lines would have blended in with the white paper. Someone coming in would be hard pressed to see a thin white line extending a little beyond one corner of the paper."

"Thank you Nancy Drew. But why wouldn't he see it after he picked up the paper just like we did?"

"Probably because he was too busy reading the note. When he was done he would have just tossed it back onto the table. Let's see what it says."

"I have two arms, one leg, five feet, and one back. When you are playful I go around in circles. When you are serious I hardly move at all. I don't have much to tell you and you have to make an effort to get whatever little information I have to give to you. But what information I do have will tell you what you want to know. Start at the

bottom. Who am I?" Russell paused. "No wonder why he didn't look back at the table. It rather stuns you, doesn't it?"

Toni concurred, "Well, Thomas always did like puzzles."

"But why use a puzzle now. Suppose we don't ever figure it out. Then we'll never meet him."

"I suppose that he used a puzzle just in case we weren't the first ones to read it. At least he got that right."

Russell seemed worried. "Well, we better figure this one out. So what in the world does it mean?"

They both contemplated silently for a few seconds.

"Well, let's take it apart," said Toni. "What has two arms?"

"Pretty much everything has two arms," replied Russell.

"No, actually very few things have two arms. Birds, lizards, insects, dogs, and fish are all excluded. In fact, maybe the only things with two arms are people and primates. Is that right?"

Russell thought carefully. He wanted really badly to think of something else; but he could not. "I guess that maybe you're right. Maybe we should go to the zoo and check out the monkey cages."

"We don't have a zoo in this town."

"Oh, yea, you're right. So that leaves only people. Do we know any one legged people?"

Both thought again real hard. Russell really wanted to come up an answer.

Toni spoke first. "I can't think of anyone, can you?"

"No."

"I went through everyone in the neighborhood, church, stores—nobody," said Toni.

"Perhaps it is someone we don't personally know, like a celebrity. There has to be some one-legged celebrity out there."

They hunkered down. No one came to mind.

"Even if it was a celebrity, we couldn't be expected to call him up and ask him where Thomas was hiding out, now could we?" Toni paused. "Perhaps it is not obvious. Maybe we're trying to think of someone with a peg leg or a prosthesis that he removes in church to scratch his back. Maybe it's just someone with a limp that we always thought of as having nothing more than a limp, but maybe it's really a fake leg."

"Then how would we know if it just a limp or a fake leg?" asked Russell. "We don't have time to hunt down every gimp person in town and ask them to roll up their pant leg because we're taking a survey."

"You're right. Maybe we should focus on the next clue. It has five feet." She paused for a few seconds.

"OK, let's skip to the next clue. It goes in circles when I am playful. That one is easy. It's a carousel." Toni got visibly hopeful. "And carousels have animals on them. So maybe he is waiting by the animal that fits that description."

"We don't have a carousel in town," said Russell.

"Oh, right. We don't have a zoo; we don't have a carousel. What kind of boring town is this anyway? Maybe the carousel isn't a real one; maybe it's a miniature." She thought for a second. "We don't have any carousels in our house. Do you have any?"

"No. But maybe it's at one of the stores in town. The most obvious would be a knick-knack shop." He paused. "But carousels don't have only one leg. If there are a dozen animals on it then that is 48 legs already." He paused again. "I'm afraid that Thomas is going to be waiting for us for a really long time. I hope that he has some candy bars in his pockets."

"We can't give up already. Let's start from the top. What else has two arms?"

Russell practically got up onto his toes. "I know! A clock! A clock has two arms." He felt his chest expand. This was good.

Toni was not quite so immediately convinced that was the solution. "OK, although technically it has two or three 'hands.' But ignoring that for now, does a clock have one leg and five feet?"

Russell deflated. She was not trying to kick his feet out from under him but the answer did have to meet all of the criteria.

He tried his best, "Um, well maybe the long body of the clock where the pendulum swings is called the leg and if that is the case then there is only one of them. And it does have feet, although usually only four. And many of them have that moon and sun disk thing that goes around in a circle." Try as he might, he was not even convincing himself.

Toni looked disappointed. They did not have all morning to figure this one out. "What else has two arms?"

Russell pleaded, "My leg is starting to kill me. Can we sit down?" He pulled out a chair and plopped into it with a good thud.

Toni stared at him for a second and then proclaimed, "Maybe you've solved it, Russell."

"How?"

“You’re sitting in a chair. Chairs have two arms.”

“Yea, but do they have one leg and five feet? Every chair that I can think of has four legs and four feet.”

As if flipping through a furniture supply catalog, Toni tried to picture every type of chair that she could think of. There were kitchen chairs, armchairs, wheelchairs, patio chairs, office chairs. “Wait a minute, what about an office chair? Think about it, an office chair has one post holding it up—the leg—and most of them have five feet coming out of it.”

Russell jumped in, “and if you are playful you can spin around in circles.”

Toni finished, “and if you are serious you are just sitting and working and not moving at all. But what is the part about information?” They both thought some more.

“I don’t know,” said Russell, “that one really has me stumped. A chair doesn’t provide any information. You just sit in it.” There was another pause. “Do you have an office in your house?”

“Ha, we barely have a house.”

“Oh come on, you have a very nice house. I wish that I lived in a house like this.”

“OK, OK,” said Toni feeling rebuffed. “We don’t have an office but there is an office chair at the desk in the corner of the living room. We just got it a couple of months ago.”

“OK, good. Maybe we’ll lick this one yet. Let’s go check it out then.”

They turned off the kitchen light and went into the living room. Unseen by them, the outside motion detector light came on.

They stood in front of the chair as if expecting it to do something on its own.

Russell spoke first, “What kind of information would a chair give you?”

“The only thing that I can think of,” Toni answered, “is the tag that tells you what it is made of and where it is made.”

“Well then, let’s turn it over.” Russell brightened. “He did say ‘start at the bottom.’”

They flipped the chair onto its arms. There was the manufacture’s tag all right and taped right next to it was an index card. They both grinned at the sight of it.

“Are we good or what?” was Russell’s confident proclamation.

“Let’s see what it says.” Toni peeled the card off of the chair bottom. “‘Gather up the gang and meet me where I got the splinter in my finger at 9:00 AM Friday.’ That’s today.”

Russell looked confused. “Do you know where he is talking about? I don’t remember any splinter. He’s not talking about the factory again is he? I sure don’t want to go there.”

“No. I know where he means. You get Sarah and meet me at the gazebo in the park at least 15 minutes before 9:00. Let’s see, that’s three hours from now. You better get going. You don’t want Mom catching you here at this time. Believe me, she’ll raise a lot of questions.”

Russell quietly opened the front door and crept out onto the sidewalk. Then keeping along the houses he made his way towards his house. Little did he know that he was being followed.

22 It Comes Together

Knowledge may be power,
but wisdom is survival

It was 8:45. Toni had been at the gazebo since 8:30; she could not sit around the house any longer. She was sitting on the bench inside nervously swinging her feet. She probably burned more calories in those fifteen minutes than in a typical day. Her head was on a swivel looking every which way. Then she jumped to her feet. Sarah and Russell came into view. Though they were setting a good pace it appeared to Toni that they were walking in sand.

When they saw that Toni was already there they quickened the pace even more.

Sarah spoke in a whisper as though they were surrounded by spies. The truth was that no one else was even within a good stone's throw. "Russell told me all about the clue. That was pretty good work." She was all excited. "What time is it? Should we meet him? How far away is it?"

Toni looked at her watch. "It's 8:45. The meeting place is about 10 to 15 minutes from here so we better get going."

They headed off not paying attention to the tall, thin figure that was trailing them at a distance.

All along the way both Russell and Sarah kept trying to figure out the rendezvous point. As they passed certain streets they would eliminate another possibility. Finally when they were within a minute of it Sarah blurted out, "Is it that lone picnic table?"

Toni faintly smiled and nodded.

As they turned past the last rhododendron they saw Thomas sitting at the table. He clearly had not much sleep but seeing everyone lifted his energy level considerably.

"Ah, great. You figured out my clue. I wondered if it was too hard. But I should have known that this group of geniuses would get it."

Toni and Russell simultaneously looked at the ground affecting a rather poorly concealed satisfaction.

Thomas continued, "But tell me—this is important—did you notice if the paper was off of the chalk mark? If you know what I am talking about."

Russell answered grimly, "Yes, it was."

Thomas looked solemn. "Then someone knows that we are up to something. We had better be careful. Did anyone notice if you were being followed?"

The other three looked at each other with "not me" faces.

"Those looks tell me that no one paid attention. Well, let's hope for the best."

Russell shot back, "Considering our luck so far we're probably surrounded by the enemy right now."

Sarah got wide-eyed and looked around, "Don't say that!"

They all realized just then that though this spot was out of the way and that they were unlikely to be spotted by anyone happenstance, they were also quite enclosed by tall and bushy plants. Anyone could be just feet away on almost any side and not be noticed.

"Maybe we should move," offered Sarah.

Toni was likewise skittish, "Perhaps Sarah's right."

Thomas was still like he was listening for the slightest indication. "I don't know where else to go right now. Everything else is going to potentially have people around. Is anyone's house available?"

"My Mom's home as usual," responded Russell.

"My Mom took the day off today to do chores around the house," answered Toni.

Thomas looked at Sarah.

"Both Mom and Dad should be at work but it's the summer and Dad usually comes home for lunch at noon."

Thomas thought. "I don't know where else to go. Maybe we should stay here."

They all gingerly sat down at the table but each one had a creepy feeling inside.

"But first," Toni piped up, "where were you all night and when you came into the house to write the note why didn't you just go upstairs and go to bed?"

"Yea, Toni thought that maybe you spent the night sleeping in a drainpipe," Russell added.

Thomas snickered. “Drainpipe? Not with all the bugs. After I left you, Toni, oh and, by the way, nice work there in the park distracting the gang until I got away.” Toni blushed. “After I left you, I hung around the back of the shops along the park and then headed over to the chocolate shop. I sat at the small table in the back...”

“Ooo, nice move,” Russell interrupted. “Did you have one of the double chocolate shakes?”

“No, but I did get something to eat and stayed there until closing. By then it was dark so I thought that I could head back home, but I was afraid that I’d get caught by well, you know. I wasn’t sure what to do. But then as I cautiously came out into the main part of the shop I saw a group of your friends, Toni, starting to leave.”

“Who were they?” Toni asked.

“I honestly can’t remember any of their names, but you know them from school and some from church. Anyway, they were heading in the general direction of your house so I joined them. There were about eight of them so I wormed my way into the middle and we headed out.”

“You sure are good at making escapes in groups,” Toni remarked.

“And quite diverse ones at that,” Russell added in.

“I got to within two blocks of your house when I had to split off. That didn’t seem too bad and I practically ran the rest of the way.

“As I was opening the door I glanced behind me and thought that I saw someone large duck into the shadows a few houses down. Of course, that freaked me out. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t stay at your house that night because I was afraid of putting you in danger. So I sneaked in, wrote the puzzle, the note, and left all within a couple of minutes. I left by the back door. I was just too creeped out to go out to the front again. And from what you’ve told me, apparently I was being followed.”

“So where did you go after that?” Sarah asked.

Thomas looked at everyone. “Where’s the safest place that you can think of?” There was silence. “Oh come on, this one is easy.” He sat up straight and then when no one answered slumped back down. “The church! I remembered that usually the pastor leaves the side door open in case anyone needs to come in and pray. Sure enough it was open and I spent the night sleeping under one of the pews. It really wasn’t that bad. In fact, considering all that went on, I slept rather peacefully.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Although my neck’s a bit stiff. And now, here we all are.”

Everyone was impressed and Russell spoke for all of them. “So there you were with the hordes of darkness hunting you down and you managed to escape them by imitating a dog and then hiding out in a chocolate shop before finally going to sleep in a church. That is certainly a big ‘Wow.’”

Thomas affected his best modest look. “Well, there certainly weren’t hordes.” Then he got all excited again. “I think that I’ve figured it out.”

“You did!?” declared Sarah. “I knew that you could do it.”

“You are the puzzle man,” proclaimed Russell.

Thomas lowered his voice and his head. “Well, to tell you the truth, I had some help.”

Several pairs of eyebrows came together. They looked at each other wondering who the accomplice was.

Thomas continued. “I was really stumped on this one. I had a good handful of clues but couldn’t quite squeeze them together and get them to stick. Here is what I know. I’m sure that you’ll recognize your contributions but please withhold your applause at those sections.

“First, I think that we are able to eliminate any relics or books that are hidden somewhere in town. The answer is not that simple. If that were the case then all that we would have to do is find it and destroy it—problem solved—we’ve saved the world.”

“Or at least Jabesh,” Toni remarked.

“Or at least Jabesh,” repeated Thomas. “So here goes. From Sarah we found out that this town was founded by a cult of wackos who broke every commandment in the Bible and who built a temple and worshipped Satan. We don’t know exactly what they did at that temple. I don’t think it involved any human sacrifice or anything that dramatic, but apparently they did do some otherwise awful things there.

“Now here’s something that’s interesting and this is what got them after me yesterday. I went to Mr. Davis at the library to see if he might know where the temple used to be.” He paused for effect. “Does anyone have any guesses?” Thomas sat up straight again but this time it was to savor the moment. He actually hoped that no one would guess. He watched eyes rolling slowly around but nothing lighting up. Finally he smiled. “Do you want me to tell you?” Everyone nodded. He leaned on the table. “The Satanic temple used to be where the liquor factory is now. In fact, I think that they converted the temple into the liquor factory by expanding it.” No one really reacted. “Come on! Don’t you get it? That was where the snake-man was going when we followed him. I think that they are using now for their headquarters, you know, just like old times.”

The others tried to act like they realized the significance, but it was still elusive.

Meanwhile, something sinister was creeping closer to the four. In its soundlessness it did not seem that the grass even bent under its feet.

“So what else did you learn?” asked Russell.

“Well, you might remember right after I first got here the church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. I found out talking to the pastor that Grace Bible Church was the first church here.”

“So for 150 years Jabesh didn’t have any good spiritual presence.” Toni mused.

“Well, there was a spiritual presence, in fact, a very strong one; it just wasn’t a good one,” Thomas retorted. “And the second church didn’t even show up until twenty years after that.”

“Now we have seven churches,” declared Russell.

“Right,” acknowledged Thomas. “So it has only been relatively recently that Jabesh had a majority of people who would call themselves Christians. So that is the second piece of information.

“The third is something else that was mentioned at our church’s anniversary celebration at the picnic. Does anyone remember what it was?”

There was a long pause. After about ten seconds Thomas finally answered. “The pastor is putting together a rather ambitious plan involving several initiatives. You remember his sermon that day on the paralytic that was lowered through the roof where Jesus was teaching?”

Russell looked confounded.

Thomas then said to Russell, “You were there; I remember you there. Don’t you remember?”

Sarah piped up, “Oh, I bet that he was sleeping as usual.”

Russell quickly countered, “I don’t sleep through the sermons. I never have.” Then he slowed down, “I just can’t seem to remember that one. Maybe I had too many hot dogs.”

“Anyway,” Thomas said, “the pastor pointed out that there were three areas where the man was hurting. The physical part of him was paralyzed. The spiritual part of him was unforgiven and in his soul he was afraid. So what was Jesus’ response?”

“I remember,” blurted out Sarah.

“Go ahead,” coaxed Thomas.

“Jesus said, ‘Do not fear, your sins are forgiven. Take up your pallid and walk.’”

Russell jumped in, “Oh, now I remember. See, I wasn’t sleeping.”

“That’s good, Sarah,” encouraged Thomas. And then looking at Russell he added, “And that’s good too, Russell.” Then he continued, “So Jesus healed all three areas of the man. In the same way the pastor wants our church to heal those same three areas of society.

“So for physical healing, he wants to send four teams to spend one week each in an impoverished part of some city and help people by bringing them medicine and staying with them and comforting them. He wants us to bring grace to those who are depressed, dying, or outcast. If it goes well then he hopes to make this into a permanent ministry.”

“I think that’s a great thing,” affirmed Toni. The others nodded.

Thomas continued, “For the spiritually hurting he wants to put together some short-term mission teams to take the Gospel of forgiveness to some area that does not have a strong Christian presence. Whether that is in our own country or international is still undetermined.”

“Another much commendable goal,” declared Russell.

“And the third thing,” said Thomas, “is to deal with the soul. Many people out there are lonely and despairing, he said. He wants us to stand with the oppressed. He wants us to take sides with the bullied, with the suicidal, and with those who have lost much. He has some ideas but he said that he hasn’t quite got them solidified yet.”

Toni said, “I remember when he talked about all of that. I was quite impressed. But I was also rather overwhelmed. We’re not a huge church and it seems that to get all of this done it is going to require everyone who attends to participate. That usually never happens.”

“But it would be great if it did happen,” responded Russell. “I know that I’d like to be involved in at least one of those.”

Sarah added in, “He was rather persuasive. I think that he will get a lot of people who never do anything to get involved in at least one of these ministries. I heard a couple of people talk about using their vacation time for one of these.”

“I think that it’s going to be very successful,” Toni chimed in.

Suddenly everyone went rigid. After many seconds Thomas said in a very low whisper, “Did anyone hear something?” The fact that everyone went rigid at the same time indicated that everyone did but there needed to be

confirmation. Everyone gave a quick nod yes. There was again a long pause, only eyeballs moved. After hearing nothing new they all relaxed.

“Maybe it was just a squirrel,” concluded Russell sounding more hopeful than he really was.

Toni finally spoke albeit quieter than before. “Well, getting back to Thomas’ facts. So far we have three things. One, our town was started 200 years ago by some nut case and evil abounded. Two, the first church didn’t show up until 50 years ago and, three, our church has an ambitious ministry plan. Is there more? I hope so because that isn’t a whole lot to go on.”

Thomas pursed his lips. “Well, there are a few small things. From Toni we learned that the Niss have been here several times before and that their appearance isn’t random. They are guided by,” and here he whispered, “Satan”—then reverted back to his normal tone—“and come for a reason.”

Thomas paused heavily. Then he continued. “From Toni we learned that seven new people came to town, targeted seven people, and tempted them back into sins that they had thought that they had beaten.”

“So is there anything else?” asked Toni.

Thomas appeared thoughtful. Then he said, “This whole thing with sticks turning into snakes and milkshakes turning into blood and the Niss being like a plague, it reminded me of what happened while Israel was in Egypt with Pharaoh and that whole deal. But I really didn’t know where to go with it. I mean, they had ten plagues and we really haven’t had anything even close to that. But still...it kept nagging at me.”

“Not every piece of a puzzle has to be big,” Toni reminded everyone. “The little pieces can pull the whole thing together. At this point we shouldn’t disregard anything. Anything else?”

In utter silence, willowy fingers slowly pulled a leafy branch aside allowing a single eye to glower through the opening. They were all in view now. Toni’s back was a mere fifteen feet away. His breath caused some of the leaves to curl.

Thomas thought for a few seconds and then said, “I don’t think so. That’s all that I can remember.”

Sarah looked at Thomas and then jumped in, “Well, there was one more thing.”

Thomas looked puzzled and scrunched his face as he searched everywhere in his mind for what he forgot.

Sarah waited for Thomas but seeing that it was not coming to him went on, “It seems that all of those slinky characters that came into town all picked on someone in our church.”

Thomas brightened up; now he remembered.

Sarah asked him, “Do you want to finish this one up?”

“No, no, you’re the one who discovered it. I’m sure that you can tell it better than I can anyway. Go on.”

“There have been a lot of attacks on the church. The most obvious is when...” here she awkwardly stopped and then finished, “someone tried to burn down the church. Also, all of the pew Bibles were found behind the church in a smoldering pile. This was just a few days ago. Someone had gathered them up and burned them. Also, I heard that...” She suddenly stopped and froze. Everyone else did also.

Russell spoke in a nearly inaudible whisper, “Did everyone else hear a noise?” There were nods all around. “It almost sounded like a low growl.” All other senses ceased including breathing while everyone listened intensely. A drop of sweat fell from Russell’s cheek to the table. After a minute each one looked at the others but without turning their heads lest the sound of their necks moving might prove to be too much. No one acknowledged hearing anything else. Thomas nodded to Sarah to continue. She appeared almost horrified at the idea of breaking the silence, especially that it might be her that does it. So Thomas whispered, “Go ahead.”

After taking a few seconds to fidget and gather herself she continued in a whisper so small that everyone leaned into the center of the table to hear. “I heard that someone spray-painted the word ‘LEAVE’ on the hood of the pastor’s car.”

The sinister person narrowed his gaze and let go of the branch.

“So it seems that our church is being targeted,” Sarah concluded.

The being lowered himself into a crouch.

Thomas concurred, “That does seem to be the case. Of course, knowing ‘why’ would be the answer to the puzzle.”

“Which you figured out,” declared Russell.

The willow man spread out his abnormally long arms and leaned slightly forward. The muscles in his legs tightened.

A large hand pushed back the branches of a rhododendron. “Well hello everyone! Are we having a powwow? What’s going on?” It was Jocum with a big smile. “Mind if I join you?”

The willow man’s lip curled as he backed far away.

“Sure... sure,” said Thomas looking perplexed. “How did you know we were here?”

“Oh, I have my ways,” replied Jocum.

“Wait a minute,” Toni remarked suspiciously, “don’t you usually show up only when there is a problem? So what are you doing here now?”

Jocum smiled coyly, “And what makes you think that’s not the case now?” Everyone paused and wondered. Then Jocum spoke again, “So what’s on the agenda?”

“Well, um, we were, um,” Russell stammered.

“Let me guess, you are trying to figure out what has been going on here lately and why.”

Toni looked suspicious, “That’s a pretty good guess. That’s like me pointing to a word in a book and you guessing correctly what that word is.”

Jocum tried to look chagrined but could not escape from a smile. “Well, I admit, I did hear some things while I was approaching. I must say, you are all quite the little detectives.” Then he turned to Thomas. “So, puzzle man, did you eventually put it all together?”

Thomas looked down at the table and shifted back and forth. “Well, kind of, yes and no, well, some of it.” Everyone was just staring at him. He was being unusually vague. “OK, I did have some help.”

“Help?” Russell asked. “Who helped you? Was it Jocum?” He looked over at the big man.

Thomas still stared down at the table. “It was your sister. I mostly just handed her the pieces while she put it all together.”

Russell looked incredulous, “Danielle? How did she get involved? I didn’t even know that she knew any of this. She sure kept it from me.” Then he narrowed his eyes and looked at Thomas. “How long have you been telling her things behind my back? And why did you involve her anyway? You know how dangerous this has been to all of us!”

Thomas jerked his head up, “No, no, it’s nothing like that. This only happened yesterday. Remember when I said that after giving the dodge to the creepy gang I went to the chocolate shop to get something to eat and sat at that small table at the back? For one I was quite tired and second, I was really focused on writing down all of the clues on the back of the place mat. So I wasn’t paying attention when she suddenly plopped herself down opposite me. Seeing her rather startled me. I didn’t think to hide the paper. Besides she already saw it so what could I do?

“I figured that I would make small talk and then leave, but apparently she read the entire paper upside-down because all of a sudden she blurts out, ‘So what’s all this about snakes in the woods and willowy men in the library, and some cult group 200 years ago?’ I must have sat there like a dog with tonight’s family meatloaf dinner in its mouth. She smiled coyly and then said, ‘Don’t forget about the bloody milkshake.’”

Russell remarked, “So that’s where you heard about it. When you were talking about it earlier I couldn’t remember ever mentioning it.”

“Yea, that’s when she told me all about it. Well, anyway, I wound up telling her everything that I just told all of you. She then spent the better part of an hour moving all of the facts around into different places. I felt like I was watching someone moving the pieces on a chess board.”

Russell was visibly pleased.

“She would ask me details about certain incidences. Some things I knew and some things I wish that I had thought of. Then maybe I could have given her an answer rather than a stupid ‘I don’t know.’”

Just then there was another rustle of the bushes and Seth came into sight. “Mind if I join the group? It looks like a fun outing.” He sat down next to Toni as she made room.

“Hello, Seth,” Jocum said rather firmly.

Seth pretended to not hear Jocum’s greeting. “Well, keep going. Don’t let me stop you. Just make believe I’m not here.” Then he looked over at Thomas with a “go ahead” expression.

Thomas stumbled around, “OK, so where was I? Um, yea, so as Danielle kept working all of the facts around. I could see things crystallizing. Quite honestly, I was impressed.”

Toni was getting anxious. “So what did she come up with?”

“Yes, what did she come up with?” Seth asked with great seriousness and with strong emphasis on the word “did.” Jocum stared at Seth but with little belying his thoughts.

Thomas seemed a bit shaken by Seth’s question. “I’m not 100% sure that everything is correct, but it seems to make the best sense. There are two parts to this puzzle.

“The first part is that at one time this place was quite the playground of sinners and the abode of Satan. I don’t know this for a fact, but it could have been a good launching point for much of his other evil activity for hundreds if not thousands of miles around. But as is often the case when evil abounds, men killed each other off and anarchy reigned. As other people settled in the area, the non-cult members eventually outnumbered the Satan worshippers. The air of evil grew thinner and thinner. Then some Christians came into town and fifty years ago built a church. Wickedness was dispersed enough that it was no greater or less than most other towns.

“So what all that means is that this was once one of Satan’s favorite places not just to hang out but to gather his troops before sending them out to war. So that’s the first part.”

“And the second part is what is happening right now,” remarked Toni.

“Exactly,” answered Thomas.

“So how does all it tie together to what is happening now?” asked Sarah.

Thomas rubbed a paint chip off the table with his finger. Then he said, “Did you ever go to a restaurant and have the best dinner that you ever had and then a couple of years later you thought about that meal and yearned to go back? So you went back there and found out that the place was closed down and you were terribly disappointed; maybe even mad.”

Russell remarked, “You’re comparing almost being killed by some monster to eating lasagna?”

Thomas feigned impatience. “No, let me finish. Maybe there was a special place that you loved; maybe a large tree with branches that hung to the ground and once you went through those branches there was a wide open area under the tree where no one could see you. You could play all kinds of games and no one would ever know what was going on. It was your own little world. But then one day you found that spot again and it was paved over and there was a restaurant there.”

“Was lasagna on the menu?” Russell just had to ask.

“Stop it. I’m serious.”

“OK, OK,” said Russell, “Go on. I’m sorry”

Realizing that he might lose everyone with his analogies Thomas cut to the quick. “And you were so mad that you wanted to burn down the restaurant. I think that sort of thing is going on here. Danielle thought that Satan wants to reclaim this town for his own. That is why these things have been happening.”

“But why now?” asked Toni.

“That’s another piece that fits in. Our church has some pretty grand plans, but they aren’t just a lot of glitter. All of them can really work and they all might make a big difference—a difference for the good. It’s attracting a lot of attention—good attention—and a lot of people are looking to get involved in some way. Satan hates stuff like that. So I thought...” Russell quickly looked up at him. “OK, Danielle thought...--Russell proudly smiled--“that the Devil wants to put a stop to these plans and so he has been bringing in some of his people to do two things.”

Toni quickly jumped in, “Let me guess: one is picking off people in our church one by one. The more people that he can steal over to his side the less resources we have.”

“Good,” confirmed Thomas.

“And second,” continued Toni, “the more problems that he can cause the more people will be distracted and the more they will worry about themselves and not others.”

“Excellent,” Thomas affirmed quite strongly. “So there you have it. It may not be fool-proof but it seems to fit together better than anything else.”

“Except for one thing,” Russell wondered, “why have all of these terrible things been happening to us? I mean, I don’t hear about anything happening to anyone else.”

“I know the answer to that one,” Seth butt in. “It’s because you four have been sticking your noses out too far. Everyone else in town is minding their own business and so that’s why nothing bad has happened to them.”

Toni shot back, “Except for Floyd and Terese and Jackie and...”

Seth cut in, “Enough of that. As you said, they were specific targets. I think that it’s best that you four lay low for a while. Let someone older and wiser handle this.”

Toni got her dander up, “And who might that be?”

Seth looked straight at her and said firmly, “I don’t know, but I’m sure that someone will step forward.”

Sarah stood up. “That someone is us!”

23 The Mission

Do not wait for a miracle when action is still to be taken

Jocum dropped his head. “Seth is right. This is too dangerous. You’ve all almost been killed already.”

“But we weren’t,” Toni disputed.

“Not yet,” Jocum parried.

Everyone stared into their own worlds. Jocum felt that his point was made and this nonsense was done with. He exhaled deeply and was satisfied.

Then Sarah said, “They’ve got to have some meeting place. I know that you mentioned that the old liquor factory is where the temple was, but it seems that that would probably be too obvious. There are too many people working at the buildings around it. Toni, didn’t you say that there was a cave somewhere?”

Jocum looked incredulous. Then he dropped his head again.

“I only heard about it. I don’t know where it is. I wouldn’t even know how to get to it,” she replied.

Russell asked, “Then who told you about it?”

She answered, “It was Tim.”

“Tim?” Thomas asked doubtfully, “He doesn’t even talk.”

“This was before his... um...”

Thomas jumped in, “vow of silence?”

“Whatever you want to call it. He told me it was out in the woods somewhere south of town. But that’s all I know.”

“Well then I guess that ends that,” Jocum proposed.

He was roundly ignored.

“Is he at the store right now?” asked Sarah.

“I don’t know,” answered Toni.

“Then let’s go find out,” said Sarah with conviction.

The four of them got up and starting walking away from the table where Jocum and Seth sat in bewilderment. Just as the four rounded the rhododendron the two of them hastily got up and joined them.

While they were passing by the central park they heard a breathless voice shouting from behind them. “Hey, wait up.” They all turned in perfect coordination like figures on a child’s toy.

Toni said, “It’s Danielle.”

Russell stepped forward and beamed as his little sister approached. Just as she got near she hesitated as she saw more closely the two very large men.

“Don’t worry,” Thomas reassured, “they’re friends of ours.”

Danielle had never seen anyone this tall and big and she did not even attempt to conceal her amazement. It was not like they were giants but Jabesh simply did not have anyone this massive. That would explain why their football team never had a winning season within anyone’s memory and not just the memories of the teenagers but anyone’s memory. Everyone was enjoying her gap-mouthed reaction.

Finally she spoke with her eyes still glued to the men, “I guess these are the guys that you mentioned that helped get your stuck tail out of the gate those several times.” She quickly looked over at Russell, back at the two men, and then did a double-take back at Russell. “What are they standing there grinning so much about?”

“Oh, just proud of my sister,” he responded.

“Proud of what? Oh, did the President call to present me with another national award and I missed it again?” she replied with heavy sarcasm.

It was hard to believe that Russell could talk clearly while maintaining that beaming grin. “No, just that you solved the puzzle.”

“What puzzle?”

“The one about the goings on here in Jabesh lately,” was Toni’s answer.

“Oh, that. I don’t know, it just all seemed to make sense. It wasn’t any big deal. Dealing with my mother is ten times harder. I guess that she just gave me a lot of practice.”

“You’re just so humble.” Russell took a step forward and tried to gently punch her in the shoulder but she swerved out of the way and he almost stumbled to the ground.

After he righted himself Danielle asked, “So what are you all up to?”

No one really wanted to answer that partly because they really were not sure themselves but also because they did not want to take a chance at another lecture either from Jocum or Seth.

Finally Sarah piped up, "We're going to do something about the situation."

"Do something?" Danielle said slowly as her forehead wrinkled.

"Yes," continued Sarah, "we're going to try to get to the bottom of it and chase the snakes out of town."

Danielle's jaw went slack. Then she went pale. "Don't! Don't do it!"

Jocum and Seth straightened up and crossed their arms in front of their chests and stared at the four.

Danielle begged, "You don't know what you're getting into. It's like four children stepping onto a battlefield to face an army where any one of their soldiers could defeat an opposing army just by themselves. Look what happened when you followed the one guy into the warehouse. Imagine facing who knows how many of them all at once. You'll be slaughtered. Just forget about it. Leave the dying to those who find it more glamorous."

"Well said," remarked Seth.

"Amen," added Jocum. "Now why don't we listen to your friend and go get something to eat and drink? I'll treat."

As though all of the sails on their boat suddenly went limp the four stared at the ground speechless. After many seconds Seth said, "Well, now then, lets all go home." He went to put his hand on Thomas' back.

Sarah spoke up, "Danielle, you don't have to worry. We're not going to confront anybody. We're just trying to figure out what's going on. When we do then we'll sit down and discuss it. Maybe we'll take it to Pastor Goldsmith and see what he thinks. But, believe me, nobody here is playing warrior."

Danielle was skeptical. "This strikes me as someone standing in the path of an avalanche saying that they only expect to get dirty." But seeing that the others were determined she did not have anything else to say.

Jocum and Seth were even more doubtful. Seth lowered his hand and pursed his lips.

"Well then, if it's that innocent," Danielle replied, "then why can't I come?"

She certainly had a way of deflating their sails. Someone made a faint, "umm."

Thomas spoke unconvincingly, "We certainly aren't out looking for trouble, but there is always that slim chance that it will find us. I guess that we don't want to take the chance that you might get hurt."

Danielle shot back, "Isn't that like saying that a big ant has a better chance against a steamroller than a small ant?"

"Umm, well," Thomas replied. "Umm, we need you here to keep an eye on things." He tried to sound convincing but it was more hollow than anything.

"Keep an eye on what things?" Danielle retorted. "It's not like events are progressing at a trip hammer rate. I doubt that anything big is going to happen in the next few hours that I'll have to jump on a horse and ride through the streets yelling 'The demons are coming! The demons are coming!'"

Thomas sighed, "You sure make things difficult." Danielle looked almost pleased at that comment. Each one of the other three glanced over at Russell. It was his sister; he had to take care of the situation. Russell briefly met each set of eyes. Then he walked over to Danielle.

"Sis, can I talk to you over here?"

He put his arm around her neck and they slowly walked about twenty feet away and stopped.

Seth spoke to the remaining three. "Now there is someone with a reasonable head on her shoulders. Everyone else should think that clearly." Then he glared down at each one.

No one could hear what he was saying but Russell appeared to be gently reasoning with Danielle. She occasionally said something, but he did most of the talking. After several minutes they both came back. The other five were waiting for the results with three hoping for one conclusion and two hoping for another.

Danielle was the one who spoke, "OK, I'll see everyone in a few hours. Good luck and stay away from steamrollers." At that she left. Jocum and Seth sagged. The other three at first looked puzzled but then they perked up. Thomas looked quizzically at Russell.

Russell bucked up and said, "Well, let's head over to see Tim." Jocum rolled his eyes. Seth dragged his hand down his face.

Five minutes later they pushed open the store's front door. Tim was not behind the cash register. Toni stepped away and walked up to the man there. "Is Tim in today?"

The man pointed to an aisle. "He might be down there. I know that he's stocking shelves. You'll find him soon enough."

The group formed again and marched down the central aisle scanning the aisles on either side. Finally they spotted him crouched down putting bags of pretzels on the lower shelf and hastened over to him. He was startled to have so many people descend upon him especially when two of them were unfamiliar and so big.

"Tim," Toni said with urgency in her voice. "We need to talk to you—now."

Tim leaned back, lost his balance and ended up sitting on the floor. They gathered around him. Thomas leaned over and gently helped him to his feet.

Toni said with great insistence, "We need to know where that cave is. You have to tell us now."

Tim hesitated but seeing that everyone was firm he signaled for them to follow him into the back room.

He pulled out a sheet of paper, started with a square, made some swirls and a lot of small circles, and a line through them that cut at a few angles before ending at a larger circle. Then he gave the paper to Toni.

She looked at it with great perplexity. Then she turned it 90 degrees, then another 90 degrees. Tim took it from her hand and turned it the correct way and handed it back to her. She stared at it again and then with exasperation said, "You're going to have to tell us how to get there. I can't figure this out and we don't have all day. This is important. You're going to have to tell us."

Tim looked mortified. His lip quivered ever so slightly. It was like someone had asked if they could put their arm down his throat and pull his lungs out.

"Come on, Tim, you can talk, get over it. Tell us now." Thomas was growing impatient. "What you know is important. We need to know now."

Seth pushed forward. "If he doesn't want to talk then why make him? Leave him alone and everyone go home. If he wants to be dumb then let him."

Tim put his hands on his hips and pressed his lips tightly together. His eyes grew like fire as he stared up at Seth. Then they quivered again but this time in a much more deliberate way. Everyone froze and stared at him.

"I'm...I'm not dumb!" he proclaimed. "I can speak if I want too!"

Everyone was taken back except for Toni. She stepped forward and gave him a big hug. Seth scowled.

Tim plopped down on the stool next to him. "So you want to know where the cave is? I can tell you. I can tell you exactly how to get there." And for the next ten minutes Tim gave exact details as to how to find the path into the woods, what landmarks to look for, and each and every turn. When he was finished he looked hard at Seth and said, "There! Anything else?"

24 The Cave

The Master we serve is the one we most believe

The entire gang set out: Thomas, Toni, Sarah, Russell, Jocum, and Seth. Tim being the only one who knew where the grotto was led the way. He brought a lantern that he had at the store. The entire time he jabbered about how he found it the first time and how he even went in a little bit. The four were quite excited. Jocum and Seth clearly were the most nervous.

Once they reached the point to where the path entered the woods Tim said, "This is it. You should be able to follow the drawing now."

Toni looked around. "So tell us again, how in the world did you find this place?"

"I was out in the woods exploring when I heard something several hundred feet away. I didn't know what it was and I heard about your snake in the woods so I ducked behind a bush. I saw this guy striding determinedly. I thought that I had seen him around town so when he was almost out of view I started following him. A few times I thought I was going to be done in."

"Why, what happened?" asked Thomas.

"He stopped and it was obvious that he was listening. When he didn't hear anything then he would slowly turn and scan the woods. Twice he stopped and stared right at me. I almost swallowed my tongue both times. But then he turned back and continued down this barely existent path.

"I managed to follow him all the way to the cave although, I must admit, as I got closer to it I felt more and more creeped out. It's the same feeling as if you're in the dark and you just know that at any second someone is going to grab you, but there is nothing that you can do about it."

Toni turned from staring into the woods and looked back at Tim. "How long ago did this happen?"

"About two weeks ago."

Russell shot back, "Two weeks ago! And you didn't tell anyone?"

Tim looked at him with a come-on look.

"OK, OK, and you didn't write anyone?"

"I didn't know that it was such a big deal. In fact, I still don't know what the fuss is all about. As far as I know some weirdo went into a cave." Tim paused thoughtfully. "Is he hiding guns or drugs in there? Is that what this is all about?"

Thomas answered, "No, no nothing like that, at least as far as we know."

This mollified Tim's previous apprehension. "I have to go back now. I have work to do at the store and I just killed my entire lunch hour getting you here."

After many thanks and another hug from Toni the group stood at the edge of the woods.

Jocum declared, "Every battle starts with warriors who are granite but ends with men who are dust. I think that it would be wise to go back and think this through again. You don't know what you are getting into. You know what happened the last..."

Sarah interjected, "This is it. Are we going to go for it or are we going to slink away?"

Everyone just stared at the woods. The path was like any other nondescript deer trail. The only way to even tell that there was something there was that a bird skeleton was nailed to a tree. Russell shuddered.

Seth proclaimed, "If a skeleton is not a bad omen then I don't know what is. In all wisdom, forget about being heroes and let someone else handle this."

Sarah took a deep breath, said, "Plans are created to be acted upon and not just talked about," and ventured into the woods. Everyone else just stood there, but when she was already twenty feet in front of them with no sign of stopping they all rushed to catch up.

They crossed into woods that many had not been in before. The woods where Russell's birdhouses were to the north were welcoming; the air was crisp and it was more colorful. These woods were those captured in fairy tales where witches gobbled down children and wraiths watched from dark skies.

The further in they got the quieter everyone became. The only time anyone would speak would be to confirm Tim's directions and even then it was with the most guarded tone. They followed a path of marrow colored clay. The wind wrestled with the trees. Overhead, the clouds resembled bones in a sagging sky. After a mile everyone stopped as if on a silent signal and caught their breath. It was not that they were walking fast but that it seemed as though something was snatching at their breath.

Sarah inhaled deeply and gingerly started walking although much more slowly. The woods seemed to be getting thicker. Leaves were falling and spotting the ground like a pox. Everyone followed.

Here the earth did not breathe.

Toni, who was holding the map, stopped short. Everyone followed suit. She looked up at a particularly gnarled tree; black moss covered its nakedness. At its foot was the deflated carcass of a squirrel. She rubbed her arm to flatten the goose bumps. Then she whispered, "According to Tim's map this is where we veer off to the left."

Sarah spoke in a loud whisper that almost made everyone jump, "Then to the left it is."

The sun here crawled as if dragged by hooks through mud. Its sunlight sporadically fought its way through the tight canopy of misshapen branches but more often than not it lost. Moss covered tree trunks like a green rash. Every footstep sounded unbearably loud. Thomas was thinking that they might as well be clanging bells yelling, "Hear ye, hear ye, we're approaching." Seeing a python in every tree, a scorpion on every branch Russell had to remind himself that scorpions do not climb trees—or do they? Despite their brave striding they all hoped that at the end there would be nothing and they could return home satisfied that they tried.

Finally Toni said, "I think that this is it." They all stopped and stared ahead. There was a small hill with gnarled roots like fingers coming out of its side. There was no other vegetation except for a couple of bushes at the base. Behind the bushes there was unending black.

Jocum said, "We've found the cave. Now I think that it would be prudent to go back and tell your pastor."

Seth affirmed, "I agree; we should all go back now." He took several steps back down the path with Jocum, but the others ignored them. So with a heavy sigh they rejoined the four.

As they cautiously approached the opening Thomas said, "I think that everyone else should stay out here and wait while I go in alone."

The others looked at each other with a "huh."

"Oh no you don't mister hero," Toni jumped in. "We're not splitting up now. We've all had to pull you out of some deep waters lately and we're not going to let you drown this time."

Toni was so overwhelmingly firm that it rather surprised Thomas. He could also see that everyone else was in agreement with her. All that he could stammer was an "Oh, OK" but in truth he was relieved. He did not even know why he made such a stupid offer to begin with.

"I am going too and that is firm," said Jocum.

Russell just looked at the ground. Everyone knew that it might be difficult for him to maneuver in the cave but since no one felt the need to point this out, nothing was said.

"I'll stay out here with the rest." Seth put a hand on each of Sarah and Russell's shoulders. Sarah tried to squirm away but Seth's hand was firm. "We need to make sure that no one traps them from behind." This suggestion of defense placated Sarah and she stopped wiggling. No matter what was said or who did what Russell was just glad to be on the outside.

"We might as well go before it gets too late," said Jocum with an air of resignation. He held out his hand and Toni gave him the lantern.

The three approached the bushes and hesitated. Toni looked back at the others who were remaining. It was difficult to tell which group was more scared. Jocum stepped forward and pushed aside some branches revealing a much larger opening than first appeared. He went in a couple of feet and then lit the lantern. Thomas and Toni looked at each other and then gathered closely behind him. The bushes snapped closed.

The cave went straight and level for about ten feet and then it made a sharp turn. This was not what they had envisioned. They were hoping for a quick and wide opening and something obvious in the center that they could snatch and run. Then all would be done, nice and neat, town saved.

Jocum took a deep breath and walked. The others followed. Toni and Thomas stayed close behind Jocum. At times they even held onto the back of his shirt. They got to the turn and stopped. Jocum leaned into the turn preceded by the lantern. He peered around the corner and then he stepped forward. Thomas and Toni quickly bounded behind him fearing to lose sight of him for even an instant. Around the curve the cave was more like a tunnel—long beyond the end of the light but consistently six feet wide and with smooth walls and floor. It sloped downward. It seemed unnatural.

As they walked further, the tunnel curved slightly. They could not see through the darkness ahead of them and behind them was a grave blackness. It was as though, as they walked, the cave was silently being filled in behind them. The effect was like fingers tight around their throats, a pillow pressed against their faces. Though the air was cool a rivulet of sweat trickled down their faces. But they did not know if it was sweat to wipe away or something else; something, perhaps, with legs. They were so focused, that time meant nothing to them. It was as though everything else had ceased to exist and that their entire lives had been in this cave from birth to death.

Thomas and Toni had a creepy feeling like something was groping at them from behind just inches away. Both kept glancing behind, occasionally brushing their backs as though something was on them or had touched them.

After going a couple hundred feet Toni whispered with heavy breath to Jocum, "Could we just look behind us real quick?"

They knew that nothing was there but they needed the reassurance that comes from actually knowing. Jocum swung the lantern around.

All three mouths sagged open; hope ran like a startled deer. Filling the cave behind them, going back beyond the curve of the cave were hundreds, if not thousands, of angst-feeders. At the intrusion of the light many opened their mouths wide revealing a gaping darkness but none disappeared. All stared intently unwaveringly, never blinking, their large black eyes riveted on the three. They were feasting.

Toni nearly fainted. Jocum grabbed her by her shoulders as she staggered. For an indeterminable number of seconds both parties stared at the other although it was clear who the dominant force was. There was clearly no turning back now.

Jocum, realizing that his two charges were faltering, said, "Come on, we must keep moving." He put his huge arm around both of them and turned them around along with the light. "Let's go. We can deal with them when we are finished here."

"Deal with them?" Thomas thought.

Jocum got in back of them and pushed them forward. He quickened the pace. They could not linger.

Eventually they could see that the cave opened into a wider area. As they entered this dark cathedral none of the walls or ceiling could be seen since the light of the lantern was unable to reach that far. At first they paused but then remembering what groped behind them they shuffled in further. The air was no longer cool but was even a little warm.

They stopped in a tight, small group. They were afraid to wander in too far and get lost and not be able to find the tunnel out again. Though they tried to control the loudness of their breathing it was unavoidable. Jocum kept turning the lantern in every direction to ensure that nothing was creeping in on them.

"So... we have some uninvited guests." The voice was low and deep but rather melodic and came from the side opposite from where they came in. Jocum swung the lantern in that direction. There stood a dark figure barely cutting into the edge of the light. In fact, many of his features were still in darkness. No one moved. Finally when the three of them felt as though their breath was going to be snatched away he spoke again.

"Now that you are here, we must make do."

Then, as if on cue, the cavern lit up starting at the dark figure and racing up the walls. The three watched the edges of this growing illumination. The cavern was far larger than they suspected. Even as rapidly as the light traveled it still took many seconds before it simultaneously met at the top.

But by then they were no longer awed by the vastness of the cavern but, rather, were terrified by what lined it. Everywhere they looked was crawling with layers of Niss. There were easily millions of them as they slithered excitedly over each other. They apparently had great anticipation.

Thomas and Toni's knees went slack. It felt as though their body was drained of blood. They knew that they were without hope. Even Jocum would be no match for them.

After scanning his pets, the figure looked back at them with a well-pleased grin. "Yes, this is how your young lives will end. You will be filled with so many of them that you will either destroy each other in a mad rage or you will destroy your own selves. Your hatred and fury will be so intense that you will be unrestrained in your attacks. Hmm, perhaps it will be both. Last one standing tears his own flesh apart. Oh, I haven't had so much fun since the last civil war that I started." He looked artificially pensive. "Oh my, but that was only a few months ago." He grinned broadly. "One can never have too much death, can one?"

"And now here we all are," said the dark man with flare. "You may or may not recognize some of your new townsfolk."

He stepped back and pointed to the snake-man. No one had previously noticed that he—it—was even there. "Here is Senesareg, or as you know him as—Peter. He is very good at temptation." And then with a twinkle in his eye he looked at the two teens, "Oh, and yes, he is also very good at bending pipes and summoning very large—what you seem to call—rats. If you weren't about to die soon you would probably come to appreciate his many talents; not to mention his startlingly good looks." The snake-man's body rippled with slithering snakes.

"And over here is Rehpitop. He was known to you and especially to Floyd as Alexander." He nodded at a horror that had skin the color of fog stretched tightly over the form of a person. There were no eyes, mouth, or other features, just a diaphragm of skin. But in dozens, if not hundreds, of random places all over this creature arms, legs, and faces all the size of small dolls momentarily pushed out against this skin as if to escape, but then quickly sank

back into the unseen interior. The arms were always grasping outward, the faces always screaming in anguish. It was as though his skin was boiling. "Rehpitop is a collector of the damned. He keeps thousands of them inside."

At that, this terror took several strides closer to the three. They cowered back. He reached out towards them an outstretched palm and then slowly curled the fingers back into a fist, which he then thumped and held against his chest. Then he slowly stepped backwards to where he was originally standing all the while eyelessly staring greedily at the three.

"He wants to add you all to his collection."

Behind the collector were several other monstrosities.

There was one like a burnt corpse. "This is Chemosh. She was good friends with Dan. She started out bringing him magazines. Eventually she just brought herself."

Another was like a large blob but three-quarters of it was an opening rimmed with several layers of overlapping blades, all of which were bent inward at 90 degrees. "This lovely is Milcom. She made wonderful friends with Jackie." When its name was mentioned all of the blades silently sprung open wide and then slowly closed back in again. Its flesh was the color and texture of lungs.

The man stepped to the side revealing a hideous creature. It was almost seven-foot tall and very thin. Its four arms were like a praying mantis' but at the ends were long strands of flesh that hung to the floor like whips. Its head was twice as wide as tall and was dominated by two huge multifaceted eyes. It stood, though, on two ordinary legs. "It is too bad that our dear Sarah isn't here. She might recognize this lovely from their encounter in the library. They could sit and reminisce and then he can crush her to death. It would only be appropriate since she denied our dear Ashtoreth the pleasure the first time. He and Joey shared many a bottle together."

"And here is Adrammelech. Patrick's best friend." This demon looked quite human until he ripped open his torso with both hands exposing all of his organs moist and glistening. Then he reached into himself with one hand and tore out his pulsating heart. He held it to his mouth and savagely ate chunks from it. "My, my, Adrammelech simply does not know his manners. He didn't even offer you any."

"And last but certainly not least is Nergal. She, so to speak, and Melinda loved to spend time together talking about everyone else's faults." This creature was grotesquely obese but had what appeared to be chains wrapped so tightly around its body that they pulled the flesh in a good six inches. From the flesh beneath these chains oozed something black and foul. Nergal would bend its head down and with a terribly long tongue lick the ooze.

"And behind you," all three quickly turned and then Toni and Thomas' knees went weak, "are my beauties." All along the wall several deep were the angst-feeders. They stood drooped over and glaring with their abnormally large, black eyes. Some of their tongues licked the air. "They are ready to fatten themselves on your fear."

The man pointed with both hands at the three; his eyes were translucent. "This is going to be so much fun." Then he straightened up and said, "Let it begin."

Jocum gathered Thomas and Toni to himself with a confident defiance. He said softly, "Resist the Devil and he will flee from you. Do not fear. God is with you."

Thomas and Toni felt every muscle in their bodies droop. "The Devil!" they both thought. This was far more than they had bargained for. Throwing matches at rats is one thing; confronting the Destroyer is on a scale infinitely worse.

"Thomas!" The Devil began pacing but all the while kept his eyes on Thomas. "You, more than any of the others, should have known what and who you are up against. You've had your chances to back out. But you refused all of them. And now I will plow your soul into the earth. But," He paused momentarily and elongated the silence. Then he started pacing again. "Because I'm not as bad as you want me to be, I will make you one last offer."

Jocum tightened his grip on Thomas and whispered, "Steady."

The Devil said, "How does this appeal to you?"

The floor in front of them became a moving picture. It was Thomas and Jill in an obviously romantic setting. They were in a garden of lush greenery with sweeping palms and brilliant orchids whose colored flowers stretched like fireworks frozen in air. She was stroking his hair with one hand and feeding him dark chocolate truffles with the other. Her eyes were seeking out his. Her sensitive fingers would touch the nape of his neck. There was the sound of a waterfall. They were sitting on a Victorian bench besides a peaceful pool where koi swam like orange angels.

Then the picture rose straight up becoming three-dimensional. Exotic birds with long, colorful tail feathers flew out and gracefully evaporated several feet away. The fish splashed playfully. It was tranquil, serene, and perfect.

The Devil spoke, “Your heart is empty, Thomas. And in that void it is collapsing in on itself. You long to embrace perfect intimacy. In gym class you run faster when Jill is watching. You make yourself more gregarious and popular with those around you when she approaches in the hall. In math class that you share with her you answer the questions more authoritatively. Imagine if you didn’t have to do any of that to impress her because you knew that she was completely and forever yours? Every rapacious appetite immediately satisfied. Her touch soft on your flesh. Rich chocolates melting sensuously in your mouth. The rest of your life could be so pleasant.”

For a minute Thomas stared at the scene. He felt his entire body flush with blood. His fingers ached to touch the leaves closest to him, to feel their reality and then to step into the body of that Thomas and stay there forever.

And then the scene was gone in an instant. Thomas gasped.

The Devil continued, “Or the rest of your life can be so short. Consider the alternative. You are too young to perish. You have so much left to do in your life. Why choose ash when you can be glowing with life, envied by all? I have set before you life and death, choose me and choose life.”

Thomas wavered. His eyes teared up. His emotions and thoughts stumbled.

Jocum sensing this whispered, “Remember that the Devil is a liar and the father of lies. It will never satisfy.” He tightened his grip. “It’s like cotton candy. It looks good and tastes sweet but it quickly melts in your mouth and is gone. God is offering you a feast. Do not be tempted by that which is fleeting.”

The Devil merely grinned.

Toni and Jocum showed great concern for Thomas. He had begun to falter. They tried their best to encourage him. He merely stared at the floor waiting—hoping—for act two. Finally in a bare mumble he said, “No, Jocum’s right. It’s not true. It’s as fake as the image that was before me.”

“Humph.” The Devil turned and walked a couple of steps towards the wall. Then he paused and slowly turned back towards them again. This time his head was lowered but his black eyes were fixed on Toni. His eyes narrowed.

Little bits of Toni began pulling away from her like droplets of water dripping from a faucet or like an amoebae unequally dividing. At first it was just a dozen or so but then it became hundreds. Each “droplet” would pull away as if stretching a long tether and then it would break as if escaping with the attached part silently snapping back into Toni as if nothing had happened. The loose droplet would form a sphere and quickly float away. These droplets came from all over her body: her feet, her face, fingers, eyes, hair.

Toni was clearly horrified, as were the others. Thomas and Jocum staggered away. She stood there with her arms held out watching as it appeared that she was bubbling away to nothing. But though hundreds and perhaps thousands of these pulled away from her she never diminished and so gave the impression that this could go on forever.

She wanted to grab at the pieces but even her very fingers were doing the same. It was as though her entire body had become liquid.

Yet perhaps even more curious was what the droplets did. Though each one pulled straight out from her they all eventually coalesced in a spot between the group and the Devil. The ones coming out from her back looped around like a boomerang to join the rest. As the drops gathered they were forming something, an image. At first it was murky, like a paint-by-numbers that was only started. But it grew rapidly as the drops came faster and faster.

After several horrifying minutes the pulling apart stopped and in front of everyone was a perfect replica of Toni wearing what appeared to be a military uniform. She was at a marble balcony with her back to the three and was waving but not the kind of wave you use with your grandmother. This was a wave of authority. She was greeted with thunderous cheers. In front of the balcony was a large crowd of admirers, hundreds at least, probably thousands. They were clearly enthralled. Many held up posters with Toni’s picture on it. In the middle of the square was a heroic bronze statue of Toni, but no one dared climb the statue out of sheer reverence. The cheers morphed into the chant, “Toni, Toni...” Toni continued to wave in the same detached manner, turning from side to side and smiling. There appeared to be a pistol in a holster at her side.

The Devil spoke, “Who remembers the peasants of history? Can you name one slave who built the pyramids? But you remember whom they contain. The common, the masses, the sheep die in obscurity. By the third generation even the photographs have crumbled and no even asks anymore, ‘Who was that?’ Their lives are like clothes: worn out and discarded and easily replaced. One nameless worker dies and another is waiting to immediately step into his spot. They are like messages on an answering machine: listened to once and then recorded over. What is their legacy? They have none. Theirs are the sad faces of the factory workers, the laborers, the middle class, and even the pretentious rich.

“But who does history remember? The kings, the presidents, those who built monuments. And even the emperors whose kingdoms have long crumbled, we still write poems about them and study them. These are the men

and women who control multitudes, whose name is cheered or feared. They speak and it is brought forth. They are gods on earth. The unknown build their statues and print money adorned with their visage. They are true power and are envied by all.”

In the image, Toni turned towards the three and walked several feet in from the balcony. As she did so the crowd broke into thousands of tiny droplets. They quickly floated towards the three passing through the Toni image and everything else. They formed a chair and the end of an elegant wooden table. Both had ancient carvings. The chair was decorated with plush red material embroidered with a coat of arms. Near the table was an important looking man wearing a uniform weighed down with metals. On the table were several papers and gold pens. The man pulled the ornate chair out and Toni sat down. He showed Toni one of the papers and handed her the pen. As Toni signed the paper from out of view many cameras flashed. The man carefully took the pen. The same ritual occurred two more times with the other papers and each time the pen was placed inside a finely carved box as a memento. Then Toni sat up straight to pose. She assumed a serious yet well-practiced compassionate look. The flashing was almost solid.

The Devil continued, “This is your calling, Toni. You can step out from your luxurious palace and overlook your people from your balcony or you can die young and unfulfilled on the damp floor of a cave.

“I set before you life or death, immortality or ignominy. I can elevate you to heights yet unseen by history or I can skin you like an apple. What will it be? Time is running out.”

Then the table, man, balcony doors, and the uniformed Toni broke up into thousands of droplets and dissolved into nothing as they scattered on the floor.

Toni stood with her mouth open. The question penetrated her like a thousand needles. She did not look down or move in the slightest but she consciously felt the floor with her feet. It was indeed inhospitable.

Then she felt Jocum’s warm hand on her shoulder. “The Devil does not nourish; he devours. How many kingdoms has he offered and how many men and women have been slain in accepting them?”

Toni did not strengthen up; rather, she slumped a little more. The battle was taking its toll. Toni was on the edge of collapse. Jocum and Thomas gathered to her for support.

“Sharing hugs and precious promises,” mocked the Devil. “So what will it be? Will you settle for a pat on the head by your doomed friends or will you seize majesty and power? Will your life end as a name and dates on a cheap tombstone or will you be immortalized by monuments and chapters in history books? Quickly now, my friends are growing eager.” He narrowed his gaze even more. “With that much power think of all the good that you could do.”

Toni inhaled deeply but did not exhale. The floor seemed even colder than before.

She looked up slightly at the sound of a faint quivering voice, “Toni, Toni, don’t do it. No good will ever come out of it. We need to stick together. We’re friends.” It was Thomas. His voice was as pale as he was. It was not much, but it was enough.

Toni could not raise her head but managed a weak, “No.”

The Devil crossed his arms in front of his chest. “There are others. Your sacrifice will accomplish nothing. You will not die a hero.” He walked a few feet to the left and then stopped and faced them again.

The three were jolted to attention by a small flash and quick electric sound. It was a few feet away from them and eye level. Then quickly there was another off to their side and then another and another. They were coming quickly and from all directions, even above.

Flash, flash. Each flash was anywhere from the size of a thumbnail to that of a fist and every one of them was accompanied by a sound like an unfortunate bug meeting its demise on an electric bug zapper.

Flash, flash. As each flash faded there was left in its place an image hanging in the air-or perhaps more correctly, a piece of an image as though a jigsaw puzzle were being assembled all around them.

Flash, flash, flash, flash. They came so quickly now that all three were forced to squint and cover their ears. It was like being surrounded by hundreds of excited paparazzi each one thinking that they have found their front-page picture.

But this was no photo session. No one’s actions were going to be exposed on the cover of a tabloid. This was more diabolical and what was being exposed was far deeper and painful.

Finally the last few flashes completed the picture. And then there was silence. They were completely surrounded within a dome. The puzzle was complete.

In front of them like a photograph were two white statues of rearing stallions. In between them was a Rolls Royce Silver Shadow on a patterned brick driveway leading to the front of a mansion. The mansion was greater than anything in Jabesh. Its sides extended beyond their view. The portico was framed by a series of white pillars. It was at least three stories high with multiple gables.

To the left of the car the scene blended into a spa with its profuse bubbling as static as a painting. Marbled floors surrounded the spa and tables with silver trays were loaded with sweets and pastries, most were chocolate. Hanging over the spa were palm trees. The center of the ceiling was a circular domed skylight. Several servants were waiting for their cue.

As they continued to turn counter-clockwise around the dome there were ornate French doors with stained-glass sidelights. The doors were open and led to a deep white beach with waves hovering in mid-crest. On the beach was a small Japanese pagoda as the beach house. It was red with sloping green tiled roofs. Pillars framed the sliding doors. Two dogs were frozen in play as though dipped suddenly in liquid nitrogen.

In front of the French doors were fruit trees that extended across the top of the dome. Oranges so realistic that Toni reached up to touch one hung in abundance. A spider monkey was motionlessly swinging between two branches. There were dozens of orchids.

Further to the left and now opposite the car stood a wooden table with inlaid woods forming squares. Chairs on either side of the board were empty. Chess pieces were stranded in the midst of a game. One side was dragons and mythical monsters: chimera and basilisks, griffins and centaurs. The rooks, however, bore a striking resemblance to Rehpitop. Medusa was the queen. The king was actually quite radiant and oddly majestic. There was something about him, though, that seemed familiar. The opposing side, which had fewer remaining pieces, had mostly angels and several nymph-like woody creatures. The queen was young and frail, the king old and bent.

Beyond this chess set was the fore of a magnificent gymnasium with basketball hoops, a weight room, and an elevated running track. On the left side of the gymnasium there was one opening which led to a billiards room. There was another opening on the right side into a room where pinball machines lined all of the walls.

The edge of the gym, like all of the previous scenes, cut away into the final picture. As all three turned they faced a large oaken table. There was a plate of grilled steaks, another with poached peaches flowing with chocolate sauce, candied yams, sticky spare ribs, and Eggplant Parmesan dripping with mozzarella cheese. On the wall hung the largest flat screen television imaginable with a crystal clear, nearly lifelike video game in mid play. At the end of the table facing them was a frighteningly realistic figure of Thomas holding the game console. The walls were covered with mahogany and silk with majestic paintings of war. A chandelier illuminated the feast.

They continued slowing turning around the dome with their mouths open when—with a start—all of the scenes simultaneously broke into motion. The dogs jumped and romped, the Medusa's hair writhed, the young queen cowered in fear, the monkey finished his swing, and the video game burst into dizzying play.

The waves roared as they splashed on the shore. The monkey screeched and the video game gushed its electronic cacophony.

A servant clad in a black tuxedo brought a dish of piled nachos and laid it on the table next to Thomas who was swaying back and forth as he triumphantly defeated all that opposed him in the game. Yet everything remained two-dimensional.

Toni (or at least a very good rendering of her) in a light, blue swimsuit climbed out of the spa and toweled off. A servant entered with what appeared to be the softest, most plush robe ever seen. It billowed as he carefully put it on her before settling gently against her skin. Vicariously, the real Toni rubbed her shoulders.

A chauffeur dressed to match the elegance of the car came into the picture as though walking through the wall of the dome. He maneuvered to the side of the Silver Shadow and opened the rear door. Toni shimmered across the border of the two pictures and stepped into the car. The chauffeur authoritatively shut the door and went around the back of the car and got into the driver's seat. The car started with a powerful rumble and came right at the three of them. They made to leap out of the way but it never left the plane of the dome as it sped forward.

Thomas, meanwhile, was savoring a Napoleon while continuing to master his foes on the screen.

Then came the voice penetrating the dome and causing Thomas and Toni to huddle like lambs hearing the wolf's growl at the edge of the door. The words seemed to exhale poison.

Not seeing where the Devil was at made the whole effect ever that much more horrifying. His voice seemed to come from every picture in the puzzle.

“Throughout every day of their lives the great mass of humanity drags with them the burdens of their tedious jobs, selfish family members, deteriorating health, and growing doubts thinking that they've finally made some progress only to find those same troubles lying at their feet again when they wake up from a frustrated sleep. There is no meaning, no glorious triumph, only bleak survival and momentary reprisals from pain. Even those few who obtain luxury, strain to keep it and guard it with a paranoia that will ultimately become their relentless master. Life consists of little more than grabbing from others and clutching tightly to keep others from snatching back. These people are worms in clothes, beetles with shoes. Dignity is like a winter leaf. In their toil and frustration they weep only to have their cries melt into the impersonal dark abyss. This too is your fate. You have no power to escape.

“In your youth you think that you can accomplish anything. You will be the one who changes the world, who does something that matters. But as you age your dreams are gutted by banality and heroism is carved into splinters by the sharp knives of debt and doubt. Why will you be different? Are you so much more intelligent, that much more clever, or outrageously beautiful? Hardly. You are just two more ants scurrying about hoping for a loose seed or a precut piece of grass to bring back to the nest so others can fatten up.

“But you both, unlike all of the others, have a choice.”

The jigsaw Thomas stretched contently. He had skillfully defeated another level. He rested the controls in his lap and looked over the table. He reached for a tender chicken morsel, dipped it into a sauce, and pleasantly ate it.

Meanwhile, Toni appeared on the beach, the chauffeur carrying a tray with a pitcher of lemonade. She stretched out in a beach chair and drank from the glass placed at her side. The dogs ran over and nuzzled her arms. Her hair rippled gently in the ocean breeze.

There was a blinding flash. All three yelped and quickly buried their faces in their hands. The brightness of the flash made their hands look like red transparent cellophane.

There was a chuckling from several feet away. Once their eyes adjusted, everything was the same as it was before the dome. However, the Devil was only three feet away staring with great pleasure at them. Encircling them several feet deep were the angst-feeders lustily lapping up the fear. Many of their tongues were licking at the air.

The three were so shocked at this nearness that all three stumbled backward and nearly fell to the ground. Jocum caught himself and held up the other two. When they looked up again, only a couple of seconds later, the Devil was back at his original place twenty feet away with his servants peering intently at them from behind him. The angst-feeders were back along the wall. The Niss squirmed greedily along the walls and ceiling.

The Devil was clearly enjoying all of this. He stepped closer and spoke again with a great sweeping voice. “I am giving you more than escape; I am giving you elevation. You both can have everything that you saw. And in return,” and here he spoke like it was such a trifle, “is something that you can’t even see. You can’t touch it or feel it. In fact, you wouldn’t even know if it was there or not.” He paused and smiled long at them. “It is merely your soul.” There was another slight pause. Toni and Thomas stood there like they just let past the winning goal in overtime. Jocum scowled at the Devil.

“How could you even miss it?” he continued. “Tell me, what would you lose? No, let me answer that one; it is too easy. You would lose drudgery, banality, commonality. You would lose the anthill.”

“And what would you gain? You would be the ones with the morsels. You would gain choices. What choice is there when you must go to work at the same time to the same job to do the same work each day? What choice is there to see the same measly paycheck barely pay the same bills every month? What choice is there to go to the same places, to eat the same food, and to talk to the same boring people about the same ridiculous subjects?

“Yield to me and you will be able to go anywhere you want, buy everything that catches your eye, meet anyone you want. That my two friends, is freedom and, yes, it does come cheaply.”

It was not hard to see that Thomas and Toni were faltering.

The Devil went in for the kill. His chest swelled with grandeur. “Does anyone really know what a soul is or does? And so what is the problem if you lose yours anyway?” He was very animated and spoke with fervent gusto. His hands swept across the room as he spoke

“But a fancy car you can see and touch. You can taste wonderful food. You can smell the ocean breezes and feel the salty air against your face.”

Toni and Thomas’ heads dropped. They stared blankly at the floor each replaying their scene from the jigsaw.

Then Jocum spoke out loudly. “True freedom is not being a slave to your greed and desires. True freedom is being able to do what is right. It is something that does more than satisfy a temporary lust. It gives you peace and joy deep into your bones.”

The Devil looked annoyed at this intrusion. But it also got Toni and Thomas to look up and break out of their trance.

But then the Devil put on the charm again. “As though, Jocum, living well is somehow immoral? As if being poor is nobler than being comfortable? That need is more spiritual than fulfillment? Is it holier to drive a cheap, broken-down car than a nice one? You know that isn’t true, Jocum. And these two know that isn’t true either.

“When you see how weak his argument is then you know how strong my case is.” Then he added quickly, “Enough of this foolish bantering. It is only delaying the inevitable. I have forces to gather. Come, choose the obvious.” He took one more step closer and spread out his arms.

Jocum spoke again much to the Devil’s even greater annoyance. “And is 80 years of comfort for an eternity of torment an even exchange? When in your equation, Satan—the great deceiver and liar, is there an accounting? Do

you evenly exchange a fancy car for the sacrifice of the Son of God? Does eternal life and a tangy dipping sauce match up evenly? Do your lies have any weight against the real truth? What you are offering is not choices but self-centered lust that has no end, no final fulfillment. The 62-inch TV will soon not be good enough, then the 82-inch will be too small. Then when you have a TV as big as a wall you'll need a theatre. At the end of the day what was your accomplishment? You killed all of your pixelated enemies and drained that pitcher of lemonade. Do you go to bed feeling deep satisfaction and joy? Have you improved the quality of anyone's life including your own?"

The Devil paced with growing agitation.

Jocum continued. "Or when you support the helpless, encourage the faint-hearted, bring friendship and concern to others, then this brings true abundance right to the depth of your soul. At the end of the day you may not bring home a bigger toy but you do bring home satisfaction.

"You are right, Deceiver, there is no real choice. When someone has all of the facts before them the decision is obvious."

Both Thomas and Toni stepped closer to Jocum. Toni put her arms around his waist and buried her face into his side.

The Devil spoke, "So is that your final decision? And I do emphasize the word 'final' in more ways than one."

Jocum answered, "I think their silence tells you what you need to know."

Rather than being infuriated, the Devil appeared resolved. "There is nothing special about you. You are just two out of billions. Losing you means nothing. I'll have forgotten about you even before you are finished being devoured. This town will once again be mine and the loss of your pitiable lives will not have slowed down the triumph by even one second. Danielle was right. Unfortunately for you the steamroller is right at your toes." He turned and walked back to the cave wall. The Niss writhed greedily. The Devil looked up at the millions of them and smiled.

Jocum shouted frantically to Thomas and Toni, "Get down on the floor! NOW! Lay flat on your stomachs as close together as you can! Cover everything! HURRY! NOW! Do not think!"

They quickly obeyed covering their ears and shutting their eyes tightly. The snakeman stood with clenched fists while his body was a riot of scaly motion. The other monstrosities hissed and growled. The Devil looked at the three of them. "You cannot save yourselves. All hope is gone. Breathe your last." With that he raised his arms. The Niss flew. The ones at the top came first. They flew in a giant vortex that narrowed as it came closer to the three. It was a dark, thick swirl, greedy and ravenous.

Fully expecting Jocum to stand over Thomas and Toni and fight off the Niss he did something quite unexpected. He lay on top of them face up with his massive body nearly obscuring theirs. He stretched out his arms from his sides and leaned back his head.

The tip of the funnel was getting closer and angrier. Those halfway down the cave walls had now peeled off and joined the fray. They were rushing downward.

Just as the Niss were nearly upon them, Jocum closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened his mouth wide. The tip of the funnel went straight into his mouth. He twitched and then stiffened.

The thick, ugly funnel roared as it grew and spun faster. All the while it continued to pour into Jocum's mouth. He convulsed violently but never moved his head from that one receiving position.

Thomas and Toni were oblivious to what was happening just inches from them. Toni simply let out a continual high-pitched squeal. The Devil watched all of this with intense and perplexed interest. This was not at all what he expected. The demons behind him were restless. The angst-feeders were writhing.

This continued for several long minutes as every single Niss flew inside Jocum. When the walls were cleared of Niss and only the top of the funnel remained it seemed as though the Devil realized something. He took a few steps back until he was against the wall. And then he went pale. The snakeman watched him with concern. The Devil said in a low voice, "no!"

The last Niss entered Jocum's mouth. After a few seconds he stopped convulsing but remained stiff, his back arched.

The Devil said again, "This cannot be."

The snakeman fluctuated between demon and human.

Jocum went limp and for several seconds everything was frozen in silence. Toni and Thomas were aware that something had happened but they did not know what.

Then Jocum began to sink into the floor as though Toni and Thomas were not even there. He passed right through them. It was not as though the floor opened up but, rather, as if he was a ghost.

The Devil uttered, "I have lost. How can that be?"

Now, only Jocum's knees and part of his face could still be seen.

“Everything was perfect. This cannot be,” the Devil continued in a low, disbelieving drawl.

Finally Jocum was gone. There was complete silence except for Toni and Thomas’ belabored breathing. No longer feeling him on top of them Toni and Thomas both turned their heads slightly and slowly opened an eye. Seeing nothing that was an immediate threat they opened both eyes and scanned everything. Then they sat up.

“Where’s Jocum?” whispered Thomas to no one.

“And where are the Niss?” said Toni in the same hushed, cautious tone.

For a full couple of minutes they stayed sitting on the stone floor and searched every shadow. There were too many evil things out there to proceed with haste no matter how much they wanted to get up and run. They both expected some horror to spring at them from beyond the darkness. But nothing came.

Toni said in a whisper, “Maybe Jocum left.”

“Impossible,” replied Thomas, “he would never abandon us.”

“So where is he?”

“I... I don’t know. I just hope that nothing happened to him.”

Finally Thomas saw the Devil against the dark wall. He gasped and pushed away with his feet. But then he squinted and looked harder. The Devil appeared weak and almost shriveled. He stood hunched and leaning against the wall as though he needed it to support him. He was gulping for air.

Thomas turned partly to Toni while still keeping an eye on the Devil. “Look over there, the Devil; doesn’t he look strange to you?”

Toni leaned over and stared intently. “Something is strange. He looks sickly. In fact, he looks like he is barely alive.”

Sensing that something dramatic had occurred much to their favor they stood up and brushed themselves off. They did not dare get closer because even one-percent of Satan would be too much for them. But still, they somehow felt safe although not enough to speak to him.

The Devil broke the silence in a very halting, barely audible voice. “Do not... think... that you... had any... hand in this. A small... set back. Your town... is... yours again.” He choked and spit a long tar-like substance onto the ground. He heaved a few times and then looked up at them. Though his body was wrecked, his eyes were still filled with evil and carved into their souls. They shrank back. “My... victory... is... still... to... come.”

With that he and the snakeman and the others seemed to sink into the wall and disappear.

Toni, in utter exhaustion slumped to the floor and just sat there staring blankly ahead. No one spoke for a while. All that had just occurred was too quick and too momentous to register.

Finally Toni looked up. “How are we going to get past the angst-feeders?”

Thomas scanned the wall behind them. “The angst-feeders are gone also. I... I think that we’re the only ones left.”

“Let’s hope.”

“And pray.”

Toni weakly struggled to her feet with help from Thomas. He held up the lantern but it was losing power. They turned and stared in the direction where the tunnel was from which they came in. It was too dark that far away to see anything. Toni lowered her head and closed her eyes for several seconds. She was muttering something. Then she said “We might as well go forward.”

“Suppose we can’t find the exit or it is blocked?” Thomas was panicked.

Toni put her hand on his back. “I have confidence.”

They shuffled towards the far wall. As they got closer they could see the entrance to the tunnel. And then the lantern flicked and went out and they disappeared into its blackness. Without light, Thomas had to feel along the wall while Toni clung to his other arm. They both fully expected at any moment for claws to dig into their flesh and tear them apart. But if there was anything in there it did not bother them. At least, so they thought, not yet.

After what seemed like the most dreadful elongation of time the air smelled less heavy and dank. Without quite realizing it this buoyed their spirits. They continued to push on.

“Is it getting a little lighter?” asked Toni. “It must be,” she answered herself, “I can make out the walls a little.”

Indeed, they were approaching the exit. Like swimmers escaping from a deep wreck it was like seeing the surface of the water from out of the murky depths.

They stepped up the pace and now stood before the bushes that covered the entrance. Subconsciously they both inhaled deeply and even managed a slight smile. But the thought that they entered as three but were leaving as two muted any burst of joy.

“Perhaps Jocum is outside,” whispered Thomas. “Maybe there was a bigger problem outside so he had to rush out there.”

“Or perhaps,” added Toni, “he led the Niss and the angst-feeders away. Maybe that’s why they were gone.”
“Could be,” shrugged Thomas. “We’ll find out in a second.”

He pushed aside the branches. They did not scratch as much or were as violent as when they came in. The two of them blinked from the burst of light. They hesitated until they heard familiar voices cry out.

“They’re here! They made it!”

As their eyes adjusted they saw two dark and blurry figures jump from a fallen log and rush towards them. Had they not recognized the voices they would have leaped back into the tunnel.

But in a second there were hardy slaps on the shoulder and assistance out from the cave to where Seth was standing. He seemed stunned.

“Where’s Jocum?” stuttered Seth. He seemed very concerned and shaken.

The exuberance of the greeting quickly settled.

Toni looked over at Thomas who was staring at nothing. “I don’t know,” he finally managed to get out. “We thought that he might be out here.”

“Did he come out?” asked Toni.

“No, no one came out until you two,” answered Russell.

Toni and Thomas looked at each other. Seth, still quite pale, took a step back. He appeared exhausted and almost frightened.

Sarah asked, “So where is he? Did you leave him behind? Is he hurt or... worse?”

Toni replied with her eyes fixed on Seth. “No, we don’t know what happened to him.”

Seth gasped hard. Everyone turned to look at him. He was quivering. His mouth was slightly ajar and his eyes were stretched out wide.

Toni reached towards him, “Are you all right?” But something held her back from walking towards him.

There was a deep rumbling from deep in the ground. Everyone looked down unsure to run or what to do. It was not a single sound but was the consolidation of many. The rumbling became louder and closer to the surface and, as it did, the sound formed discrete patterns. Finally it became distinguishable as words.

“You have failed!” came a deep, harsh voice as if spoken by stone.

Thomas, Toni, Sarah, and Russell held their breaths. The hair on their necks stood up. They moved into a tight group and stopped breathing.

“You must now suffer!” came the voices from the earth.

To everyone’s shock, Seth cried out, “NO! NO! It’s not fair! How was I to know he would interfere? I did everything you told me to do! I tried to keep them away! Give me another chance!”

“Failure has only one consequence and mercy is never it! You must return!” spoke the voices now much closer to the surface than before.

It was now plain that it was not one voice but many speaking in jagged unison.

At that instant bursting violently out of the ground at Seth’s feet and grabbing him tightly at his calf was a long, thin gray arm with a very large clawed hand. The claws sank all of the way through his flesh as the hand curled around his leg.

Seth staggered and tried to pull away but was unable. “Noooo!” Dark, ugly blood flowed over his shoe.

Two more hands with multiple layers of knobby fingers facing each other on both sides of the palm grasped both of his ankles. Seth struggled violently. A fat tentacle with barbs instead of suckers wrapped around his waist.

“It’s not fair,” he screamed. “It’s not fair.”

More and more grotesque appendages burst out of the ground. Some had large hooks that dug into flesh like meat hooks. Others had multiple claws. One like a leech with a round mouth and circles and circles of sharp teeth swallowed his left arm up to his elbow. All were pulling down.

As each arm erupted through the ground it grabbed one of the few parts of Seth that was still untouched. At this point almost nothing of Seth could be seen except for his wild, panicked eyes.

He was pulled down into the ground like it was quicksand but it remained as solid as ever. The three could tell that he was fighting furiously but that his cause was futile.

All the while the voices screamed out, “You must return! You have failed!”

There was one more muffled yell from Seth and then he was gone. All that remained was a swirl of dirt and silence. Several brown leaves settled onto the ground where Seth had been only seconds earlier.

The four of them stared with paralyzed horror at the spot. Then Sarah yelled, “Let’s get out of here.”

Obedience was quick in coming. They all ran back towards town. However the other three were careful to stay at Russell’s pace. Telling him to “hurry up” or to try to pull him along would do no good and so they did not.

They were less than halfway home when they all ran out of breath. They could not even merely slow to a walk; they had to stop and either bend over or put their hands on their hips and walk in a tight circle. Russell's leg was burning. Even above their labored breathing they listened for noises beneath their feet. There were none.

Eventually they were able to commence walking albeit at a slow pace. Their sense of safety was uncertain as long as they remained in the woods. On the one hand they felt that the attack on Seth was directed only at him. If it/they wanted the others then they were as easy as a bird in a cage. On the other hand, there was the idea that "things" lurked everywhere underground and could be right under their feet at any time. The fact that Seth was not standing at any kind of special place was even more unnerving. It was not as if he was in the middle of a bull's eye. Was anyplace safe? Could these things suddenly burst through the floorboards of the house and drag them to... where? They were all wondering the same thing but no one dared voice it because actually hearing something being talked about sometimes makes it all that more real.

Perhaps even more disturbing to Toni and Thomas was the thought that perhaps that is what also happened to Jocum.

No one spoke.

Finally they reached town and were at the point where they either had to agree to go somewhere together or head to their respective homes. Since no one offered the first, they all did the latter in silence. Sarah split off and headed down her block. Russell just stood there like he was in a town where he had never been before. Thomas put his hand on Russell's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Russell tapped it a couple of times and turned towards his house.

Russell nearly fell in through the front door. He sighed loudly and with his hand on his forehead dragged his feet across the dilapidated carpet as though there was a federal law against lifting your feet off of the ground. After all of that running his bad leg was even less cooperative than usual.

The curtains were drawn as was typical and the room was dim. As he neared his bedroom he was startled to see his mother sitting quietly in the living room chair.

"Mom, are you OK?"

She stared off to the side momentarily and then looked back at Russell. Her face was half in shadow. He felt too weary to endure another "Do you realize what you are doing to me?" speech. He was about to wave her off when she said, "Please sit down" with a dignity that he did not recognize. He sank into the couch and waited. She folded her hands in her lap. Then softly and calmly she spoke.

"I don't know where you've been, but I can see that it didn't go well for you." Russell looked like someone suddenly let some air out of him.

"Wait," his mother said. "Let me finish. It's obvious that something has been going on this last month or so. You've come in dragging more than usual. There's been a lot of strangeness happening in town what with the Niss and all and somehow I feel like you've been in the middle of it." Russell squirmed and stared at the floor.

"I know that I drive you and Danielle to madness with my worrying." Russell froze as if shot. "I can see how exasperated you get. It may look like I do nothing but fret and worry about my problems but I've always got my eyes on you and Danielle." Russell slowly looked up at his mother. "There is nothing in this world as important to me as you two." Russell's face softened. "And I worry because I want everything to be well for the both of you.

"As you know, your father walked out on us ten years ago. He claimed that he couldn't take me anymore. I don't know. But it left us in a tight spot. I work at the best job that I can, but it barely pays for what meager expenses we have. I try to protect you from our money issues. I don't want to feel that you've got to help out somehow. I'd rather that you enjoy your teenage years without any burdens. There will certainly be enough later on." She paused and looked away. Russell continued to look at her. She turned back once again. "One last thing. I see what you do with Danielle and how you guide her. I appreciate that and I want to tell you that you're doing a great job." Even in the dark both sets of eyes glistened. "Now you go upstairs and get yourself cleaned up. You look like you've been in Hell."

When Toni and Thomas were getting close to her house Toni said weakly, "Perhaps we should stop someplace and gather ourselves. If we walk in like this, Mom will ask all kinds of questions and I don't think that either of us are in good enough shape to come up with clever answers."

"You're right," replied Thomas. "Maybe we should treat ourselves to an ice cream. We certainly deserve it and it would be a nice return to normalcy."

"But do we want to walk a couple of more blocks?" Toni asked through great exhaustion. "And after all of that can we eat anything?"

“For a coffee, chocolate chip cone? —You bet.” He tried to sound enthusiastic but he really did not have it in him. None-the-less, he was persuasive enough.

At the shop while licking their cones Toni asked, “Do you want to talk about any of it?”

Thomas took a few more licks but much slower. “Maybe not right now. I think that we need to get our heads straightened out a bit before we dive back in. I feel like I’m still coughing up water. Besides, maybe it would be best if we all got together and went through everything. But right now I just need to chill.”

After the cones had disappeared they just sat and watched the people walk by. Some said “hello” and they both faintly smiled and waved. This was good practice. After all, the best way to appear normal is to act normal.

After a while Toni said, “Supper is going to be ready soon. We’d better head back home because if we are late then no matter how calm we look there’ll be questions.”

At home Mrs. Donnelee’s sharp eyes led her to comment, “Boy, you two are sure dragging in slower than a slug with a salt shaker on its back. Did you have a rough day?”

“It was... um, very busy,” answered Toni perhaps a little too quickly. “We had... a lot of ice cream to eat.” And wanting to divert the topic she added, “And yet we still are sure hungry. I hope that you got some good vittles a waitin’.”

“Whether they’re good or not is yours to judge. But they are a waiting,” Mrs. Donnelee said still keeping a questioning eye on them.

She put out three plates and filled the middle of the table with bowls of steaming food. Everyone helped themselves.

Toni and Thomas both lacked the energy to eat at anything resembling even a normal pace. This elicited another comment from Mrs. Donnelee. “I thought you two were so hungry?”

Thomas looked up and smiled, “We’re savoring it. It would be a crime to gulp food as fabulous as this.”

“Yea, right,” said Mrs. Donnelee with a disbelieving smirk.

25 After Stories

Stories are best told by those who survive

Everyone needed some time to get their heads back on straight and think through everything that has been happening that summer. Each person saw differently how everything fit together rather like each one sitting at a different side of a jigsaw puzzle.

Three days later Thomas and Toni called the others. Sarah and her parents were going away for the day. Of course, Russell's mother was still too anguished about the Niss and did not think that anyone should go outside unless absolutely necessary for at least a month. This thinking suited her just fine since she was always clutching at reasons to remain at home and avoid the gossiping eyes of others. So everyone agreed to get together in the gazebo on Sunday at 2:00.

It was the usual four plus Danielle. Russell did not want her to come along since he thought that the recap might be too scary. He had not told her anything. But she argued that she already knew quite a bit already and so it would be unfair to keep her out of the wrap-up. As the two of them left their house their mother cried out through the window screen, "If you hear or see anything unusual you come running back here at once! Russell, you're in charge of your sister so don't let anything happen to her." Then they heard more faintly, "Oh my, oh my," as she turned from the window.

At 1:45 they were all sitting in the gazebo. Toni's mother made snacks for everyone. They were all trying to look and act normal but it was clear that everyone's guts were being stirred. Danielle was the most anxious because she wanted to hear what happened. In her ignorance there were not any horrors, no missing people, just an untold wrap-up to an exciting story. She was particularly impatient to see if her conclusions were right.

"First off," Sarah began, "I'd like to know what Russell said to Danielle that convinced her not to come along."

Russell and Danielle looked at each other. Russell spoke, "I told her that there was one part of the puzzle that no one could figure out and we needed her to look into it. That was indeed true and she was more than up to the challenge."

"So what was that part?" asked Toni.

"You know how those seven new people suddenly showed up?" Russell responded. "I thought that it might answer a lot of questions if we knew where they came from. If we knew that they all came from the same city, for example, then that might go a long ways to solving things.

"Also, without revealing her intentions since we know how, um, riled up they got when they discovered that someone was snooping, I asked her to find out where they were living.

"Ultimately, I was trying to find a connection between all of them."

Danielle chimed in, "So for the three of them that I knew where they worked I went there to find out when they started."

Toni asked, "And the company just told you? Isn't there some kind of law against that?"

"Well, I just didn't walk up to HR and ask to see his file. I ran into a few people that I knew there and struck up a conversation. It wasn't that hard especially in Peter's case. He was the juiciest piece of gossip that they've had there in a long time. Some of those people stuck to me like bubble gum on a movie theatre seat. I found out more about him than I really cared to know.

"But what was interesting was that the three that I checked up on all started on the same week. So I went down to the bus station and talked to Mr. Fierogy who runs the place. He was sure that nobody new came in on any of the buses around that time.

"Every time that we've ever seen any of them they were always walking or riding with someone so I don't think that any of them had a car. Besides, there weren't any cars ever parked outside of the old liquor factory where you followed one of them. And there isn't another town around for quite a long ways so I doubt that they all walked here. So, really, instead of answering a question I wound up with a new riddle. If they didn't take the bus, didn't drive or walk here then how did they get here? I find it hard to believe that they all managed to hitchhike here at the same time and nobody said a word about it. It just seemed that they 'arrived' from out of the blue."

Thomas and Toni glanced at each other sideways. So far they had not told anyone about what happened in the cave.

Sarah inquired, "Did you find out anything about where they all lived?"

Danielle shifted in her seat. “That wasn’t as easy. Nobody at their businesses knew that or even seemed to care. I think that they found their at work antics sizzling enough. I couldn’t snoop around their desks since, quite inconveniently, they were most probably at them. I thought about going down to the post office and seeing what I could get out of Mr. Freestead, but I couldn’t think of a good reason for why I needed to know. I thought about the telling him that my brother had to bring something by that night but lost his address, but that seemed too clichéd. Besides, after hearing about Mr. Davis I wasn’t sure who I could trust anymore and I sure didn’t want to spend the night sleeping in a drainpipe.”

“I didn’t sleep in a drainpipe,” Thomas protested. “I slept in the church.”

“So did you do anything at all?” asked Sarah directing back the conversation.

Toni commented, “You could always have followed them home, but considering how that turned out for us,” Thomas hung his head, “I would never recommend it.”

Danielle hesitated, “Well, that’s sort-of what I would up doing,” Thomas jerked up his head ready to scold but Danielle quickly added, “but not very far. Peter was the first to quit work so I followed him first.”

“You followed him!” Thomas nearly yelled.

“But only for a few blocks. Once he got beyond the populated parts of town I turned around. I may be young but I’m no fool.” Toni had to do everything that she could to keep from glancing at Thomas. “My main goal was just to get a general idea.”

“And?” asked Thomas.

“Well, to no one’s surprise I’m sure, he headed southwest.” Danielle replied.

“Then I came back and waited for Alexander. But while I was hanging around I saw that tall guy that, um, Sarah ran into at the library.”

“How did you know it was him?” Sarah asked.

“We don’t have too many people in town who are around six foot seven inches and those that are close to that I know. So I knew that it had to be him. Besides, he had a creepy look about him. So I followed him and stopped at the same place.”

“So he went southwest also,” Toni commented.

“Exactly. While I was coming back I nearly ran into Alexander. I wasn’t paying attention and he got off of work earlier than I expected. I nearly walked right into him. I jumped and just about screamed.”

“That certainly wouldn’t have drawn any attention,” remarked Russell.

“I heard from his coworkers that once Floyd stopped putting in the extra hours then so did Alexander. I guess that once he completed his task he didn’t need to play the part anymore. But anyway, I let Alexander go past me and once my pounding heart stopped playing the drums and he got sufficiently distant I followed him. Well, I’m sure that everyone can guess where he went.”

“Southwest,” came four responses.

“Exactly. So they all were heading to the same area. And if I went a few more blocks in that direction—which of course I had no intention of doing—do you know what I’d run into?”

There was a moments hesitation and then Toni said, “The old liquor factory?”

“You pegged that one. Of course I didn’t follow them that far so I don’t know for a fact that that’s where they all went...”

“But I’d be willing to bet my mother’s left arm that that was exactly where they all wound up,” concluded Russell.

“Hey, you leave my mother’s arm out of this,” retorted Danielle with a smirk.

“Sorry,” Russell said weakly with exaggerated chagrin. “Besides, how would she wring her hands with only one arm?”

Danielle clamped her teeth tightly together until her lips compressed as she stared at Russell. Russell grimaced. But both were far from serious.

Thomas jumped in, “So I think that we can easily conclude that they are—or were—all together.” He looked over at Toni. He knew that he and Toni were holding back and that it was now time. “And actually I know that they were all together because we saw them all together in the cave.”

The other three leaned forward. Sarah cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. Danielle muttered, “Cave?”

So for the next couple of hours Toni and Thomas traded telling the story with more details than seemed there actually was in the reality of it. When they got to the part of coming out then all four had to jostle with each other to tell the rest of the story. At the conclusion of each vignette opinions and analysis were presented by all. Every participant, every event, every tangent was scrutinized and probed until everyone was either satisfied with the conclusion or it just seemed hopelessly murky.

When all was told each one felt as if he or she had run a marathon. After a while Danielle finally said, “So they never really came to town; they just appeared here. That explains it.”

After another stretch of silence Toni said, “I think that we have here a lot to digest. It’s after five. We should go home and let it churn for at least a few days.”

“I agree,” added Thomas. “I’m exhausted.”

“But at least one thing we can probably be sure of,” added Sarah, “they’re probably all gone and everything will return to normal.”

Without looking up Thomas said, “For the time being.”

After agreeing to get together the next day and do something normal and fun and not bring up any of this they split off.

As Thomas and Toni approached her house they saw a small bag on the front porch next to the door. They stopped at the bottom of the steps and studied every aspect of it. When it did not leap at them or emit any horrible odor Toni cautiously climbed the steps and with a big stretch gingerly picked it up. She held it away from her body for a few seconds. It was light so that seemed to reassure her. Neither said a word the entire time as though sound might trigger something.

Finally, with great slowness, Toni opened the bag. Holding it at arm’s length and with her head as back as far as it would go she looked in. Actually she stared into the bag for a good long time. Thomas was now getting anxious. “What do you see?” She reached into the bag. Thomas wanted to grab her arm to stop her but he was too slow. She pulled out a golden brown wafer and held it up.

Thomas brightened, “It’s a honey wafer.”